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From sheep to sweater, Centerville woman protecting her passion for wool

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CENTERVILLE — There was a time when most towns along the Wasatch Front were separate — no chain stores, multi-lane highways or subdivisions with hundreds of homes.

Judy Gunn fondly remembers those days. From the Centerville "fortress" she calls home, she does what she can to hold of the ways of the past.

"We live in such an artificial environment," Gunn said, speaking from a wooden chair in her home. "Living in town, how much nature do we really have?"

Her house is a citadel, holding back the modern world.

"Neighbors across the street, which is now a cul-de-sac of houses, used to be a little farm," Gunn said.

Every castle has a queen, and Gunn is just that: the queen of spinning wool. She's spent decades perfecting her craft.

Sitting in her living room, running her spinning wheel with the power of her feet (no shoes, just socks), some would call her outdated; others have called her obsolete.

"It's therapeutic," she said with a laugh, "cheaper than Prozac."

Gunn finds humor in most anything, even in spelling her name. "G-U-N-N, as in double-barreled," she said.

For her, spinning wool is more important now than ever. She'll gladly explain how she feels about keeping in touch with those who came before.

"We talk about the pioneers, and what the children had to do growing up," she said, recounting a conversation she had with a group of kids. "Yeah, mom had to spin her own yarn and weave it into cloth; and if you wanted a different color, you had to go pick plants to make the dyes. If you wanted something, you had to make it."

Certainly, slaving away to spin and dye your own yarn isn't necessary these days, but Gunn doesn't look at it as work. She enjoys "the satisfaction of making something from scratch" and "the satisfaction of knowing

you can, if you needed to."

Gunn speaks about her craft with a passion you'll only find in those who've devoted their lives to something they love. She knows how to work with the wool through every step of the process — from using a hand-operated machine to "blow open" the freshly sheared wool to dyeing it in a pot on her kitchen stove (next to a bottle of hot sauce and a bag of cough drops).

Gunn does things the old-fashioned way, and she's doing her part to keep this art alive. She is also a teacher, something that brings her a lot of fulfillment.

"They're just starting, and all of the sudden they're feeling it," she said. "They're getting it."

Gunn's passion has taken over her home. She calls her living room her "store," and that's not an exaggeration. Baskets and shelves with products for sale crowd an area where most might put a television. She calls it [Judy's Novelty Wool](#).

"It's all my late husband's fault," she said with a laugh, adding that he wanted something besides a lawnmower to cut their grass.

"He said 'We can get some bummers,'" Gunn said. "Well, I'm a beach bunny from Southern California. 'You're gonna hire bums to mow all that?' (she asked). 'No, no, no, no,' (he said), 'Bummers: baby lambs you have to bottle feed.'"

When Gunn says she makes something "from beginning to end," she means just that — the queen of spinning is also a shepherd. Her back yard consists of a small farm, complete with a pasture full of wandering sheep.

"The sheep were just sheared," she said, pointing to bags of wool in her barn.

She regularly employs local children — partly for assistance, but also to educate them in "the way things used to be." With their help, Gunn's kept her flock and her farm safe from change.

"Golly," she said, shaking her head. "Since my husband died 22 years ago, I would have at least two developers knock on my door every year. Wanted to help me out. 'This is so much for an old lady to take care of,' (they'd say)."

Gunn's found herself and her flock living on a hot commodity. It's not just the former farm across the street that's fallen to a cluster of new homes.

"As soon as someone sells their house along Chase Lane," she said, gesturing towards the far side of her farm, "The city and county automatically changes it to residential, unless the buyer specifically states they are purchasing this as agricultural."

While her castle may be under siege, Gunn's taken steps to defend it — all the way down to her will.

"All of this is in my trust, in perpetuity," she said. "It cannot be sold and developed. So my kids know that when I'm gone, they're not getting any money out of it. They're trustees of the trust, keeping this agricultural."

Although they may not inherit her intense love of spinning wool, Gunn's children will make sure her fortress endures even after her reign comes to an end.

"We're trying to keep a little bit of mother nature's sanity," she said. "In the middle of town."

To learn more about Gunn's products or her classes, visit her website: judysnoveltywool.com.

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