

## Hall of Fame Recipient Grace Hatton

### MY JOURNEY WITH FINNSHEEP

What brought me to Finnsheep in 1985 was their prolificacy. I'd raised dairy goats for a while and wanted to get away from the twice daily milking routine. The first sheep I had was a grade Suffolk ewe. She was several years old and only had single lambs. I did a little research and bought a Tunis ewe because of what I had read about their prolificacy with the same result. Eventually I guess I might have had twins from one or the other, but I was accustomed to my Nubian dairy goats frequently have twins, triplets and even quads now and then.

There was no way I could afford to keep sheep that had single lambs or even twins. We live in the Poconos in Northeast Pennsylvania and winter lasts a long time and hay needs to be fed for at least six months of the year. And that hay and grain needed to be brought in. The main crop harvested from our county is rocks. Fact: the bluestone from quarries along the Delaware River paved New York City's sidewalks.

I bought my first Finn ewe in 1985. After a disastrous first purchase of a Finn ewe that had OPP, we found another breeder, Brian Magee. So our little Finn flock started off OPP negative and soon began to produce the numbers of lambs I had hoped for from everything I had read.

We never had more than half a dozen ewes at any time. Out of curiosity I decided to see if I could breed them twice a year. I had read about how Finnsheep were managed on smallholdings in Finland and some were managed to lamb twice a year in that country.

Finnsheep developed in Finland because the length of the winters severely limited the number of animals that could be overwintered, but the grass grew like crazy during the brief summer under the midnight sun. Very few ewes were fed over the winter, and yet lots of lambs were produced to eat all the grass.

It was hard to lamb in late March here because there was the very real possibility of temperatures of around 10 above zero. A couple of times in the early 80's here the overnight temperature mid-winter had dipped to 25 below zero. But by lambing in late March or early April, I could wean lambs and rebreed the ewes at about five or six weeks post lambing. Lambs had creep feed available from birth. The ewes usually had smaller litters in the fall, and the milder weather at lambing time was very welcome. One of my best ewes, Hannah, dropped five lambs one spring and five more in the fall of that same year. That year our six ewes, including one yearling, produced 26 lambs.

Martha, my best ewe ever in terms of lifetime production, was the offspring of two Magee Finns and had trips as a yearling and then two more lambs that fall. She had quads the following spring and was not bred for fall lambing that year. As a three year old she had quads in the spring and triplets in the fall. I can't locate the rest of her production, but it was phenomenal.

Our soil is very dry and sandy and we only have a couple of acres of pasture and then there are the bears. After losing a ewe to a black bear, we learned to lock the sheep in the barn at night year round and to top our 4' woven wire fence with electric.

Having sheep here was very labor intensive and could never be much more than a hobby. The farm has been in the Hatton family since the 1850's and we love it, but most of it is wooded or ledge and all of it on a slope.

A few years into raising sheep I learned to spin on a spinning wheel and then fell in love with the beautiful, lustrous Finn wool. Shortly thereafter, my husband was given an antique spinning wheel from the early 1800's which he restored for me. Then word got around and soon he was restoring antique spinning wheels so they could actually be used for spinning for folks all over the USA.

The sheep led us both on a long and pleasant journey. We are grateful to have had the opportunity to own such lovely animals as our Finnsheep.