

Wool Power

THOUSANDS FLOCK TO BLACK SHEEP GATHERING THIS WEEKEND.

By Annie Doehnahl

What's black, brown and baaaaing all over? The 31st annual Black Sheep Gathering at the Lane County Fairgrounds this weekend. Shepherds, their woolly and hairy beasts, vendors and wool wonks from near and distant pastures are rolling in for three days of showing, learning, and poop management. The Gathering celebrates the age-old and modern crafts of raising fiber animals and turning their fleece into art. The Black Sheep Gathering is one of the largest events held at the Fairgrounds. And contrary to its name, participants do not have to identify as "black sheep" in order to gather.

Dark Roots

The Black Sheep Gathering (BSG) began as an annual farm potluck in the early 1970s at the Polk County Fairgrounds in Rickreall. The purpose of the round-up, then named the Black Sheep Growers' Potluck, was for people who raised colored sheep to share their tales of small flocks and wool-craft. Most U.S. sheep breeders selected against black sheep traits, making it difficult to find information on raising colored sheep. White sheep were (and still are) more commercially prized since their wool can be dyed any color. Only white sheep were welcome in the conventional county and state fair sheep shows at that time.

The annual potluck grew under the vision and inspiration of Sachiye Jones, a Lorane poet and artist credited with bringing together the first Black Sheep participants. Open workshops, informal animal judging, and sales of sheep and fleeces on a haggle basis were thriving. Interest in colored sheep continued to grow, drawing more animals, demonstrations and visitors each year. By 1981, the potluck spilled into a two-day event, moved to the Fairgrounds, and adopted the name Black Sheep Gathering. From 1982-1988, it shifted to Cottage Grove, and in 1989 BSG returned to the Fairgrounds where it has found its home ever since. The gathering now dominates the Fairgrounds for three days each June.

Shear Delights

Many of the thousands of visitors to the BSG are neither animal breeders nor hand spinners, yet are drawn by the up close and personal glimpse into ancient and modern crafts. Last year I had two house guests visiting for the Bach Festival. Since it was also BSG weekend, I suggested that my violin friends check out the Gathering. In my estimation, wool-producing animals and creative fiber arts would round out their Bachfest experience. The BSG stimulates all of the senses — from the smell of hay and lanolin, to the sight of multicolored yarns, to the touch of soft merino, to the sound of animals bleating. It isn't a cantata, yet it's real and alive and brings out the best of people working alternative and local livelihoods through communion with

fiber animals. Our relationship with and, in some cases, dependence on wool dates back to the dawn of recorded history.

I wanted my guests to experience this. As it turns out, they came all three days. The Alaskan bought a drop spindle and was eager to learn how to spin. My friend from Idaho was inspired to return to the knitting she'd learned as a girl and bought yarn from a local wool producer. For the rest of their stay, they were all questions and curiosity about sheep, wool and fiber arts. It was evident to them that contemporary wool craft has evolved way past the lumpy, chunky, itchy days of yore.

Bleating Hearts

Janice Thompson has coordinated the BSG demonstrations for years and has stories to tell. At her Dye-lots shop in Eugene, she recounts how two years ago she rustled up a young 4Her to talk about his prized sheep in the demo area. He was only 11, shy and needed encouragement from his dad to go. Reluctantly, the lad began walking his ewe toward the waiting throngs. His sheep preceded to poop the entire length of the walk — through the two trade show buildings buzzing with shoppers — his dad doing the "Peter DeFazio" scoop with a shovel in the rear. Once in the demo area, 30 or so woman began oogling over the boy and his sheep, who

took this opportunity to pee unceremoniously and copiously. Where can you find such elegant and raw material so closely juxtaposed?

Janice likens fiber work to "yoga for the brain." She says "Many of the cutting edge fashion designs from New York are made from hand-spun yarns. Designing these thick and thin yarns from glorious colors is all part of the thrill." Watching folks move through the isles and piles of brightly colored yarns, she swears she sees people having

fashion show of sorts, where the artist walks across a "runway" (i.e. barnyard swept relatively clear of droppings) sporting a garment fashioned out of the wool from the animal which accompanies her. Many spinners come on with, and wearing an item spun from, a Shetland sheep because of their sweet disposition and small size. Janice also lead a Shetland — a friend's sheep named Gypsy Rose — but first opted to rainbow dye her fleece with wedding cake frosting dye. Gypsy Rose was the poster sheep for tie-dye meets 4H. Woman and sheep took their turns around the barnyard runway to an audience laughing a "now I've seen it all" joy.

The Shorn Identity

For the sequentially minded, BSG provides a terrific lesson in start to finish craftsmanship. In one building, you'll find hundreds of animals organized by breed (e.g. long wool sheep, fine wool sheep, sheep with four horns, angora goats — who produce mohair — and angora rabbits — who produce angora). This is far more than other animal shows at the Fairgrounds. In another building, you'll find 400 to 500 bags of wool. Like the animals, the fleeces may be



More Baaad Puns

Sheep talk somehow brings out the most irritating yet irresistibly pun-ishing humor in the English language. If you haven't suffered enough yet with our headlines, try to ram these sheep shots into your conversations at the BSG:

On the lamb. Sheep of fools. A sheep at the wheel. Woolly bully. Sheep thrills. Three sheeps to the wind. Baaa humbug. Sheep date. Sheepskate. Like sheeps passing in the night. Bleating the competition. Miles to go before we sheep. Little Sheep of Horrors. Sheep trick. Fleece Navidad. Thanks for mutton.

Sheep hypnotists might say, "You're getting sheeepy." A courting sheep might ask, "Wool you marry me? I only have eyes for ewe." And of course a macho young sheep would have to be called Lambo. — TJT