

# Wild + Woolly

*Northeastern Wyoming has a rich history when it comes to sheep and wool growers. More than a century ago, Basque shepherders from Spain and France settled the region and created a thriving industry that still continues locally today, thanks to the big dreams of two women who revived a once-declining industry by sourcing locally and making quality wool products and threads that kept Wyoming on the map as one of the premier wool-producing regions. Nearly two decades later, in the shadows of the Bighorn Mountains, the Mountain Meadow Wool Mill continues to grow, supporting local ranchers and raising awareness about the agricultural industry that forms the backbone of the West.*

By: Jen Kocher

**K**aren Hostetler doesn't look like your average CEO, nor would she ever consider giving herself that title. Petite and soft spoken in a casual linen top and black pants, Karen maneuvered across the factory floor, stopping to check out operations and chat with the half-dozen or so workers manning the industrial machines that wash, process, and spin the raw wool into yarn.

That she owns and oversees the largest full-service spinning mill in the West is, as far as she's concerned, just a footnote. For her, it's more about helping to keep the sheep on the rocky, craggy mountains in Wyoming where they belong, supporting local ranchers, and delivering quality woolen goods to customers that are distinctly Wyoming.

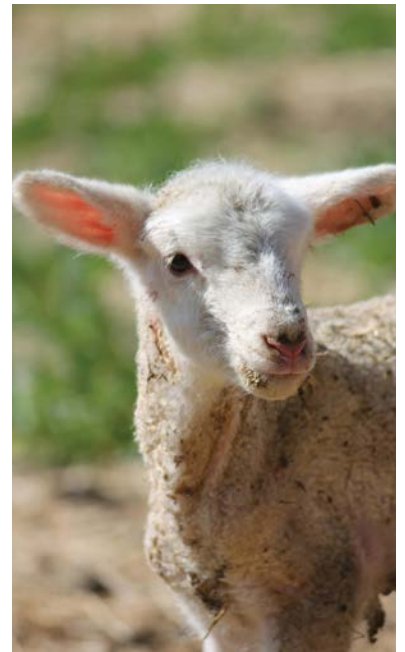
This part of the country produces some of the best wool in the world, Karen pointed out, and offers the perfect environment for some of the softest wool breeds like the Rambouillet, Cormo, Targhee, Merino and Columbia. Unlike people, those breeds thrive in the long harsh, dry winters. Part of the impetus for starting the company in the first place was to source from local ranchers to help revive the wool market after seeing one too many local ranchers go belly up in the ensuing decades since the wool price peaked in the late 1960s. Currently, Meadow Mountain Wool sources from 16 local ranches.

Along with offering customers a little piece of the Cowboy State, Karen is also committed to running an eco-friendly operation. Along with using natural, biodegradable soaps and non-petroleum spinning oil to wash and

render the wool into yarn, they also recycle 50 percent of the water used in their scouring process. The natural processing helps the wool retain its natural lanolin, which makes for more luxurious, softer yarns.

The spinning process itself is fascinating to watch, and in front of Karen, a large antiquated machine that looks a lot like the inside of a grand piano, was feeding large streamers of pale wool underneath little rubber rollers and mallets that transformed it into thin, shiny tendrils that will go on to be spun into skeins of yarn. Most of the machines date back to the 60s and were imported from Spain and other European countries and have the Baroque quality of classical instruments. Like a symphony, they hum, tick and rumble in a mechanical rhythm as they process the wool through its various stages. Not surprisingly, touring the factory has become popular with the tourists, some who describe it as going back in time to an earlier era when pride was inherently sewn into the mix.

Unlike many commercial wool operations, all of the yarn at the mill is hand-dyed. In an alcove off the factory floor in the dyeing kitchen, the resident dyer was in the process of mixing a pastel pine green from a jacquard acid dye taken from a recipe in the company cookbook. Most of the dye recipes came from experimentation, coupled with ideas they learned in various workshops and classes. Once the dye was mixed, she poured it onto the yarn out of little plastic container and blotted the color in slowly, like mixing sauce onto a pile of spaghetti. Once she gets it thoroughly saturated,



she'll pop it in the oven where it will cook at 230 degrees for a couple hours until the color is baked in.

It's a far cry from larger operations that do all their dyeing in large vats, churning out about 500 pounds of colored yarn a day as opposed to her 10 pounds, if she's lucky. Today, she's lucky but other days she might get called off to help on other machines or elsewhere to help keep the process moving. There are a lot of cogs in this wheel, as Karen pointed out, and everybody is trained to step in where needed.

These are happy employees. Despite the repetitive, often physical work, her staff of 17 full- and part-time workers act like they want to be there. They do, according to Karen, who doesn't see a lot of turnover. Most are knitters themselves or interested in textiles or just people who love to be part of the full-circle, local operation directly tied to the ranching community.

