

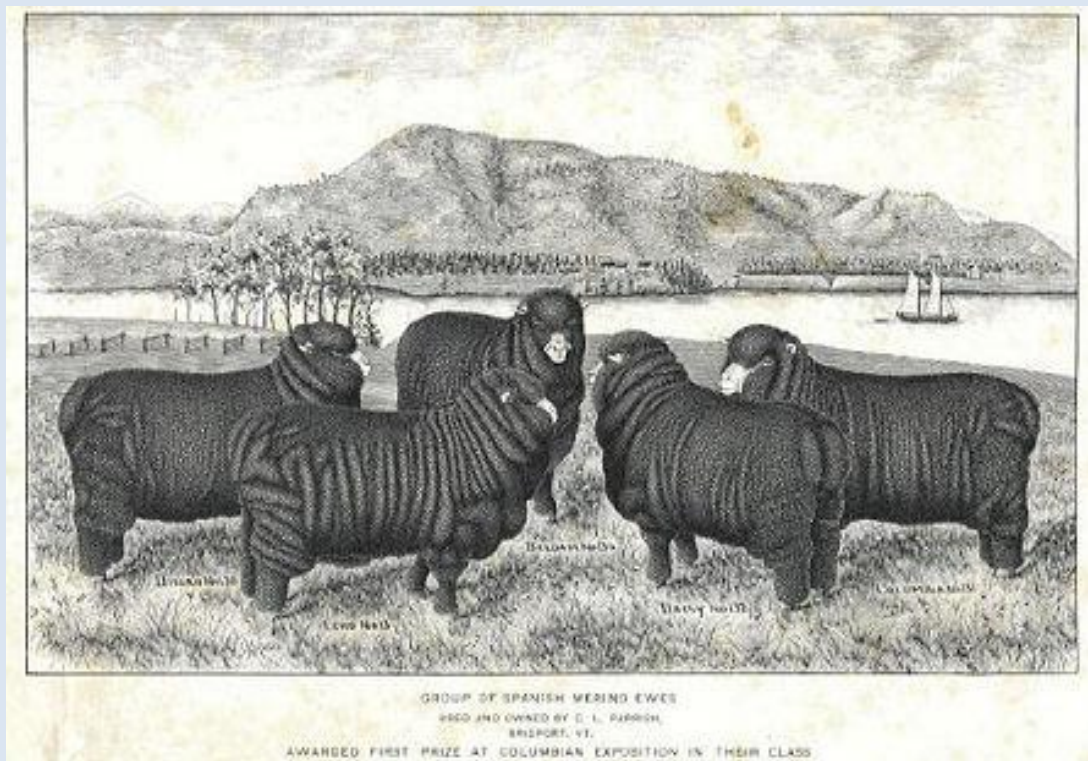
PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

Lambing Time

Jan Albers, former Executive Director, Henry Sheldon Museum

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March is lambing time in Addison County, where one of the great rites of spring is a visit to the Duclos family's annual Open Barn on Sheep Farm Road in Weybridge. Many of us have gone for years, tramping through early mud season to ooh and aah over the multi-colored lambs, guess the weight of the bag of wool, guiltily eat samples of lamb kielbasa and reconnect with Vermont's agricultural roots.



Luther Webster's etching of five prize-winning Merino ewes from the Parrish farm in Bridport. Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum

The Duclos lambs are vestiges of a time when the fields around us were filled with tens of thousands of sheep. In the nineteenth century, Addison County was internationally known as the epicenter of the sheep industry. Those heady years can be traced in the archives of the Sheldon Museum, home to many strangely beautiful etchings of sheep, most of them the work of a local artist named Luther Webster. Farmers are notoriously thrifty, and generally unsentimental, about their livestock. Why would a farmer pay an

artist to create elaborate etchings of his animals? The answer lies in the story of the great Merino sheep craze.

In 1811, William Jarvis, the U.S. consul in Lisbon, managed to talk the Spanish royal family into selling him a flock of their exclusive Merino sheep. He shipped them back to his farm in Weathersfield, Vermont, and was soon sending breeding stock all over the state. By the 1820s, Merino sheep had almost totally supplanted the native breeds, and the lower Champlain Valley was proving to be perfect sheep country.

The rate of growth was astounding. By 1840, at its height, there were 1,681,000 sheep in Vermont—six times the human population. The hillsides had been largely deforested, so the Green Mountains would have looked much like the Yorkshire Dales today, with their stone fences and sheep-filled pastures. But the most successful farms, then and now, were in the valleys; especially in Addison County, which soon had more sheep per capita (11) and produced more wool per acre than any county in America. The sheep of kings had become the king of sheep, and Addison County got a reputation for having the greatest Merinos in the world. By 1840, Shoreham alone was home to 41,000 sheep.

