

# THE SHEEP BOOK



RON PARKER

# THE SHEEP BOOK

A HANDBOOK FOR THE MODERN SHEPHERD

REVISED AND UPDATED

FOREWORD BY GARRISON KEILLOR | SKETCHES BY RUTH HALVORSON

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## FOREWORD

The life of a shepherd is a temptation I have resisted so far, and when I see sheep at a fair I suppress the urge to make them a part of my life, for which those sheep ought to feel mighty grateful. My pasture in the city would be no more than a light snack for a small flock, and my life is too comical for sheep and too fastidious. City life has bred in me an instinct to travel with herds while keeping my distance and avoiding eye contact, and the idea of grabbing someone and prying open his mouth or examining the hindquarters is very far from my mind.

Still, it's good to examine a life one doesn't choose and to see what was missed, which is why my son and I drove up to visit the Parkers in the summer of 1982. My journal for Monday, July 12, reads, in part:

Got to Ron and Teresa Parker's place at one. They have 93 acres on which they raise sheep bred especially for their fine long wool which the P's sell (by mail) to woolspinners and knitters. Moved here six years ago, lived in an Airstream trailer for six months with infant son, then moved

into one-room workshop with solar panel roof temporarily while building large circular solar home nearby which they are still building.

RP: “I grew up in L.A., Teresa in Wichita, neither of us on a farm, so when we came out here we had never handled animals before, other than dogs and cats. At first we tried to drive the sheep from pasture to barn and barn to pasture—running at them and clapping our hands and barking like we imagined sheepdogs bark—and we just about ran ourselves silly. The sheep would move a little ways, turn around, and stare at us. Finally we discovered that sheep can be led. They’re out there wandering around and looking for a leader. You walk up to them and at the right moment you turn and they will follow you, especially if you reward them with grain now and then. I say, ‘Sheep sheep sheep’ to call them, or if they’re a ways off, I call ‘o-VEE’ which is slang Latin and which I read in Thomas Hardy’s *Far from the Madding Crowd* and which works.

“Sheep are stoics. We perform operations on them that would put a human in bed for a week, but the sheep get right up and walk away from it. One of Joshua’s little rams had kidney stones, so we opened up his belly, cut off a few inches of the urethra, and strung it out below his anus, which is a handy thing to know. He’s up and walking.

“All the sheep have names, and the triplets we try to name in series, such as Good, Bad, and Indifferent, or Shirley, Goodness, and Mercy. We lamb in April and by now we’re ready to ship some to market. We breed them for wool, which we sell for \$4.00 or so a pound (ordinary wool goes for 50 cents/lb. or less), but still, wool accounts for only a quarter of our income; meat provides the rest. We slaughter a couple of sheep a year for ourselves, which is hard to do but you just steel yourself and do it.”

The P’s have a fine little sheep dog, Spot, black with white chest markings, who climbed all over us, since she had been chained up for two days while the P’s were in Mpls. After lunch we baled hay with them, using an antique Minneapolis-Moline tractor and John Deere baler, then had supper (bok choy).

RP: “It’s almost cheaper to buy hay than raise your own; in fact it is. You can get hay for \$1.25/bale, which is close to what it costs me to bale, or

## FOREWORD

less, but—I'm a farmer and I like to do it myself. Most of the farmers around here don't earn much. It'd be much smarter to invest money in government bonds than in a farm; you'd earn more—but we're farmers. That's what we like to do. So we do it."

RP is also a writer. Sold article on sheep to *Country Journal* and is writing a book about sheep-raising for Scribners. Has written some short fiction with a sheep farm setting which he sends to *Atlantic* and *NYer* and collects rejection slips.

