

# OREGON'S WOOL INDUSTRY

By Emma Seckle Marshall

**I**T is a far cry from a weather-worn sheep to a suit of fine broadcloth and the wearer of the broadcloth would probably step hastily aside to avoid contact with the timid animal to the fleece of whose ancestors he more than likely owes the garments of which he is so proud. In Oregon one may see the flocks driven from their pastures to the corrals; may watch the deft shearer clip the fleece from the passive animals and then note the rapid baling that forestalls its ultimate shipment to mill. Visiting the mill he may follow the interesting operation of transforming the dirty, greasy piles of wool into beautiful cloth that dainty lady or dignified gentleman may take to their tailor with pride in texture, weave and coloring.

Although it is even now among the most important of Oregon's industries, the day must come when wool production, and the manufacturies attendant upon it, will be synonymous terms with the name of the state that is rapidly forging to the front as a wool producing and wool manufacturing section. In 1905 this state produced about 22,000,000 pounds of wool of which about one-tenth was used in her own mills, while the remainder, nearly 20,000,000 pounds, was shipped to the east. Montana

that year furnished 25,000,000 pounds; Washington, 15,000,000 pounds and Idaho 13,000,000, while Wyoming, Utah and Nevada each added a small quota to the output of the great northwest.

Most of this product was sent to Massachusetts, which has the greatest number of woolen mills of any state in the Union. If these immense factories are paying institutions after deducting expenses of scouring, freightage, and other things incidental on bringing great quantities of raw material such long distances, why may not Oregon some day take precedence, or at least equal the state which has so far made the industry her own? Oregon is the natural home of the finest wool-producing sheep, and everywhere are unequaled facilities for water and electric power, cheap fuel and unexcelled freighting conveniences.

One argument frequently used in endeavoring to prove that the West cannot become a successful rival of the east in wool manufacturing is the lack of a local or convenient market. It is contended that there can never be the demand from the sparsely settled west that there is from the many large cities and closely-populated country districts of the east. Perhaps this is true at present but the west is rapidly building and British



SHEEP SHEARERS AT WORK

Columbia, Alaska, and the Orient must be taken into account when we consider a market for our wares, and they are already large enough buyers to warrant even the most conservative in believing that their demands will certainly increase.

Nowhere in the world, except in Australia, is there finer or better wool produced than in Oregon. Naturally the quality varies even here for the fineness of a fleece depends almost entirely upon climatic conditions. The sheep require a dry but bracing climate and well-drained soil for pasturage. These conditions are at their best in eastern Oregon and the uplands of the Willamette Valley. Sheep raised on the lower levels of the valley net the shepherds a larger sum for each fleece than those bred on the higher altitudes or on the other side of the Cascades for the reason that a moist climate conduces to a very thick and heavy growth of wool; the fact that it is thicker and heavier proves that the fibre or staple is of coarser quality, but as wool is bought by weight the heavier fleece necessarily brings a larger return.

Willamette Valley wool is cleaner

than that brought from many other localities because the climate being damper there is always good pasturage and the fleece does not catch as much dust or as many burrs as where the flocks range over a drier country in which dust and burr weeds abound.

Prices received for Willamette Valley wool last year (1905) ranged from twenty to thirty cents while in eastern Oregon the wool brought a return of from twenty to twenty-six cents. The finer fleeces of eastern Oregon range from six to eight and a half pounds in weight while the coarser ones from the Willamette Valley often weigh as high as fifteen pounds.

Shearing is usually begun as early in Spring as the weather will permit in order that the flocks may be moved to the mountain ranges for summer feeding. A shearing camp is a busy place at such times, and, like a "round up," its scenes are typical of the great west. Flocks are driven from great distances, each band being detained in a separate corral until its turn arrives. After shearing the sheep are moved on to their new feeding grounds. There is much rivalry

among the shearers as to who will shear the largest number of sheep in a day and the person who has the temerity to ask for a cessation of operations long enough to obtain a photograph of the scene is regarded with scowls and black looks, and muttered remarks that sound quite the reverse of complimentary.

