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The Vermont Sheep Industry: 1811-1880

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THE beginning of Vermont's sheep industry was in Spain. When Napoleon invaded Spain during the Napoleonic Wars, he created much dissension among the Spanish factions by seizing the estates and flocks of the nobles who did not side with him. The Spanish Loyalist junta did the same to its own deserters. The estates which Napoleon seized were "big estates of some of the noble hidalgos, estates where never a one [sheep] had been permitted to leave Spain."¹ The Spanish government began to panic, and, in the confusion, permitted some sheep to be sent to France and other countries. Because of this panic, William Jarvis, the American Consul at Lisbon, received permission in 1809 to export two hundred Merino rams of the Escorial Royal flock.² Some of these sheep were sold for as much as a thousand dollars a head in America. The great interest in the Merinos was created by their quality of fine wool, which hung in especially heavy folds from their shoulders and chest, and by the heavy weight of their fleece.

Mr. Jarvis retired from his Consular post and returned to Boston in 1810. There he retained two hundred of the three hundred and fifty sheep which he had brought with him upon his retirement from Spain. The following year he bought a farm in Weathersfield Bow, about twenty miles above Bellows Falls in Vermont.

When he first returned to Boston, Jarvis had said, ". . . I was disposed to distribute those valuable animals to every state which would be likely to profit by the acquisition."³ Because of its treeless hills, denuded by the pioneers' need for firewood, building materials, and lumber for the

1. Harold Fisher Wilson, *Hill Country of Northern New England*, (Montpelier, Vermont Historical Society), 75.

2. Isaac Newton, *Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture for the Year 1864*: (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1865), 253.

3. C. Benton and S. F. Barry, *A Statistical View of the Number of Sheep . . .*, 127.

potash markets, Jarvis thought that Vermont was an ideal location for his Merinos and began to distribute his sheep to Vermonters. For forty-eight years he bred sheep on his farm and helped the industry grow at a phenomenal pace, especially in Vermont.

In bringing the Merinos from Spain, Jarvis introduced to the domestic industry a sheep of higher quality than the pioneers' English breeds, which had been raised with perhaps more thought to their mutton than to their wool. One proof of this is shown in the following reminiscence by William R. Sanford, in 1865:

I can well remember the first Merino ram brought into my neighborhood. He was small and had short wool, which was very dark and crusty on its outer ends. So strong was the prejudice against him that one person gave notice to his owner that if he got into the lot with his [native] sheep, he would shoot him! But after a few experiments, the tide turned strongly in favor of the Merinos.⁴

The industry grew and thrived with the need for woolen uniforms in the War of 1812. However, at the end of the war the price of wool fell from a dollar fifty to forty cents a pound. The setback was only temporary. About ten years later the industry flourished again under a high tariff protection. The mills, too, were again paying good prices for the wool, which sold from fifty to seventy-five cents a pound.⁵

In 1820 the sheep industry was the main and most profitable industry of Vermont. The increase in number of mills followed that of the sheep population. "On every hillside the flocks were grazing." The rugged hills could produce sheeps' wool better and less costly than it could corn or wheat, because the sheep could thrive on the rocky land and produce a greater profit than from grains.

In 1833, Vermont farmers were selling their cows in order to make room for more sheep. Some of the farmers sold their farms and moved West, "for it paid the well-to-do to buy up the small places, use the barns for sheep folds, and let the houses fall into the cellars."⁶ But the scribe warned the farmers, "Beware of the 'western fever' and above all, sell not your farms to rich neighbors for sheep pastures."⁷ The price of wool rose with the demand. "According to a *Statistical View* of the industry published in 1837, the price of wool mounted, with some fluctuations, from thirty-nine cents a pound in 1827, to fifty-seven cents in 1835." At the same time the sheep industry grew, the dairy industry

4. Newton, *op. cit.*, 185.

5. Benton and Barry, *op. cit.*

6. This and the preceding quotation are from Miriam Chapin, "Sheep in Vermont" *Vermont Life*, XIII, #3, (Spring 1959), 5. Subsequent references to Miss Chapin are to this source.

7. This and the following quotation are from Wilson, *op. cit.*, 79, 77.

began to wither. Between 1832 and 1837 the number of cows decreased by 13,000; the two year old stock by 15,000; and the yokes of oxen by 13,000.⁸ Except for "remote districts in the Green Mountain Range and in the frontier section of Northeast Vermont, every town had more than 1000 sheep, while some possessed over 5000, and a few in the Connecticut Valley had been transformed into vast sheep runs where the numbers totaled more than 10,000 per town."

