

WinterBrook Farm: All fiber all the time

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By Nicole Carter Advertiser Democrat

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OXFORD — Sally Harney was not born on a farm but she is a born farmer. She and her husband Jim have run a fiber farm for the past 15 years, following earlier various ventures that included a butcher shop, home interiors and a campground.

“I’ve worked in an office, we ran a campground in Turner for 17 years,” Harney says. “But I love this. I can’t imagine doing anything different. From getting hay to the farm to shoveling manure. I love the whole deal. My sister would just shake her head at me. Some people don’t want to get their hands dirty.”

Starting with a beef critter when they first married, the Harneys have almost always farmed something. Six years ago they added a major compliment to their farm operation, a fiber spinning mill. She splits her days between working in the mill, on the farm and her fiber arts.

The Mill

In 2012 Harney’s husband Jim bought her a fiber carder out of the Robinson Manufacturing Company, the woolen mill that operated in Oxford from the 1850s until 2003. The couple’s son Cory was working at the shuttered mill, hauling out equipment for scrap.

“It was an impulse buy,” Harney said. “One weekend my husband went along with my son to the mill to help him out. He saw this carder and said, ‘Oh my, Sal needs that.’”

“Cory had to get a bunch of guys to help move it. They brought it home and set it in an old, falling-down garage. I asked Jim, ‘what am I going to do with it?’ And he said he was going to build me a shop for it. So that’s what he and Cory did.”

The carder is an antique, made in 1907 by a long defunct equipment manufacturer. It’s possible that the work the Harneys put into building the shop to house it was easier than making the unit function as it should.



Sally Harney feeds fleece into the carding machine, which her husband bought as salvage from the Robinson Mill in Oxford.
Nicole Carter/Advertiser Democrat

“The feeder was much shorter so we made it longer,” said Harney. “We had to change it over to a different power source. Someone at the mill had changed all the teeth on the rollers. It took a year before we figured out how to run the thing.”

It wasn't until she found pictures of other carders online that the Harneys were able to properly calibrate the carder.

“I found a book on a Yahoo site that showed what it was supposed to look like,” Harney laughed. “Whoever had redone it last? They put the teeth in the wrong direction. It wouldn't have ever worked right. But we finally got it fixed and running.

“If we ever need replacement parts we'll have to hunt for them. I expect that anyone who does metal works should be able to machine parts for us but we haven't needed to yet.”

The Harneys also had to put all new belts on the carder to get it to run at the right speed. Luckily Sally's brother was able to help, having previously run the carding room at the Oxford mill. She finds it ironic that she was the only member of her family who never worked at the mill and now she runs what is possibly the last operational piece of equipment from it.

While an antique carder would be a fun conversation piece for any fiber aficionado, the Harneys meant it to be business equipment, not a room-filling ornament. That meant acquiring other, more modern machinery to complement it.

“We picked up more mill equipment from Belfast Mini Mills up in Prince Edward Isle,” Harney said. “I needed a picker, which separates the fiber before it is fed into the carder. And we bought a sliver, the unit that takes the webs of fiber from the carder and turns out long trails of roving.”

“I just love this machine and I love working on it,” Harney said. “At first my husband did work out here with me, during the first year. But then I decided it would be more fun to do it myself. He wasn't as patient as I was.”

Harney's mill serves local small fiber and hobby farmers. All her business is acquired through word of mouth from a loyal pool of about three dozen customers. Other mini-mills will take six to nine months to process fiber; Harney's turn-around time is generally about six weeks.



Once washed and air-dried, Harney feeds a sheep fleece into the “picker” which separates the fibers. *Nicole Carter/Advertiser Democrat*

She preps (skirts) incoming fleeces as an extra service if her customers wish. She hand washes each one in a large industrial sink, multiple times, and spins the excess water out in a regular top-loading washing machine. Then she sets out the clean fiber on layers of screens and once dried, she feeds it into the picker, producing big tufts of fluff ready to be carded and processed into roving – the final product of the mill.

“I process five to seven pounds of fiber an hour on the machinery,” Harney said. “That’s from feeding the picker to producing the rovings.”

The Farm

In addition to processing fiber in the mill the Harneys tend to an ever fluctuating fiber herd, thanks to their reputation as a home for wayward livestock.

“Currently, we have 30 sheep, two llamas, one alpaca and seven Angora goats,” Harney counted. “We started with just Romney sheep but we are always taking in ‘strays.’ People know that we can take them in because we put up our own hay and always have enough feed.”

