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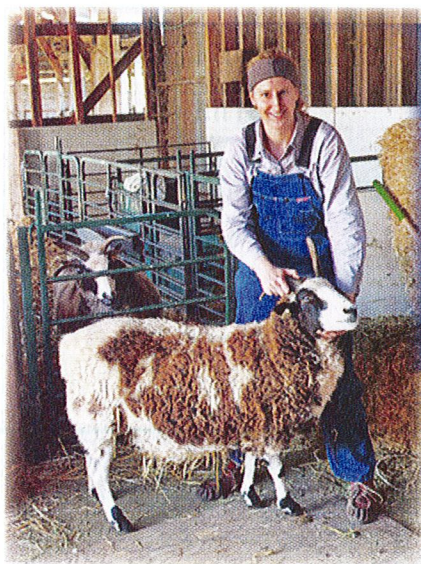
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Earn As You Learn

New Shearing Opportunities

Stephany Wilkes started shearing "tiny flocks" of up to 20 sheep on weekends before quitting her computer software development position due to too much demand for her shearing services. (Photo by Dona Snow)

BY TIM KING

In June, Stephany Wilkes quit her job as a computer software developer for Mozilla so she could dedicate more of her time to her sheep shearing work. Wilkes had been attempting to balance her software development work during the week with shearing jobs on the weekend. Shearing on the weekend did work well for many of her customers. She specializes in shearing what she calls "tiny flocks."

"Many people with backyard or hobby flocks also have full time day jobs so weekends have worked out fine for them," she said.

Weekend shearing also worked for Stephany in the first year after she graduated from the University of California's shearing school at Hopland Research and Extension Center in Mendocino County. But three years after taking her first course at Hopland, the schedule was starting to take its toll.

"This year, I was on a ranch almost every weekend from January through June," she said. "I had more job requests than I could handle on weekends alone. I was using vacation days from my job to do shearing and not for vacation: I got pretty burnt out."

By specializing in tiny flocks, Stephany was getting e-mails and requests from across northern California, similar to this one that was posted to her blog in the summer of 2014:

"I have 4 sheep to be sheared! They were last sheared June of 2013. My shearer moved and did not leave a forwarding address or number. The weekends work great

and your prices look very fair. Looking forward to hearing from you!"

Sometimes she would be exhausted after a weekend of shearing. Then she'd have to head back to a full week of office work. She told herself that the grueling schedule was worth it because she was improving her shearing skills. But now, a few months into her revamped career, quitting her full time office job appears to have been the right decision.

"Now I'm doing freelance software work, have more time for sheep shearing and wool classing and am much happier for it—and so is my husband," the tiny-flock shearer said.

The Mission

Stephany shears tiny flocks for two reasons.

"I use the 'tiny flock' language to distinguish myself from *small flock* shearers. It's a way to honestly reflect my shearing ability and to serve people who have the hardest time finding shearers," she said.

A "small flock" in Central and Northern California consists of between 50 and 150 sheep. A *tiny flock* is between one and twenty sheep, by Stephany's estimation.

Stephany—a Certified Beginner Level II shearer—says she currently is able to shear about 20 sheep in a day. She will gladly shear a flock that size or she will shear just two to three sheep.

"The 'tiny flock' designation suits me well right now," she said.

If you have 20 sheep in your tiny flock Stephany would charge you

\$8.00 per shorn sheep. She also charges a set-up fee of \$45 to \$75, depending on how far she has to drive. The fewer sheep you have, the higher the price per head. She charges \$12 per head to shear one to five sheep. There is an additional \$5 charge to shear horned or obese animals, rams, or sheep that have 18 months or more of fleece on them.

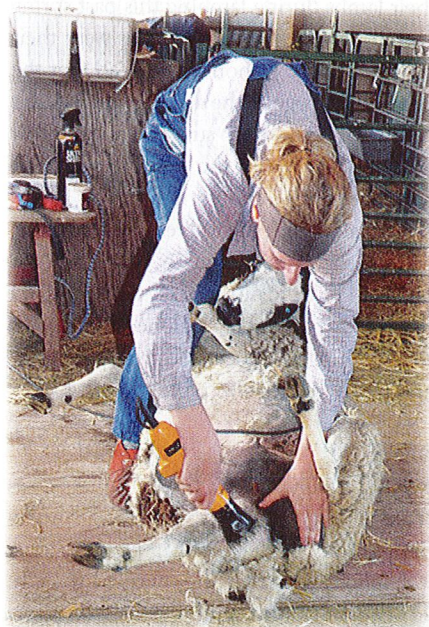
"I established my price structure to be reasonable for wool producers, but also to pay myself just enough to make shearing worthwhile," she said. "Most of my customers tip me, thank me profusely, and one even cooks me a huge breakfast each year."