Were invited to spend night in Airstream but declined due to highway fever & also felt if we stayed one night we might want to stay for the summer and beyond. They are gentle & attentive people & good company, which I find true of most farmers. Wonder if, in all the technical writing on animal husbandry, anyone notes the civilizing influence animal raising may have on people. Maybe it's simply understood by all—that for all the modern discoveries, shepherding is an ancient scientific culture & teaches people more than they intended to learn & brings out qualities in them they might not attain directly through moral ambition.

i thought so then and think about it now as I sit at home in the city, worn out after a day of trying to rush a piece of fiction to a state of perfection and beating it to death in the process. Nobody rushes sheep—to perfection or anywhere else. Perhaps if sheep were part of my life, they would impose an order on it and bring out in me the calm patience and good humor so evident in this book. Perhaps you, dear readers who raise sheep or are thinking about it (or raise sheep *and* are thinking about it), can take some pleasure in knowing someone envies you and your enterprise. It's a pleasure to envy you and imagine what sheep raising is like, and if I'm all wrong—well, no sheep will ever suffer as a result.

—GARRISON KEILLOR



# PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITION

Sheep haven't changed much since 1983, but many things about sheep stewardship have changed. There are new medications, and a few that are no longer available. Artificial insemination and embryo transplants are almost routine now. A pregnant ewe can be scanned with ultrasound to see how many lambs she is carrying, and starting with the now famous Dolly, sheep are even cloned. What's more, if you want to know about some genes in a sheep, don't guess from breeding records—get a DNA analysis.

On the negative side, some diseases have appeared in sheep that were formerly found only in other species, especially cattle, and many sheep diseases that were confined to one part of the country have spread along with the widespread transportation of sheep. Worms have not given up trying to make their living inside sheep, and careless use of anthelmintics has built resistance in worm populations. Many antibiotics and other chemicals have been removed from the market after discovery that they had become ineffective or were dangerous in some way.

That said, new breeds are appearing in North America. A milk sheep industry is growing slowly. New shepherds are learning their ways with sheep, and new flocks are being started in many areas where sheep have not been common in the recent past.

The Information Age has not left sheep and shepherding behind. All manner of sheep and sheep-raising information is available on the Internet. The sheep-L mailing list, physically located in a computer in Uppsala, Sweden, has hundreds of subscribers from all over the world who exchange information and chat in as many as a hundred or more email messages a day. One can get information about breeds of sheep that most people have never even heard of at [www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/sheep/](http://www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/sheep/) and many sheep breed associations have web sites to tell how wonderful their breed is. Information on sheep health is widely available from authoritative online sources. Wool enthusiasts and fiber arts/crafts people can start at my web site at [www.rbparker.com](http://www.rbparker.com) to find many links and references to mailing lists, web sites, and all manner of information. Fiber people can subscribe to my mailing list, FiberNet, celebrating its eleventh anniversary in 2001, by sending an email to

PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITION

fibernet-request@imagicomm.com with the word “subscribe” as the message, or by visiting my web site.

So, I hope you enjoy this version of *The Sheep Book*. If you have any comments, I can be reached by email at ron@rbparker.com.

I want to give hearty thanks to Alexandra Weikert of Munich, Germany, who generously scanned a copy of the original edition of *The Sheep Book* and converted the information into text for me to work with. Alexandra did that after several subscribers to my FiberNet mailing list volunteered to type the book into their computers by hand. What better testament could one have to the togetherness of sheep and fiber people than such unselfish willingness to help. My constant companion, Susanne Kallstenius, also devoted countless hours to working with data and graphics that became part of this version, without which I would never have met the deadlines.

—RON PARKER  
Täby, Sweden

# PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

When I quit a perfectly good job as a tenured professor in one of the country's top geology departments to move to Minnesota with my wife and son to raise sheep, did I bring with me a background in farming and raising livestock? I did not. Was my wife from rural roots and full of knowledge of things pastoral? She was not. In fact, we didn't know a thing about sheep, or very little at least. My wife had taken up spinning and weaving, and we thought we should raise some animals, so sheep it was. I sat in on some courses in the agriculture college at my university, and we read what books we could lay hands on, but we were mighty ignorant of both theory and practice. Oh, we had seen sheep; we had even sheared a sheep apiece at a clinic for 4-H kids, but that was about it.

