

Flax Cultivation on the Lüneburg Heath (1870s)

Abstract

In the 1870s, mechanization was still underdeveloped in most parts of rural Germany, and farming was closely linked to seasonal cycles: summer entailed long, outdoor workdays, while indoor tasks were performed mainly in the winter. The cultivation and processing of flax played an important role in supplementing farm income and in providing steady employment for female farmhands. This account demonstrates how work and leisure activities were tightly integrated in many rural households.

Source

In those days machines were not common in agriculture or were at least very rare. In order to ensure a workforce for the summer, laborers also had to be employed during the wintertime. This was possible because clothing had to be produced in addition to food. Flax and its processing played a significant role in the annual work cycle. In spring the linseed was sown; every full female farmhand also got her *Spinnt*, a dry measure, sown as part of her wages. As soon as the seeds came up, the fields were weeded—twice, as a rule. The tall stalk bears small blue flowers, from which round capsules grow. Once ripened, the flax was pulled up and tied together in bundles using the roots, and then brought in. [...]

The fine flax [...] was spun with a double spinning wheel with a dual spindle, with each hand guiding one thread; then it was wound and prepared as a warp on the shearing frame; sometimes the threads were also wound onto little bobbins and used as weft thread or woof for weaving. Alternatively, wool or cotton was also used as woof, depending on whether canvas, triple worsted, or quintuple worsted was to be made for clothing. The tailor came to the house with his journeyman or apprentice to make suits from it. As the old proverb goes: “Homemade, homespun makes the best peasant costume [...].” Back then even farmers with extensive lands rarely owned more than one cloth suit, which was only worn when they went to supper or to Holy Communion with their wives. [...]

The real pride and joy of the housewife, however, lay in the old hand-painted chests and drawers—“that white line” and “the blackberry ticking” (ticking with a blackberry pattern). A girl’s value was judged according to the rolled canvas she carried in her suitcase; after all, her linseed was processed together with the housemother’s over the course of the year. In this way, the work with flax was carried out throughout the year. In a proper farmhouse, spinning had to be finished by Christmas, and at Easter the weaving ropes had to be moved out of the house and the linen put onto the bleaching ground. After that, the cycle started again with the sowing of the linseed. [...]

The turners were responsible for making the spinning wheels, reels, whisks, regular and small bobbins, and were thus closely connected to the production of canvas in the farmer’s parlors; making good spinning wheels is harder than shaping columns and vases. The farmers’ wives and the chief female farmhands came to the workshop in person to express their wishes, especially when it came to repairs; after all, their performance depended very much on the quality of the wheel.

When autumn came and the potatoes and turnips had been harvested, the motto for the male farmhands was:

Bartholomew-tide has come,
Has taken away the afternoon meal,
Has brought along flails,

Now you shall thresh night and day.

For the maidens the spinning wheels were fetched from the attic, and spinning began in earnest. Grandmothers and young female farmhands would spin tow with a single-spindle wheel, but every full female farmhand and young woman would spin flax using a double-spindle wheel. Karl Marx may state in the first volume of *Das Kapital*: “People who are capable of spinning with both hands are just as common as people with two heads,” but in this case he is not correct. A farmhand who could not spin with both hands, i.e., using two spindles at once, would not have been hired by any farmer. In the evenings the young women gathered at one of the farmers’ houses. These so-called spinning parlors were really something special; much tomfoolery was hatched, but many kind words were also spoken and good advice given; there was much singing. While feeding the animals in the barn [integrated into the farmhouse], they played forfeits or danced to accordion music.

Source: Heinrich Lange, *Aus einer alten Handwerksburschenmappe*. Leipzig, 1925, pp. 44–48; reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870–1914. Dokumente und Skizzen*, 3rd ed. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982, pp. 183–85.

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