



Spinning and Weaving

by John Millen

The Denman Island Spinners and Weavers might choose to celebrate their 30th anniversary this year but the history of their craft on Denman Island stretches much further back.

In the 1934 Provincial Summer School for Teachers held at the Victoria High School a Mr. H P Eldridge was offering a course on weaving. Mr Eldridge was an experienced weaver, and was reported to be chiefly responsible for the development of weaving on Denman Island. He had available for his classes in the summer of 1934 about a dozen looms made at the Red Cross workshop ranging from the small cardboard loom to the full-sized hand loom.

It seems likely that Mr Eldridge's work on Denman Island had been arranged through the Women's Institute. After its Denman inauguration meeting in January 1920 the Institute was very busy for many years and among its early activities 'wool carding and spinning' is listed. Weaving is among the long list of crafts contributed to the Denman Island Women's Institute displays of crafts which won (three times) the silver trophy cup at the Vancouver PNE, competing against Women's Institutes from all over BC.

In the 1940's and 50's there were several weavers on the island. Weavers arriving after World War 2 brought their looms with them and one, who was a member of the Vancouver Weavers Guild, was well known for her fine work.

By the early 1990s a small Denman group of fibre craft enthusiasts were meeting with their spinning wheels to spin yarn at Rae Ellis's home, Hawthorn House on Kirk Road. Then, as the new

Denman School located downtown was completed, the question about what to do with the Old School arose. On Hornby Island in the early 1980's the construction of a new school made their old schoolhouse redundant. Recognizing the heritage quality of the schoolhouse built in 1892, the School Board agreed to donate the building to Hornby's New Horizons organization. The building was moved in 1988 down Sollans Road to the New Horizons property where it was established as the home of Fabricators, a weaving group formed under the leadership of Betty Smith, Rita Trimble and Muriel Rodgers.

The School Board declared the Denman 'Old School' redundant and planned to sell the property. "Not so fast" said the Denman community represented by the Denman Island Ratepayers Association. "That property was donated to the Board by a Denman resident for the purpose of having a school and should be returned to the community if it is no longer needed for that purpose." This argument won the day, though the Board asked for \$10,000 for the buildings. (Note: at that time DIRA was still called the 'Ratepayers' Association.)

At the DIRA meeting to discuss the acceptance of the Old School crusty old Marcus Isbister adamantly opposed the acquisition: "Denman already has too many buildings to look after and the old school building would cost a lot to maintain and to operate!" (He was right about the latter). Nevertheless the deal was accepted. However DIRA is not constituted to own property so in 1994, with \$10,000 donated by DIRA, the Islands Trust became the owner of the Old School property. The building(s) were leased to DIRA for 99 years for a total fee of \$10. To honour his long service to the community it was decided to name the property 'The Marcus Isbister Old School Centre'.

DIRA's Old School Committee. led then and since by Gloria Michin, chose Denman Spinners and Weavers to lease the eastern Classroom while Denman Conservancy took the west classroom. Two small offices were occupied by Islands Trust and Denman Island Women's Outreach Society.

(When these offices were no longer needed by those organizations Denman Conservancy took over the space.) The Freestore was set up in the basement and the formerly 'covered play area' was closed in to become the Recycle Depot. The classrooms were also renovated, lowering the ceilings and improving the lighting.

The Denman Spinners and Weavers group soon acquired some looms owned collectively and some member's looms were also placed in the Old School room for shared use. The group initially had few experienced weavers but with some lessons and learning from each-other the group was soon producing the fine work that has since found a ready market at Christmas Craft Fairs, on Studio Tours and at the Farmer's Market in summer.

