

History by Mary Alice Denson Natural Fiber Fair beginnings

Once upon a time we had a recording company called Kicking Mule Records. We sponsored music events called Eel River Music Camp. Musicians, professional and amateur, came to the camp and gave workshops. Dale Miller gave expert workshops in fingerpicking guitar, Mark Nelson taught dulcimer. There was also a show in the evenings; Darryl Cherney tried out his new songs on stage, and anyone who had always dreamed of performing for an audience could participate. People came for the weekend, camped out, went to and gave workshops, and had a lot of fun.

Some of us were not musicians, however. Eventually we put together our own workshops. We had our choice of watercolors, pine needle basket weaving, quilting, knitting (of course), and more. The idea for a fair for non-musicians was born of this effort.

The first Natural Fiber Fair was an effort to collect community members who dealt in natural fibers in one form or another: wool from the animal through dealing with fleece, processing, dyeing and producing a garment; cotton and all its useful applications; silk and its luster and care; vegetable fibers for baskets, paper, and sculptures. It turned out there were a lot of people in this community who worked with one or another of these items.

Interest in the non-fiber community was very high and support of the first event at the Mateel Community Center that one day, twenty years ago, led us to decide immediately to make the Fair a two day event. And so it has been ever since.

The community has spread to include Humboldt and Mendocino Counties along with visitors from, literally, around the world. A visitor who was coming to northern California from England for a visit made sure she included the Fair in her itinerary. Mostly, we are from northern California, and interested in working with these various fibers in one way or another.

On entering the Fair the first thing we see is the people who raise sheep along with the fleece they have harvested this year, beautiful colored and white fleece from various breeds. Step inside the door and it is hard to decide which direction to head. Bright colors to the right, spinners to the left, and straight back a dye workshop. Upstairs might contain exhibits of types of weavings along with primitive twig shapes. There might be displays of exchanges, which happen during the year. This year, for instance, people are working on bags with yarn they have received from a partner participant.

I produced the Fair for 10 years, and Laura Doyle took over from there. She first came to the fair as a basket weaver with her friend Asia. They set up a charming booth with flowers and twigs and by the end of the event both of them were spinning and knitting. Now Laura has added weaving and felting to her skills, and Asia is a dyer. The Fiber

Fairs has evolved, once again, and now has a core group of dedicated volunteers carrying on the tradition of bringing the love of all things fiber to the community.

That's what you get from the Fiber Fair: an exposure to more skills than you know about when you first encountered the fair, along with friends to share them with.