



Elaine Bourque

Acadian Brown Cotton Spinner and Weaver

Elaine Bourque says that her crafts have developed out of her "first love," gardening. In her garden, she grows brown and white cotton for spinning and weaving. She also grows the bead-like seeds known as Job's Tears, from which she makes rosaries.

Born in Acadia Parish near Bosco, Elaine Bourque moved to Lafayette Parish as a teenager. With her husband, she has lived in Milton, along the Vermillion River, for the last 36 years. She feels strongly about her Acadian heritage and says that she hopes to help keep alive the tradition of Acadian brown cotton spinning and weaving.

Although her great-grandmother spun and wove both cotton and wool many years ago, the tradition of Acadian weaving had almost disappeared when Elaine Bourque was growing up. Mrs. Bourque learned her skill from master weaver Gladys Clark during the late 1980s, after becoming fascinated as she watched Mrs. Clark demonstrate at various festivals. She approached Mrs. Clark about teaching her to spin and weave in the Acadian style, and they were awarded a Folk Arts Apprenticeship Grant by the Louisiana Division of the Arts in 1989. Mrs. Bourque says, "When I watch Mrs. Clark spin, I think, surely, this is an art!"

Elaine Bourque spins her yarn on a new spinning wheel, but she is also repairing an old wheel handed down in her husband's family. She works with both white cotton and the *coton jaune* (brown cotton) which gives Acadian textiles their distinctive beauty. She says that she prefers to work with the brown cotton, which she considers prettier. Her first brown cotton was given to her by a friend, but now she grows it in her garden. The *coton jaune* is a soft, natural shade of brown and does not need to be dyed, but it is more difficult to gin than white cotton. Mrs. Bourque remarks that if brown cotton thread is boiled it turns a rich, darker shade of brown.

Using a loom set up in her house (she says that she likes to have it "close by" so that she can weave every day), she weaves table runners, napkins, coasters, placemats, rag rugs and rag placemats. She uses the same warp on the loom to make placemats, table runners, and napkins. She has also inherited a larger loom on which she hopes someday to weave cotton blankets.

Mrs. Bourque is careful to make her pieces subtly different from Mrs. Clark's, since she says that she hopes one day to be able to weave a placemat and napkin that will be difficult to distinguish from Mrs. Clark's. For instance, Elaine uses five white bands on

her brown cotton place mats, rather than the four stripes that Mrs. Clark uses. She has experimented with using Job's tears in some pieces, and remarks that the beads blend nicely with brown cotton.

She does not sell her work but has demonstrated weaving and spinning at Lafayette's Native Crafts Festival, the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, and the Natchitoches-NSU Folk Festival. She has also demonstrated rosary making in Vermilionville.

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