

Thriving Wool Business Spun From Frustration

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LOGANVILLE — "Virtually unemployable" is the phrase Martha Lau uses to describe herself.

Yet, this "unemployable" farm woman has difficulty finding enough hours in a day to accomplish all she sets out to do.

Years ago, Martha put aside career plans and went to work to help her husband Greg through his graduate studies degree to teach science. With Greg established in his teaching profession, their daughters nearly grown, and no real marketable personal skills, Martha took a job in a local greenhouse. But she felt lost and unsatisfied in what she called the "world of unskilled labor."

In her spare hours, Martha especially enjoyed knitting. It was an appropriate hobby interest, since the Laus maintain a flock of 50 purebred Oxford ewes at their small farm on the edge of the town of Loganville.

"I liked knitting, we had all these sheep running around, and it just seemed as though there should be some way I could put all that wool to use," she remembers. Plus, it bothered the Loganville farm woman that high-quality, 100 percent wool yarn was difficult to locate in the York County locale.

After a great deal of personal soul-searching and, with enthusiastic moral and financial support from Greg, Martha focused her dissatisfaction with available wool yarns into a fledgling cottage business.

She called it Country Spun.

Country Spun yarn is a specialty product, made from selected fleeces, and processed on Victorian jennies at a Philadelphia firm. The old-fashioned process causes the fibers in the yarn to bunch together, rather than stretch out, during the spinning. When a garment crafted from Country Spun yarn is washed, there are no stretched fibers to shrink out of shape. Thus, Country Spun yarn garments are completely machine washable.

In May 1983, Martha took her product to market — specifically, a stand at York's downtown Central Market. It was an interim move until that fall, when an addition to the Lau's country home was completed as a shop for the Country Spun business.

Well-aware of the specialty demand for the somewhat nubby-textured yarn, the Laus began focusing on mail order sales, advertising in crafting and regional publications. Not only skeins of yarn, but kits complete with directions, and exclusive "ewenique" knitting accessories, such as carefully crafted wooden knitting needles, were stocked.

Along with her skills as a knitter, marketer and salesperson, Martha's abilities as a public relations specialist began to emerge. She put together a public relations kit, contacted local and regional media representatives, and established ties with the county's tourist bureau. Soon, Country Spun's on-farm colonial display room, coupled with the



Martha Lau stacks her Country Spun yarn in her colonial-style shop. Her business, located near Loganville, started with her interest in knitting.

flock of ewes and lambs which never failed to enthrall customers, became an attraction for visiting tourists, especially those seeking out quality crafting materials.

"We promote some of the best quality wool knitting yarns available anywhere," believes Martha. "And we offer a variety of textures, colors and weights."

Market acceptance of Country Spun has been rewarding. Other shop retailers began approaching the Laus about handling the yarns, and wholesaling is now a major portion of the business. Retailing of the yarns, kits and related merchandise is handled through the Williamsburg-like shop, but the wholesaling inventory has laid

claim to the Lau's basement.

Trade shows play an increasing role in the Lau's marketing savvy. Initial displays at craft and supply shows were at the local and regional level, including Baltimore and New York-based events. Now, Martha and Greg are considering expanding toward more national product exposure, possibly through major shows as far away as California. Also anticipated as part of future merchandising is putting their line of yarns "on the road" with a distributor.

With Country Spun merchandise so closely related to the garment industry, Martha has become more aware of fashion trends and colors. She must stay abreast of fast-changing craft fads, too, since Country Spun is deeply rooted in that market area.

For example, home knitting machines are in a "renaissance" of popularity, both for crafters and home-based workers.

"With a knitting machine," Martha points out, "a sweater which would take a hand knitter perhaps 25 to 30 hours to complete can be finished in just four or five hours. And, when you combine quality textured wool yarns with the speed of a knitting machine, it makes a garment with the hand-crafted look in just a fraction of the time."

Labor laws which strictly regulate what sort of goods may be produced by home workers have focused on the garment industry. Certain sweaters and outerwear are permitted to be made at home, promising a potential market for home knitting machine operators. With this market in mind, and plans for a line of original-design ladies sweaters and vests, Country Spun now includes yarn on cones for use with knitting machines.

Country Spun has already generated a great deal of media interest, appearing in such publications as USA Today, Early American Life, Pennsylvania Magazine, and major newspapers in Baltimore and Philadelphia. Regional television "magazine" programs have also covered the Lau's innovative business, helping to draw customers from surrounding urban areas.

Through promoting her yarns and kits, Martha has honed her flair for public relations and writing, skills she never dreamed she would master. Putting together a press packet was one of the very first steps she took when laying the groundwork for Country Spun, and she's since collaborated on related articles about York and surrounding tourist areas. Working closely with the York County Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Laus are helping encourage tourists to spend more time in the areas.

"It has helped sharpen our hospitality skills," smiles Martha, who, if the shop isn't excessively busy, will often invite customers to have a cup of tea. And the sheep flock remains a favorite of customers, who are encouraged to visit the source of the shop's yarn goods.

Visitors find such a personal touch vastly more appealing than the excessively commercialized "tourist" attractions, and often linger to chat. In fact, Laus have been told by customers touring the locale that they were the only people they had met on their vacations who would take time to talk.

Inevitably, conversation seems to turn to the beauty of the area's patchwork of fields and farms over the rolling hills. Frequently, out-of-state customers have inquired about the possibility of staying at the Lau's country home.

Prodded by the inquiries, the Laus are looking toward becoming a bed-and-breakfast establishment on a very small scale for select guests. Their country-style home, tastefully decorated in classic colonial colors ornamented with Greg's artful stenciling, makes a casual visitor immediately feel at home. An adjoining patio looks out over the carefully mulched vegetable garden, bright with the contrasts of deep green fall vegetables and cheerful marigolds. Blue morning glories climb on a trellis near the tidy barn, where one unexpected fall lamb keeps company with a flock of watchful ewes.

Bed and breakfast is a tourist

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Visitors to the Country Spun Fall Festival observe a sheep shearing demonstration by Dave Green, world champion sheep shearer.



The source of Country Spun Wool, a flock of purebred Oxfords, graze contentedly for a visitor's photo.

Homestead Notes