



By Hypatia Francis

A typical workday for Tom Redpath starts early. By five o'clock in the morning—while most of us are still asleep—he's on the road, heading for his first job of the day: a sheep farm in Vankleek Hill, Ontario. He has a long day ahead of him—likely multiple farms and hundreds of animals to work with. Tom, you see, is one of a near-extinct breed: the North American sheep shearer.

“My grandfather told me if I could find something other people don't want to do, and if I could find enough of those people, I would always be busy,” Tom says. “I didn't really understand what he was talking about at the time, but I certainly do now.”

Tom began his career in the wool industry in 1973, working with Canadian Cooperative Wool Growers in Carleton Place, Ontario, where most of the wool produced in Canada gets graded and sold. Two years into the job, he went New Zealand to train as a shepherd. For several years, he worked on a sheep station near Taupo, on New Zealand's North Island, with ten thousand ewes, and only three shepherds. This is where he learned the basics of shearing. As a shepherd, one of his responsibilities was to crutch and eye-wig the sheep, referring to the practice of cutting the wool away from around the animal's hindquarters and eyes. “Shearing gangs would work on the white sheep and the younger ones,” Tom explains. “The shepherds worked on the old girls and the colored sheep. That's where I learned what was involved in doing a full shear.”



Tom Redpath has been shearing sheep for the better part of three decades. Photo by Mike Routliffe

Tom works in two-hour shifts, with short breaks in between. At his first stop, a farm belonging to Lee Mode in Vankleek Hill, Ontario, Tom's been working since eight o'clock. Mode's flock is small, just seventy ewes and one Scottish Blackface ram, named Charlie. It's crisp outside, but in the barn it's warm enough that Tom is wearing a sleeveless top. Mode is there as well, along with a hand he's hired for the day. One end of the barn is divided into two large pens. One is full of ewes waiting to be sheared; the other holds a handful of their shorn sisters, looking somewhat diminished without their thick wool. Charlie has a stall to himself. With several cats looking on, Tom oils his handpiece, which looks like an oversized version of barber's clippers, and gets ready for the next sheep.

There are several ways to shear a sheep. Like most shearers, Tom uses what's known as the Bowen technique. He starts by sitting the sheep on its rump, with its legs sticking out in front. The first cut removes the belly wool, a lower quality fleece that gets thrown off to one side. (This wool doesn't go to waste, mind you, later it will find its way into a blend for blankets and socks.) The legs are next, beginning with the back limbs. After repositioning the sheep, Tom comes up through the neck area. Once both the neck and leg areas are cleared, he starts on the long blows, guiding the blades down around the rump, and working up the sides to the sheep's head. With six or seven blows, Tom removes roughly two-thirds of the entire fleece.

It is physical work, and a few sheep struggle while being led to where Tom is waiting. But once properly positioned, most are fairly calm. According to Tom, that's thanks to the Bowen technique. In the early 1950s, champion New Zealand shearer Godfrey Bowen developed the method to better control the animals and improve efficiency; it also made the sheep more comfortable during shearing. Shearers have been improving on it ever since. "When I was starting out in the '70s, the average number of strokes was sixty, now it's forty," explains Tom. "It used to take four minutes, and now it takes two." When Tom is finished, the fleece rolls off the sheep in one piece, like a blanket.



Tom shears using the Bowen technique. Photo by Mike Routliffe

The day done, Mode gathers up the fleeces to take to the cooperative in Carleton Place, where they will be skirted to remove burry, dusty wool, as well as other less desirable parts. After this, the fleece will be folded, rolled, and classed. Back in the 1950s, when the Bowen technique was developed, a farmer would get \$1.10 a pound for the wool. By 1993, that figure had dropped to 10 cents per pound. The price has risen since then, with farmers getting 50 cents per pound. But these days says Tom, farmers are no longer being rewarded for good quality wool. Mode will pay \$400 for the shearing of his flock; when he sells the wool he'll be paid roughly \$250 for the fleece. Add in the cost of transporting the fleece to Carleton Place and Mode will be nearly \$200 out of pocket. Mode is philosophical about the expense, saying it's part of maintaining a healthy flock. But's it's a cost that cuts into an already narrow margin.

With 90 percent of their revenue coming from meat production, fewer farmers are working with

wool sheep. “There are still people keeping spinner’s flocks,” says Tom, “but that’s a niche market.” That’s what Tom specializes in—the niche. When he returned to Canada from New Zealand in 1978, he decided to set up his own sheep farm in Lanark County in Eastern Ontario. During that first year he couldn’t find anyone to shear his sheep. So he bought his own equipment and sheared them himself. And suddenly he had a new career. “Word got around, as it does in any rural place,” he recalls. “Other sheep producers started calling me and asking me to do their flocks.” Soon, Tom was shearing between 15,000 and 18,000 sheep a year, including the 3,000-ewe foundation flock of Rideau Arcott sheep being developed by Agriculture Canada during the ‘80s and ‘90s.



Lee Mode will receive about 50 cents per pound for the fleece his flock provides. Photo by Mike Routliffe.

These days much of Tom’s work is with llamas and alpacas, and working with these animals

presents its own set of challenges. Camelid coats are made up of much finer fiber than those of sheep, requiring sharper equipment and more frequent blade changes. Because they're less docile than sheep these animals require a bit more patience and understanding. "They have this sort of adversarial relationship with us," explains Tom, "they see us as predatory." To accommodate the llamas and alpacas, Tom uses a specially designed shearing table that tilts. It's worth the extra trouble though as alpaca fleece can fetch \$200, compared to just a few dollars for a sheep's.

Tom's territory extends east from London, Ontario, to the Charlevoix region of Quebec and from the Niagara region in the south, north to Temiskaming and Lac Saint-Jean. It's a huge area. Tom organizes his schedule so that he does a series of runs, stopping in at a number of farms in the same region in a given week. Semi-retired these days, he works by choice, out of sense of loyalty to his clients, with whom he has become friends over the years. "It's a dying art," Tom says of shearing. "It's becoming more and more difficult to find people who will shear sheep." And so, Tom continues to get up before sunrise, hitting the road to get to the next farm, where he'll work until the sun sets.

Hypatia Francis is a Montreal-based editor, writer, and translator. When she isn't wrestling with split infinitives, she likes to travel, cook, and read long, mind-improving books. While Hypatia is an enthusiastic knitter, she has yet to get beyond the stocking stitch.