



Marianne Horchler, right, advises a customer on wool crafts during the recent Pennsylvania Sheep and Wool Field Day at Penn State University.

Former urban couple successfully combine sheep farming, mail order business

BY MARGIE FUSCO
Staff Correspondent

GENOA, NY — Tim and Marianne Horchler not only have pursued a dream; they've achieved it and are taking it to the limit. They've gone from urban life to sheep farming to a successful mail order business.

Five years ago, Tim was a policeman in Bethesda, MD. He was doing well, but he and Marianne dreamed of escaping urban life. "We had life in the fast lane," he recalls. "And we didn't want it anymore."

They had a dream about owning a farm and putting their energies into working it. For most young couples with no farming background in their families, the idea never goes much beyond a dream, because the odds of success aren't great. But Tim ever encountered skepticism at his dream, he doesn't acknowledge it. Finally, he took a week's vacation, rented a recreational vehicle, and headed north.

In southern New York state, they stopped. The area was rich in farmland with lots of real estate available. The Horchlers started calling real estate agents. "We looked all week long," Tim says. Finally on the last day, the last farm they saw caught their imaginations.

It was 80 acres with a house and some buildings that had been neglected for too long, including a barn with a caved-in wall. Obviously it was run down, but the Horchlers found most of the structures sound and decided the place was promising.

Before launching on their new life, the Horchlers made up for their lack of farming experience by studying. They decided to raise sheep and because they needed another income to survive for a while, Tim took a job with a marketing firm near their Genoa, New York farm. They moved their possessions, bought seven sheep, and began a new life.

Five years later, the Horchlers have not only made their sheep operation a success; they've also used their wool business as the basis for a mail order wool crafters supply house, known as The Woolery.

"We did a lot of reading," Tim explains. "And we gained a lot of practical experience as we went along." Their farm's location, just 15 miles from Cornell University, as Tim says, "didn't hurt." The couple made every possible use of the Cornell resources to get established.

Today they have 75 sheep,

although their flock of Finns, Border Leicesters, and Lincolns at times numbers 100 or more. The Horchlers chose Lincolns and Leicesters because they offered a marketable combination of fleece and carcasses. The Horchlers have found a comfortable local market selling their lambs to the locker trade; however they feel with their proximity to the East Coast they're in a good position to reach the ethnic markets if they ever need to.

The Finn sheep were added to their flock for breeding purposes. Tim says, "Some people call Finns the salvation of the American sheep market. They can be bred year-round and can bear two or three lambs a year. Breeding with Finns enables you to spread out your lambing season. It's a lot less wear-and-tear on the farmer."

While Tim went to his job every day, Marianne took charge of the flock. She soon discovered that the best market for their wool was among handcrafters. She began by selling white and colored wool to

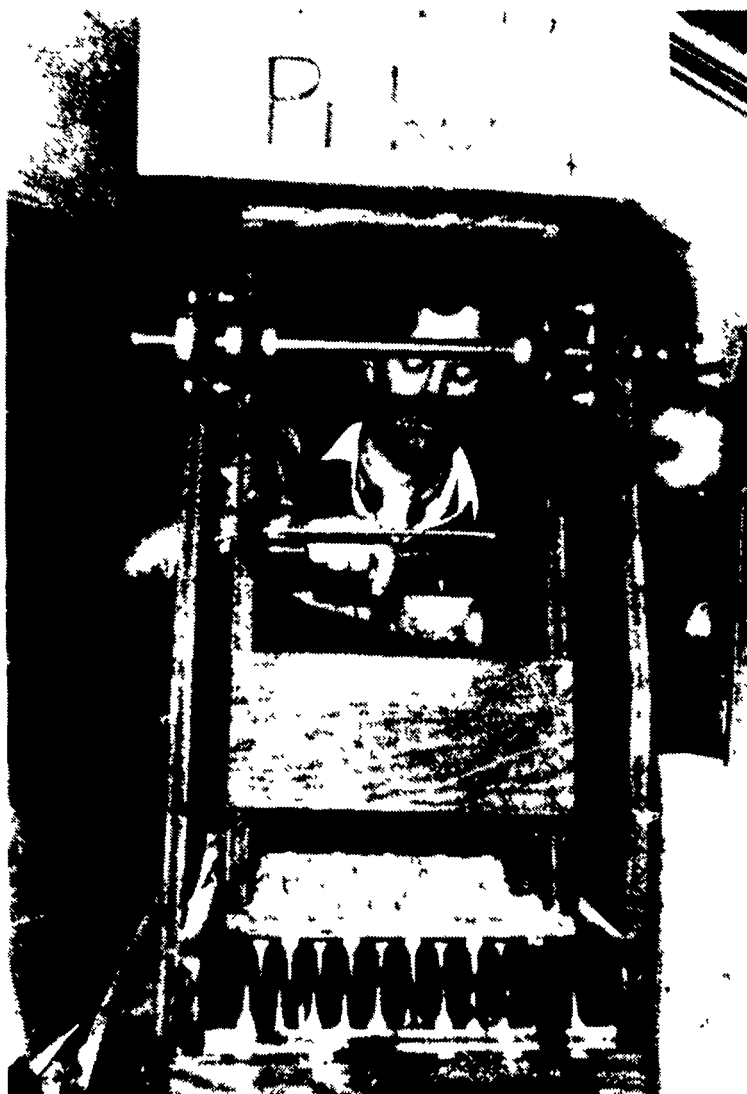
the craft trade. As she got more involved in wool crafts, Marianne could see the need for a good supplier to the craftspeople.

Wool crafts — spinning, knitting, and weaving — are "cottage" industries. That is, they are produced in private homes or small groups. The craftspeople are relatively isolated and often have difficulty finding the supplies they need. If they can locate a product they need, it often must be ordered from another country, requiring a long wait.

Marianne and Tim decided they could do it better. They began visiting craft shows and groups, and started stocking up on the basic supplies and more exotic things that might attract a wool crafter.

Today, Woolery displays can be found at shows and festivals up and down the eastern United States. People who don't find what they want at the Woolery stand can order items through their bountiful mail order catalog. Woolery items

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Tim demonstrates the Woolery Picker.

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