

Cindy Slatcoff Believes Wool Business Is Ideal For Women

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GLENCOE (Somerset Co.) —
Brush Creek Wool Works, owned
by Anthony (Tony) and Cindy
Slatcoff, is operated mainly by
Cindy, but her family often helps
her with sundry tasks.

The year-around business is headquartered at their sheltered home in a mountainous valley; the under-construction house (where they have done everything "but dig the hole"), flanked by tree-lined slopes and small adjacent sheep pasture. Passing through the rugged terrain, down near the main road, and on its way to somewhere else, flows the gurgling waters of the Brush Creek tributary.

The Slatcoffs sell breeding stock, freezer lambs, and wool sheared from their stock of White Romney and Border Leicester sheep, currently numbering some 23 animals. Cindy is an artisan who works with wool (not usually their own), from beginning to end. Which means that, after all the preparations, she demonstrates, sells, and teaches classes from May through November each year.

Cindy says she is ready for the lambing season — nine pregnant ewes are due on March 7 — and looking forward to using the newly-built lodging facility that Tony has built for her in the second larger sheep barn. The modern paneled nook has bed space and a counter area for conveniences such as a coffee maker.

The ewes and lambs will have 24-hour attention from Cindy while Tony and their sons — Jason, 14, and Mark, 9, — follow their normal routine. They travel together to school in Berlin where Tony teaches biology and the boys attend classes in the Berlin-Brothersvalley School District.

When she was in fourth grade, Cindy was taught by her baby-sitter, Yorkshire, England, grandmother, to knit. "After moving to Somerset County (as an adult)," says Cindy, "I thought it would be nice to spin my own yarn." She

didn't like the synthetic yarns on the market. At the Somerset Historical Center qualified persons taught her how to spin and soon she was invited to demonstrate the craft during the Center's annual Mountain Craft Days.

"It was more like doing it for friends than a business arrangement," she notes, saying how a strong bond of friendship had been formed.

Despite their upbringing in separate Cambria County mining towns where neither Tony nor Cindy had had any agricultural experience, the Slatcoffs itched to raise sheep, because they realized the best wool-producing sheep breeds weren't being raised locally.

"In this area, most wool is on meat-producing sheep and the wool is not ideal for spinning," says Cindy. "I did a lot of research," she says. "I researched for two years. I found what kind of fleece I and other spinners like and those are what I bought," she says.

I decided that if I'm going to do this, I'm going to follow the example of the experts."

To Cindy, that meant gathering information about wool-producing sheep raised in Australia and New Zealand. She located a four-year-old copy of *National Geographic* that she keeps in her shop in which the subject is featured on its glossy, informational pages. She told about the network of women throughout eastern United States who are in the same business and who are excellent resources.

Nevertheless, mistakes were inevitably made. This bothered Cindy. "We've lost sheep because of being ignorant," she says. "I didn't want an animal to have to suffer at my expense," says the former teacher of earth and planetary science, who taught classes at two campuses of the University of Pittsburgh.

"Raising sheep is a business that lends itself to a woman doing the work by herself if need be," she says as she recalled some tough personal experiences.

"I can do this and make a living doing this," she says. "It gives me a sense of pride and a lot of peace of mind."

Her uncompromising standards are high, based on an unshakeable belief that bigger dividends will reward meticulous care of the sheep and their wool. A staunch devotion to that philosophy paid off in 1991 when her wool sold for prices well above the average prices being paid.

"Everybody laughs at my sheep wearing coats," she says, but I don't care. "My fleece is clean, has no breaks, and they get the breed they want. They get the best," she states without apology. "They only get grease when they wash it."

But wearing the coats on the sheep is only part of her strategy. Cindy says she tells her shearer, Bedford County's Karl Kaufman, when the pregnant ewes are due. He comes to shear them days before that date. While he shears he allows Cindy to work with the wool. Thus the fleece isn't exposed to the dirt and matting that naturally accompany the lambing process. Coats are put on the ewes for warmth and then changed later.

Made in the United States of a polypropylene material, Cindy says the coats last at least three years. They shed water easily, dry fast and are machine washable, all for about \$6 each. She uses and sells them.

