

Sheep Provide Weave For Bow Family Fabric

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ANNVILLE (Lebanon Co.) — At the edge of an old apple orchard in the sheep pasture behind the Anville farmhouse that Ben and Mary Bow call home is a rotting, old wooden wagon.

For years, friends and visitors who have traveled back the long, winding dirt lane to the farm have commented on the wagon and its wooden-spoke-and-iron wheels.

Most said that Ben and Mary's wagon was probably worth some money, especially when the wheels became faddish lawn decorations.

But Ben said the wagon doesn't move.

Years ago, when the couple were trying to make a go of making the farm pay for itself, they raised tobacco next to the orchard.

The wagon was used to haul the harvested tobacco lathe. And, after back-breaking harvesting and loading the wagon, they started pulling the wagon down through the orchard to get to the lane to take the tobacco to the barn.

The weighed-down wagon slid sideways on the grassy knoll of an orchard and into an old tree.

Using an ax and saw, Ben, already tired and sore from the tobacco harvest, then spent several hours cutting down the tree.

After freeing the wagon, they had a brief victory celebration, and started forward with the harvest.

The wagon traveled several more feet and then the axle broke.

That was the last straw. God must have meant for the wagon to stay in the orchard.

That's where it stays.

No use messing around trying to change things that can't be changed.

But for those things that lend themselves to change, the Bows are ready to get involved.

Such as sheep.

Last year the Bow family received a prestigious national traveling award from the American Corriedale Association, a sheep breed registry and promotion organization with an estimated 1,000 members.

The Bows were named the 1997-98 outstanding Corriedale breeders of the United States.

Corriedale sheep are a dual-purpose, high grade wool breed developed about 1866 by James Little of the Corriedale Estate in North Otago, New Zealand.

The award itself is a large, fancy silver serving tray, the "Guthrie Trophy" donated by Senator J.F. Guthrie, of Victoria, Australia, where the Corriedale breed is historically recorded as being developed almost simultaneously.

Guthrie was a noted Corriedale breeder who made the donation with the understanding that it be awarded annually to the most outstanding Corriedale breeder in the United States.

The award was first presented by the ACA in 1951 to J.F. Walker

of Gambier, Ohio.

According to ACA spokesperson Marcia Craig, of Clay City, Ill., the award is based on the number of flocks started, advertising, service to the association and breed, and the improvement accomplished for the breed.

The Guthrie Trophy recognizes the progress and outstanding success the Bows have had in breeding top quality Corriedale sheep.

Craig said that while she didn't know the Bows personally, she knew of them and said they have a reputation of being strong promoters of the breed.

On the back of the serving tray are the names of the 45 previous awardees, and most winners are from the traditional big sheep country in the Middle West and West — Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Texas, Missouri, Nebraska, Colorado, Montana, Michigan, California, Washington — but there has been a Maryland winner (related to an Ohio winner) and a previous Pennsylvania winner. In 1994, Rupperts Corriedales, of Fairfield, Pennsylvania were the recipients.

Some of the names are professionally engraved. Others appear to have been scratched in by hand.

The tray carries some wear, from being held and admired by the different people who have received it.

"It's an honor to be chosen by your peers as being the outstanding breeder of the year," Ben said. "That means quite a bit. That is recognition by the industry for doing a good job, and you can't be anything but proud of your family," he said.

Ben said that the award wasn't presented to any one member of the Bow family, because raising and breeding Corriedale sheep has been a family effort.

"When you say farming, it's not a one-man job," he said, adding that the recognition the family received came from years of effort by his family. "It's not something that comes in one year. It takes everybody and a lot of years to accomplish something like that," he said.

The Bow family includes their three children — a son Benjamin Jr., or "Benj," who lives at the farm and works in Lancaster in an agriculturally related job; and two grown daughters, Melanie Horchler of Volant who has a flock of 40 Suffolk ewes, and Julie Willard of Lawn who raises Hampshires and has two children involved in showing them.

All three of the Bow children have been involved with 4-H sheep projects, and showed in competitions at the county level and Farm Show. They still are involved. Melanie worked for three years with the university flock at Penn State, before getting married and moving with her husband to a small farm where they raise their sheep.

The family has traveled to vari-



From the left, Ben and Mary Bow and son Benjamin Jr. display the J.F. Guthrie award presented to them for being recognized as the national outstanding Corriedale sheep breeders.

ous shows in the Northeast and to some in the Mid West, working side by side at the farm to prepare for the shows.

