

Pendleton Woolen Mills adapts to changing times, markets

By SIERRA DAWN MCCLAIN
Capital Press

PENDLETON, Ore. — Machines rumbled and roared. Looms interlaced colorful yarns at right angles to form cloth. People scurried by, pushing tubs of spools.

Here at Pendleton Woolen Mills, the same family has run the business since 1909. More than 100 years later, Pendleton's brand remains popular, with an online store and 35 retail locations. The mill buys wool from about 170 sheep farms.

The operation's enduring success, industry experts say, is tied to its adaptability. The Bishop family, which has run Pendleton Woolen Mills for generations, has adapted to shifting wool production and changing global markets.

Some of the company's earliest designs, including blankets inspired by Native American culture, remain best sellers. But other aspects of the industry have changed over the century.

The introduction of man-made fibers in the 1880s shrank wool's share of the textile market, especially after polyester was invented in 1941. Americans ditched the itch of prickly wool for softer synthetic fibers.

According to a 2019 Textile Exchange report, sheep wool makes up 1% of global textile fibers. By comparison, polyester constitutes 52% and cotton 24%.

Specific products have also changed. According to a 2021 study in *Animal Frontiers*, a scientific journal, apparel wool used to be popular as outer knitwear or woven suits, but as the American workforce has become more casual, people have bought fewer suits.

New opportunities, however, have opened, including growing markets for next-to-skin knitwear and "athleisure" wear made with fine, small-micron wool.

Although Pendleton uses coarser wool to create blankets and rugs, the company uses finer wool for next-to-skin clothing.

New international markets are also emerging, especially among Asia's rising middle classes. According to the *Animal Frontiers* study, because wool is four to seven times more expensive to produce and process than most fibers, it's marketed internationally as a luxury niche product.

Wool has also found a place among eco-conscious consumers avoiding man-made fibers.

"I see the push for natural fibers as being good for the wool business," said Dan Gutzman, manager of Pendleton Woolen Mills' wool buying department.



John Boston, manager of Pendleton Woolen Mills' Pendleton mill.

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A loom weaves or interlaces yarns at right angles to form cloth: in this case, a blanket designed by Pendleton Woolen Mills.

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Employees at Pendleton Woolen Mills in Pendleton, Ore., work beside spinning frames, which take the wool from the roving stage to the yarn stage by simultaneously drafting or stretching the roving and twisting. This process entraps the fibers and gives the yarn strength and a defined texture.

Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press



Jaime Ramirez, a dresser at the mill in Pendleton, at the warp. Dressing prepares threads for the loom.

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wool buying department.

Additionally, the pandemic shifted consumer demands. Though consumers have bought less work attire, Pendleton has seen demand spike for home goods including blankets, rugs and décor and has pivoted to meet that demand.

"COVID was good for the home business," said John Bishop, president of Pendleton Woolen Mills.

Consumers also increasingly want "local" products, and Pendleton Woolen Mills is well-positioned to tout that it sources wool from many U.S. farms.

Pendleton also buys from Australia, New Zealand, Brazil and Uruguay, but the company sources as much wool as possible — about 40% — from domestic ranches.

According to April Rogers, Pendleton's spokeswoman, some longtime providers include Krebs

Livestock, Krebs Sheep Co., Cunningham Sheep Co., Etcheverry Sheep Co., Wixom Livestock, Noh Livestock, Five O Ranch and Ian Anderson Livestock.

Although the mill works with ranches at any scale — buying a few fleeces or buying them by the truckloads — Gutzman encourages farmers with small flocks to pool their wool with others.

Gutzman said farmers should also be aware of market trends. For example, U.S. consumers have been moving toward softer wool, 23 microns or finer.

The domestic value of fine wool from a white-faced breed like a Rambouillet is worth about three to four times more per pound than coarse black-face sheep wool, according to Gutzman.

Not every farmer can jump into the fine wool industry, however. It takes

the right kind of land. Rambouillets are built for arid, rocky ranges.

"You pretty much have to have sheep that fit your land," said Gutzman.

Bishop, the company president, said Pendleton will continue supporting sheep farmers and adapting to the times.

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