We hurriedly fenced a pasture and moved in our newly acquired flock of twelve wild, crazy ewe lambs. They prospered on the abundant grass and tasty water, and we even caught sight of them now and then as they cruised around their pasture like so many gazelles. As breeding season approached we knew that we would have to catch them and remove the yearling ram and one ram lamb. We tried in vain to lure them into a small corral. We even enlisted the aid of a pair of neighbors, but, under the leadership of a half-Karakul ram whose instincts had reverted to those of his ancestors in the wilds of Persia, they outmaneuvered us with disheartening grace.

We knew there had to be a better way, so we did what any sensible person would have done: built a trap. Not an elaborate trap, mind you, just an enclosure at a fence corner that looked innocent enough even to a suspicious sheep with a love of freedom. We baited our trap with some corn after giving the sheep enough free samples to get them hooked. They moved in with cautious hunger, and my wife, prone in the grass, quickly reeled in the fifty-foot rope that slid the carefully balanced and lubricated door shut behind them. At last, we had our flock in captivity.

We knew that setting traps was no way to become shepherds, so we started to watch the sheep to learn what made them tick. We kept them confined, and pretty soon had them rushing in for grain and hay. We also discovered that sheep don't want to be chased. They want to be led. We changed our

strategy to my leading and my wife coming along behind, clapping, and now and then—partly as a joke, and partly because it worked—barking like a sheep dog.

Things have come a long way since that period seven years ago. The sheep follow me anywhere I call them, and we even have a sheep dog who rounds them up for us (without barking, I might add). No longer do we desperately call our retired shepherd neighbor when something goes wrong. It no longer takes us an hour to shear a sheep. People even phone and ask us for advice.

Over the past few years, as we talked with sheep raisers, referred to some books on sheep raising and to our *Merck Veterinary Manual*, called our vet or took animals to him so we could watch what he did to doctor a sheep, we wished that we had a modern, complete book on sheep raising. As we learned more, I began to write short articles about what we thought would be helpful to the beginners we had once been—first for *Countryside*, then later for *The New Farm*, *The Shepherd*, and *sheep!* I finally got brave enough to try a book, and with lots of encouragement from editors, especially Bill Allison, the first editor of *sheep!*, and from my always understanding and sustaining wife, I gave it a try. What you see is almost the book that I wish I had had when I first got into the sheep and shepherding business.

So, read the book, get yourself some sheep, find a good veterinarian, and go to it. The sheep will teach you if you give them half a chance. Go to meetings of sheep organizations, read magazines, books, newspapers, and learn. The more you know about sheep, the more you'll love and enjoy them.

I want to thank the many people whose brains I picked, although I won't mention their names because I don't think it's fair for them to take any of the blame for my somewhat opinionated handbook. I do want to thank my wife, Teresa, and our close friend Kathy Barber for the many hours they both spent reading the first draft of this book and for setting me in the right direction more than once.

—RON PARKER

Sammen Sheep Farm  
Henning, Minnesota  
1983

# INTRODUCTION

Sheep are the ideal, useful domesticated animal. They are hardy and healthy. Except for an occasional aggressive ram or uppity ewe they are gentle and submissive. They are small enough for a good-sized child or a senior citizen to handle. They give both superlative meat and a fiber that has no peer. They are the ideal animal for the homestead, small farm, place in the country, suburban backyard, or any other place where man makes his home and grass will grow.

Sheep don't get a lot of press coverage; they are shyly in the background while horses, cattle, hogs, rabbits, and even llamas catch the eye of the public. Still, though their flashier confrères may bathe in the limelight, sheep emerge as the old reliables. The first food-producing animal ever domesticated by man quietly eats grass and leaves and goes about its business of producing lambs and wool.

