

Cochranville's Menhennetts big on Shropshire sheep

BY LAURA ENGLAND

COCHRANVILLE — About five miles deep in the backroad farm country of Cochranville, near the Octoraro Creek, lies the 96-acre Menhennett Farm. Obscured by an overgrown hedgerow, one cannot see the farm from the road, and if not paying close attention, can easily miss the farm entrance bordered by trees and brush.

Once past the hedgerow, one sees the two aluminum-sided, open front barns and the acres of pasture land. At first glance, it appears a typical farm — and it may very well be — but what sets this Shropshire sheep farm apart from others is the precision, experience and know-how of its owners, Annette and Warn Menhennett.

Owners of the 150-head sheep operation, the Menhennetts began their farming venture in 1965 when they purchased the land. Three years later, they bought their first flock of sheep and were on their way to a profitable and pleasurable farm business.

Currently raising 80 brood ewes, six rams, and approximately 60 sheep from this year's lamb crop, Annette Menhennett finds her hands full in running the day-to-day operation. Husband Warn is a chemical engineer who helps out when he can and especially during the lambing season.

"Warn tries to plan his two-week vacation around lambing time," Mrs. Menhennett says. "That's when we are really busy."

Lambing season is about five months away, explains Mrs. Menhennett, but breeding season

preparations are underway now. The rams were shorn, wormed and their hooves trimmed at the beginning of the month to help rid of stressful situations. Added stress can cause a lower breeding potential, and because one ram is responsible for breeding 25-30 ewes, top performance is critical, Mrs. Menhennett says.

"The ewe flock is in long fleece now," she explains. "We don't shear them in the spring like most people."

Instead, the Menhennetts have been experimenting with alternative shearing practices. One method they tried, based on a Scottish experiment, was to shear the ewes after breeding and before lambing. Through this, the fetuses were found to grow more and were stronger, more viable at birth.

Also, the ewes were cleaner, having less wool, and didn't take up as much room. They were more conscientious of their lambs, too, Mrs. Menhennett says.

But this method didn't work out for the Menhennetts. A 10-15 percent increase in the number of resorbed fetuses caused them to try another method.

The method currently used is shearing the ewes before breeding which has led to a better lambing percentage and fewer birth problems. Through the shearing, the ewes are stimulated and have multiple ovulations which result in the higher lambing percentage, Mrs. Menhennett adds.

"It's important to get multiple births," she says. "It's a challenge to improve genetically a purebred line of sheep."

Following the shearing



The 80 brood ewes raised on the Menhennett Farm in Cochranville, are pastured during the day and put into pens at night. Currently, the ewes are rotated on three pasture areas.

preparations, a teaser ram is placed in the ewe herd, and flushing — feeding more grain — is started. This gets the ewes into a gaining procedure which can have a positive affect on multiple ovulation and twinning, Mrs. Menhennett says.

At the beginning of September, the flock will be divided into three groups, and a ram, equipped with a sire-sign harness, will be placed in the herd. The harness, Mrs. Menhennett explains, aids in identifying which ewes have been bred.

Once the ewes are bred, it's waiting time until the lambing begins in late-January and early February. During this time, the ewes are watched closely with the help of a monitor placed in the house.

"We try to assist in all the births," Mrs. Menhennett says, "and sometimes we're up 24 hours a day."

That problem, however, is resolved by Mrs. Menhennett and her husband taking turns with the monitoring process.

Shortly after birth, the ewe and her lamb are placed in a 4 by 4 pen called the jail. With an overhead heatlamp to add warmth, the lamb is dried and fed colostrum from its mother.

The birthing process begins yet another of the Menhennetts operation procedures, record-keeping. Three systems are used and kept up-to-date. A card system records the breeding and lambing dates and any information associated with the actual lambing process, such as birthing problems and the vitality of the lamb.

