

Preliminary Report:

I confess that it mystifies me when folks in weaving groups remark that they dread warping. It might be the overconfidence of a beginner to assert that warping is not difficult at all, but I really think it is because Sarah Saulson's methodical teaching was just that good.

I learned to warp a loom from front to back, with the beater tied so it is perpendicular to the floor and halfway between the heddles and the breast beam. At the last meeting of my guild's class for beginning weavers, a classmate demonstrated another instructor's method of sleying the reed while it is lying flat on lease sticks at the back of the loom. At the risk of setting off a "front vs. back" warping war, let me say that Sarah's method appeals to my desire for simple, streamlined procedures.

The first few things I wove after MAFA embodied simplicity. Using worsted weight cotton knitting yarn, I explored the interaction of two colors and two shuttles with plain weave. The next project was an easy Bird's Eye pattern that warped up quickly and was just as fast to weave.

I foolishly chose a complicated twill pattern to work on at public demonstrations. I did not take into account how a 20-step treadling sequence that looks manageable in theory becomes challenging in interrupted practice. By the third demonstration, however, I had become intimately acquainted with the pattern, had learned to "read" it like I would stitches on a knitting needle, and had burned the treadling sequence into my muscle memory.

I need to turn my attention now to finishing techniques, which I expect we will cover at some point in the guild class. I taught myself how to hemstitch for one of my early projects, but I have several other pieces still in their raw state that I need to finish. One piece of fabric is woven with handspun alpaca as part of a guild challenge.

Earlier this summer, a guild member brought roving that was filled with vegetable matter (VM) to a meeting. The mill had been unable to get out the tiny particles of VM and waived the processing fee, so rather than throw it out, my colleague distributed portions of the roving to us to do with as we wanted, with the stipulation that we need to show off our finished product at our guild's holiday party. I spun the fiber fairly fine, and a lot of VM fell out or was picked out during the spinning and plying processes. Winding the yarn onto weaving bobbins at a high speed dislodged even more VM. The finished fabric – a warp of plant fibers and a weft of handspun alpaca – shows minimal VM. While the fabric itself is striking, the story behind it is what makes it notable. This is a piece that I will take to demonstrations to display along with photos of the roving as something to inspire visitors to consider possibilities, especially when the conditions at the start are not ideal.

I have set as my next learning task a tea towel pattern purchased from Interweave. I recently bought a tablet so I can run weaving software while at the loom. Oddly enough, the idea of trying to follow directions is more intimidating than any other aspect of weaving. I picked bright colors for the project because that is what I like. Those colors will also serve me well at demonstrations. I discovered through experience that high-contrast weaving is more interesting to the public than projects where the warp and weft are identical or related pale shades.

Nearly six months out from MAFA, I cannot say that I have converted anyone from the public to a life of weaving, but I have distributed dozens of information cards about our guild, raised awareness of the fabric manufacturing process, and encouraged guild members in their weaving pursuits. This is only the beginning.

Final Report:

I am a weaver. It's such a great feeling to say that!

Thanks to MAFA and instructor Sarah Saulson, I am no longer intimidated by the Dorset loom I am borrowing from the guild. In fact, for the first three Saturdays in September, I confidently wove on the loom at guild demonstrations, including the fourth annual Scottish Covenanter Festival in Quarryville, the wool frolic at Landis Valley Village & Farm Museum, and Community Day at Sunny Crest Home in Morgantown. It has been gratifying to explain the weaving process to children and adults and to see them gain an appreciation of fabric production.

At MAFA, I learned a clear, step-by-step method for warping a loom. While Sarah suggested that confidence comes after warping a loom 10 to 12 times, I have warped the Dorset loom three times on my own so far and feel competent. Of course, the true test will be assembling and then warping the rug loom in my sunroom.

From my own experience, I have learned that it is better to choose a simple pattern to weave at demonstrations. Sarah taught us basic twill patterns, and after MAFA, I purchased "The Handweaver's Pattern Directory" by Anne Dixon. For the first project I made on my own, I used a striped warp and tried different striping patterns in the plain weave weft. Next, I wove a Bird's Eye pattern during a guild retreat in August. That project used three different colorways of identical weft yarn and allowed me to compare how the colorways worked up. The six-step treading pattern was easy, and I finished that project in a few hours. Not so my third project.

I have really enjoyed exploring how colors and patterns interact in weaving. For my third project, I warped sections of stripes and solids. Then, I used Weavelt to design a draft that combined two patterns in vertical stripes. I discounted how difficult following the 20-step treading sequence would be when stopping frequently to answer questions from observers. Whoops! Thankfully, the warp was an assortment of pale yarns, and the weft was a dark red, so it was easy to see the pattern when I started up again. At that first demonstration, it seemed like I spent more time frogging than I did weaving.

Practice makes proficient, and that is true with this more challenging pattern. By the third demonstration, I was able to quickly pick up where I left off during educational interludes and weave with confidence. That warp is still on the loom – I tied on 7 yards just for fun – and I will keep weaving at the next two demonstrations in October. I am thinking of trying a handspun alpaca yarn for the weft, and I want to see what designs emerge when changing up the treading sequence.

While I have been sharing the knowledge I gained at MAFA in casual encounters with the public, I am also participating in a beginning weaver's class hosted by my guild. We had an organizational meeting in September and decided to work through Deborah Chandler's "Learning to Weave" in our class that will begin in October. There are several students in the class who are intimidated by warping their looms, and I am excited to instill in them the confidence that Sarah inspired in me.

At the end of our series of demonstrations, the Dorset loom will go back to the guild, and I will turn my attention to the rug loom. Several guild members have expressed interest in weaving on that loom, and I am excited to invite them over and coach them through the process. I will miss the Dorset loom, but I want to make it available for other folks who want to learn to weave. So if you hear of a Schacht Baby Wolf or a Harrisville loom about the size of that Dorset available for a low cost, let me know...

Here's to a future as a weaver!

PHOTOS



Caption: I'm pretty pleased with this sampler, which I created during my class at MAFA. The Q-tips were assigned as part of an "unconventional materials" challenge given to us by Sarah. I tried various ways of incorporating them into the weaving.



Caption: Winding a bobbin for my project at the guild retreat.



Caption: Displaying the finished shawl (all except the fringe) at the weaving class organizational meeting.



Caption: My first demonstration as a weaver!



Caption: Talking about weaving at a guild demonstration at Sunny Crest Home.