

When things are looking a little rough, I gaze up at the old certificate on the wall by the desk. "Michigan State College Extension Service, Wolvering Lamb Production Project 1939, Record of Achievement made by Einar Erickson, produced 125.12 pounds of lamb per ewe in 135 days with a flock of 24 ewes." When I think about my father's enthusiasm for sheep, it brings my spirits up as well. Still living in depressed times at the end of the 1930s, he had enough love for farming that he went to the trouble of entering the state lamb production contest. As it turned out, he and his little flock of Shropshires won the competition that year.

My father has been gone for many years now, but his legacy lives on. He was known in the neighborhood as a man who was "good with livestock." His younger brothers farmed together less than half a mile away, and his oldest brother raised sheep equally close by, in another direction. They all depended on my father--as he depended on them in other ways--for certain skills. His older sibling, Albert, had sheep all his days, but he never dealt with lambing difficulties, never docked or castrated lambs. He called Einar. The two younger brothers, dubbed "The Boys" by family and neighbors alike, were much more adept at looking after problems and shearing sheep, but they, too, depended on my father for expertise at castrating time. He always went there, in the euphemism of our area, "to take care of the buck lambs."

Dad's advice served us well when I came back to the farm, bringing my Swedish husband--a farmer, but one who had never dealt with sheep. Although he was ill at the time, Dad went to the barn and showed Runo how to correct a malpresentation in lambing. Runo has become very skilled in dealing with lambing difficulties since those days, and he's always gone by Dad's methods. He learned from Einar how to cut the ram lambs for quick and safe castration, as well.

Dad was never an expert sheep shearer, but he sheared our flock for many years, whenever there was no good sheep shearer readily available in our area. So, Runo inherited an old but good shearing machine and handpiece. The shearer did not show up one year--payment from his last shearing job burning a hole in his pocket all the way to the

nearest saloon!--and Runo sheared the sheep that spring. He used that old shearing rig until the year 2000, when he reached farther back in basic skills and learned to shear sheep with hand blades.

My father was a good sheep man because he was good with animal husbandry. Dad believed that one should take care of the livestock's needs first, then worry about one's own comfort. We've continued in this tradition, though it often makes for wakeful nights during lambing season and sometimes means missing family or community events because of livestock issues.

I admire new farmers who move to the country and work hard to raise livestock successfully. It is not an easy life, especially if one wants to be self sufficient--as we do--and not depend any more than absolutely necessary on outside help or costly resources. So, I am doubly thankful that here on Coe Creek Farm, we have the traditions of good livestock practices on which to build. It makes a life that is not a simple one a little bit easier.