

Oregon Fiber Flax Collection, 1940-2001

Overview of the Collection

Creator	Hoskins, Nancy Arthur.
Title	Oregon Fiber Flax Collection
Dates	1940-2001 (inclusive) 1940 2001 1948-1960 (bulk) 1948 1960
Quantity	0.70 cubic feet, including 19 photographs, (5 boxes)
Collection Number	MSS ORFiberFlax
Summary	Collected by Nancy Arthur Hoskins, a weaving instructor and author on textiles, in the course of her own research on flax, the Oregon Fiber Flax Collection documents the processing, marketing, and use of Oregon-grown fiber flax; the work of Joan Patterson, Professor of Clothing, Textiles, and Related Arts; and the work of Jesse E. Harmond, USDA agricultural engineer and head of Small Seed Harvesting and Processing Investigations at Oregon State College. The collection is comprised of correspondence, publications, reports, photographs, notes, news clippings, and artifacts.
Repository	Oregon State University Libraries, Special Collections and Archives Research Center Special Collections and Archives Research Center 121 The Valley Library Oregon State University Corvallis OR 97331-4501 Telephone: 541-737-2075 Fax: 541-737-8674 scarc@oregonstate.edu
Access Restrictions	Collection is open for research.
Languages	English

Historical Note

Oregon's historical connection to flax is a long one. The Wasco, Klickitat, Warm Springs, Cayuse, Umatilla, and other tribes have long used native flax fibers to make bags, cordage, and fishing nets. Traveling through Oregon in 1805, several members of the Lewis and Clark expedition remarked frequently on seeing flax growing in abundance; Lewis, noting that the "bark of the stem is thick, strong, and appears if it would make excellent flax," gathered and preserved some of the mature flaxseed for the journey home. In 1844, Oregon pioneers Sarah Damon Owen and Mary Matheny, both of whom brought their own flax seeds west with them, reported in their journals the resulting plants were superior to any they'd grown back home.

One of the major draws of planting flax was that it produced minimal waste product – what could not be processed into fabric was used for oil and replanting (the seeds), or fuel and cattle feed (the

woody parts of the stalks). In 1865 the Pioneer Oil Company began processing locally grown flax for oil, the tow fibers – the coarse, broken fiber, removed during processing flax, hemp, or jute – as upholstery filling, and any leftover waste matter became cattle feed. In 1876, a sample of Oregon linen produced by a small fiber-flax plant won a prize at the Centennial Exposition; the judges remarked on its “extraordinary length, superior gloss and silky finish.” A flax spinning mill was subsequently built in Albany in 1877, and by the early 1900s several additional flax processing facilities had been built, including a plant at the Oregon State Penitentiary.

Juliet Montague Lord, wife of Oregon Governor William P. Lord, advocated heavily for the flax industry from the late 1800s until her death in 1924. At a House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means hearing regarding the 1921 General Tariff reviews, Mrs. Lord argued the unique character and qualities of the soil in the Northwest would create a flax far superior to that which was being grown in places less suited. Benjamin Miles, representing the Amerlin Company of Chicago, Illinois testified that, due to the post-World War I demand for “all fibers of this nature, there has been a very considerable improvement in machinery specialized for flax farming,” and these improvements would, in turn, decrease the time investment, and increase the economic yield, of flax. In fact, Miles speculated, by 1920 much of the flax growing and harvesting process could be mechanized – it could be “drilled” by machinery and pulled by machinery.

Studies already underway at Oregon State College supported Lord’s and Miles’ claims, and indeed flax, and later fiber flax, had been a perennial part of the College’s agricultural curriculum since the late 1890s. An article in the December 1925 issue of the *Oregon State Technical Record* argued that the Willamette Valley could “produce flax equal to that now imported from Europe,” using machines in place of cheap labor. In 1932, the March issue of *Oregon State Monthly* reported on the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) establishment of an office for fiber flax research at OSC with Brittain Bragunier Robinson – former head of the USDA’s fiber flax bureau, headquartered in Michigan – at the helm. The move to Oregon was made because, at the time, Oregon produced more fiber flax than any other state, and was the only state to produce flax for “spinning purposes.” Prior to the establishment of this office, fiber flax experimentation had been carried out under the direction of Donald David Hill, Associate Professor of Farm Crops, in cooperation with the fiber flax office of the USDA.

