

## Sheep Heaven in Maryland

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### *David Greene Celebrates 50 Years as a Shearer*

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WHITE HALL, Md. — Among the rolling hills and beautiful landscape of northern Maryland is a place that David Greene and his wife Nancy call home.

It's also the perfect place for them to raise their more than 100 head of sheep.

Locally, the farm is well-known for its high quality lamb meat. The couple, and their lambs, have become fixtures at local and state fairs and David has become a legend in sheep shearing. During a recent celebration at the Maryland-Delaware Sheep Shearing School, he celebrated 50 years of plying this uncommon skill.

Inching ever closer to full-fledged retirement, the Greens see no plans for slowing down. The love for their animals and David's love for teaching people the lost art of shearing is what has kept this couple doing what they love for more than 50 years.

David's first encounter with sheep was when he was 10 years old. His cousin Grace gave him a ewe and two lambs as a gift and he hasn't looked back since.

"I've never not had sheep. They're pretty neat animals," he said.

Having three older siblings, David was the first to have sheep on his father's farm. He became good at raising them and even showed sheep at local county fairs.

When he was 16, he started learning something that has since nearly become a lost skill: shearing.

A man he met at shows, Jack Matthews, took David under his wing and started teaching him the art of sheep shearing. This was back in 1958.

"I watched him and that's where you really get good at it," David said.

He got so good at it that when he went to college at the University of Maryland, he paid for it by shearing for other sheep shearers on the weekends. Shearing was in high demand back then and it paid pretty good money.

He competed at shearing competitions and even claims to have sheared three sheep in less than six minutes.

But it's not a job for a person with a bad back. Professional shearers, he said, spend eight to nine hours a day bent over trying to keep sometimes aggressive sheep calm enough to get their wool off.

"You're using every muscle in your body plus your brain," he said.

Professionals, he said, can shear anywhere between 250 and 450 sheep per day.

Wool is classified by its length and microns — anything over three inches in length is considered the best quality.

"The goal in shearing is to cut the wool at the length it grows off the sheep," he said.

Most of the shearing he does is before the ewes lamb, generally because the sheep are calmer.

"It's just easier. You can get more sheep in the barn. You produce better wool doing it this way," he said.

David first went to the Maryland-Delaware Sheep Shearing School in 1958. He soon became an instructor in the class and by 1982, became its main instructor. The school is one of the oldest and largest sheep shearing schools in the nation. It is held each March.

"The goal of the shearing school is for (students) to shear sheep in 10 minutes or less," he said.

Shearing is done in five different motions, starting with the belly and hind legs, moving around the sides and eventually finishing on the sheep's back and head.

"Most can do it, but it's tough," he said.

Up to 25 students can take the class. This year, 20 students graduated after five dropped out.

"Some realized it's a lot tougher than what it looks like," he said.

Shearing has become a thing of interest, particularly with people raising sheep. Professional shearers are hard to find and can charge hundreds of dollars for their services.

"Some people have decided to just learn how to do it because it can save them money," he said. The class costs \$80.

Even though he was good at it, professional shearing never quite paid the bills for David. For one thing, the price for wool has gone down over the years while the price of sheep feed has skyrocketed.

In 1979, he and his wife bought his cousin Grace's farm, which has been in his family for more than 200 years.

David and Nancy met while competing at 4-H shows when they were younger.

The year they bought the farm was the same time they started direct marketing lamb meat to the general public.

It was a slow process getting people to buy the meat. But when they started appearing at the annual Maryland Sheep and Wool Festival with packs of lamb quarters and racks of ribs, it became an instant hit.

"When we started in the sheep festival, that's when it just took off," he said. "It's been a steady increase over the years. People want quality and we know what we're doing."

Lamb meat is considered a delicacy and is known for its tender taste.

"It's more easily digested than beef or pork," he said. "Young lamb is naturally tender."

The Greens take pride in the fact that they raise their lambs "all natural", feeding them a strict diet of mostly corn and soybean-based feed.

Most lambs, David said, are taken to market just before they are one-year-old. They weigh anywhere between 90 and 110 pounds when they are ready to be processed.

The majority of their lamb is sold directly, where the Greens can set their own prices.

Nancy is in charge of the marketing aspect of the business. She said they use a local USDA inspected butcher to process their sheep. Various cuts of chops, ribs, steaks and even ground lamb meat is sold out of a small freezer the Greens have at their farm.

Most of their business, Nancy said, is through word of mouth and a small sign the couple displays at the end of their driveway. Nancy likes it this way because she doesn't want the farm to attract too many customers at one time.

Most of the older sheep they keep between seven and 10 years and are eventually slaughtered for mutton.

Being semi-retired, the couple has tried to make their business as easy as possible. A few years ago, they brought in "hair sheep", which actually shed their coats instead of having to have it sheared. Half of the flock is made up of these hair sheep.

As a result, the amount of shearing David does is not as much as he used to do.

But having a lot of spare time doesn't mean they still don't stay active. David is a member of numerous state and national sheep boards and has developed an interest in farm preservation being a member of his county's farm preservation board as well as a trustee of the Maryland Environmental Trust.

He also does extension work with Maryland Cooperative Extension.

Their lives, though, still revolve around their sheep.

"You just get started in something and you become successful at it," he said. "It's kind of been an evolution of sorts. It's kind of what we're known for now."

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