

Unalakleet muskox farm triggers knitting needles into action

FAIRBANKS—A new musk ox farm in Unalakleet has triggered at least 14 new knitting needles into action, stitching scarves of musk ox underwool into an ancient mask pattern.

In early spring, seven village residents joined the knitters' cooperative which works with underwool from the University of Alaska Fairbanks musk ox farm. This brings the number of villages participating to nine. With the new Unalakleet pattern, there are now eight village designs.

Known as Oomingmak (Eskimo for musk ox), the cooperative has existed since 1969, providing jobs for more than 80 rural residents in the new cottage industry based on the underwool, called qiviut (ki-vee-ute).

The Unalakleet farm started last December. Subsequently, a workshop for knitters attracted some 40 village residents and the first knitters began in March.

Coordinator of the knitting project, Jill Bennett, said the first crop of underwool from Unalakleet's herd is being harvested this spring, just as the knitters are warming up. This qiviut will be sent with the Fairbanks harvest to Rhode Island for processing into yarn.

When it recrosses the country back to the villages, Unalakleet knitters may be expanding their mask pattern to stoles, hats and a variety of other articles produced in other villages.

Bennett explained the Unalakleet pattern is taken from a wolverine mask.

Some scarves with the mask pattern have been completed and will be displayed with the other hand qiviut knits in the Oomingmak cabin at the Alaskaland Park in Fairbanks. Bennett estimates that this summer the demand for the musk ox products will outpace the supply.

She said the number of items for sale has grown by leaps and bounds over the years. The shortage is attributed to the limited amount of qiviut available and the growing market. This is also the reason the yarn is not sold to the public.

The qiviut is still donated to the cooperative by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation which provides financial support for the farms. The price for the knitted items pays for the knitter's labor and any profit above expenses goes into the cooperative.

Those price tags qualify the products for luxury status and the continued demand seems to prove the cooperative's slogan that it is "rarer than vicuna and finer than cashmere."

Even if the supply is depleted, Bennett said customers may place orders which can be shipped to them later. They will be filled when many of the villagers return from fish camps and begin active knitting during the cold months.

She said the knitters usually decide which of the articles to produce and she notifies the cooperative when an item is in oversupply. Sizing is as loosely structured as the inventory, since the yarn has a great deal of

give. Also a range of sizes naturally emerges as each person's stitches are a little different.

Probably the most popular item, Bennett said, is an unusual head piece called Eskimo Smoke Rings. This is a tubular, knitted sleeve which may be worn over the head as a cowl or draped loosely over the shoulders.

This piece is available in the Mekoryuk harpoon design, derived from a 1,200 year old harpoon head or in Bethel's butterflies design.

Bennett explained that these and other patterns were created either by the villagers themselves or modeled after artifacts and art typical of the village or surrounding area. Models have included modern skin parka trim, beaded mukluks and ivory artifacts.

The fashion designs have likewise come from diverse sources. One Eskimo knitter, Edna Mathlaw of Mekoryuk won local acclaim when a cloche hat

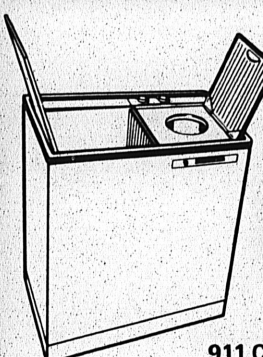
she designed appeared in Vogue Magazine. Unfortunately, neither she nor the project was mentioned in the credits.

Bennett said often weavers' groups will send patterns for use by the knitters. But, usually

they don't understand problems imposed by knitters who don't read English. She said all designs must be easy so they can be rendered into a six symbol instruction system.

In spite of the limitations

imposed on the project, more village residents than ever have work these days, turning a Native Alaskan resource into profit. And the musk oxen, now providing scarves instead of steaks, don't mind a bit.



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