World War II would affect significant changes to the international fiber flax markets and, in turn, Oregon’s. With their temperate climates, rich soil, and long history of textile-making, Belgium, the Netherlands, and northern France long dominated the world flax market. However, with those producers effectively out of commission during the war, production in the United States peaked, as flax was considered an “essential war product.” On the home front it was used for everything from upholstery fabric to shoelaces; overseas it was used in flak jackets and mobile infantry tent fabric. By 1940, over 18,000 acres of flax were being cultivated in the Willamette Valley. When the war ended, however, European flax producers and processors once again took up their former mantles, and the Oregon industry declined, both due to renewed international competition and the increasing popularity of synthetic fibers.

Despite all the positives, steep production costs and lengthy processing times often made fiber flax a less-than-desirable option for many farmers. Moreover, the Great Depression and the World Wars, competition from foreign markets in Belgium and Northern France, and the eventual introduction and popularity of synthetic fabrics, resulted in uncertainty in the economic viability of a fiber flax industry in Oregon, though it was a recurrent source of investigation and interest. An article in the *Barometer* in March 1954 discusses “reactivating” the flax industry, arguing that “since the flax plant can be completely utilized, and the demand is becoming greater, flax could be a good crop for farmers.” This argument wasn’t sufficient, however, and by 1955 the last of the government-funded flax processing facilities in Oregon had closed.

Jesse Edward Harmond was born in Columbus, Mississippi on December 10, 1906. From 1927 to 1932, he attended Mississippi State University, earning a Bachelor of Science degree in Electrical Engineering. In 1939, Harmond began work with the United States Department of Agriculture as an Agricultural Engineer. Harmond came to Oregon State College in 1945 to serve as the head of Small Seed Harvesting and Processing Investigations, funded jointly by the Agricultural Engineering Research Division of the USDA and OSC. Harmond's research and subsequent publications seem primarily to have focused on the mechanization of agricultural processes. Research topics included the efficacy of fluid conveying when processing seeds, using vibration in the separating of seeds, and seed cleaning by electrostatic separation. Harmond developed new fiber flax processing machines that drastically cut processing time at all stages of the process – from harvesting to drying to hand-working. In 1963, Harmond even researched the introduction of “electronic computers for the precise programming of [seed processing] machines, and the use of radioactive tracers for more effective blending of seed.” All these efforts cut the cost of labor and reduced processing times, further increasing the economic feasibility of fiber flax production in Oregon. Harmond retired in November 1969.

Joan Patterson was born April 25, 1907 in Baker, Oregon. She attended the University of Oregon from 1925 to 1931, graduating with a Bachelor of Architecture in interior design; in 1950, she completed a Master of Fine Arts degree at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. Patterson worked for a year as a Research Assistant in Art Appreciation Teaching immediately after graduating from the University of Oregon, and in 1935 worked briefly as Assistant Decorator for the Meier and Frank Company. Hired by OSC in 1936 as a statewide Extension Service Instructor in home furnishings, Patterson later transferred to a resident teaching position in OSC's School of Home Economics, where her teaching duties primarily focused on textiles design, home furnishing and interiors. By 1951 she'd been promoted to the rank of full professor. Patterson's research focused largely on the use of Oregon-grown flax in weaving linen and other home furnishing fabrics. Fabrics woven by Professor Patterson were exhibited widely in the west, and in 1948 won first place in a national competition held by Moss-rose Manufacturing Company for a Jacquard loomed fabric. In 1952, Patterson collaborated with Jesse Harmond on a business venture, [Oregon Custom Weavers](#), to produce and market home furnishing fabrics from Oregon flax. Patterson served as the designer, the linen yarns were produced by the Oregon Flax Textile Company of Salem, and the fabric itself woven by the Oregon Worsted Company of Portland. Patterson's textiles were shown at the Silkar Studios in New York City in 1950, and the Chrysler Corporation placed a tentative order of 100,000 yards per car model; lack of sufficient credit rating, however, caused the order to fall through, and manufacturing ultimately ceased. Oregon Custom Weavers was able to sell the remainder of Patterson's previously manufactured fabric out of Harmond's home, at Russell's Department Store in Eugene, Oregon, and at the Ceramic Studio in Portland. Joan Patterson retired from OSU in June of 1969.

