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8-11-1952

### Dieffenbach on Sheep, August 11, 1952

Victor C. Dieffenbach

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Sheep.

Sheep were among the first animals to be domesticated by man. From way back to the Bible-times, they were the mainstay of the agriculturist. So, when the first settlers came to this country, naturally they brought their flocks along, to provide them with food and clothing.

What breed they originally brought over, the writer cannot tell. But most of the sheep that I saw on the farms of Berke County, as a boy, were big, and quite heavy-boned, and they had long, heavy fleeces. This was a prime requisite, as lots of farmers kept them mostly for their wool, depending more or less on beef, pork and game for their meat-supply. Undoubtedly then, as now, some were ignorant as to the proper way to kill or dress a sheep, and were thus prejudiced against mutton as a food.

I remember old John Deck telling me that if he couldn't get Southdowns or Hampshires, he would not keep any sheep.

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So I imagine that his flock was of the two breeds, at the time I did not think of asking about it - not realizing that later on I myself would own a flock.

Nowadays the trend is more towards the fine-wooled breeds like the Merino, but the farmer of long ago was not so tender-skinned as to care about the fineness of the wool nor of the texture of the cloth, once it was woven.

When my grandmother handed me a pair of long woollen stockings for a Christmas present, one which she had spent many an hour knitting them, one loop at a time, she said to me: "schtil see null dort ins eck!" (Stand them up in the corner, once!) I did; and they stood there, upright like a board - and they were almost as thick as one. Those could be washed and worn for years; and if my big toes came out to see the world, she would darn those stockings until one could not see that they had been mended.

I was already full-grown, when I was still wearing a pair of mittens that she had

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knit for me. They were lined with cotton-flannel, and the palms were covered with good home-tanned calf skin. When they were finally worn too badly to be repaired I bought the best that the stores had, but I never yet found anything to measure up to them.

Teenage girls were knitting whenever they had spare-time to do it. and when company came, they proudly showed what they had knit. Many a girl of twelve was as proficient as the Grand-dame that had so lovingly instructed her in the art of knitting.

Sheep will not thrive on low or wet ground; so the farmers usually had some upland pasture for them.

Several years ago, while attending a sale of farm-stock near Summit Station, Schuyl-kill County, I met a farmer who told me how his father used to have a flock of sheep up in the mountains, years ago. He said they had no shelter except the low-hanging limbs of the pines and spruces. On Saturdays, when this man and his brothers were finished with

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the chores, they would go up and look at the sheep.

Sometimes when there was deep snow they would put several bags of corn - nubbins on the block-sled (der block-schlitta) and pile several shocks of corn-fodder on top of it, and haul it up through the fields and give it to the sheep. On one such trip they were surprised to see several small lambs creeping around under the pines.

So they took several axes and cut poles, and laid them with one end on the ground, and the other end in the crotch of a tree. This crude framework they then proceeded to thatch with pine and spruce, starting at the lower end, and overlapping the boughs like shingles.

They did not tell their father about the lambs, but a few weeks later, when a whole bunch of them were scampering in the woods, they asked him if they had not better look after the sheep up in the mountain. So he told them that the following Saturday they would all go up and look at them.

He said his Dad was so surprised when he  
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saw all those lambs running around all over, and how they had cared for them, so he told them that if they would continue to care for them in that way, the boys could have one-half of them.

"Meer hen over nu shofe griekt!" (We got some sheep then!) he said. There were a bunch of boys (I think he said four or five of them) and until all were grown and left the farm, they always had their flock housed up on the mountain. Woodland always affords some grazing, and he said that they lost very few lambs, due to the invasions of foxes and wild-cats.

"Oh ya! Des hut much wild-kotza ollawid!" (Oh yes! It still has wild-cats today) he said. "Usht see sin nimmy so plenty as we see ols waur a freyer!" (Only they are not so plenty as they were years ago.)

