

by Barbara Parry

In late March, the New England landscape softens and greens. The farm comes back to life as the barn and paddocks fill with rollicking lambs sprinting from one end of the barn to the other, practicing their high jumps and ninja kicks. After a long winter, they are a welcome sight. Their arrival signals a fresh start and the beginning of a new season.

For a yarn farmer, each lamb promises a cherished prize. Yearling lambs are called hoggetts; their first fleece (called a hogget fleece) will be the softest, finest wool that animal grows in its lifetime. Each spring's influx of lambs replenishes the farm's wool reservoir and maintains age diversity within the flock.

As a flock matures, the character of its wool changes both in texture and sometimes in color. Black fleece ewes develop a gray or silver patina. The fleece of medium and long wool breeds, such as Leicesters, Coopworths and Romneys, becomes more bold and pronounced in texture. Even the fleeces of fine wool sheep, if not maintained in excellent condition, can show tell-tale signs of aging. Hogget fleeces are an essential component in balancing the bouquet of a year's wool clip.



While lambs wool may seem to be manna from heaven, raising lambs can be the single most challenging task for a fiber shepherd. Sheep midwifery and tending to newborn lambs is something we learn from talking to other flock owners, from magazine articles, and sometimes just from winging it. For shepherds, there is no Dr. Spock or *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. Paula Simmon's book, *Raising Sheep the Modern Way* comes closest. My copy is more than ten years old. I remember studying the birthing chapters, which cover everything from picture perfect deliveries to the really scary stuff: breech presentations, orphaned triplets, and uterine prolapses. Surely I would never have to deal with any of these worst-case scenarios, I thought. My sheep were strong and healthy. I had visions of ewes lambing twins with ease and trouble-free lactation. I had big plans for this little flock. Little did I know.

In the spring of 2006, we had a new generation of Como ewes, a hearty ram, and newly renovated lambing facilities. In a moment of extreme confidence, I invited Linda Cortright of Wild Fibers magazine and her photographer, Don Moore, to spend several days at the farm. Linda was writing a feature about lambing on a New England sheep farm and all went smoothly for their visit. They captured the textbook-perfect arrival of twin Como ewes for their readership. I exhaled in relief as they packed up cameras and laptops and headed back to mid-coast Maine.



Within twenty four hours of their departure, all hell broke loose.

Another shepherd once told me that a full moon draws lambs. The evening of March 11 was cold and clear with a waxing gibbous moon reminding me that the full moon was still a few days away. I did a last barn check at 10 pm. The ewes were quietly chewing their cud, comfortably ensconced in fresh straw. Several pens held new lambs and mothers. I wished all of them good night and went to bed expecting a quiet night.

11 pm

My sleep is interrupted by the sharp sound of hoof pawing straw coming through the baby monitor on my nightstand. I dress quickly -- insulated coveralls, wool sweater and hat, down vest. Birthing kit in hand, I flick on the barn overhead lights to find Fern, a Border Leicester ewe, in serious pushing mode. Grabbing clean towels, I park myself nearby and let her work. Thirty minutes later a healthy set of twins shiver in the straw by her side. I coax them all into a 5 x 5' pen called a "lambing jug", dip the lambs' navels in iodine and help their mother clean the viscous wet veil from their faces. The lambs, a pair of ewes, are fast on their feet. Instinctively they begin exploring Fern's undercarriage, homing in on the udder. Smart lambs. Fern snickers as she quickly licks their tails and haunches, guiding them in the right direction. Good mother.



While gathering wet towels and the birthing kit, I spy another Leicester ewe, Amethyst, in the corner with her head down. She pirouettes 360° and again stands head down facing the wall. As I fetch a bucket of fresh water for Fern and keep an eye on Amethyst I notice another ewe, Jewel, is drawn to the wet spot in the straw where Fern had dropped her lambs. Interesting.

12:30 am

On my hands and knees I support Jewel's ten-minute-old white ewe lamb while her much larger sibling, a black ram, wastes no time in chugging down more than his share of colostrum, the antibody-rich syrup essential for newborn survival. The white ewe-lamb is having trouble using her legs but no problems at all using her vocal chords. She is tiny. And hungry. And LOUD. I milk a little colostrum into a yogurt cup and feed her drops at a time with a small syringe. Like a shot of espresso, the syrup quickly energizes her. She finds her footing and makes her way to Jewel's udder.

My attention is diverted by the new arrivals in pen number two. Amethyst's twins, who arrived at midnight, are looking for seconds but Amethyst is clearly distracted by uncomfortable contractions as she prepares to pass the afterbirth.

Belle, a demure and expectant Cormo ewe, pokes her nose through the wooden slats of the pen checking out the newcomers with an unusual amount of interest. And I then spot Amy, a dark Leicester ewe standing alone in the "the corner". I begin wishing I had brought a thermos of hot tea.

2 am

Three ewes are restlessly milling around the common pen like planes circling in a holding pattern over LaGuardia. Amy and her five-minute old triplets are in the pen adjacent to Belle with her pair of ram lambs. The barn is now ringing with a full chorus of sheep vocalists. It begins to dawn on me that I may need help.



2:45 am

Mike is hauling fresh water while I tend to Sugar and her single lamb. Jewel's white ewe-ling looks cold. I am not, so I wrap her in my down vest.

??:?? am

I'm unsure of the time, but the eastern sky is brightening. Asa, my favorite Leicester ewe who is standing beside the row of full pens, softly snickers to her unborn lambs. She hears Kodiak's ewe lamb call out from a pen and panics, thinking it is somehow hers. She looks for a way to scramble into Kodiak's pen. Kodiak stomps her hoof in warning and there's a dust-up. I tell Asa her lambs will be here soon.

We are out of lambing pens. Mike and I lash panels and odd gates together with baling twine. They jut out into the aisle at funky angles.

7:30 am

It's time for morning chores. Reinforcement arrives in the form of Tish, my barn assistant who sends me home to rest. As soon as I set foot in the house, I receive her frantic phone call that Snowdrop is in labor. I pour coffee into a thermos and return to the barn.



1 pm

I am beyond exhausted. My overalls plastered with bits of straw, colostrum and birthing goo, my hands stained with blood and iodine, I survey my once-orderly barn now wall-to-wall with lambs. The east pens are full, as are the impromptu pens set up everywhere else, seemingly arranged by a sleep-deprived maniac. Sodden towels are strewn over panels and the various items from my birthing kit are scattered about.

Half the flock has lambed in a little over twelve hours. Twenty-two new lambs means twenty-two hoggett fleeces for next year's harvest and many potential replacement ewes to sustain the flock in coming years. Not bad for a night's work. I think Linda Cortright would have enjoyed this, but I am rather relieved that the lamb storm of '06 was not a moment sooner.

Whether lambs arrive in gentle showers or in full-blown storms, it takes an entire year's hard work raising these fledglings to realize a woolly reward. Each yearling's contribution of a single fleece on shearing day ensures a larger wool clip with a higher percentage of soft, fine wool. I'll have the flexibility to process yarns of several different weights or blends, if I choose, rather than limiting myself to one or two varieties. Invariably there will be a handful of stunning hoggett fleeces, precious beauties that are reserved for fleece competitions and later marketed as prized hand-spinning fleeces.

My careful selection for future breeding of the strongest ewe lambs who possess the most desirable wool traits is one of the hardest but most important decisions I will make in cultivating my fiber flock. Ultimately this hand-picked group will carry the blueprint for this flock's future and the yarns to come.

