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Sheep Farming and Shearing (1874 – May – August)

Sara Bennett

2015

Sheep may seem insignificant and even silly to consider important but to Martha and James McMillan (also known as Mr. Mc.) sheep had great importance in their daily lives. Mr. Mc kept sheep as a large part of his farm. From 1867-1906 sheep lived on the McMillan farm. Martha writes on 16 April 1867 “Tuesday. Rain. Rain. James has been out all day making arrangements for his flock. There is no doubt of it but James is a shepherd in the highest sense of the term - a shepherd of sheep I mean (!) (!) (11)” (ed. Wood). Martha’s words show the importance of sheep to Mr. Mc and that the sheep claimed a lot of his time. Martha’s mentions of the sheep may seem like trivial references to farm life but knowing about caring for the sheep, the tools and process of shearing sheep, and washing the wool help readers see into Martha’s world and understand why Martha’s references to the sheep are important.

In Martha’s time sheep dogs helped care for the sheep. Smart sheep dogs make the sheep think they decide where they want to go (Hartnagle-Taylor and Taylor, par. 4). Farmers use the Scotch Collie for herding sheep. The dogs ferociously protect the flock from intruders such as wolves or wandering wild dogs. The collies’ loyalty belonged to their masters and to their flocks (Hartnagle-Taylor and Taylor, par. 4). Martha does not mention Mr. Mc having sheep dogs but it would be logical for Mr. Mc to own a sheep dog or dogs. June 23 1868 Mr. Mc sold five hundred eighty-five ewes to a man from Illinois. It took them twenty-days to drive them there on foot (McMillan, Rankin 4). Such a sheep drive would be a nightmare without sheep dogs to aid the men in herding the large flock. Mr. Mc owned several hundred head of sheep pasturing them on four other farms beside his own (McMillan, Rankin 5). Mr. Mc’s sheep would take a lot of care,

explaining why Martha writes on 26 June 1874 “After supper he [Mr. Mc] and Patt left with sheep for the Packer pasture” (ed. Bennett). From the entries in May to August of 1874 it appears Mr. Mc spent much of his time with the sheep and worked hard in devotion to the farm. Rankin remarks in his notes for 1880 “As I read these diaries I learn that he (James) seemed to spend most of his time with the sheep, or in buying wool and trading in other livestock in a radius of about ten or 15 miles” (McMillan 7). Rankin states what becomes obvious to a reader when he or she reads the journals. Sheep are an important part of the farm seemingly more important than grain or other planted crops making sheep Mr. Mc’s specialty.

While shearing the sheep Mr. Mc and his men would have used clippers or hand shears. Martha records the sheep shearing briefly over the course of shearing time. In 1874 Martha writes:

29 May ...Mr. Mc took George Walker with him to assist with the Sheep washing...

1 June ...Began shearing sheep...

3 June ...Our two men shear Sheep till noon. This afternoon – Mr. Mc and his men washing wool at the Creek...

6 June ...This afternoon Miller and Mr. Mc at the Packer Sheep pasture did not not get home till late...

15 June ...Geo Walker and our two Jansrider men, Harlan Thompson, & Sam Washington finished the sheep shearing... ed. Bennett.

In 1874 the sheep shearing took fifteen days. Martha gives brief mentions of sheep shearing when she records the daily farm work. Martha most commonly mentions the Packer pasture in regard to the location of the sheep and shearers. Depending on the year the McMillan sheep shearing took somewhere around two weeks, starting anywhere from mid May to early June also

depending on the year. Shearing sheep took skill. An average shearer could shear about twenty-five sheep a day. An exceptional shearer could clip thirty-five sheep (“Raising Sheep,” par. 2). The sheep shearing process started with washing then shearing the sheep. Afterwards the wool would be washed. In 1871 the sheep shearing started May 19th and ended June 10th with one thousand sheep sheared. In 1888 on June 1st sheep shearers came and in the first week of June sheared six hundred sheep (McMillan, Rankin 5, 11). Understanding why sheep shearing happens and how long it takes gives a reader of Martha’s journals an appreciation of the work accomplished to shear six hundred or one thousand sheep. The knowledge of it taking an average shearer a day to de-fleece twenty five sheep gives readers an appreciation of the hardworking sheep shearers who would shear the sheep for days on end to complete the work. It took nearly three weeks to shear the sheep in 1871, not counting Sundays or as Martha calls them Sabbaths. Averaging everything out, fifty sheep were sheared in a day. Taking the number of sheep an average shearer could shear in a day from the article “Raising Sheep,” the sheep shearing in 1871 meant it could have taken two men shearing sheep for twenty days to finish the flock of one thousand sheep.

Washing the wool happens after the sheep have been sheared. Wool contains a substance called lanolin, the sheep’s natural fatty substance of oil and sweat. The wool also can have dust, dirt, bits of vegetation, and erm, things clinging on the back area (van Deijnen, par. 6). A sheep’s fleece becomes very dirty during the year interval between sheep shearings. Washing the wool removes the dirt and oil from the fleece. Two methods of wool washing exist depending on the use for the wool later. Washing the fleece in cold water leaves the lanolin in making the woolen products from the fleece waterproof (Reser, par. 21). Most fleeces are washed in soapy, warm water. Though the fleece cannot be agitated for fear of felting and has to have a warm water rinse

the same temperature as the soapy washing water so the wool fibers would not shrink (Reser, par. 24). Felting the wool fibers would help as it would tangle the wool fibers and make it very difficult to untangle them or make them useful again. Understanding the intricacies of wool washing helps to understand Martha's reference to the men washing wool in the creek. Washing the wool in the creek would be a cold water wash to remove the dirt, dust, and whatever else stuck in the wool not removed by washing the sheep before shearing.

Knowing about sheep and sheep shearing brings an understanding to what Martha talks about during her mentions of the men going up to the sheep pasture, sheep shearing, washing the wool. Understanding a method for caring for sheep using sheep dogs gives a picture of what the Packer Sheep pasture, or other pastures Mr. Mc had sheep in, looked like. Knowing how sheep shearing and wool washing works gives an appreciation to the hard work the men accomplished in a few weeks. Information about sheep gives an insight into Martha's life and the life on the McMillan farm.

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