

# QUILTING THE PAST WITH THE PRESENT

## COURTNEY WOOLEN MILL

by Katrina Gebert

Several years ago, I went to an anniversary event at the Courtney Woolen Mill. I was a history-loving high schooler, who had a lot more to experience in life. Ever since that visit, when I imagined places ingrained in the history of Appleton, the woolen mill came to mind. Therefore, when I received an opportunity to conduct an interview with Tom Courtney, the current owner of the mill, I was excited to seize it.



Katrina Gebert  
Alpaca and sheep wool were sorted and dried in the mill's attic.

The Courtney Woolen Mill is a prominent business for wool production and quilting in Appleton. It is a family-run enterprise inherited through generations. The story of this business is long and complex because the mill opened back in the 1880s, over one hundred years ago. Originally, the Kelley family owned the building and was involved in the construction of the business. After the Kelley family, the building was sold to different people until the Courtney family bought it in 1904. This purchase was made by John Courtney, who moved to Appleton.

The mill has been passed down through three generations since that time. Tom Courtney, the grandson of Giles Courtney, is the current owner of the business. He has been working in the wool industry for fifty years and has made many deep connections to the community and his customers.

The structure of the building is mostly original; nevertheless, there have been some changes to the architecture, and the type of energy used to power the mill has changed over the years. An example of this change is the shift from a water wheel to a water turbine, which later became electrically powered. For years, the mill was water powered until it switched to electricity in 1922 by Giles Courtney. In addition, the mill used coal and a boiler to generate heat; however, this was changed to natural gas by Tom Courtney in 1986. Interestingly, one of the first jobs given to Tom Courtney when he began to do work for the business was cleaning the boiler. There was a separate room where coal was stored, piled high like a mountain. As a reminder of that era, the coal stains can still be seen on the walls of this room. Since the shift from coal to electricity, the room is now used for other purposes.

The community around the mill has shifted drastically since the time in which it was built. When observing the area around the mill, a visitor immediately notices a tennis court adjacent to the property. Historically, this area along the river was originally a lumber yard, part of the local area's connection to a once-thriving wood industry. As the surrounding area has shifted, the mill has remained unchanged and is still operating using machinery that dates from over one hundred years ago.

The process of wool production employs a variety of machines—each of which is crucial to the processing of textiles. Various people

Jen Couser On Unsplash



Katrina Gebert

The main floor of the mill with some of its old machinery.

from around the area bring in wool after it has been sheared from the animals. Both alpaca wool and sheep wool are processed at the mill, as well as polyester. Each of the three floors of the building has equipment and machines to manage the process. The basement of the building is where raw wool is “dusted” to open up the fibers and remove any unwanted seeds or other contaminants. In the next step of the production process, the wool goes through the washing machine and is rinsed. The wool then goes to the attic, where it will dry and be separated into specific types. When the windows on the third floor are open, it takes three to four days to dry. According to Tom Courtney, with the windows closed it can take up to a week for the wool to dry completely, a factor that must be considered once fall and winter arrive.

The second floor is where the picking machine and the carding are located. The carding machine is labeled as “Davis and Ferber,” the manufacturer of the machine nearly one hundred years ago, attesting to the excellent maintenance or perhaps due to the high quality of machinery constructed at that time. These machines throughout the building are vintage and are at risk of breaking at times. Tom Courtney shared that if a machine breaks the repairs must be fixed by himself or other local connections from the Appleton area, who are familiar with the specific demands of these machines. Due to loving care and a bit of luck, these machines are still running and processing wool as they have been for generations. Since Tom Courtney has

**“The Courtney Woolen Mill is a staple of history within the Appleton area of Wisconsin.”**

worked in this field for half a century, he has attained knowledge of how these machines run and has a feel for what is needed to repair a breakdown.

On the main floor of the building, there are other devices and equipment with a fascinating history. One of the old pieces of equipment is a drill press, which was employed during the Second World War, most likely to construct new parts for the machines. This drill press has remained on the main floor for many years. As a side note, the mill was used to produce moonshine during Prohibition until December 5, 1933, when the Twenty-first Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified.

When the wool is ready, there are a variety of processes that happen next, depending on what type of textile is being produced. For example, some of the alpaca wool is crafted into laundry balls and will be sold to help with the drying of laundry. The sheep wool will be sold in a variety of sizes and quantities for many purposes. One of the businesses' most important clientele are quilters, who buy sheep wool to craft creative and artistic quilts. Pillows are also products produced from wool. In addition, polyester is also crafted into pillows that are sold to customers. Most of the wool made by the mill is sold in-state, but some wool is shipped to other states. Tom Courtney mentioned during our meeting that they have a client in Alaska.

The Courtney Woolen Mill is a staple of history within the Appleton area of Wisconsin. Tom Courtney, the owner of the mill, is diligent and kind, and is experienced in his field of work. Even with changing times, the mill remains and produces wool and other products every year with a commitment to excellence and service to their clients.

Wisconsin Architecture and History Inventory, 38955

The Courtney Woolen Mill seen from across the Fox River.