This man seemed to be a reliable man - one who could be depended on to tell the truth. He was a real dirt-farmer, as well as being well versed in wood-craft and lore of the wood-lands. At the time of this narrative I  
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did not yet know of writing Folktales, and gathering material for the Folklore Center; hence I did not get the man's name.

Lice on sheep very much resemble a bed-bug or a hog-louse. They will cause a sheep to lose a lot of weight, since they live by sucking the sheep's blood. Any good disinfectant will kill them, and since a flock is clean, it is easy to keep them that way.

If they ever get on the shepherd accidentally, they will soon leave, as the clothes on a man's back do not compare to the sheep's covering.

Some of the homespun clothing was dyed, and sometimes, in later years, the proper dye could not be obtained and some substitute would be used instead.

I remember the very heavy woolen coat my father had. The sleeves were lined with a fiery-red material, resembling silk or satin.

Once the coat was unfit to be worn as his Sunday-best, he wore it while working during the Winters.

One day we were caught in a rain-storm while out in the woods. by the time  
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we came home we were pretty well soaked, and when he started to take off that coat in our kitchen, we almost died laughing. The red dye was not waterproof, and most of it was on his shirt-sleeves, his under-weary, and soon he had a lot of it on his hands, his face, and the top of his bald head.

When we almost screamed, he went and looked in the looking-glass on the wall, and thus his Pennsylvania Dutch profanity overflowed.

"Ei, Ich gook you ferdamm't sei grandt os we won mer en Carrels uff en barber-pole huck a date, un date see no in en eckschty nich dishdick ei-wickla! As es dinner-wetter, seely gitta ferschlanga date woos seller ruck galint heu!" (Why, I look just as if you set a pumpkin on a barber-pole, and then wrap it up in a red-checkered table-cloth! I wish lightning would hit the Jews who lived that coat!)

"Now traisht do minny Deef abach - now traisht do Podcarmel!" (Now you aint called August 11 - 1852  
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Dieffenbach anymore, but Rode-armed!) I said. And Dad replied: "Do besser, doosht moofa, ud dey see doonw dei nanna uff en shtay hocka." (You better move or they will put your name on a stone!)

Once he had most of the "steam" blowed off, he told us of how the old folks used to dye the wool, and how it would keep its color. I do not remember of all the different ingredients he mentioned, but one I do remember.

He said that when the factories started to make clothing, and the weaving was commercialized, and cotton came to replace a lot of wool and linen for clothing - then a man would come once a year to the farms and buy dried cow-dung - "gadarrter kee-dreck". It was used as a mordant in printing calico over in Lancaster. The dung was dissolved, and then mixed with some thing to make it stick to the fabric, it was then smeared on the rolls of a machine and was printed on the plain cloth. Then, when it was dyed, the cloth thus coated would absorb the dye, or vice versa. I am not sure which way it worked.

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He said that the man said that sheep-manure would be much better than that from the cattle; only it had to be free of all straw, etc. <sup>64</sup>Un waar der deffel weth donoll de glaind shofe-gruttla uff-laisa?" (And who would want to pick up all those little dungballs!) he said.

I'll never forget the day I came home and had a paper-bag (ew dutt) full of sheep-dung-balls. We had been to old John Deck's for seed-potatoes, and while Dad and John Deck were in the cellar getting them, I snuck out to the barn and picked up several thousand of the little pellets.

When I gave them to Granny, I said: "Now won Ich witter hols-way hob no consht do meer tay mocka!" (Now if I get a sore throat you can make tea for me!) She dropped into that big old rocker of hers that it almost broke down; she held her gingham apron to her eyes, and she cried as if her very best friend had died.

"Was iss dow letts, Mummy?" (What is wrong, Granny!) I cried.

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"Ach do lieber Gott! Hee-hee-hee! So dumma socha mocha! Schofe quittla de wols uff ma hecka-pusch, drumma in der wiss, naiva ou der grick!" (Oh, for the love of God! Hee-hee-hee! Such dumb goings on!