Stephany also offers hoof-trimming services for \$5 per head as well as other ranch services as needed.

Learning To Shear

Stephany learned her shearing and some marketing skills at the shearing school at Hopland Research and Extension Center in northern California.

"It is the longest running shearing school in California and I believe it's currently the only one," instructor John Harper says. Harper has hosted the Hopland school for twenty years and has been shearing for over forty years.



"A small flock shearer with an investment of less than \$3,000 can readily earn between \$50 and \$100 per hour." Small flocks can hardly find shearers; they're very grateful for specialists like Wilkes. (Photo by Dona Snow)

"Historically, we started the course with imported instructors from the New Zealand Wool Board," Harper said. "When the cost of bringing in New Zealand instructors became prohibitive, I worked with Mike McWilliams from Oregon. Mike was part of the U.S. Team that competed in the Golden Shears competition and was trained by the New Zealanders. He and I were the chief instructors."

When Mr. McWilliams developed health problems, Harper reached out to Gary Vorderbruggen to help with the five-day course. Vorderbruggen was inspired by watching U.S. shearing champions McWilliams and Randy Helms at work, some quarter of a century ago.

"I was to learn later that Mike's best day shearing in New Zealand was 536 head," Vorderbruggen said in awe.

Randy Helms declined the young Vorderbruggen's request to teach him the trade. Instead, Helms referred him to a shearing course located at Birds Landing, California.

"The course was taught by a Senior Shearing Instructor from New Zealand named Colin Gibson. He was gruff but he knew his business well," Vorderbruggen said. "I never hurt so bad in my life from the physical nature of the work, but by Wednesday afternoon I had learned the steps to shear a sheep unaided. The next two days were spent refining my technique—if you could call it that in those early years. Shearing school was a great way to spend a week."

Hopland's Shearing School

Five days of shearing school continue to be a good way to spend a week if you are a beginner and want to learn how to shear, an experienced shearer and want to refine your technique, or you simply want to spend time with other shearers. At the Hopland school, beginning students who complete all five days of the course will have sheared at least eight sheep and will be awarded a Beginner Level I certificate, according to John Harper."

"After my first week at school I was competent and careful enough to shear for other people," Stephany Wilkes, who first attended the school in 2013 and returned in 2014 and 2015, said. "Now it's like vacation for me. I get to have a mini-reunion with instructors and students in a beautiful place. I get time to focus on

my craft and I always learn something new. Different instructors teach things differently and constructive feedback from experts and trained classmates is incredibly helpful."

Vorderbruggen, who eventually befriended Mike McWilliams, sees the class the same way as Wilkes.

"I guess I started volunteering to teach with Mike about 20 years ago," he said. "I have been pretty regular for about the last 15 years. It was also a way of seeing other shearers that we worked with and competed against in contests. Guys like Judd Redden, John Veech, Russ Duguid, and Chris Cornet and John Harper helped to instruct at the school. These shearers would come and volunteer their time to help teach. It really is a great community of people that make the shearing school a success and a fun week."

As official instructors in 2016, Vorderbruggen and Harper will be assisted by New Zealand trained shearer Trevor Hollenback. The course, which costs \$300, has elements of classroom instruction and demonstration but is very strong on hands-on experience.

At 9 a.m. on the first day of class students are shown a series of warm up exercises. At 9:30 there is a shearing demonstration by an instructor, and at 10 a.m. students begin shearing a sheep. There is lunch at noon, a shearing demonstration at 1 p.m., and students are back shearing under the guidance of an instructor from 1:30 until 5 p.m."

The following four days are fairly similar. They start at 8 a.m. with a review of the previous day, a discussion about some aspect of the shearing business, warm-up exercises, a shearing demonstration and by shortly after 9 a.m. students are shearing.

Both beginning and experienced shearers have the opportunity of one-on-one instruction and advice from experienced shearers like Hollenbeck, Harper, and Vorderbruggen.

The Dance

Early in the first day students are told that learning the shearing pattern is just like learning the steps to a dance. By the second day it is simply referred to as "The Dance".