In 1837, the statistics of the state's counties, including their towns with the most sheep, were as follows:⁹

Bennington Co.	— 69,828	Shaftsbury	—12,084
Windham Co.	— 76,582	Westminster	—13,766
Rutland Co.	—180,984	Orwell	—21,512
Windsor Co.	—171,581	Springfield	—17,872
Addison Co.	—159,411	Shoreham	—26,584
Orange Co.	— 99,346	Randolph	—12,714
Chittenden Co.	— 77,249	Charlotte	—11,552
Washington Co.	— 60,025	Montpelier	— 8,082
Grand Isle Co	— 15,709	South Hero	— 6,196
Caledonia Co.	— 58,153	Danville	— 9,654
Lamoille Co.	— 28,677	Cambridge	— 6,219
Franklin Co.	— 62,940	Georgia	—10,567
Essex Co.	— 7,869	Concord	— 2,305
Orleans Co.	— 30,657	Greensboro	— 3,832
Total for the state	—1,099,011		
Total mills	—70		
Total wool produced	—3,571,786 pounds		
Total profit @ 50½c/lb.	—\$1,803,751		

In this same year, mills were being built in the Black River Valley, Quechee, Hartford, Johnson, and Northfield, with the largest at Winooski.¹⁰ Vermont was fourth in the country in sheep population. In 1836 there had been thirty-three woolen factories in the state; a year later there were three hundred thirty-four. The value of the mills was \$1,331,-953; the capital invested, \$1,409,950; and the average number of wage earners, 1450.¹¹

Between 1824 and 1840 Vermont's sheep population quadrupled.

8. *Ibid.*, 76. Obtained from the *Cheshire Farmer*, II, (June 1839), 99, which in turn obtained it from a *Special Report of the Vermont Legislature*.

9. Benton and Barry, *op. cit.*, 22-34, *passim*.

10. Charles Edward Crane, *Let Me Show You Vermont*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1937,) 166.

11. Walter H. Crockett, *History of Vermont*, (New York: Century History Co., Inc., 1921), III, 316-318.

However, in 1839 and 1840 the prices took a temporary plunge. Addison County never fully recovered from this recession, even though the state's industry reached its peak in early 1840. In this year Vermont had 1,681,819 sheep which produced 3,699,235 pounds of wool. At its peak, Vermont held the second position in the country of wool produced.

In this same year Addison County contained more sheep than any other county in the country, and it led the other counties in wool production. Its best town in sheepraising, Shoreham, had 41,188 sheep which produced 95,276 pounds of wool: the town's average was more than one and five-eighths sheep per acre; there were more than twenty-four sheep per inhabitant; and Shoreham was the largest wool-growing town in the state of Vermont. The state itself had an average of six sheep per person.¹² In addition to the raising of sheep, there was also a great deal of experimentation with breeding. "The improvement and refinement of these sheep [Merinos] is due to Edmund Hammond of Middlebury, more than any other man in the country," reported Mr. William Sanford in 1865.¹³

But in the late 1840s the industry began to fall apart. The first and perhaps most important factor which brought about the decline was the lowering and complete abolition of the protective tariff rates. In 1841 the tariff was first lowered. The factories demanded cheaper wool to provide the urban population with cheaper clothing. Consequently the price of wool dropped. In 1842 the rates were completely abolished on the higher grades of wool. The real blow, however, came in 1846 when the tariff on all wool was removed. There was no longer protection for those who had painfully worked to improve the quality of the Vermont Merinos.

Then again there was the competition of the Western states. This was the second most influential factor. At first the West produced wool for its home needs. There was no concern about competition then because of the bad transportation. But with the opening of the Ohio and Pennsylvania canal systems (1832-34), the then unknown sheep runs of the Ohio Valley were exposed to the Eastern trade markets. "Ohio and the other Western states, with wider pastures and less costly grain, began to compete." The Erie Canal could carry the wool from the West to the Massachusetts and New York mills "at prices lower than New England was willing to accept."¹⁴

The third factor influencing the decline of the Vermont sheep industry, one which most contemporary history books fail to recognize, was the inbreeding of Saxon sheep.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Newton, *op. cit.*, 252.

