

Round Up

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Fiber Fun

Annual festival showcases sheep, wool, collies and fiber artists

by Stephanie C. Hamel, photographs courtesy of the EMFF

A WHISTLE PIPES ACROSS THE FIELD, STARTLING me. Turning, I spot two border collies hurtling determinedly toward a flock of sheep as a tall, booted woman trills another short burst from her silver whistle. The dogs,

now closing in on the sheep, veer sharply.

First this way, then another, the collies respond to her piped commands as they quickly corner the now-scrambling sheep by the fence in front of me. Have I been transported

to rural Yorkshire in England? No, I am in Harford, Susquehanna County, amidst a sheepherding demonstration at the Endless Mountains Fiber Festival.

This annual September event, the largest and longest running





of its kind in the state, showcases fiber-producing animals and the textile arts.

Spinning and Shearing

JULIE PERRY, A SHEEP farmer and fiber artist from Sundance Life Farm in Towanda, Bradford County, laughs when I tell her that I feel transported back in time. She is selling hand-loomed rugs and potholders at the event, and as we chat, she hand-spins yarn using a drop-spindle, an ancient way of creating thread.

“My husband said that very thing—that



he lives in a James Herriot veterinary story,” she shares. “An onlooker at our fair might be surprised by how many people are doing this type of work and of the satisfaction that we gain from it.”

Perry was raised on a farm and learned handcrafts at an early age. Her mother, an expert quilter, gave her cardboard pages with large holes punched in them to teach her how to “sew” with yarn.

The annual festival brings local shepherds and artists together to share their knowledge of fiber-producing animals and

(left) A border collie shepherds a group of sheep during a demonstration at the event. (above) A youngster snuggles up to an angora rabbit. A demonstration on Saturday will showcase the species’ care and housing and how to harvest the rabbit’s fiber, as well as spin it into yarn.

the methods used to process their fiber. It began in 2003 in conjunction with the Penn State Extension. Throughout the weekend, demonstrations and classes are held, ranging from hoof trimming to loom weaving.

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Held at the Harford Fairgrounds, the event features vendors selling raw fiber as well as spun and dyed yarn. Visitors can also attend demonstrations and lectures on related topics, such as fiber dyeing and sheep shearing. (far right, bottom) Kelly DeBree of River's End Sheep Farm demonstrates how to shear a sheep.

Other Fiber Festivals in Pennsylvania

Landis Valley Wool Frolic and Yarn Sale, Landis Valley Village and Farm Museum, Lancaster—held annually in September. landisvalley.museum.org/event/wool-frolic-and-yarn-sale

Lehigh Valley Fiber Festival, Macungie Memorial Park, Macungie, Lehigh County—September 11-12. lvfiberfest.com

Fall Fiber Arts Festival, Leesport Farmers Market, Leesport, Berks County—November 20-21. galaonline.org/pa-fall-fiber-arts-festival

Allentown Fiber Festival, Merchants Square Mall, Allentown, Lehigh County—held annually in April. allentownfiberfestival.com

Central Pennsylvania Fiber Festival, Lycoming County Fairgrounds, Hughesville—held annually in May. centralpennfiberfest.com

Sheep and Fiber Festival, Greene County Fairgrounds, Waynesburg—held annually in May. sheepandfiber.com

As I wander past pens holding various breeds of sheep, goats, alpacas and llamas, I overhear teenager Karina Anderson of Aboundingful Farm in Palmyra, Dauphin County, explaining the proper care of an angora rabbit to a small child, who is stroking the animal's incredibly soft fur.

I hear the buzzing of a razor and turn to watch a sheepshearer at work. A mat of thick wool piles up on the floor. The freshly shorn sheep suddenly leaps up and rushes past two seated women, who are treadling spinning wheels with their feet. Unfazed by the commotion, they continue telling an onlooker how wool fibers are blended to yield different weights of yarn with varying textures, durability and warmth.

An open, juried fleece sale and show is under way in a shaded area, and as I gaze at the bags of cashmere, llama and Icelandic wool, I am surprised by how much there is to learn about fibers, how little I know of how clothing is prepared and how much effort is involved in the process.

Fiber Arts

BENEDETTA LAWRENCE OF BEAR Creek, Luzerne County, has come to the festival to find yarn for her knitting, but she also en-

joys seeing the animals and discussing fiber arts with other interested craftsppeople.

"We have a border collie at home," she tells me, "so I enjoy watching the dogs here herding in the field. I also like to learn about the breeds of sheep and rabbits. I try to spin angora wool. It is not easy, but it's fun to try."

Those who do not knit, weave or spin will still find things to do at the festival and items to purchase from vendors, who sell handcrafted arts and goods, including wool socks, jackets and scarves. At one of the stalls, I stop to preen in a mirror while trying on a lovely plum-colored hat. I ask the fiber artist why she decided to sell hats.

"We raised horses forever and then jumped into raising alpacas," says Nancy Imphong of Shadowberry Farm Alpacas in Carlisle, Cumberland County. "After shearing them, we had the fiber, so I learned to spin and began knitting."

She explains that alpaca fiber is known for its fineness, but as an animal ages, its fiber becomes slightly coarse. "It is not something you would want against your neck," she says, "so I use the fiber from Acer, our first alpaca, for some of these hats."



I ask her how long it takes to make each hat, and she calculates as she explains the process. First, she takes the sheared fiber to a little mill to be cleaned and carded. After dyeing it, she knits the hat and then felts it, a process where the hat is agitated in hot, soapy water to connect the fibers and make them thicker and more dense.

“Since the hat shrinks when I felt it,” she says, “I knit it to twice the size as I want.”

The felted wool helps to retain heat when the hat is worn, she explains. Next, she dries the hat on a mold to shrink and reshape it. Then, she brushes it and maybe adds a little adornment.

“So, each hat takes about 10 to 12 hours to create,” she concludes.

With the hat still perched on my head, I buy it. It will be a perfect cold winter accessory and reminder of my trip to the Endless Mountains Fiber Festival. ♡

—Stephanie C. Hamel hikes, bikes and writes in Bear Creek.

WHEN YOU GO

The **Endless Mountains Fiber Festival** will be held September 11-12 at the Harford Fairgrounds in New Milford, Susquehanna County. The two-day event features demonstrations, breed displays, classes, contests, vendors, and a fleece sale. endlessmountainsfiberfest.com; 570-434-4300