"Schofe quittla" grow on bushes, down in the meadow, alongside the creek!) And then it was that I realized that she wasn't crying, but she was laughing until her old belly shook and the tears came.

I have since found out that the sheep-berry or black-haw was what she had meant. When she had quieted down, so she could speak coherently, she said: "Ower de doe sort de cow Ich ante goot usa - de doow Ich in my blumma-heffa - sell iss was Ich do mitt!" (But I can use these too - I'll put them in my new flower-pots - that is what I'll do!) And she did.

Another fine product of the flock was der schofe-beltz (the sheep-pelt.) This is a luxury to have on a wagon-seat, in a car, or on your very best easy-chair. I helped to tan many a one of them while still a boy of tender years. Old John Deck would take  
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an old barn-door and put it on several boxes so it was up off of the ground. Then he would nail the pelt on this door with the skin-side up, nailing it all around with small nails or tacks, every three inches. Then we would scrape all the meat and fat off of it, and this is where I helped.

"Now gebacht nu schneidt net nei-do bicht tau ferflucht huddlich!" (Now take care and don't cut a hole in it - you are too darned much in a hurry.) he would say.

When it was clean, (or as clean as he wanted it to be) then he got a big bottle out of an old cupboard that stood in the shed. Then he would slowly pour some of the liquid on the skin, and I would spread it all over that skin with a swab made by tying a rag to a stick of wood. He told me not to get any of the stuff in my mouth, as it was poison - sulphuric acid. When the pelt was dried he would put another application on it - a second one of the same stuff; but then he would pour just a bit of it, and I had to rub so much harder so as

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to spread it all over evenly. About a week later, he would take that pelt and hang it on the clothes-line, out in the yard, and then he took a heavy stick of wood and he would club and pound it - it looked almost like a base-ball bat what he used on it. This was to remove the dust, chaff and clover-hulls and other dirt.

Then he would hang up the big iron kettle, and fill it with water - I'd be pumping it, and he carried it over. Then he built a fire under it. When it was hot he put it in the big scalding trough (der bree-droke) and put in some powdered borax, this was to dissolve the natural grease or oil (lanolin) in the wool.

Then he would put that sheepskin in the trough, and stir it around a while with his club. When he lifted it up he grunted like a bear, and there was hardly a bucket-full of water left in the trough. He would squeeze it and flop it up and down. At times he got in the troughs and jumped up and down  
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and dance on it. This he kept up for at least an hour, or until the dirt and filth was soaked through, and would dissolve. Then the dark-colored liquid was poured away, and a fresh batch prepared. This second washing did not take so long as the first one, but the dirt now being softened up came loose readily, and soon the water again looked like weak coffee. A third washing usually completed the job and then it had to be rinsed several times, when it was dry it was as white as snow.

Some sheep-pelts exhibited and for sale in stores and saddlery shops were dyed in all the colors of the rainbow. But old John told me never to buy any of them. "See sin net souver — fur sell doona see selly beltz so shay farvera — so os mer der dreck net saint!" (They are not clean — that is why they dye them — so one cannot see the dirt.)

"Uu do waisht much fur sellera' ruck-arnel bissness!" (and you still know of that red-coat-sleeve business.)

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Some farmers tanned sheep-skins by rubbing them with salt and powdered alum, but the latter caused the skin to get hard, and if too much of it was used, it would crumble and break into little pieces.

Granddad used to tell of a farmer who had such a fine big sheep-pelt, and he knew that once he had passed on, thus his sons would all be arguing and quibbling about who was to get it. So he told all of his sons that as only one could have it anyway, he would dispose of it in this manner.

Whenever he died they were to put the sheepskin in the coffin before they put his body in it.

<sup>65</sup> "No lie I do waich nu waurem, nu deer het nix tru fehta nu tru renkla dawayga!"  
(Then I'll be lying soft and warm, and you will not have anything to fight or wrangle about!) he said.

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