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How To Make a Pioneer Shawl

The simplest outer wrap for a mid-19th century person is a wool shawl. Infants, small children, girls, women, even men might wear a wool shawl to keep warm! Your pioneer shawl can wrap around your shoulders when its cool out, be drawn over your head when its misty, or spread out on the ground for a picnic blanket when the sun is shining. It doesn't take up much packing space, and has so many uses that you'll find it's an indispensable part of a pioneer wardrobe.

Why Wool?

Before polypropylene and micro-fiber, there was wool, a staple fabric for the pioneer era. It can absorb a great deal of moisture without feeling wet, and keep you warm while doing so. It wicks away perspiration and allows evaporative cooling on hot days. Wool is also naturally fire-resistant, and smolders before it flames, an important property when the wind can lift a fire spark and land it on you 20 feet away! When a spark lights on wool, you'll smell the distinct odor of scorched sheep—not something you'll ever forget. Wool does not need to be thick and stiff to be warm; thin, lighter weights in layers will be warmer than one thick layer.

Wool weights are measured according to how much one square yard of wool weighs in ounces. For your shawl, look for a lighter weight (8-12 ounces per square yard), which is often given the name "Tropical", "Summer" or "Light Suit" weight wool on the end of the bolt. "Broadcloth" and "Flannel" weaves are both suitable for wool shawls. Wool flannel is slightly fuzzy; broadcloth is very smooth.

A plain, solid color is common (black, grey, brown, dark or bright green and blue, red—you have lots of color options), or you might choose a plaid or check. (Avoid pinstripes and other modern suit patterns, though!) Some things to keep in mind: as a pioneer, you'll be in dusty, grimy conditions most of the time. You'll have limited access to laundry, and in most cases, wool items were not regularly laundered, anyhow. Choose a color that won't look filthy immediately (white and cream are out!)

Yardage

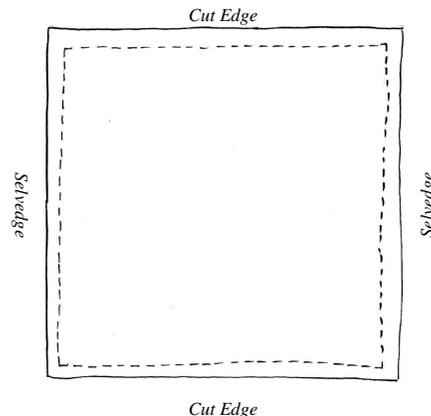
Most wools today are made in 54" to 60" widths. Shawls are easily made from a square of fabric. You'll want a bit extra to account for uneven cutting at the store, though: plan to purchase a length of 65-72" of wool for your shawl (about 2 yards)

Cutting

Snip into the selvedge of your wool, and draw out a single thread from the weave. By cutting along the gap left behind, you can get a perfectly square piece of fabric. You may need to draw a few inches, cut, and pick out the thread to draw again, repeating this across the width of the fabric. When you have one end even, measure down the selvage an amount equal to the fabric width, and draw/cut again. Your square is now virtually perfect, 54-60" wide and 54-60" long.

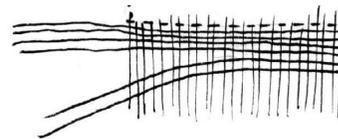
"Hemming"

Calling this process hemming is a little misleading. You won't be pressing anything. Instead, you'll stabilize the weave, then fringe the edges to create one of the most typical shawl finishes of the period.



With chalk, mark a line about 1.5" in from each edge. Work a line of backstitch by hand, or straight stitch by machine, along this line. This is illustrated above. You will need to carefully trim about 1/4" off of each selvedge edge (the firmly-finished sides of the cloth.) You can do this before or after stitching—the slight difference won't affect the performance or look of your shawl.

Now, begin drawing out the threads parallel to your stitching line. This will take awhile, and you may need a straight pin to help tease the threads away from the weave.



You'll have a little "naked" spot at each corner, where all the threads have been removed. When you have fringed all four edges, you're done! The holding row of stitches keeps the fringe from pulling out any further, and no additional finish is needed.

Fold the shawl to a triangle, wrap it around your shoulders, and keep toasty on cool prairie mornings and nights.

About the Author
Elizabeth Stewart Clark is a 19th century dressmaking instructor and historic pattern designer. A member of the LDS Church, she is always interested in helping others more fully appreciate our pioneer heritage. Find more patterns, articles, and books related to living history and the 19th century at
www.elizabethstewartclark.com