

Making Clothing

Pioneers made their own clothing at home; there was little “store” clothing available. Skins and furs were used a great deal. Loose deerskin shirts, somewhat like those of the Native Americans, were worn by many of the men. Deerskin moccasins were common footwear. Caps were often made of raccoon or fox skins with the tails left hanging down in back for decoration.

Pioneer women knew how to make cloth. Where sheep were raised cloth was made of wool. After the wool was sheared from the sheep, the women washed, combed and carded it into smooth silky strands. Then they used a spinning wheel to twist the strands of wool into thread.

Flax was also used to make cloth. Flax came from a plant that grew in swamps. The stems of the plant were soaked and separated into strands that were then made into thread on a spinning wheel. A large wheel was used for spinning wool and a smaller wheel for flax. Cloth that is made from flax is called linen.

Thread was woven into cloth on a loom. The cloth was called homespun. Besides pure woolen and pure linen cloth, the pioneers also made linsey-woolsey. The lengthwise threads of this cloth were linen and the crosswise threads were wool. The linen made it strong and the wool added warmth.

Cloth was dyed with dyes made from plants that were found in the woods and fields. Pioneers made dyes from blueberries (berry), beets (roots), goldenrod (flower), black walnuts (husks), alder (bark), wild cherry (bark), sumac (berries), birch (dry leaves), bloodroot (roots), and other plants.

Cloth dyed with these dyes faded when washed or left in the sun, but the pioneers found that certain things would set the dye and keep it from fading. These were called mordants. Salt, vinegar, alum, and lye were commonly used as mordants. Mordants also changed some colors. Salt made some colors lighter, alum made some darker.