

OUT ON THE RANGE

Shearing Woollies

The Bair Ranch in Montana. Words & photos by Todd Klassy.

Every year on the Bair Ranch near Martinsdale, Mont., shearers arrive to cut fleece a few short weeks before the ewes give birth to a new generation of lambs. It is a tradition that has endured here ever since Charles Bair arrived as a railroad employee in 1883.

Bair, now a legend in Montana, may have arrived as a lowly con-

ductor on the Northern Pacific Railroad, but he left a very rich man. He made a fortune in the gold rush and another tidy sum investing in oil and real estate. But none of that would have been possible had it not been for one thing. Sheep.

One of the most successful sheep ranchers in history, Bair owned



Peering into the open doors of the barn on the Bair Ranch near Martinsdale, Mont., a flock of sheep huddle together before getting sheared.

more than 300,000 of them—more than Montana had people at the time—and more sheepdogs than any other ranchers had sheep. Someone once asked Bair how much land he owned. Bair wasn't sure but said, "Every section from White Sulphur Springs to Harlowton—and every other section from there to Judith Gap." To put that into

perspective, on a swift Montana highway it would take you well over an hour to drive from one end of his ranch to the other.

Bair died in 1943, and with his passing so too passed the glory days on the Bair Ranch. The ranch soon fell into disrepair. That's when Jim and Deb Murphy took over and began a 25-year mission to



One by one sheep enter the chute for their turn to be sheared.



Lachlan Baynes and Gavin Kelly of New Zealand and Michael Peters of Bridger, Mont. (front to back), work from 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. shearing Targhee sheep on the Bair Ranch. The world record for shearing sheep is 839 lambs in nine hours by Rodney Sutton of New Zealand (2000) and 720 ewes in nine hours by Darin Forde of New Zealand. Together as a team of three they will shear as many as 2,000 sheep in a day.



Wool classer Chuck Dallas of Wilsall, Mont., sorts freshly cut fleece and places it into piles to be baled and sold later.



Mariah Smith of Laurel, Mont., tosses fleece onto the table where it will be graded based on fineness, length, color, and appearance to determine its end use and value.



Once the day is done and their wool has been removed a flock of sheep bask in the sun near Martinsdale.

fix the ranch and buttress the memory of Charles Bair.

Natives of Montana, Jim and Deb worked hard to turn the ranch into a successful operation again. "We take great pride in maintaining his tradition," Deb says. "We didn't want the legacy to fall apart."

One of the traditions that has remained constant on the ranch over time is sheepshearing. "It's an exciting time of year," Deb says, "when the shearers arrive."

Today they shear Targhee sheep. Charlie Bair had Rambouillets.

But that and the smaller size of their flock are the only real differences. The ranch is successful again and that's how the Murphys like it. And how Charles Bair would have wanted it. ■

Todd Klassy is a professional photographer who specializes in farm and ranch photography in the western United States. He was recently honored as a Treasured Montana Artist by his home state. He offers prints for sale and equine photography workshops in Montana. To see more of his work, go to www.toddklassy.com.