

He Makes Socks From His Own Flock

By Jim Ruen, Contributing Editor

Wade Kopren's Fishhook brand socks are named after the South Dakota ranch where he raises the sheep that produce all the wool that goes into his socks.

"Getting a product like this on the market is not for the weak of heart," says Kopren about the multi-year process he went through to get his socks on the market. "We had \$100,000 tied up before we saw a single sock. It took a year to figure out the final design and then we still had to do the website, patents and everything else."

A dedicated wool sock wearer for many years, Kopren knew what quality socks should be. Wool socks are noted for their ability to wick away moisture, promote blood flow, and resist odors.

"We wanted them shrink-resistant and super strong so they won't get hard," he says. "We double-padded them to add strength to the toe and heel, yet leave them super thin on the top. We even sewed the family's Fishhook brand into the toe of each sock."

Kopren and his family run about 250 registered Rambouillet ewes and another 1,500 Rambouillet/Targhee Merino ewes in their commercial flock. For many years he also ran a shearing crew and worked with sheep producers in a multi-state area. That, combined with being active with both state and national sheep industry groups, gave him vital contacts when it came to making socks.

He pays special credit to John Helle, a former shearing client from Dillon, Mont. Helle runs a flock of 12,000 Rambouillet Merinos and uses all of their wool to make Duckworth wool clothing.

"Without John, there is no way we could have done this," says Kopren. "I met people who work with John. Others I met while serving on the American Wool Council. Those personal relationships were vital."

Kopren ran his ideas past these contacts multiple times before processing 2,500 lbs. of wool at Mountain Meadow Wool Mill in Buffalo, Wyo. There it was scoured and cleaned to make rope-like "top" with all the fibers in line.

From there it went to Chargeurs Wool USA in South Carolina for a super wash that descales the fiber, shrinks the strands, and makes them washable and not itchy. By that point the weight is reduced by 50 percent.

The Burlington factory in North Carolina, where it was spun into yarn, was next. It was followed by the Crescent Sock Company in Tennessee, where the yarn was made into 5,500 pairs of socks.

One of the challenges was that Burlington and Crescent are companies that normally deal in large volumes only. In order to maintain the integrity of Kopren's single-source socks, production lines had to be shut down before and after his wool was handled.

"We were super appreciative of what they did," says Kopren. "They're set up for 25,000 to 50,000 lbs. of top, and we showed up with 1,250."

Two years from starting the process, the Koprens are selling socks out of their house. While they are counting on millennial interest in knowing where their food and clothing come from, it is farmers and ranchers who have been their biggest customers initially.

"We have yet to crack our target urban market," says Kopren. "That will take time,



Kopren operates a thriving business turning wool from his own shop into quality socks. They're double-padded to add strength to toe and heel, and thin on top.

but wool socks are a growing market. We're glad we are in on the beginning stages."

Kopren is excited about the future and has plans to commit 25,000 lbs. of wool to the next batch of Fishhook socks. Even so, he is hesitant to suggest others follow suit.

"I don't want to discourage people, but it takes time and assets to get an enterprise like this going," he says. "If you want to see your wool in a finished product, a company like Mountain Meadow can do it. They are in between small mills and large with the capability of doing everything from yarn to blankets. There's not a lot of margin in small lots, but it can be fun."

Fishhook socks are available in crew and quarter sock styles. The taller crew socks are priced at \$24.00 and quarter socks are \$22. The socks are 68 percent Rambouillet/

Targhee Merino wool, 38 percent nylon and 2 percent Lycra Spandex.

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Editor's Note: Jim Ruen, who wrote the above article, bought a pair of Fishhook socks and said this: "They feel so good that you hate to take them off. They fit like gloves and feel like slippers. The double-layered bottoms give support you didn't know you needed. Meanwhile, the single-layered uppers wick away heat and moisture. I never thought I'd spend \$24 for a pair of socks, but I'm glad I did. I'll be buying another pair soon."

Small Goats Produce Great Milk

When Andrea "Andy" Johnson acquired a few Nigerian goats 5 years ago to clear some of the thick brush on her Northern Minnesota farm, she had no idea it was the start of a whole new business for her.

Today Andy's Acres Goat Farm produces goat milk soap, handcrafted cheese, and sells wether bucks for meat. She also sells a limited number of kids for breeding stock or pets.

Johnson's Nigerian Dwarfs weigh from 40 to 100 lbs., with does standing about 22 1/2 in. tall at the shoulder and bucks 23 1/2 in. "They're small and friendly, but their milk can have twice the butterfat content as most dairy goats," says Johnson. "Also, the milk tastes better, about the same as fresh, raw cow's milk."

"I tried milking full-size Nigerian goats, hoping to increase the amount of milk I could get per day, but while there was more milk, it only made half the cheese," says Johnson. "They are a larger animal so they cost more to raise, and the milk tasted more goatly, too." Her Nigerian Dwarfs only produce about half a gallon of milk per day, but she says it has a "fresher" taste.

Johnson's background as a USDA federal meat packing inspector in Iowa has provided valuable insight for the clean processes she uses for collecting milk and in cheese production. Her goats have annually tested herd-negative for CAE, CL, Johne's and brucellosis. Her family consumes raw goats milk and cheese on the farm. Johnson also enjoys selling and gifting her handcrafted milk soaps.

Johnson pays close attention to the genetics in her herd with 4 breeding



Andrea Johnson raises Nigerian Dwarf goats to produce milk and make different types of soap.

bucks selected for production, performance and personality. "Top genetics is really an investment in my herd," she says. In the future she's hoping to produce milking does that can be milked just once a day rather than twice, without drying up. "This would make them more marketable to other homesteaders, because milking twice a day is a real commitment.

"Nigerian Dwarfs are a fun breed, very winter hearty, and they like playing outdoors all year long. They're a joy to have around and a big deal for our family, too."

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Extra Jars Of Jam Led To Farm-Based Business

When Paulette Crampton gave a few extra jars of strawberry jam to a market gardening friend nearly 30 years ago, she didn't expect that those first jars of jam would sell out in a day. The business grew to the point that in 1997 Paulette and her husband Sam sold their cattle herd and quit raising grain. Since then, they've been making jams and jellies full-time, selling to independent retailers.

"It's hard to deliver jam to customers when you have 60 cows calving," explains Paulette. "We also moved closer to Winnipeg to make marketing easier."

Today Manitoba Maid makes nearly 40 different jams, jellies and marmalades. It's no longer made in Paulette's kitchen, but in a government approved production facility.

"We started out flying by the seat of our pants," says Paulette. "Today it is more complicated with more hoops to jump through."

She gives credit to officials from both the province of Manitoba and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency for helping her and Sam through the process. She also took a training program through the University of Manitoba.

"Before you start any food business, talk to the inspectors," says Paulette. "When we moved and built our processing facility, we had the health inspector in on the ground floor. He guided us on what was needed and helped us weather bureaucratic challenges."

The Cramptons pride themselves on using nearly all local fruit, with the exception of



Sam and Paulette Crampton make nearly 40 different jams, jellies and marmalades, selling to independent retailers.

those not found in Manitoba. Products are still packed in Mason jars and filled by hand. While they use the basic recipe on the pectin box, their jams are chunky compared to that of larger commercial operations that have to puree their jams for their automated systems.

Recently the Cramptons made another change in the business, selling it to neighbors Joyce and Douglas Livingston who plan to carry on the business as before.

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