

'Made to last': More than 100 years old, Canadian wool company thrives in changing knitting market

Briggs & Little survives by keeping its yarn and its business old school, natural and on a small scale

Heather Barrett · Posted: Feb 14, 2020 4:14 PM ET | Last Updated: February 14 [Link to story on CBC](#)



From left to right: Mike Little, the fourth-generation owner-operator of Briggs & Little, with his sons John and C.J., who work on the factory floor. (Heather Barrett/CBC)

Briggs & Little's knitting yarn is a bit scratchy and has a faint whiff of its barnyard origins.

But in today's \$2.8-billion North American knitting market, both the yarn and the small Canadian company that makes it have proved to be surprisingly durable.

"Part of the appeal to our customers is that we're just real people like anyone else," said John Little, the recently retired, third-generation owner and operator of the family-run company.

Located in York Mills, N.B., the mill started in 1857 and changed ownership and names over the years. In 1916, the business became Briggs & Little Woolen Mills Ltd., making it Canada's oldest continuously-operating woollen mill and one of the few remaining woollen mills left in North America.

The first thing you notice when you enter Briggs & Little's woollen mill is the smell of wet sheep.

"After a while you'll grow to really like it," laughed Mike Little, the mill's current owner-operator, and John's son. Mike is the fourth-generation Little to run the mill.



John Little, the third-generation owner-operator of Briggs & Little Woolen Mills Ltd., in front of the mill's world headquarters in York Mills, near Harvey Station, N.B. Pictured at right: Briggs & Little yarn ready to be shipped to customers. (Heather Barrett/CBC)

The mill takes freshly-shorn sheep's wool, most of it from Canadian Co-operative Wool Growers in Carleton Place, Ont., and the rest from individual farmers, and turns it into yarn in a rainbow of colours.

Inside Briggs & Little:



The mill takes freshly-shorn sheep's wool and turns it into yarn in a rainbow of colours. (Heather Barrett/CBC)

Farmer Louise Wiggans knit these gloves with Briggs & Little yarn, made with wool from sheep just like the ones behind her. (Heather Barrett/CBC)



A Briggs & Little employee shovels wool into the picker, which will blend the colours. (Heather Barrett/CBC)



One of the mill's earlier signs, rescued from a fire, now hangs in the modern factory. (Heather Barrett/CBC)



This washer is the first step for the raw sheep wool. (Heather Barrett/CBC)



This yarn-making machine is called a reeler. (Heather Barrett/CBC)



An industrial wool dryer at Briggs & Little. (Heather Barrett/CBC)



These dyed fleeces will be made into a heathered yarn. (Heather Barrett/CBC)



*The picker blends wool colours for heathered skeins.
(Heather Barrett/CBC)*

Vintage machinery

Using water from the small pond across the road from the mill, the sheep's wool is washed, dyed and bleached.

The wool is then carded, spun, and prepared for shipping. All of this is done on wrought iron, vintage machines that are operated by hand by the company's two dozen employees.

It's a steampunk paradise.

"Probably our newest piece of equipment, our carding machine, is a 1958," said Mike Little.

"There does have to be some fabrication work done on site from time to time," Little continued.

"But it's all mechanical. I'm sure there's stuff here from the '30s and '40s."



Briggs & Little makes yarn on vintage machinery. The newest piece of equipment in this mill was made in 1958. (Heather Barrett/CBC)

Affordable wool

Briggs & Little's 100 per cent Canadian wool product is a bit of an anomaly in the world knitting industry.

These days, most hobby yarn comes from big, high-tech manufacturers. It's heavy on the synthetic fibres, and you can find cheap piles of it in chain stores.

On the high end of the yarn market is small batch, handmade artisanal yarn, which can cost more than \$30 a skein. Knitting a sweater from high-quality yarn will cost much more than buying one ready-made.

- [Newfoundland knitters rescue trigger mitts from extinction](#)
- [The last wool company in N.B. prepares 100th anniversary](#)

However, Briggs & Little has been the most popular and preferred yarn in Atlantic Canada for years.

Briggs & Little's yarn is less smooth and processed than most pure wool knitting yarn, and retails for an affordable \$5 to \$10 per skein.

The Littles said they are able to keep that price point by keeping the company's costs low.



Heather MacFadyen and Crystal Nason work in the Briggs & Little stockroom, wearing their hand-knit sweaters, made from Briggs & Little yarn. (Heather Barrett/CBC)

Its workers make a bit more than minimum wage, and the factory closes for the summer. The Littles said the mill has not made their family wealthy.

However, the jobs come with a family health plan and flexible hours, and many employees have been with Briggs & Little for decades.

Snags in the yarn business

But the company has hit some snags, said John Little.

The mill has burned to the ground four times.

"We decided if we're going back in business, we're going to be as close to the same product as we were."

- John Little

After the last mill fire in 1994, John Little considered closing Briggs & Little for good, as many other North American woollen mills were doing at the time.

"The only advantage to that in our case was because they were downsizing, there was used equipment available," John said.

"And we decided if we're going back in business, we're going to be as close to the same product as we were."



Briggs & Little Woolen Mills makes 2,500 skeins of yarn every day. (Heather Barrett/CBC)

Slow fashion

In a world in love with change, Briggs & Little has adopted a radical business strategy of staying the same.

Little said he resisted rushing to meet big spikes in demand caused by knitting trends and instead has focused on a steady output, cultivating and holding on to long-term customers.

*"We're going to keep it this way as long as we possibly can."
- Mike Little*

Briggs & Little's business strategy is so out of time that it has become cutting-edge in the slow fashion movement, which veers away from disposable clothing and is popular with younger knitters.

"I think it [Briggs & Little yarn] ties in beautifully because it's made to last," said Briggs & Little's American distributor, Lacie Glidden.

"The impact on the environment is very minimal compared to a lot of different fibres," said the Cutler, Maine, resident.

Briggs & Little has shed its old-school ways in one key area — marketing.

Both Briggs & Little and Glidden are plugged into the large and active online knitting community. They spend a lot of time posting about the yarn on social media and knitting websites.

Today, Briggs & Little yarn can be found in about 175 independent shops across North America and online through the company's website.



Lacie Glidden, with her children Davey and Elsie, is Briggs & Little's American distributor. (Heather Barrett/CBC)

Currently, the company makes 2,500 skeins of yarn each day, enough to satisfy its longtime, loyal customers and new knitting enthusiasts, said Mike Little.

Little hopes that his sons, who currently work on the factory floor, will eventually take over the business and become the fifth-generation Littles to own the mill.

"We're going to keep it this way as long as we possibly can."