

Naomi Smith, Finnsheep Breeder Extraordinaire
by Mary O'Malley

Legendary Finnsheep breeder, Naomi Smith was inducted into the Finnsheep Hall of Fame at the May 2018 meeting of the Finnsheep Breeders Association. Naomi graduated in 1953 from Cornell University with a degree in animal husbandry. She and her husband Joe Smith would manage Angus cattle for many years before beginning their own farming venture. An article by Dr. Charles Parker, (a former roommate of Joe's and an expert on all things sheep) highlighting the benefits of raising Finnsheep intrigued Naomi. She proposed to raise breeding sheep, not market lambs. The Finn, with its excellent maternal instincts and ability to forage seemed a good fit for their mountainous property. The trait of prolificacy would ensure they could grow their flock quickly.

In her over 30 years of breeding Finns, Naomi has developed a keen understanding of Finnsheep. She notes that the early Finns were smaller, similar in size to a Shetland. Through careful breeding, she and other breeders have increased the size of the Finn- sheep so that currently a mature Finn ewe will range in weight from 130-180 lbs and a mature ram can be expected to weigh from 170-240 lbs. She will only sell rams from litters of triplets or more. Twin rams will be sold for the ethnic market.

A spry 85 year old, Naomi keeps going at an age when many people have turned into couch potatoes. Naomi continues to do a great deal of her own farm work, writes articles on Finnsheep for a variety of sheep publications and participates in farm related workshops and sales. It has not always been easy to maintain this enthusiasm as her personal life has contained heartbreak and loss with the untimely deaths of each of her 4 children as well as her husband. As Naomi puts it, the sheep are a reason to keep going. The joy of seeing newborn lambs, and the challenge of keeping the flock healthy are reason enough to get up in the morning.

Naomi's enthusiasm and excellent ideas have been a guiding force in the FBA for many years. She recognizes the value of a breed organization in preserving the unique qualities of a purebred animal (whether Finnsheep or Angus cattle). She has served the FBA as president, director, and secretary. Her knowledge about the organization is so vast, that nearly any question can be answered if you simply "ask Naomi".

A tireless promoter of Finnsheep, Naomi has traveled all over the country in her pickup truck, Finns in tow. In recent years, she has been a regular participant in both the Great Lakes Sale (May) and the Rhinebeck Sale (October). Participating in the 2018 Great Lakes Show and Sale myself this year, I can tell you that many people stopped by my sheep and asked for.... Naomi! This is in part due to the personal attention Naomi gives prospective and eventual buyers. Jason McCune a breeder in Ohio commented that Naomi writes him a handwritten letter every year and calls to make sure things are going well. In this technologically sophisticated world, it can be hard for a breeder without a computer to keep up, but Naomi manages. Her example is one from which every shepherd can learn.

Note: this article also appears in the 2018 July/August of THE BANNER