Farmers whose fathers and grandfathers had cut the virgin forests to clear land for hardscrabble lives of subsistence farming, were now finding that there were big profits to be made by specializing in one thing. Breeders like the Wilcoxes of Orwell and the Jewetts of Weybridge were making a killing, breeding Merinos with fleeces heavier than ever before. The big operators were expanding rapidly, buying out the smaller, more marginal farmers around them to expand their sheep pastures.

A naïve agricultural community did not fully anticipate the pitfalls of specialization. In 1840, it seemed the sheep miracle would never end, and by 1850 the Merino craze was almost over. The relaxing of government tariffs in the 1840s flooded the market with cheaper wool from the opening West. By the end of the decade, owners were slaughtering whole flocks because they couldn't afford to feed them. Up to 2/3 of the state's sheep were killed between 1846-1850. Vermont farmers now saw that there were dangers in putting all of your eggs, or fleeces, in one basket.

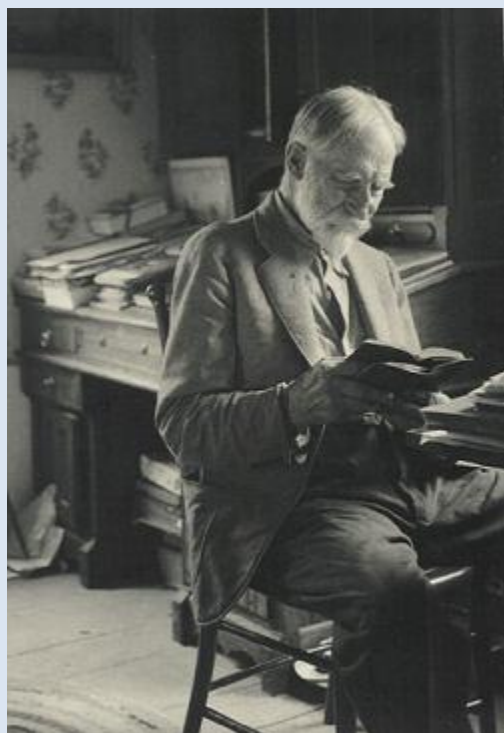
But Addison County's reputation for breeding the greatest Merinos did not die so quickly. A select few Merino breeders continued to do well, selling breeding stock all over the world. Alonzo Bingham of Cornwall sold \$43,402 worth of breeding Merinos in one eight-month period in the 1850, to farmers from as far away as Virginia and Michigan. A great Merino ram could command stud fees of \$3000 and sell outright for \$10,000. Later in the century, Addison County Merinos were being sold to customers as far away as Australia.

A farmer about to make an investment in an animal that expensive wanted to see what he was getting. This being the high end of the trade, the advertisements could not just be accurate, they were expected to be aesthetically pleasing. Luckily, the County also

spawned creativity, and a native son, Luther Webster, [often known as L.A. Webster], became known as one of America's greatest livestock artists.

Webster (1858-1944), was born too late to have seen the big sheep boom, but he grew up in Shoreham around the surviving Merino breeding stock industry. He and his brother, Frank, were both artistically talented, and found their niche capturing the noble frames and great rolls of curly fleece of the Merinos in three mediums: etching, crayon and pen and ink. Frank died young, but a number of his meticulous drawings survive in the Sheldon Museum. Luther thrived, following the agricultural fairs across the country in the summer, fulfilling commissions to immortalize the farmers' prize breeders.

Luther Webster's eye for a good Merino was not solely artistic. He was enough of a specialist to be chosen to judge sheep at the famed Chicago International show. He also enjoyed another career in livestock journalism, serving as field editor of the American Sheep Breeder and contributing to the Shepherd's Criterion. He knew how to spot a prize sheep like few men of his age.



Webster's clients appreciated his rare combination of art and animal husbandry. They wanted beautiful etchings as advertisements. (And if the images exaggerated a little, was that so wrong?) In creating his illustrations, Webster did the sketches from life, then sent the completed etchings, on copper plates, to New York to be struck in multiple copies. A handwritten listing entitled "Sheep Notes," now at the Sheldon, recorded some of the works he undertook in 1884, including, "One Ram for Henry Robins Cornwall Vt. 5 inch plate at 2-1/2 inch 50 copies struck in New York \$45," and "Sheep in group 5 ewes one 7-1/2 inch plate 1000 copies struck in N.Y. for C.W. Mason, Vergennes Vt. \$70.00." The numbers of copies suggest the wide reach of the farmers' promotional initiatives.

Livestock artist Luther Webster in 1917, aged 59

By the early 20th century, most of the sheep industry had been replaced by dairying, as Vermont farmers sent oceans of milk to the big industrial cities of the East Coast. The green valley pastures were being planted with rows of corn, and the trees began to grow back on the mountainsides. But you can still stand outside, on a cool spring night in Vermont, listening for the ghostly bleating of the lambs.