

Sheep farm

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drove past I said, "that's it!" she recalls.

Finally, in 1976, Vesper Valley Farm's 100-plus acres became Billie's own piece of the country.

Practically the first thing she did after signing the papers was to buy the horse of her little-girl dreams, a mare that still roams the peaceful pasture.

"Then I thought I'd better come up with some way to make a living off the place" she figured.

With her mother a market researcher, Billie had grown up with statistical conversation around the family dinner table. So she set out to analyze her farm situation from a "market research" angle, to determine what she could do with the property.

Steers, she decided, were really too large for her to single-handedly manage and move. Neither chickens nor hogs particularly aroused her interest.

It was the purchase of a single black sheep," because it was different, "that proved a critical turning point.

"I really enjoyed that sheep and its colored wool, and decided to take spinning lessons. Actually, I wanted to knit myself a black wool sweater," Billie relates.

From there, her enthusiasm for the natural fiber just took over. If she was going to raise sheep, and wool she was going to do it with the same business-like, approach she takes toward any task.

Back to research she went, weighing the quality of fleeces of various purebreds, and their carcass growth efficiencies. Before long, sheep meetings, shows, sales and extension short courses crammed her calendar.

Her aim, Billie determined, was to establish better-than-average prices for her flock production. Drawing on her own fashion background, spinning experience and artistic creativity urges, she thought it would be possible to generate customer demand for top-quality crafting fleeces. A long-haired breed would best fit

that market. With that qualification, plus a desire for weight-gain efficient carcass animals, Billie settled on the Corriedale breed.

Her studies told Billie that the Corriedale breed was developed through crossing Lincolns, one of the world's oldest breeds, with Spanish Merinos. Sending out letters to sheep breeders across the country, she again set out to find the most qualified and successful sheep breeders, to "go sit on their doorsteps to learn from them."

Her praise for these breeders, willing to share their experiences and knowledge is enthusiastic.

"The Corriedale people have been wonderful in sharing information. Their support and the camaraderie among them is great."

Through her introductions to Corriedale breeders, Billie became familiar with the top lines developed in the flock of Philip Resiter, Tenino, Washington. Her purchase of top breeding stock from Reister is part of the foundation on which she is rapidly building a string of show successes.

At last year's Maryland State Fair at Timonium, Vesper Valley entries earned both the Corriedale division's champion ewe and reserve champion ram honors. One of her entries was half of the winning pair at the national show, held in Louisville in November.

Along with the purebred Corriedales and Romanys, Billie is developing her own lines of long-haired colored sheep. A separate challenge is to breed a flock of red-fleeced sheep, a rare and elusive natural shade in wool.

The few strains of sheep with red-fleece genes are, unfortunately, the poorest in carcass gain efficiency. Also, the genes that produce the rusty-red wool shade are recessant to the more dominant black, and many generations of crossing and re-crossing for the red color may still bring a breeder little or no satisfactory results.

Genetic developments in the natural colored lines have come somewhat faster. A favorite of this

spring's crop of lambs has a fleece with a long, thick silvery staple, and an almost shimmering quality running through the fiber.

Unlike most shepherds, Billie does not set aside a day in late spring to shear the entire flock for her wool harvest. Instead, to maintain only the very highest quality of fresh fleece for her specialty retailing, she clips fleeces as customers order, or as her own design needs dictate.

"The best place to store fleece is on the sheep," she says adamantly.

Spinners prefer a four-to-five-inch staple for working into yarn. Since some of her bloodlines produce nearly an inch of fleece per month, a twice-yearly harvest of wool doubles production. Extremely detailed records are kept on every animal, including a sheet of samples from various areas of each fleece harvested.

In addition to retail demand for raw fleeces, Billie's design background has interested her in experimenting with producing do-it-yourself kits and finished, individualistic garments for high-fashion boutiques.

In the basement of her farmhouse, Billie processes selected colored or dyed wools into felt for designing garments. Handfuls of raw wool are run through a picker and a carder, to straighten and separate the individual fibers of wool. Loose and fluffy, the airy cluster of wool is called a "batt." Several batts are laid side by side, then other are criss-crossed, many layers high, into a fluffy stack of wool strands, about a yard square.

Alternately immersed in very hot water, then in extremely cold water, the stacks of fibers are "shocked" into shrinking together into a tight fabric, much as an all-wool sweater would shrink if given similar treatment.

