

# ONE SHEPHERD'S CHOICE

by Elizabeth H. Kinne Gossner, Stillmeadow Finnsheep

The unifying factor which all shepherds share is freedom of choice. An interest in fiber arts propelled my own early fascination with raising sheep and led me to my first flock of Finn crossbreeds in 1977. They were my learner flock, or so I thought. Years later the fond memories were re-kindled and I chose to begin again, this time with purebred ambitions.

In 1994 my seedstock was acquired and Stillmeadow Finnsheep farm was founded. We began by vigorously adapting to the STAR system of intensive breeding with three alternating groups of ewes. In doing so the ewes kept us busy with lambs born every 73 days. That's a whole lot of work for an individual shepherd!

These Finnsheep presented so many opportunities and we wanted to explore them all at once. The intense lambing schedule in theory would reward us with year-round meat sales, but just as our marketing skills improved, a new challenge hit us head on. Its name was O.P.P.

Discovered here when one ewe had given her third set of triplets, Ovine Progressive Pneumonia (OPP) is an incurable virus

which sneaks in and spreads rapidly through an over-crowded flock. Infected young carrier sheep may exhibit no visible signs of this disease that eventually causes wasting of the body and ruined udders. Our ewe "Nibbles" had been such a naturally maternal dam with strong litters twice already that when I found one of her lively newborn triplets dead the day after lambing I thought it was accidental. She had always loved her lambs. Another day passed and a second lamb was found dead. At that point my alarms went off and I climbed into her pen to find that her large udder had become as hard as a rock and had no milk. She was in terrible trouble and my learning curve was about to grow much steeper.

Our veterinarian came and drew blood which was tested at Cornell University, confirming that she had OPP. So there we were with our beautiful flock in the midst

of lambing, knowing that we faced an enormous decision. For me, that difficult choice was quickly made. I had fulfilled my dream of becoming a shepherd and I would not abandon my flock. This meant that all of the 60 new lambs would be grown out for meat. Also, every mature ewe and each ram would need to be blood tested at six-month intervals with the positives being separated and culled. We learned that there could be no false-positive test results, but that false-negative tests were unfortunately possible at that time. My vet advised testing multiple times until we achieved three consecutive whole-flock negative test results. We followed her directive, after which she wrote a letter identifying our flock as OPP-free.

Choosing to face this extended dilemma was emotionally draining, but I have never doubted the decision to totally rid our Finn flock of this crippling disease. We were left with enough genetic strength to rebuild and I gained a clear commitment to be ever watchful over the flock. Several of our early ewes came through the years of blood testing with consistent resistance to the virus and those strengths have continued in progeny to the 7th generation. Since 1998, we have stressed bio-security, encouraging others to become health conscious.

The pride I have in my Finnsheep is immense. They have given me the opportunity to learn and to become a better shepherd. Having chosen annual springtime lambing now allows efficient grass-fed lambs to be offered as registered breeding stock. Selective introduction of rams as needed provides fresh genetics for the continued development of the pure breed. And now, since I've achieved a truly easy-care flock, I am able to enjoy my additional interests of handspinning and other traditional artisan crafts. Shepherding the Finns has enriched my life beyond measure.

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Photo courtesy Elizabeth H. Kinne Gossner of Stillmeadow Finnsheep

**Ginger Ears is a 9-year old white triplet Finn ewe, pictured here with her litter of quads. She has been a spectacular dam whose lambing average exceeds 300%.**