Her opinion is that United States wool dealers would make out better if they devoted more attention to the wool while it is still on the sheep.

"I'm really tied down with shows," she says. "Even if you are sick, the show goes on." She says you just can't back out of something like this and disappoint persons who come each year just to see your new designs because they know and like your work. Summer shows demand a lot of travel, lugging things, handling animals, and always being creative," she says. "That's work!"

With her carding machine — purchased in Vancouver for a price equal to that of a good used car — she creates original yarn designs often using mohair, alpaca, rayon or silk in addition to wool.

From Silk For Life, located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Cindy buys silk fiber in an effort to help the organization in its quest to encourage South American people to grow silk rather than cocaine. The mulberry tree which is home to the silkworm is adaptable to the same climate.

"The biggest drawback is getting people to take you seriously," says Cindy. "The family doesn't understand why you don't attend family gatherings."

Growing up around coal-mining and the coal-shipping railroads, Cindy learned all about black lung disease and cancer. So she isn't taking good health for granted. She wears a face mask, gloves and apron that are approved by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), to do her work. Regardless of what it is, washing, dyeing, picking, carding, spinning, there are dusts and chemicals to be reckoned with. So unless she is demonstrating at a show, Cindy is always protected from these things.

Although the summer travel



The Slatcoff family standing in the snow near the sheep barns, from left, Jason, Tony, Cindy, and Mark.

reaps educational benefits for the boys — they've seen Vancouver, Oregon, Michigan and Pennsylvania neighbors — Cindy says, "I try not to make this their work. If we need help, we ask them, but they have to find what they want to do." One of their current interests is membership in the Johnstown Figure Skating Club.

Cindy says her 1992 show season starts with the Maryland Sheep and Wool Festival near Baltimore. Then it's the Bedford

Sheep and Wool Festival, Bedford; the Fiber Festival, Somerset; Cooks Forest Spin-In, Allegheny National Forest; Summerfest, Grantsville Md.; Mountain Craft Days, Somerset and the Springs Folk Festival, Springs. Additionally, in conjunction with FiberFest '92, held in Kalamazoo, Michigan, Cindy will teach at a textile workshop during the spinning and weaving conference. She has just contracted to work as a summer artisan in the Spruce Forst Artisan Village near Grantsville, Md.

Parenting Teens

YORK (York Co.) — Do you, or the parents of teens that you know, sometimes wish your teens and pre-teens could be sent away for a few years and then returned to you as cooperative young adults? Or maybe, as the parents of teens, you and your friends just want some direction on how to guide adolescents through their most troublesome years. Well, now there's help — an innovative video-based parent education program designed specifically for parents of teens — and pre-teens. Called **Active Parenting of Teens**, the program is being sponsored by Penn State Cooperative Extension starting Tuesday, March 3, and continues March 10, 17, 24, 31 and ends April 7th.

Active Parenting of Teens will be taught in six, two-hour sessions by Lois Kinzie, private parent education consultants. The program features more than 60 video vignettes that stir reactions like "Yes, that's just how I feel" or "That's our teenager, all right"; and demonstrates positive ways to resolve the conflict. After viewing the various scenarios, parents participate in group discussion, role plays and other activities.

Active Parenting of Teens is not psychotherapy, but rather a common-sense approach to parenting. There is no dwelling on blame, only a move-ahead attitude that shows it is never too late to improve parent-child relationships.

Parents will learn encouragement skills, discipline skills, communication skills, problem solving skills, problem prevention skills and family enrichment skills. There are also sessions on how to prevent substance abuse and how to openly discuss sexuality.

To sign up for the **Active Parenting of Teens** program, call Penn State Cooperative Extension at (717) 757-9657. The cost of the program is \$20 per participant, or \$30 per couple. A handbook is included in this price. The first session will be held Tuesday, March 3, at the West York Junior High School, Bannister Street, York with subsequent sessions to be held over the course of the following five weeks. Don't wait until your children are teens to take this class. It may be too late then!



Son Jason is the owner of this Jacob sheep, a rare breed having four horns and traced back to England and Scotland.

