Wool Pool pulls in wool!

By Harold Shelly

DOYLESTOWN — Trucks, cars and station wagons lined Oakland Street, adjacent to the Doylestown freight station early one morning recently, for the Bucks County Wool Pool.

Members of the wool pool from Bucks and Montgomery counties were bringing the end result of a year's hard work to the station for grading, bagging and shipment. The fleeces were transported in the family sedan, station wagon or the farmer's truck, depending on the size of the flock. There are several professional sheep raisers in the pool, but the majority are people with two to a dozen sheep, who have them, in a lot of cases, just to keep the grass out.

A team, which varied in size from 12 to 20 persons, unloaded the vehicles, graded the wool and separated it into various classifications. Each shipment was recorded and weighed. The wool was bagged, weighed again and loaded into a freight car for transport to the woolen mill in South Carolina.

Mike Fournier, Bucks Extension agent, said that the wool is purchased each year at the Pennsylvania annual wool sale at State College. This event, held in April, brings together representatives of wool pools around the state and buyers from major woolen manufacturers.

The buyers are invited by the president of the Pennsylvania Sheep and Wool Growers Association to bid. Every buyer submits a sealed bid for the wool from each pool. The statewide total usually amounts to between 500,000 and 750,000 pounds, and the buyers are bidding on the basis of last year's production.

Prices for this year's wool range from 52 cents a pound for fine staple which is used for clothing, to 5 cents a pound for tags, which are shorter than one inch, usually dirty and used in a felting process.

The wool pool has become an annual tradition for several people. Professor James Diamond, chairman of the ag science major at Penn State, returns to Doylestown every year to take part. He stopped jamming wool into a bagging machine long enough to say that he has been doing this every year since 1962, and comes back to see old friends and renew acquaintances. Diamond formerly raised sheep on a farm in Ottsville. .

The closest anyone could estimate the age of the pool was to say, "It's been in existence since the 1940s." Pool Vice President Warren Landis made this statment as he busily weighed and marked each bag of wool with the weight, the shipping number, the kind of wool and its use, just before it was loaded onto the rail car. Landis, and his daughter Irene, raise 200 sheep on a farm near Franconia.

This shipping schedule was adhered to as closely as possible. Grading and weighing began at 7 a.m. and continued non-stop until 4 p.m. The larger producers were scheduled early in the day, and those with 300 pounds or less came in the afternoon. At times the line of vehicles extended two blocks from the freight station.

Treasurer Fred Haentze said that expenses incurred by the pool were defrayed in part by the sale of wool to home spinners at $1 per pound. He said the one expense that doesn't vary too much over the years is the amount of coffee and donuts consumed by the workers.

Successful bidder for this year's crop of wool was Prouvost, LeFebvre Co., Inc., of Jamestown, South Carolina. Pool President William Rockafellow said that the car was filled, and the total amount of wool shipped by the 200-member pool was 28,000 pounds.

Bucks County Extension agent Mike Fournier, center, grades the wool with the assistance of Cheryl Fairbairn, Chester County Extension agent and Rod Gilbert of DelVal College.

A team of 12 to 20 people helps unload the packed vehicles. From there the wool is graded, separated, and weighed.

George Rockafellow and his brother John load the heavy bags of wool in waiting freight cars.

Professor James Diamond, left, surveys a pile of wool as Bill Rockafellow stuffs another arm full in the packager.

Wool, wool everywhere! In the forefront is a pile of wool just unloaded from one truck, while another waits in the foreground to be eased of its burden.