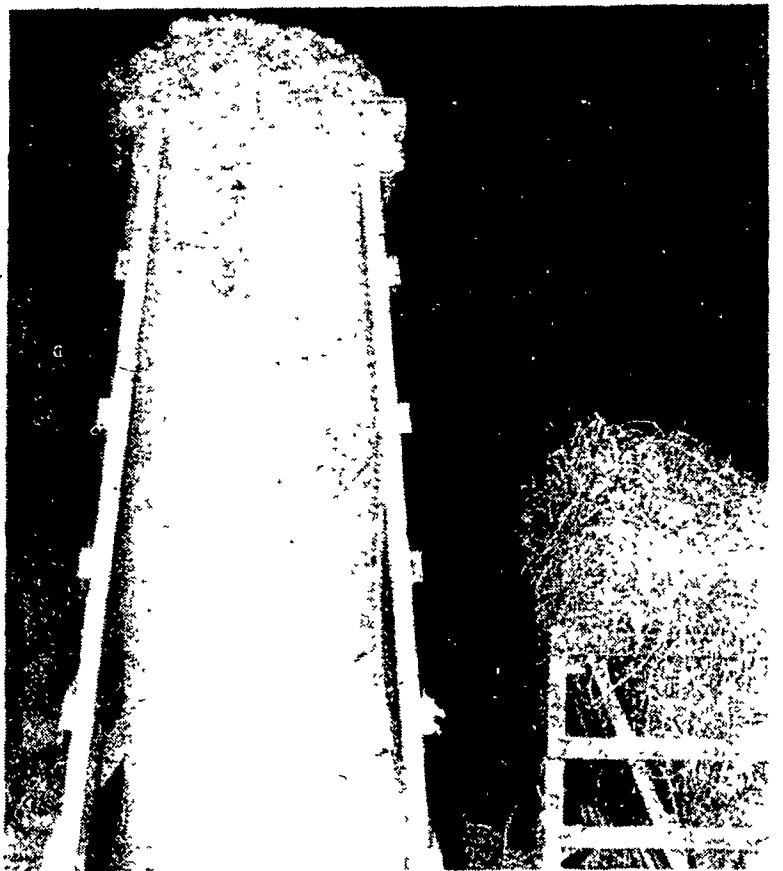
A barn sheet is used to record eartag numbers and weight gains. Weights are checked every 30, 60 and 90 days. A permanent flock book rounds out the record-keeping system by listing pedigrees and other family traits.

Besides the usual daily chores, Mrs. Menhennett takes the time to show her Shropshires at area fairs and has done quite well. Last year, the Menhennetts owned the champion ewe and the champion ram at the Pa. Farm Show.

Although she shows, Mrs. Menhennett says she believes sheep shows have done more damage than good to the sheep industry.

"The criteria in placing the blues, reds and etc.," she says, "are economically unimportant." "You can't determine rate of gain, and no emphasis is placed on twinning and multiple births."

She cites other characteristics, such as udder evaluation, fleece quality and the scrotol circumference of the ram, as other



After shearing, the wool is placed into large sacks, about 10 feet long, which are then sent to brokers and other wool processors.



These Shropshire rams, part of the Menhennett's breeding program, were recently shorn for the breeding season. Besides shearing, the rams are wormed and the hooves trimmed to help avoid added stress which could harm their breeding potential.

areas which receive no consideration in open show judging.

But despite these problems found in judging contests, the Menhennetts carry a strong breeding program at home, having mostly performance registered (superior weight gains), purebred Shropshire sheep.

Although she is sold on raising her sheep, Mrs. Menhennett notes that veterinary care has been a problem with what she considers "a lack of adequate veterinary assistance."

Through her position as president of the Pa. — Md.

Shropshire Association and through work with the Pa. Sheep and Wool Growers Association and Pa. Suffolk and Southdown breeders, she is trying to get improved veterinary services.

"Sheep are considered a minor species in this country," she says, "and this adds to the problems of adequate veterinary care."

This is just one of the areas where Mrs. Menhennett sees a need for improvement in the sheep industry, and through her experience and knowledge of sheep breeding she hopes to make some positive changes and adjustments.



Record-keeping is an important part of the Menhennett's Shropshire operation. Annette Menhennett keeps three types of records — a card system for breeding, a barn sheet for eartag identification and weight gains, and a permanent flock book for pedigrees.



Soon after giving birth, the ewe and her lamb are moved to a room called the jail. The jail is a series of 4 x 4 movable pens, each with an overhead heat lamp to add warmth and help dry the newborn lamb.