"They take a lot of pride in what they're doing," Karen said. "We all do."

## HAPPY ACCIDENT

Twelve years later, it's hard for Karen to believe the mill started as a hobby. In 2002, she and friend Valerie Spanos thought it would be fun to make their own wool. Though she's not from the agricultural world, Karen liked the idea of raw textiles and fabrics, along with helping out the local producers by buying their product. They started with about a 100 pounds of raw Wyoming wool that they sent to be processed at a mill in Canada, and later worked into their various crafts they sold at local trade shows.

Karen laughed when she thought about how the two of them must have looked showing up at their first show with about 20 skeins of yarn. Five years later, it had grown into much more than just a little craft shop. With the help of a \$386,000 Small Business Innovation Research grant through





the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the duo began meticulously touring mills and research institutions to learn everything they could about wool. At the time, wool prices were down, and the industry was pretty iffy, and against the advice of a few people already in the industry, they took a leap of faith, and in 2007, opened the mill.

Today, they process more than 15,000 pounds of wool a year and have sold over 70,000 skeins, with 23 different types of hand-dyed yarn and other products like hats, scarves, booties and sweaters across at least 42 states and three foreign countries. Valerie has since left the company, and now Karen's son Ben helps oversee operations as it continues to grow.

## LINKING, NOT SINKING

Along with the skeins of yarn and products sold on their website and in their store, they have since divested in other arms of the business that has helped them continue to grow. Karen estimates about 25 percent of business is yarn and another 25 percent goes into processing wool for other customers. Another surprising growing arm of the business has been loaning their wool products for in-house research and development for companies around the country and world, some of which have been pretty surprising. Like the marimba covers sponsored by Yale University, a project for a bio-tech company in Silicon Valley and a company wanting to test the wool linings inside their golf clubs.

"Who knew golf clubs had wool inside them?" Karen said with a grin.

This spring, they've also just added equipment to do their own machine knitting in-house instead of sourcing it out to shops on the West Coast or New York City. The addition of the new industrial knitting machines and

linking stations will allow them to not only grow their product line with the addition of hoodies, sweaters, blankets and other products, but will now allow them to make a 100 percent Wyoming product. Bringing this work back to the native soil is a big deal to the company as it allows them to deliver a product that is directly tied to the local ranching community, and as such, offers customers a distinct token of the West. It's a selling point with their customers, according to Karen, who hears all the time how many people like knowing that their wool is coming from local ranches.

Plus, there's the quality of Wyoming wool, Karen added, that is really top notch.

She has a point. Until you actually pick up one of their wool blankets or sweaters and feel the quality craftsmanship, the weight and texture in your own two hands, you can't appreciate how much you're getting ripped off by buying cheap wool products from China and elsewhere.

That said, it's not going to be as easy as it looks to launch the new operation, and right now, Karen and her crew are still ironing out the kinks. For starters, one does not just go out and by the machinery just anywhere. They bought theirs out of Burma, and after about a year of negotiations and procuring "export licenses," the machines finally turned up on a flat-bed truck in the thick of winter. Once inside, they realized the machines been damaged in transit with wires chewed through by mice among other mechanical problems. With limited diagrams written in German, they brought in a Burmese former wool mill owner, who had been working in the industry since he was 13, to help fix it and train them.

Now, the trick is finding employees who can actually do the work, which has been a lot harder than they'd imagined. Linking involves sewing the various seams together and it takes a certain skill set not germane to this

part of the country. Of the 12 new hires Karen was able to find locally, less than a month later only three remain. And they are all part-timers due to the meticulous nature of the work.

Ben tried placing ads in refugee settlements and foreign newspapers with no return. Now, Karen's considering bringing over Burmese workers on work Visas.

Like anything else, she is undeterred. It's just part of taking risks in order to grow a business, which at this point, she's taken several. Worse for her would be remaining stagnant and settling for status quo.

"We want to thrive, not survive," she said, "Now, we can say it's a 100 percent made in Wyoming."

## A BIG COMMUNITY

In contrast to the shrewd dealings on Wall Street, Karen makes sure that her producers are paid either the commodity rate or higher. She's all about the little guy, and small companies helping other small companies.

That circular, independent artisans and growers supporting one another is at the crux of Karen's business philosophy, which she sees as all entities working together for the greater good of preserving the Western wool industry.

She has a personal relationship with all the ranches she works with and even regularly attends the seasonal shearings and lambings.

"It's a big community," she said, "and we're helping to keep a much revered, Western industry thriving."

By: *Jem* C. Kocher

## Karen's Tips for Washing Wool

Let it soak in your washer in warm water with a mild detergent for about 10 minutes, avoiding any extreme temperatures. Spin it out and rinse it, then hang to dry.



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