Sheep have a quality that makes them almost a symbol of rural peace and tranquillity. Landscape painters know that a sylvan scene can be rendered really irenic only if a band of grazing sheep and perhaps a shepherd are included in the composition. And can anyone listen to Beethoven's Sixth or Copland's "Appalachian Spring" without visualizing a flock of sheep at some point? This quality of sheep is a result of their mutual dependency, their soft gregariousness, and their ready acceptance of a leader-shepherd. They are endearing because they respond to loving care so willingly, and even flighty, frightened ones follow the familiar herder with eager timidity. They thrive in man's care, and return abundance to those who will care for them. Sheep alone among domesticated species give back innocence and gentleness to almost any treatment, and they can elicit the best from the best of us, those who are willing to give of themselves unselfishly.

Sheep have been domesticated for so long that even the scholars who specialize in such matters disagree about the precise identity of their wild precursors. Sheep as we know them today have coexisted with man for so long that they are more a part of human culture than beasts of the field.

The popularity of this domestic animal par excellence is enjoying a well-deserved renaissance in America. Sheep numbers declined in the decades after

World War II because of the combined impact of the returning GIs' dislike of the mutton served to them in the Pacific Theater, the explosive growth of the synthetic fiber industry, an increase in production and promotion of fowl and swine, the conversion of small and diversified farms to a few large-scale, cash-crop production units, the loss of sheepherders to higher paying and less demanding employment, and the impact of reduced predator control in the West.

The sheep renaissance is taking place not on the vast rangelands of the West but on thousands of small farms and homesteads all over the United States and Canada, especially in the Pacific Northwest, the Midwest, and the Northeast. The expansion in numbers is a reflection of an increase in the number of flocks, from handfuls to hundreds or thousands. The average number of sheep per producer in Minnesota is only about thirty. The new sheep raiser might be a farmer but just as often is a doctor, a mechanic, a college professor, a trucker, an artist, a homesteader, a retired person, or a pastor. The modern shepherd is a person looking for a degree of self-sufficiency and an involvement in producing his own food and even clothing, or may be trying to make a living at shepherding. He or she is a person who wants input into life that is lacking when every need is provided ready-made by a complex and structured human society.

The sheep raiser of the 2000s is a person who wants to be involved with the sheep and wants to do the job of shepherd in a professional way. The modern shepherd reads magazines and books, goes to meetings and seminars, joins sheep raisers' organizations, subscribes to sheep-related mailing lists on the Internet, visits other sheep owners to learn from them, and strives to attain a level of competence undreamed of by the farmer of yesteryear who might have kept a few sheep around the farmstead to trim the brush down. Today's shepherd recognizes the benefits that a complex, technologically oriented society can confer on the agrarian way of life, and is likely to keep current on the latest drugs, techniques, and management practices to a degree that may surprise extension agents, veterinarians, and other animal husbandry professionals. The shepherd of the 2000s uses a computer, may synchronize breeding and lambing times with biologically active chemicals, and generally does things that would have been thought avant garde even at university experiment stations only decades ago. This shepherd is reversing the evolution of the shepherd David to a great leader by coming from a position of expertise in middle-class society to become guardian of a sheep flock. Yet, the mod-

ern shepherd brings along a sophistication that the young David needed many years to learn, and acquires humility and a new sense of personal worth with the sheep as David did when he was a lad.

Sheep are an ideal animal for the small grower. They thrive on care yet will utilize hilly, rocky land that other animals disdain. Given fencing to prevent their wandering away, and protection from predators, sheep will take care of themselves provided enough grazing, browsing, and water are available. A flock of sheep will turn a brushy, weedy pasture into a place that resembles a well-groomed park. Their wool coat gives them such protection from the elements that they seldom require shelter, even in conditions that would be fatal to other animals.