Over the years, breeding, raising and showing sheep became a core family activity, Ben said.

But the family didn't start out with the idea of sheep becoming so central to their lives.

The family farm is called Locust Ridge, accurately enough because of the locust trees that provide a thin forest along a ridge that backs the small secluded valley in which the farm sits.

The farm is 65-acres of freedom from the sights and sounds of the nearby and surrounding urban sprawl that is currently threatening to pressure local resources beyond limits.

The way the family got into sheep was because of the nature of the farm and how it came to become acquired by the Bows.

The farm has 200 yards of the Quittapahelia Creek running through it, and Ben said he used to avidly hunt ducks along it. A bend in the creek he now owns was one of his favorite spots.

He said he used to take a break from hunting and look around the unoccupied and overgrown farmstead.

Eventually he said he got to know the place well and, with no one around, sat on the porch of the house and looked out and said to himself that it was a very beautiful place and would make a good place to live.

After they purchased the farm in 1967, some friends visited to see the property that Ben and Mary bought.

One of their friends had an unwanted Dorset ram. "It was butting people and they wanted to get rid of it and we had all this empty

ground," Ben explained.

So they got a ram.

The farmstead was overgrown with raspberries, poison ivy and honeysuckle, and the Dorset ram enjoyed the weeds, Ben said. He said that sheep are good at cleaning up those weeds.

"So we had one sheep, and we decided maybe we should get some more," Ben said. "We got a couple of sheep to beat back the brush so we could see what we had (in buildings and landscape on the farm) and it seemed we had so much poison ivy and my wife is allergic to poison ivy, and we got a couple more (sheep)."

He said that the one barn was so covered with poison ivy that it looked like some of the older houses that have purposeful walls of English Ivy.

"As the children got close to 4-H age, we started to upgrade the flock to help them, and then it begins to get competitive, and then it becomes like a disease, and then 30 years later, you get dialed in on this thing," Ben said, laughing.

They currently have 80 mature Corriedale ewes, not counting yearlings and lambs. As of this week they had 136 lambs on the ground and were waiting for a few more to come to finish out their spring lambing season.

They also have 48 Suffolk, though Ben said that they have Suffolk thanks to Melanie.

"There is not a lot of poison ivy here now," Bow said.

They started with Dorsets, but Ben said that in his mind, and given the self-reliance upon which the family has depended, he wanted a dual-purpose breed and the Corriedale fit the ticket.

"Corriedale wool is clothing wool," he said. "It is nice, it's soft. I like wool, and I also think they're pretty when you see them in the field.

"I look at them every day and you got to like what you're looking at," he said.

As far as table fare, Ben said, "We've eaten Corriedale and Suffolk, but can't tell the difference."

Bow is a school teacher at Lebanon High School.

In fact, he has been involved in a number of different activities — he is a high school industrial arts teacher, just retired from the Pennsylvania National Guard that was

involved in the Gulf War, he has been involved with the Lebanon Area Fair for 25 years, 15 years in leadership.

"I've got a lot of irons in the fire," Ben said.

The irons are being pulled out now, he said. With 33 years teaching, now retiring from the Guard, and the children grown, he said it's time that he and Mary start working on some things for themselves.

"Our goal right now is just to remain constant and fine tune this so that our genetics are predictable," he said. "Overall we have a good flock. The top 50 percent is pretty good, but I would like to refine it so that whatever animal is sold out of the flock is top quality. I want to be one of the top breeders in the nation."

He still has his work cut out for him, he said.

"It's finally paying off," Bow said about the years of studying sheep judges' decisions, observing stock of other breeders, selecting from his own flock, and making careful decisions in purchasing breeding stock.

One of his keys to recent success has been a ram that he has been using to breed a number of his ewes.

The large male has a long, well-shaped body, neck and head, and has fathered several show-winning offspring.

According to Ben, breeding for quality requires a certain intensity of focus in order to maintain consistent results.

The practice of raising and breeding lines of any type of animal can be daunting, considering the variability of genetics and the surprises of recessive traits.

However, after spending some time with a species, breeding generations of animals, participating in shows, listening to judges give reasons for placing animals from best to worst, repeatedly scrutinizing winners and making mental notes, and reading, patterns can become apparent, and insights can be gained.

Being able to see through the grooming techniques designed to hide flaws or enhance positive attributes also helps in understanding the realities of breeding sheep.

"We've been at it for some time," Ben said recently. "We still

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OMESTEAD OTES