Nancy Arthur Hoskins received a Bachelor of Arts in Education from Long Beach State College in 1957. From 1957 to 1966, Hoskins worked in Long Beach, California; Seattle, Washington; and Lake Oswego, Oregon as an Elementary School teacher. In 1966, she began a long career of teaching embroidery and weaving, beginning at the Portland Arts and Crafts Society. From 1967 to 1970, Hoskins worked as an Embroidery Instructor for the Eugene Parks and Recreation Department. She earned a Master of Science in Interdisciplinary studies in Art History, Art Education, and Fine Arts (Weaving) from the University of Oregon in 1978. From 1980 to 1981, Hoskins worked as a Weaving Instructor at the Maude Kerns Art Center in Eugene, Oregon. From 1981 to 1996, she worked at Lane Community College as a Weaving Instructor, teaching term-long courses on weaving at both the University of Oregon and Oregon State University in 1981 and 1984, respectively. Hoskins has published extensively on textiles and weaving, with a special focus on ancient Egypt, and has received several grants and book awards for her studies of pharaonic, Coptic, and early Islamic textiles.

The following resources were used to prepare this biographical note: 1. Hoskins, Nancy. "Oregon Flax and Linen." *Handwoven* March/April 1997: 63-64. Print. 2. Hoskins, Nancy. "[Flax and Linen Industry in Oregon.](#)" *The Oregon Encyclopedia*, Oregon Historical Society, 17 March, 2018, https://oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/flax_and_linen_industry_of_oregon/#.XDkfeiB7nGg. 3. Tobin, Louise Agnes. *A History and Analysis of the Oregon Linen Industry*. MS Thesis. Oregon State University, 1959. Web. 8 Jan. 2019.

Content Description

The Oregon Fiber Flax Collection is comprised of correspondence, publications, reports, photographs, notes, news clippings, and artifacts, and represents the research interests of its creator, Nancy Hoskins, focusing on fiber flax growing and processing in Oregon, and the work of two former Oregon State College (OSC) employees, Jesses E. Harmond and Joan Patterson, both of whom conducted flax-related research while at OSC.

Jesse Harmond's correspondence primarily relates to his work with the Oregon Worsted Company to develop a new fabric combining Oregon-grown flax and wool, what would come to be known as "Marilinn." Correspondents include Governor Douglas McKay, Senator Wayne Morse, and Tom Bishop, President of the Oregon Worsted Company. The collection also includes one piece of correspondence to Nancy Hoskins, from Margaret Bischof, in which Bischof thanks Hoskins for helping Bischof to straighten out the threading of her loom.

Publications in the collection are comprised of bulletins and circulars authored by Jesse Harmond, and by Brittain B. Robinson; five issues of the *Handweaver and Craftsman*, a quarterly magazine for handweavers and those interested in handweaving; and several pamphlets and other similar publications by various authors. Harmond's publications primarily relate to efficacy of various machines in different stages of flax processing, including pulling, deseeding, scutching, and drying. The Summer 1951 issue of the *Handweaver and Craftsman* includes an article, written by Margaret Sargent, about Joan Patterson's linen fabrics.

The reports in the collection primarily represent Jesse Harmond's investigations of fiber flax processing while at Oregon State College. The collection includes four *Fiber Flax Processing Investigation Annual Reports*, for fiscal years 1946, 1948, 1949, and 1950. Each report includes original photographs prints documenting the types of machinery used to process the flax (some of them experimental), stages of flax processing, and data tables. Of particular note is a report on the thermal conductivity of pressed flax board. The test, conducted by the Measurements Section of the Physics Department at Oregon State College, showed that the k-value, or thermal conductivity rating, of pressed flax board was lower than gypsum board (.462) or yellow pine (1.00), at .462 Btus.

In addition to the photographic prints included as part of Harmond's annual reports, the collection includes a single negative of Jesse Harmond. Harmond appears to be standing inside one of the agricultural barns on campus.