A ewe births and raises one or more cuddly lambs each year that grow up to be sturdy young sheep ready for market in four to six months. The ewe and her lambs provide a clipping of wool each year that can be sold or spun into yarn for garments. Indeed, many of today's small sheep flocks were started because the shepherd wanted some wool for spinning, and many a fiber artist finds that raising sheep is at least as interesting as spinning and weaving. Some of them become shepherds of large commercial flocks, as Teresa and I did.

The new shepherd soon realizes that sheep are not something to be dominated but finds instead that they have a wide range of capabilities that the shepherd must learn. A wise shepherd today adapts lifestyle and schedule to the biological timing and needs of his flock, just as the wise shepherds of ten millennia ago did. The observant herder adjusts his annual work cycle to the natural cycle of the ewe, one that is strongly seasonal compared to that of animals such as swine, cattle, or horses. The sage shepherd becomes the servant of his flock and alters her ways and those of the family to function in a mutually beneficial rhythm according to the ewe's cycle of estrus, gestation, and parturition.

It is essential to learn how sheep behave and do it their way. Treat a sheep like a sheep, and it will reward you by doing as it should. Don't try to make a sheep like a dog, or a child, or a horse. Instead, spend time learning about how sheep operate, and guide them in what they will do naturally. Learn that a sheep has a safety zone around it, and if you enter that zone, it will flee. Learn that sheep will follow you if you give them a chance.

In recognition of the shepherd's ability to adapt to the essentially unalterable dictates of the ewe's biological clock, I have organized the core of *The*

*Sheep Book* according to the major sexual cycles of the mature ewe. I begin with the period of building and rebuilding, when a young ewe grows to maturity, or when an older one rebuilds her body after lambing and lactation. The physically prepared ewes are made ready for their role as mothers by a period of high nutrition called flushing. This is followed by breeding, gestation, lambing, lactation, weaning, and finally the rebuilding of resources for the beginning of a new cycle.

This book is written for everyone who is a shepherd or would become a shepherd. The size of the flock is not a relevant issue. Regardless of whether the flock is a couple of ewes in the backyard, a few hundred on a farm, or ten thousand on the range, the needs of an individual ewe remain the same. Her world is dominated by her natural cycle and the shepherd's responses to her wants. It is likewise not relevant whether the sheep are raised for their wool, their lambs, or as pets, nor does it matter whether profit is a motive. A good shepherd must have a feeling for the essential biological and psychological requirements of the flock that comes from a blend of observation, intuition, study, and a love for shepherding.

The book should first be read through from start to finish in order to get a sense of the ewe's rhythm. The details of chores, facilities, and health matters are not vital the first time through. When you have read the whole book you will be ready to read some parts again, more carefully. Use the index to help you locate where the same question is treated in the context of different stages of the ewe's cycle. Compare your sheep to those described in the book. Ask yourself how they are the same and how they differ. Test your own perceptions against those detailed in the book. What have you missed, and, conversely, what have you seen that isn't mentioned in the book? Read it for pleasure, use it as a reference, and, most important, use it as a starting point from which to become a better shepherd. When you think you know it all, buy some more books, watch some more sheep, and deepen your knowledge.

If you have access to a computer and a connection to the world, join the sheep-L mailing list and learn from an informed, chatty, sometimes rowdy, almost always cheerful group based all over the world who share an interest in sheep. Send email to [listserv@listserv.uu.se](mailto:listserv@listserv.uu.se) with the message "subscribe sheep-L" and you will start to learn about sheep the first time you get your list mail.

Although the book is geared toward sheep raisers in North America, not every generality or piece of advice will fit every single situation even there.

## INTRODUCTION

Some shepherds do certain things at a different stage in the cycle or at a different time of year than I have assumed. There are also discussions of some activities that are not tied to the ewe's reproductive cycle at all, which are noted where necessary. The cardinal rule for today's shepherd, as it was for yesterday's, remains: let your ewes be your guide.