Shearing machines are being operated in eastern Oregon but they have not, as yet, been the entire success that was anticipated. Two men are necessary to a machine while one expert with the hand shears can shear almost as many sheep a day as the machine. Sheep usually lie perfectly quiet and allow the man with the shears to turn them at will, but they rather resent the action of the machine and are, consequently, more difficult to manage while being shorn. It is a source of pride to the professional shearer to remove a fleece as a whole; the shearer who draws blood in process of shearing is considered a tyro at his work and is looked upon with something akin to contempt by his adept fellow worker.

After shearing, the wool is baled for shipment to the selling centers which are located as conveniently as possible to the shearing places. At these selling centers woolmen, sheepmen and railroad men interested in securing freight meet, and the bidding for the clip of the different owners is sometimes most spirited. The bidders represent mills in all parts of the country and competition is especially keen when the clip presented is of unusual quality. At the mill the wool is sorted for the range of quality in a flock and sometimes in a single fleece, is great. It varies, too, from year to year, according to prevalent weather conditions and the well-being of the flock.

The difference in the manner of weaving in the days of our great-grandmothers and today is exemplified by a visit to one of the great woolen mills of Oregon. Here machinery that is so perfect that it is almost human runs so nearly noiselessly

that one sometimes forgets he is in a large factory. From the scouring vats to the folding machines the process is fraught with a wonderful interest, and one does not soon tire of watching the operative manipulate the levers that start or stop the huge looms.

The owners of the Portland Woolen Mills, located at St. Johns, a suburb of Portland, are unusually progressive men and have the interests of their employes at heart. In their mill are large lunch rooms for the employes that are light, airy and comfortable; here, too, are conveniences for the man or woman who is taken ill while at work. They have built a number of tasty cottages for such of their employes as care to occupy them, and are planning many things which will conduce to the social life and outdoor recreation of the mill hands, hoping by attention to the material wants of their people to incite them to a keener interest in their work and their own well-being.

The Oregon City Mills are the largest woolen mills west of the Mississippi river and have been in existence nearly half a century. Their plant is thoroughly up-to-date and gives employment to about four hundred people. Other mills are located at Pendleton, Salem, Brownsville, Union and Bandon, each of which turns out work of excellent character. Many of the operatives of these mills are women and girls just budding into womanhood, but the work is light and easy and all seem contented and happy. The mills of the northwest buy the wool in what is termed "the grease," which, in ordinary language, means unscoured or just as it is shorn from the animal. It has been found cheaper to have the scouring done near the wool centers than to pay freight on the grease and dirt. One of these scouring plants has recently been erected in the suburbs of Portland. It is the largest of the kind in the northwest and has a capacity for handling about 50,000 pounds of wool a day. It is the intention to

maintain a knitting factory on the grounds, for the reason that few mills use the long staple for manufacturing purposes, if they do it is only after it has been split, but for yarns or any of the zephyrs made from the combed wool the long fiber is best. The finest wools are those obtained from the Merino and Delaine breeds and from this is woven the very finest of woolen cloths. Next to these rank the Shropshire, Cotswold and Dawn.

The coarse, heavy wool is made into blankets of varying quality, carriage robes, horse blankets and coarse fabrics that are sent to Alaska, or are made up here into warm garments for those in the frozen north. The finer qualities of cloth made in the mills include tailors' materials for garments for men and women in both plain and figured patterns, and in all shades of color. These goods are produced in all qualities from the finest and most expensive weaves to the cheaper materials that suit the purse of the small wage earner. The demand for Indian blankets

inspired the managers of the Pendleton mills to place upon the market blankets woven in their factory but patterned after those which the Indians wove centuries before the white man's foot trod the fastnesses of the western land. The braves and squaws often find it easier to buy of the mills than to spend the time necessary to weave their own blankets on their crude looms.

Little of the output of fine cloth finds a local market, but is shipped to the eastern states and, not infrequently, is reshipped to the west as the choice of buyers from western houses who have been searching eastern markets for desirable weaves and patterns. In this connection it is interesting to note that not only does Oregon send to the east much of her wool and woven cloth but also pays nearly three million dollars annually for ready-made clothing bought in eastern markets, much of it, doubtless, made from cloth woven in the mills of Oregon. There is room for thought in these facts and figures.

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