14. Both quotations are from Chapin, 5.

The Saxon sheep produced incalculable risk in this state. They were unadapted to our rigorous climate. They yielded far less wool than the Paulars and Jarvis sheep, and it did not sell for enough per pound to compensate for the difference in amount. Yet for a time a mania to obtain them was universal. Even Mr. Jarvis, induced, as he declared, by the flattering representations of the manufacturers, yielded to that unfortunate epidemic and crossed most of his flock with them. But the good time promised by the manufacturers never came. The worthlessness of these feeble little sheep became apparent, and also the fact that they had, by crossing, nearly ruined our old Merinos. But very few flocks of the latter, and those mostly small ones, had escaped the contamination.¹⁵

Because of these three factors, many persons “sold out their fine sheep and abandoned wool-growing altogether. Some tried the experiment of breeding the large mutton sheep. But this generally resulted in entire failure.” Butter and cheese began to be the main industry of the state, for the profit from these was more stable than that of the sheep industry.

Between 1850 and 1860 Vermont lost one quarter of its sheep population. This is shown on the table following. The figures of this graph also indicate how the state devoted itself to the industry and then, when the decline began, made the shift to dairying.

	Dairy Cows	Sheep	Population
1771			7,000
1776			20,000
1783			30,000
1800			86,425
			154,465
		(1824) 475,000	217,895
		(1828) 700,000	235,891
		(1837) 1,600,000	280,652
1850	146,128	1,681,819	291,948
		1,014,122	314,120
	174,667	752,201	315,098
	180,285	580,347	330,551
	217,033	439,870	332,286
1900	231,419	333,947	332,422
	199,603	297,521	343,641
	265,483	118,752	355,956
	290,122	62,756	352,428
1940	281,883	17,425	359,611
			359,231

15. This, the next quotation, and the table are from I. Newton, *op. cit.*, 186, 201

The Civil War brought a brief rise to the industry with the soldiers' needs for uniforms and other products such as blankets. The wool began to sell at a dollar a pound for one or two years, for wool began to replace the articles formerly made of cotton which could no longer be smuggled from the South. So temporarily the profit from wool exceeded the profit from cheese and butter which were being produced as a resort when the sheep industry had failed. "In 1863, the home product of wool in the loyal states was 77,413,070 pounds; imports, 64,433,760 pounds. The imports of woolens amounted to the value of between \$24,000,000 and \$25,000,000, exclusive of shoddy and of free wool from Canada, which probably exceeded \$1,500,000 more."¹⁶

But the Western states were also doing quite well. In 1850 Minnesota had fifty sheep. This grew to 175,000 in 1863. The 149,960 that Iowa had in 1850 grew to 1,250,000 in 1864. So Vermont faced considerable competition in the wool market.

The optimistic reinvigoration which grew out of the Civil War was short lived. Between 1860 and 1870 the world production of wool increased by more than one-third, causing an oversupply by 1870. So between 1867 and 1870 some Vermonters were selling sheep from seventy-five cents to a dollar per head—a decrease from the prices during the Civil War.¹⁷ The dairy industry began to replace the sheep industry once again.

Although the number of sheep decreased steadily after the Civil War, the quality of the sheep went in the opposite direction. Between 1860 and 1870 the sheep population had decreased by twenty-two percent while the amount of wool shorn only decreased by eight percent. Here again the use of careful breeding gave the sheep more wool. The following shows how the work of Hammond and his associates improved the quality of the sheep:¹⁸

<i>Year</i>	<i>Lbs. of wool sheared</i>	<i>Average weight of wool per head</i>	<i>Population</i>
1840	3,699,235	2.20	1,681,819
1850	3,400,717	3.35	1,014,122
1860	3,118,950	4.14	752,201
1870	3,102,137	5.34	580,347

The quality of the sheep had become internationally known; indeed, so much so that Australia began to import the prize Merinos. The last shipload from Vermont was made in the late 1890s.

16. *Ibid.* 193. Note: Shoddy wool is that which has been reprocessed from used woolen fabrics. Statistics in succeeding paragraph are from Newton, 179.

17. Wilson, *op. cit.*, 134.

18. *Ibid.*

Since the 1880s the sheep industry in Vermont has become unprofitable because of Western and international competition; but new steps are currently being taken by University of Vermont agriculturists and animal husbandry experts to reassess the future of the industry in Vermont.

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