



THE CLOSE-KNIT CIRCLE

**Recent Titles in
the American Subcultures**

Vegetarians and Vegans in America Today

Karen Iacobbo and Michael Iacobbo

THE CLOSE-KNIT CIRCLE

American Knitters Today

Kerry Wills

AMERICAN SUBCULTURES

Bruce Jackson, Series Editor

PRAEGER

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To Meredith, who endured my tears, curses, and hours of befuddlement when she taught me to knit. She gave me a lifelong delight and obsession.

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SERIES FOREWORD

The guiding spirit for *American Subcultures* is not an anthropologist or sociologist or social scientist or a theorist of any kind. Rather, it is the greatest American poet of them all, Walt Whitman, proclaiming in “Song of Myself”:

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

As do we all. No one belongs to and is fully identified or explained by membership in only one subculture, though at a particular moment in time one subculture may be dominant in any of us.

When we’re traveling abroad, we may think of ourselves (and be identified by others) as Americans, but most of the time that category is too gross to be of any use for anything but caricature. It covers too many things that are not us, and it omits too many things that are. We are, in the course of our days, people who live in this town or that city, people who are gay or straight, people who work at this trade or that profession. We are bowlers, machinists, dancers, lawyers, ball players, students, teachers, cooks, eaters, lovers, bikers, cross-dressers, knitters, Vietnam vets, Gulf war (I) vets, Gulf war (II) vets, cops, crooks, body-builders, surfers, novelists, nudists, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, Christians, born-again, drug addicts, Internet addicts, street people . . .

A subculture is part of a larger culture. In ordinary scholarly or popular discourse, the meaning of *subculture* depends on who is talking

and what he or she is talking about. If the subject is North America, a subculture could be anything from local Little League team players and their parents to lawyers or Jews or Yankees or Westerners. But even those categories are often too broad to be of use. If the subject is Westerners, then further subcultures are coastal, mountain, high plains, water-rich, water-poor, farming, ranching Westerners. You can slice the apple a hundred ways, nearly all of them valid.

An African American musician from New York who went to Harvard and who is on active duty in the reserves in Iraq is at once a member of several distinct subcultures. Army reservists in Iraq are most obviously members of the subculture of the American military, but they are also members of such more specific military subcultures as Special Forces or the medical corps or helicopter pilots or the infantry. They are also as much members of the subcultures of Tennessee farmers or Los Angeles bus drivers or New York schoolteachers as they were when they left home. A man serving a prison sentence is most obviously and immediately a member of the subculture of convicts, but he is also a white or black or Hispanic or Native American or Asian. Neither the reservists nor the convicts leave those other parts of their experience and knowledge at home with their civilian clothes.

An interest or a behavior is not enough to define a subculture. Everyone eats and most people run sometimes, but eaters don't constitute a subculture on the basis of that fact alone and neither do people who run only to catch the bus. But vegetarians who are part of the community of information of other vegetarians are members of a subculture, as are runners who take part in serious running events. Likewise oenophiles and professional cooks and artisan bakers.

Which is to say, every one of us is not only a resident of this or that geographical place but we are also a member of this or that community of interest, concern, ethnicity, behavior: our lives are in our subcultures, several of them, simultaneously or alternatively.

And that is what the books in *American Subcultures*, each of them written by experts in that particular field or area, are about. Each explores a specific piece of the great range of interest and behavior that in sum comprise the essence of American life.

In *The Close-Knit Circle: American Knitters Today*, Kerry Wills explores the history and huge range of behaviors and communities that make up the subculture of American knitters. It is a subculture that has roots in the distant past, one that has equal room for artists and hobbyists, for people who work alone and for people who work in company; it is a subculture that brings together people who might otherwise never have occasion to talk, share, and hang out. It is a world of endless possibility defined by an activity that serves countless needs

and ends. Kerry Wills introduces us to a subculture that does all of the useful and interesting things subcultures do, and she writes about those things with wit, verve, insight, and energy.

