

Flying the Colours

By Bruce Masterman

The Mackinaw wool jacket is the ultimate in gang wear. It signifies membership in the proud community of hunters and anglers -- as clear a declaration of territorial interest as leathers and gang patches are for outlaw motorcyclists. At one time, long ago, it seemed as if all teenaged boys -- and, blessedly, some girls -- worth their salt wore the heavy, woven wool coat with checkered patterns of black and red, or black and green, yellow or blue. It was a show of pride, announcing to the world who you were and what you liked to do, which was spend as much time as possible outdoors.

Mackinaw coats and blankets not only look good; they're also highly practical. The true Mackinaw -- yes, some pretenders exist -- is made from 100 per cent pure virgin wool taken from hardy sheep with thick, sturdy fibers. The fabric is fulled -- worked in hot water -- to form a dense, felt-like material. Fulling brings the fibers tightly together to increase the density and strength, making the fabric highly resistant to wind and rain. Even when wet, the Mackinaw coat retains body heat -- a serious point of appreciation for an angler blind-sided by a sudden rainstorm, or a deer hunter perched in a tree-stand during a heavy snowfall.

In this era of SPACE-AGE! BREATHABLE! fabrics, Mackinaw wool garments are true survivors. They can be traced back more than 200 years, to an important trading post at Fort Michilimackinac on the south shore of Michigan's Straits of Mackinac, connecting Lake Michigan and Lake Huron. In the 1700's, natives, fur traders, trappers and explorers traded many items at the post. Among them were heavy wool blankets and coats, which became known as Mackinaws. They became the standard uniform of lumberjacks and trappers -- and, many years later, of kids who dreamed of being just like them one day.

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