

The black sheep of Wasteland Farm

BY JACK HUBLEY

ATGLEN — An afternoon drive to this place is a step back in time. Leave the bumper-to-bumper behind in Lancaster, head for Strasburg, then south to Ninepoints, a left, a right, top the rise, coast down the hill and you're there.

The old two-story stone and stucco house has been there since the 1830's, tucked away in a wrinkle of southern Lancaster County only a half-mile from the Chester County line in Sadsbury Township.

Like a fetching bookcover, the outside of this house insists that you see more. Walk across the hardwood floors and warm your hands by the woodstove within the chest-high hearth of an ancient fireplace.

A window sill as deep as your bedroom closet catches your eye. They don't make walls and sills like this anymore, so you walk over for a closer look and happen to spy the herd of sheep out back.

No ordinary flock of uniformly white animals, these sheep range in color from black to chocolate to a silvery cream. There are a lot of questions stirring in your head so you shoo the snoozing cat from the

stuffed chair and settle back for a chat with Caren Schoonhoven on the subject of Wasteland Farm.

Born and raised in California, Caren Glotfelty had already owned the old stone place and it's 20 acres for five years before she married Wim Schoonhoven in 1982.

Wasteland Farm? The name seems no more appropriate than calling a continent north of the Arctic Circle, Greenland, but Caren explains that in years past the area's steep, wooded hills were of no use to farmers, hence the name Wasteland, which was also applied to a church and cemetery in the area.

And this was just the kind of "wasteland" that appealed to Caren and Wim, whose careers as environmental planners brought them great distances—she from California, and he from the Netherlands—to settle in Lancaster County.

As environmental planners, the couple's concern over erosion influenced their decision to convert the surrounding cornfields to pastureland, and to raise sheep.

It was in 1981 when Wasteland Farm acquired its first flock of eight Karakuls. Mrs. Schoonhoven explains that the breed probably

reached the height of its popularity early in the century when the sheep were imported from Central Asia to satisfy the demand for Persian lamb coats.

Though today's commercial operators are not fond of the Karakul's relatively poor carcass and black (usually applied to any color fleece other than white) pelage, Caren points out that Karakul fleece is popular with hand spinners interested in the natural color variations and long staple (length of the wool fibers) characteristic of the breed.

The Karakul begins life as a black lamb, becoming blackish-brown as a yearling, chocolate brown as a two-year-old, and changing to a silvery salt-and-pepper at age three. The breed's wool is coarse and heavy, which led the Schoonhovens to begin cross-breeding their ewes with purebred Romney rams in an effort to produce a finer fleece.

Results of the breeding program have been gratifying, yielding lambs with a richer, more lustrous fleece while retaining the distinctive Karakul color. The couple has taken their program one step further by breeding these first-generation lambs with a black Romney ram in an effort to insure a colored fleece.

Why take pains to produce these black sheep with the current emphasis on meat production and white fleeces?

At the present time Caren's greatest concern is producing quality fleeces for her own use, but she also points out that a small but healthy market does exist for the better black fleeces, with prices ranging from \$2.50 to \$9.00 a pound.

One of the keys to satisfying such buyers lies in producing a clean product, free of chaff and vegetable matter. Clean wool is important to hand spinners who don't want to be bothered with repeated washings, and the Schoonhovens have experimented with various feeding methods in an effort to keep food from working its way into the fleece.

Shearing time plays an important role in the cleanliness of the finished product, as well.

As air temperatures warm, the lanolin in wool begins to coagulate, resulting in oily yellow deposits that are difficult to remove.

With their second-generation sheep rancher on the way last spring, the couple delayed shearing until late June, a mistake that Caren vows not to repeat this year.

These days Caren is no longer alone as she tends her flock, with nine-month-old Jake supervising from his perch in mom's backpack. Arriving home from work each evening at about 6:30, Wim takes charge of the evening feeding, as well as any barn or fence-mending chores that need to be done.

Though the Schoonhovens are not fattening lambs for market, Caren emphasizes that good nutrition is no less important for wool production. The flock is fed good quality alfalfa hay along with a trace mineral supplement, and Caren points out that a creep-feeding program instituted this year has already resulted in a noticeable improvement in the lamb crop.

Caren reports that both Romneys and Karakuls lamb easily, but recommends always being on hand for the occasional emergency. Wasteland ewes are bred in late July and August, with the lambing season getting underway in January.

Though future plans include house renovations, and rebuilding of the barn on the original stone foundation that remains, for the present the Schoonhovens admit to concentrating all of their spare time and resources on their sheep



Caren Schoonhoven examines one of her Romney rams as son Jake looks on.



Two different fleece types to be found at Wasteland Farm are (left), the dark, heavy Karakul, and the light, softer Romney. Through crossbreeding, the Schoonhovens hope to produce a softer wool while retaining the rich color variations of the Karakul.



This young Katakul/Romney hybrid displayed by Caren possesses the dark, lustrous fleece of interest to hand spinners.



A salt-and-pepper flock of Romney and Karakul sheep feeds contentedly at Caren and Wim Schoonhoven's Wasteland Farm.



Millie, the foundation ewe in the Schoonhoven's breeding program, shows the silvery fleece characteristic of Karakuls when reaching three years of age.

The flock is currently made of 16 breeding animals, including three hybrid bred ewes, and 12 hybrid lambs.

With Jake's head start in the business, Caren hopes to interest their son in the 4-H program, where she hopes the family's influence may stimulate more interest in quality wool production.

"The wool pools could certainly become more organized and exert more influence," she observes,

"but with prices at their current levels there's little incentive to breed for a better product."

But current prices and a scarcity of markets for their colorful wool are hardly deterrents to this Atglen couple in their quest for the Golden Fleece, and in years to come those seeking the finest wool for the manufacture of rugs and outer garments may well find their fortune in Wasteland.