



Eric Flaxenburg has watched his 40-acre abandoned farm grow into a multi-million dollar company that produces apparel from sheepskins.

Seven Sheep Launch Multi-Million Dollar Company

BY LOU ANN GOOD
ELVERSON (Chester Co.) — To take a flock of seven sheep and turn them into a multi-million dollar international business sounds like a dream. For Eric and Jean Flaxenburg of Elverson, it's "shear" reality. They now use 10,000 to 20,000 sheepskins annually to fill orders for their shearing coats and apparel worn here and abroad.

In 1966, the couple purchased a 40-acre abandoned farm bordered by the French Creek State Park. They did not intend to start a business. Eric, commuted to a Philadelphia university where he taught American civilization. Jean, a fashion designer, quit her job when their first child was born.

Putting her fashion flair to practice, Jean designed a baby bunting from one of their sheepskins.

Amazed, she noticed that whenever she lay their colicky baby in it, he quieted.

Convinced there was a market for her sheepskin baby buntings, she stitched a dozen, which Eric showed to a major New York department store.

The store ordered 12, paid \$20 a piece, slapped a \$75 price tag on them, and did not pay the Flaxenburgs for eight months.

Frustrated by the redtape involved in wholesales, and perhaps, enticed by the high price tags of retail sales, the Flaxenburgs decided to pursue direct markets.

They printed brochures and advertised their baby buntings and sheeplined coats that Jean designed.

That was in 1970. After they had mailed the brochures, people ridiculed the ideal of selling a high

price item through mailorder. Then, typical mail-order catalogues flaunted cheap, gimmicky wares.

"We were ignorant," Eric admits. "We did it."

It was a good thing they did, for the Flaxenburgs proved the business community wrong. Not only did the Flaxenburgs sell mail order, they were forerunners in a whole new era of upscale catalogues.

As Eric fingers the fleece of a Corriedale that will become part of a \$2,000 coat made by his company, he insists, "We were very lucky. He pauses, then adds, "It's better to be lucky than smart."

He shuns comments that infer that marketing skills and brilliance caused the business to flourish.

"We were simply there at the right place, at the right time. Postal rates were cheap. Shearlings were fashionable. In fashion, success is 10 percent hard work and 90 percent luck," Eric insists.

But luck did not eliminate sleepless nights of agonizing how they were going to pull through finan-



Flaxenburg examines one of the coats that a sewer from his company stitches from beginning to end.



An employee of French Creek Sheep & Wool cuts a coat from one of the 10,000 to 20,000 sheepskins that the company uses annually to produce its shearing coats.



Celebrities such as Tom Selleck cannot resist coats sewn by the French Creek Company.

cially. In fact, Eric said, "In this business, you never feel confident. People think we have it made—traveling to New York for trade and fashion shows, visiting tanneries in Europe—but there are times I don't enjoy the business at all. There is always something bad happening even when good is happening."

In fashion, it's easy to be successful and it's easy to fail, and these nagging doubts add to the

pressures of keeping control of a ever-changing business.

As Eric sits in his office four stories high in a silo-like tower attached to the barn that has been remodeled to house all the stages of clothing construction, he talks about the toughness of surviving in the fashion and business world.

He glances out the French doors that open onto a balcony overlooking a panoramic view of the rolling

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