From the resulting piece of wool felt, Billie creates garments, slippers, even hats, that are warm, long-wearing, washable, and, because each piece of felt is different in shading, a one-of-a-kind item.

A born marketer and merchandiser, Billie has sold even the

sounds of her flock for a television commercial.

While visiting her brother, an award-winning song writer who lives in New York, Billie made the acquaintance of a sound effects professional, who happened to need the bleating voices of sheep for use in a commercial he was helping to produce. Via the magic of tape, Billie recorded the sounds of her flock at feeding, the distinct sounds of baby lambs and mothering calls and the deep calls of the rams, lending an unusual claim to fame for her vocal flock.

No longer considered a novice by her peers in sheep breeding, Billie is now frequently sought out by others for her expertise in genetics

and marketing. An enthusiastic supporter of the 4-H program and the assistance it can give youngsters, she was recently asked to talk with sheep club members at one of their seminars. The award of appreciation they presented to her has become a treasured memento for the city girl whose dream to become a farmer has become successful reality.

"I'm still playing," she grins. "I just have a bigger sandbox and larger toys."

Perhaps, someday, Billie may even find time to knit that black sweater that she never got around to starting.

4-H cookbook offered for last time

A few copies of "Favorite Recipes Of Pennsylvania 4-H Families: Appetite Pleasers" are still available from the Montgomery County Extension Service. The book is a limited one-of-a-kind edition with hundreds of homesteaded recipes from 4-H leaders and members throughout the state. Favorite recipes of famous 4-H alumni are also included.

The collector's item includes more than 450 recipes in the following categories:

- salads and salad dressings
- soups and sandwiches
- breads
- main dishes made with meats, poultry, seafood and vegetables
- vegetables
- desserts
- side dishes

In addition to American dishes, recipes from many different

cultures are represented to reflect the diversity of cooking in Pennsylvania. Each recipe includes a nutritional breakdown of calories, sodium, protein, potassium, carbohydrates, total fat and cholesterol per serving.

This general, all-purpose cookbook also includes cooking charts, tips, information about the 4-H program, and color and black and white photographs. The cookbook features a spill-proof cover and is spiral-bound for easy use. 4-H clubs have them for sale at the time. All proceeds are benefiting the 4-H program in Pennsylvania, which currently serves 145,000 youths between the ages of 8 and 19.

To order the cookbook, please contact your local County Extension Office at 277-0574. This cost is \$5.00 + 30 cents tax, + \$1.00 for shipping and handling.

Fulton Grange passes resolution

Fulton Grange 66 passed a resolution favoring a constitutional amendment to change the present form of selecting judges for statewide office to a merit system.

Lecturer Sandy Glabreath asked for participation in the art, photo and talent contests. She also asked all Grange ladies to create an

original Easter bonnet from things in the home and to bring the Pomona Grange meeting on April 21.

Wanda Galamore, York, spoke on "Deaf Awareness" and demonstrated the sign alphabet.

The next meeting will be April 9 and will feature a humorous film.

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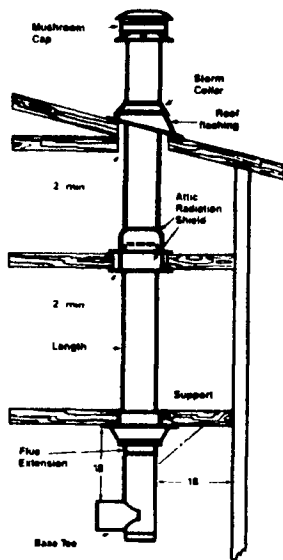
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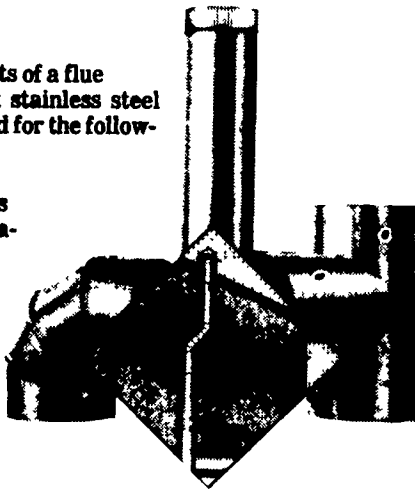
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