The notes in the collection are comprised of a single document: a list of the press in attendance at the preview of Oregon Custom Weavers fabric – designed by Joan Patterson – at the Silkar Studios in New York City, New York in 1951. Press in attendance included *Good Housekeeping*, *House and Garden*, *Handweaver and Craftsman*, and the *New York Times*. The document is on Oregon Custom Weaver's letterhead.

News clippings in the collection document Harmond's and Patterson's work with flax while at OSC. News article topics include: Harmond's work with flax fiber board and in developing new flax processing

machinery; the status of the flax industry in Oregon; Patterson's fabric designs, research, and exhibitions; and flax production and processing in Oregon.

The product of Patterson's and Harmond's business collaboration – Oregon Custom Weavers – is represented by the artifacts in the collection. Incorporated in 1952, Oregon Custom Weavers used Patterson's designs, linen yarns produced by the Oregon Flax Textile Company of Salem, Oregon, and the looms of the Oregon Worsted Company of Portland, Oregon to create linen and upholstery fabric. Product samples – a linen covered bridge notebook, address book, binder, and unmounted fabric sample – are included in the collection. The artifacts also include 11 spools of Oregon flax linen, in Bleached, Natural, yellow, Ocean Aqua, blue, Dawn, Wild Cherry, and Cattail Brown (Boxes 3 - 5). These may be the spools to which Bischof referred in her thank you letter.

Use of the Collection

Preferred Citation

Oregon Fiber Flax Collection (MSS ORFiberFlax), Oregon State University Special Collections and Archives Research Center, Corvallis, Oregon.

Administrative Information

Arrangement

Collection is arranged by document type.

Acquisition Information

Collection was donated by Nancy Hoskins in 2006.

Related Materials

The [Apparel, Interiors, Housing, and Merchandising Department Records \(RG 028\)](#) include records of the flax research conducted by Joan Patterson from 1947 to 1954. Additional materials documenting Joan Patteron's work with flax and flax weaving include the Gwil Evans Photographic Collection (P 082), and the [News and Communications Services Records](#) (RG 203). Joan Patterson's MFA thesis, [Oregon Flax to Fabrics](#), completed at Cranbrook Academy in 1950, is a part of the History of the Pacific Northwest Rare Book Collection, and is available for review in the Oregon State University Libraries Special Collections and Archives Research Center Reading Room.

Additional materials documenting Jesse Harmond's work with flax, and the machinery he developed for processing seeds include the Oregon Custom Weavers Guild Linen Research Notebook (MSS OCWG) Gwil Evans Photographic Collection (P 082), and the [News and Communications Services Records](#) (RG 203). Images from the Gwil Evans Photographic Collection have been digitized and are [available in Oregon Digital](#). The Oregon Custom Weavers Guild Linen Research Notebook (MSS OCWG) consists of samples of Oregon linen compiled by Harmond.

The [Bioresource Engineering Department Records \(RG 001\)](#) include extensive flax research records as well as equipment plans and drawings. The Bioresource Engineering Department Photograph Collection (P 106) and the [Agricultural Engineering Department Motion Picture Films \(FV 106\)](#) include

approximately 500 images documenting flax harvesting and processing equipment and facilities and a 1947 film, Fiber Flax Growing and Processing in the Willamette Valley of Oregon.

A gallery of Nancy Hoskins work, and her curriculum vitae, can be found [online](#).

Names and Subjects

Subject Terms :

Flax industry--Oregon.

Flax--Processing--Oregon--Willamette River Valley.

Linen--Oregon.

Textile research--Oregon--Corvallis.

Personal Names :

Harmond, Jesse E. (Jesse Edward), 1906-

Hoskins, Nancy Arthur.

Patterson, Joan, 1907-

Form or Genre Terms :

Cultural artifacts.

Film negatives.

Photographic prints.

Other Creators :

Personal Names :

Harmond, Jesse E. (Jesse Edward), 1906-
(creator)

Patterson, Joan, 1907-
(creator)

Corporate Names :

Oregon State College. Federal Cooperative Extension Service.
(creator)

United States. Department of Agriculture.
(creator)

Finding Aid Authors: Elizabeth Nielsen and Rachel Lilley.
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