"Learning to shear sheep is like learning to square dance or dance a waltz," Gary Vorderbruggen says. "It consists of putting your feet, your hands, your legs and your

body in certain spots and positions at just the right time. This dance keeps the sheep in the correct position, which is always changing, and in the proper attitude to keep the sheep and shearer as comfortable as possible while removing the fleece in the most expeditious manner."

"I tell the new students that I can draw five or six small circles on the floor where my feet will visit as I do the dance and that my feet won't vary much out of those circles as I shear sheep after sheep."



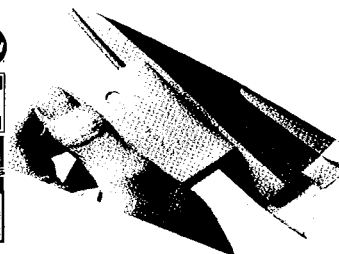
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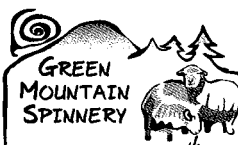
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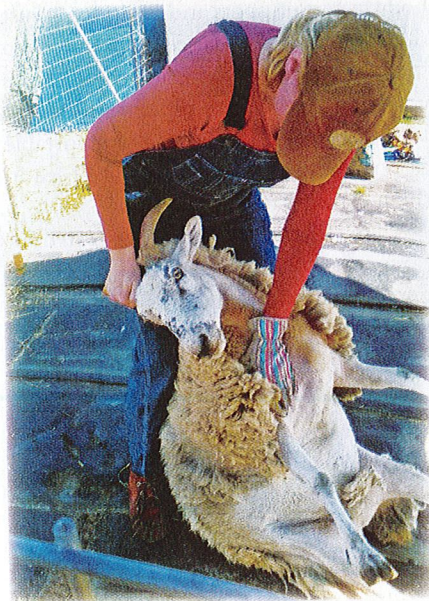
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At Hopland's shearing school, Wilkes learned "the dance": The choreography or footwork in keeping sheep and shearer happy while smoothly fleecing the sheep. (Photo by Cricket Frerking)

A few students find dancing with sheep too physically demanding or simply too difficult and they drop out of the course. Others take joy in the physical demands and the new skills that they are learning and they work to refine them. If you are one of those people you can become a shearer. Stephany Wilkes has discovered it doesn't matter if you are old or young, a man or woman, or a small or large person.

"When I was less skilled, and shearing was harder for me, I used to think that my challenges were primarily due to my size or weight," she said. "After all, it's not unusual for a sheep to weigh at least as much as I do, or 50 to 100 pounds more. But, as I've gotten more experienced and better with animal handling, I've found that technique counts for more than I initially thought.

"My friend Carrie is another example of this. She is tiny—petite. She started shearing in her early 50s. She can shear 28 large sheep in a day. That's not too shabby for a beginner. I don't think size and weight are entirely irrelevant, but I do see how technique can make them less relevant.

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Shearing school can be grueling hard work until confidence in technique is attained. Certification is a happy goal, as shown by the 2015 Hopland class of newly qualified shearers.

"There were a few times this year when another shearer showed me how to flip a sheep more easily by using my right knee more than I was or how to place my knee a little differently. Seemingly tiny changes added up to a world of difference."

Other Benefits

Training new shearers like Stephany Wilkes is important, according to John Harper. Harper said that there is a shortage of skilled shearers locally, regionally and nationally. There's an even greater shortage of qualified wool graders, he says. Because of the wool grader shortage Hopland has developed a wool grading course that runs at the same time as the shearing course.

"Large commercial operators have access to the crews," Harper said. "But the smaller farm flocks have a tough time.

We tell our students that once they learn to shear and have their own equipment they will never be unemployed in the spring and summer months. A small flock shearer with an investment of less than \$3,000 can readily earn between \$50 and \$100 per hour."

Prospective shearing students can contact Harper via the Hopland Research and Extension Center website at cemendocino.ucanr.edu/Sheep_Shearing_School/ or they can call 707-463-4495.

A Shearing and Wool Classing School will be also held in Hettinger North Dakota, November 21 through 23, 2015. North Dakota State University sponsors the class. More information on that school can be obtained by contacting Christopher Schauer at 701-567-4323.

Stephany Wilkes can be reached via e-mail at stephany.wilkes@gmail.com.



It's even harder to find wool classers than shearers. Hopland and other shearing schools are now offering instruction and certification in this essential skill, too.