One year Harney was given a herd of 15 Finn sheep. Over the last few years she’s taken in Shetlands, a couple of California Variate Mutant (CVM)/Romney, a recently developed breed, and a couple of ewes from a nearby farm that surprised her with their unbelievable milk production.

“Those two, they’ll produce one or two lambs but they easily feed any orphans,” Harney marveled. They’ll have up to four at a time nursing. They’ve got so much milk.”

With such an assortment of sheep Harney experiments with her own hybrid breeding program. In the past she had purchased three heritage Blue-Faced Leicester (BFL) sheep but found they weren’t winter-hardy and lost two of them.

“Since the BFL fiber is so wonderful I’ve tried breeding the CVM girls to my remaining ram,” she said. “But he hasn’t been successful. He’s not very aggressive.

“I have so much fun blending the different breeds. You don’t know what you’ll get, but I try for as soft a fiber as I can. I want easy-to-spin wool.”



Carded fiber is fed into the “sliver” which pushes out finished roving, ready for hand spinning or other fiber arts. *Nicole Carter/Advertiser Democrat*

The Angora goats joined WinterBrook farm last summer. A few of them hadn't had their annual shearing, so Harney borrowed some shears from a friend and picked up yet another new farm skill.

"The goats came because they needed to be rehomed," said Harney. "Another farm called and told me about someone who had gotten them but couldn't take care of them. So of course I said, 'sure!'"

"I had to shear three of them, and I learned how then. I only shear the goats (not the sheep) but I fell in love with doing it. It was such fun. Their fiber is very curly. It's been fun to work with, it has a nice white sheen when you blend it with other fibers."

WinterBrook Farm is also home to the Harneys' pack of four dogs, all useful to the farm operation.

"One of our dogs is an English sheepdog," said Harney. "She helps me when any animals get out. She knows ... we haven't trained her but she knows what to do when I need her. She watches and figures it out."

After a period of losing animals to predators the Harneys acquired a livestock guardian dog. Bella is a Maremma, an Italian breed similar to the Great Pyrenees.

"We lost like 12 sheep in one year," Harney said. "We never figured out what the predator was but since we got the Maremma we haven't had any losses. We got her from one of our customers who lives in Bridgton who had health issues and couldn't keep such a big dog. She can squeeze through anything, even a gap of six to eight inches. But she doesn't roam."

Bella sleeps in the house during the day and patrols the farm at night. When she barks at real and imagined intruders, Harney opens the door and the sheepdog and her two rescue Labs race out to help.

Fiber Arts



One of Sally Harney's 30 sheep peaks around her benefactor. *Nicole Carter/Advertiser Democrat*



One of Sally Harney's sheep, leading the way through fresh snow on the farm. *Nicole Carter/Advertiser Democrat*

Harney's third occupation is fiber artist. She hand spins yarn and estimates that she sells about 1,000 dryer balls each year. She also sells kits for making Christmas ornaments and locker hooking projects and teaches classes on both. Locker hooking came about recently when the Fryeburg Fair needed someone for demonstrations and she was asked to fill the void. She makes up her own patterns and supplies the kits with fiber from her farm.



Bella the livestock guardian dog of WinterBrook Farm in Oxford keeps watch over new members to her flock last summer. *Supplied photo*



Some of the brightly dyed natural rovings on display at Sally Harney's fiber shop in Oxford. *Nicole Carter/Advertiser Democrat*

“And I do lots of dying,” Harney said. “I experiment with different types, whatever color hits my fancy at the time. But I don’t provide dyeing services for customers. You can never be sure of what shade you get or if it’s the shade they want.”

Harney travels around to different fairs and festivals in Maine to sell her dyed rovings, kits and finished goods. She enjoys the customer interactions.

“Once at the Common Ground Fair, this young girl started buying my roving, just a little bit at a time,” Harney laughs. “She kept coming back for a little at a time so I asked her to show me what she’d spun. It was beautiful. I told her I’d trade her, 4 ounces of roving for every 4 ounces of spun yarn. She keeps coming back and she started bringing a friend. They spin the yarn and come back for more.

“She’ll come around and stand there, like she’s wondering if I’ll recognize her. She’s probably 13 or so now. She spins with a group there. And she’s brought me more business from her group.”

During the winter months Harney will focus on the mill and producing her own fiber products for the festival season ahead. But she’s already thinking about next spring, of freshly harvested fiber, and looking forward to haying. When she and Jim began raising sheep back in 2004 they invested in haying equipment so they could supply their own feed. They mow a number of fields in east Oxford, putting up 4,000-5,000 bales a year.

“I wasn’t born a farmer but I’m a farmer for sure,” said Harney. “The minute the hay is ready, I’m out there.”

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