Bruce Jackson
Series Editor

PREFACE

One of the most remarkable aspects of the American subculture of young and new knitters is that it is so welcoming to newcomers. It's as if this group's members all know they have a secret too amazing to keep to themselves. As I researched this book, I rarely encountered resistance from anyone when I sought an interview, a fact, or a photograph. More often, I was shocked by the willingness of busy people to drop everything and help me out. After a decade as a daily news reporter, during which I wrestled daily with reluctant sources, I was delighted to find my intrusions into knitters' lives greeted with friendliness and enthusiasm. Over and over, I spoke with notable knitters for the first time and sensed I was speaking with old friends. The effusive and generous spirit of this subculture is among the main reasons I felt compelled to write about it, and I hope that you, the reader, will feel the same warm embrace as you turn the following pages.

I must thank many people for their time, information, and willingness to let me into their close-knit world. Elinore Kaufman and Maria Alvarez are two young women whose knitting circle I first invaded early in 2005. Knowing I was the wife of a future Lutheran pastor, they were good enough to trust me and welcome me into their specialized club, Knitters for Choice. Their warmth and acceptance gave me much courage, and, as a first-time author, I truly needed that kind of support.

From then on, I was able to get to know so many talented, fascinating, and very busy people. Many of these knitters have worked knitting into a career, and so speaking to me was a notable act of trust. I want to thank them explicitly here. To Debbie Stoller, who has reclaimed

knitting for feminists everywhere and whose books have revived this long-neglected craft, I owe great thanks. Debbie walks the talk. She had never met or heard of me, and yet she called me direct at home in response to my first letter to her. She treats people with respect, and she deserves a great deal of respect for unapologetically touting the value of women's work.

Stephanie Pearl-McPhee also deserves my praise and gratitude. The best-selling author was inundated with demands on her time during the year that I wrote my book, and yet she made time for me.

Sabrina Gschwandtner helped me immensely to understand the realm of fine fiber arts. A fine artist and a curator herself, she took a leap of faith in sharing her time and knowledge with me. I was fortunate to meet her and learn from her.

Freddie Robins is English, but she fascinates knitters in America and around the globe, and I believe her influence on the way knitting is viewed will be substantial. I am very thankful that she was willing to contribute her thoughts and image to this book.

Many other women and men gave me their time, trust, and knowledge, and I am glad for all of their help. Brenda Dayne, Jesse Loesberg, Selma Miriam, Kay Gardiner, Rachael Herron, Zabet Stewart, Renée Rigdon, Kate Gilbert, Katie Franceschi, and Cat Mazza are among those I want to thank for sharing their stories with me. There are many other knitters who also deserve my thanks. I hope that acknowledgments in the form of notes will suffice to let you know how much I appreciate you.

I offer deep thanks to Hilary Claggett, who believed in this project, adopted it, and persuaded others at Praeger that it was worthy of their subculture series.

Lisa Pierce Breunig is my dear friend who recognized the story I had to tell. She picked up on my intense enthusiasm for knitting and absorption with the simultaneously ethereal and solid network of knitters around the world, through blogging. I never would have had the gumption to consider this endeavor without her confidence in me. I think women should make a more deliberate effort to acknowledge the support they get from other women, and so, I will lead by example and give Lisa her due credit and praise for believing in me.

I want also to thank my husband, Jonathan Wills, for his extreme patience and lovingness. Writing this book meant turning down freelance writing assignments, foregoing a full-time job that might have offered us money and benefits, and spending countless hours on research and writing when I might have been spending it with him in this, our second year of marriage. Jon, you are my love, my best friend, and my booster. I managed to live thirty-four years without you, but I do not know how.

And last, I must thank Meredith Wills-Davey, Jonathan's sister and my sister-in-law, for teaching me how to knit. This book never would have happened if she hadn't gotten the notion to sit me down with a pair of needles and some yarn. Meredith, you showed me that so-called domestic crafts do not diminish a person, even if she is an astrophysicist. Knitting is yet another of your many great accomplishments, and I am proud to say it is one of mine, too.

