THREE BAGS FULL

Finns & Wool Processing

BY MARY O’MALLEY
PHOTOS BY E. H. KINNE GOSNNER

When my husband and I acquired our first flock of sheep 14 years ago I had only the vaguest notion of what I would do with the wool. Visions of me, deftly spinning, floated dimly in the back of my mind. But in truth, I had no idea how to spin wool and not the slightest idea of how to prepare wool for spinning or felting. Nor did I have any appreciation for the amount of time involved in hand processing fleeces or the quantity of wool that even a few sheep would produce.

When we incorporated purebred Finnsheep into the flock, my motivation to work with the lustrous, soft locks increased.

My initial attempts at hand-washing the fleeces, were gratifying. I loved watching the wool evolve from smelly, greasy beige to soft fluffy white. I enjoyed hand carding the wool and even acquired a drum carder.

The big negative was the time involved. Besides sheep, I had four children at home. At the rate I was going I would never actually use any of the wool.

Solving A Wool Pile-Up

Discussions with handspinners left me slightly intimidated. They understandably emphasized clean fleeces, free of vegetable matter. My sheep, uncoated, spend time in the woods where “nature” of all kinds finds its way into their fleece.

“What to do?”

The ad for Fingerlakes Woolen Mill in sheep! caught my eye. I knew where their stall was at the Maryland Sheep and Wool Festival. Perhaps I could talk to them....

It was with some hesitation that I brought three bags full of raw Finnsheep fleeces to Jay Ardai of Fingerlakes Woolen Mill. I was certain they would be rejected. Instead, this kind, soft spoken man reassured me that, no, my fleeces didn’t look any worse than others he had seen. And yes, he thought they could process these. Delighted, I left my fleeces to eagerly await their return a few months later.

When that first box of roving arrived, I could hardly contain my excitement. Silky soft, clean and white, like what I imagine cumulus clouds or angel’s hair to be; the roving exceeded all my expectations.

Over the years, my curiosity increased about how a smelly raw fleece evolves to fluffy soft roving. I spoke with Jay at the 2014 New York Sheep and Wool Festival to learn more about the process and his business.

Back in the 1990s Jay and his wife, Suzanne O’Hara were both oceanographic researchers at Columbia University, residing outside of New York City in Rockland County. Suzanne was a spinner and fiber enthusiast. Jay was interested in moving away from their current urban lifestyle. Periodically they would purge real estate magazines or Blair and Ketchum’s Country Journal musing about attaining a farm.

Jay Ardai, managing the Fingerlakes Woolen Mill’s “first breaker” carding machine.
In 1998 or 1999 an ad offering the Fingerlakes Woolen Mill for sale caught their eyes. The opportunity appealed to both of them. But with the high prices of farmland, it would be 2001 before they closed on the deal. Following that, a life’s worth of learning was packed into an intense week of on the job training with Tim Horschler, the previous owner of the mill.

For Jay, the perfect fleece to process is well skirted and without burrs or vegetable matter. It doesn’t take much vegetable matter to ruin a fleece. Ewes love to dive into their hay and this is a major source of the vegetable matter problem. For this reason, good skirting should remove the fleece around the neck. In addition, shepherds should remove, or “skirt,” the manure contaminated fleece from the rear end, belly wool, and fleece that has matted on the sheep.

Fingerlakes Woolen Mill uses a 60-inch industrial carder so a fleece weight of four pounds is the minimum for processing. A cottage carder is a better choice for people who have small amounts of wool to process. In addition, the processing steps are the same whether you have one pound or 50 pounds of wool, so it is more efficient to work with larger amounts of wool.

Making Good Wool Into Beautiful Wool

The first step in processing is to open the fleece. As it enters the “pre-carding” machine, it rides up a spike belt and the fleece is stretched out into pieces the size of a hand. Vegetable matter shakes out during this process which is sort of the first cleaning of the fleece.

The fleece is transferred to a big vat with very hot water, hot enough to melt lanolin. A favorite detergent in which to wash the wool has been Joy Dishwashing Ultra. However, this may change as detergent formulas can change.

While many breeds need only one wash, some of the greasier fleeces like Targhee, Merino and Rambouillet may need more than one wash.

Both outdoors and indoors, racks are used to dry the fleece. On a sunny summer afternoon, the fleece might be dry by afternoon. But times vary, particularly indoors, with the level of humidity in the air. In the late 1800s, Columbia University (in New York City) found that 65 percent humidity was the optimum humidity to card out wool fibers, leaving them more flexible and less brittle.

At this point, the wool is ready to go into the “opener,” which has a conveyor belt that feeds the picker. In winter, the wool will be sprayed with a water soluble solution to reduce static and lubricate the wool. In the summer, it may be possible to spray with only water. The lubricated wool will be further opened, fed through the picker and divided into locks of fiber, about the size of a finger. Everything falls out the back into a box where there is a fan that blows the fleece around. Additional dirt is released that falls away from the wool as dirt is heavier than wool.

Once this stage is completed, the fan is shut off and the wool is fed to the 60-inch carding machine. Another “rake” at this point allows the processor to vary the volume of wool being fed to the carder. Generally however, the product will be a light continuous web of roving, about 10 inches wide. The roving is packed into a clear bag and box, to be returned to the consumer.

Now & Tomorrow

With Jay and Suzanne’s expert help, I’ve been able to move beyond wondering what I would ever do with my beautiful Finnsheep wool and into action. Visions of me deftly spinning wool still occasionally float at the back of my mind (where I expect them to stay permanently).

Over the years, I’ve found that what I enjoy most—besides actually caring for the sheep—is felting. Finn wool is ideal for felting and I love to turn the exquisite roving I receive back from Fingerlakes Woolen Mill to practical, cozy, yet unique mittens and hats, as well as bags and pillow coverings.

Mary O’Malley raises purebred registered Finnsheep, with help from her husband and family in Silver Spring, Md. She is Vice-President of the Finnsheep Breeders Association.