

On the farm, sheep shearing is one of the rites of spring

By LOUISE OKRUTSKY

In the city, spring is the time of year for new hats and white shoes. In a corner of Farmington where rural life persists, spring is the time for setting up an appointment to have the sheep sheared.

For 25 years, Eleanor Spicer has issued a standing invitation to school children to watch the spring shearing on her Farmington Hills farm, next to the Farmington Community Center.

This year, about 100 youngsters bidely ignored a steady mid-morning rain to watch wide-eyed as Alan Faulhaber of Manchester used his 56 years of shearing experience to divest 17 sheep of their winter covering.

Like any barber who regularly cuts children's hair, he found his customers in varying states of cooperation.

"I think the weather has a lot to do with it," he said, as he peered through the slats of Mrs. Spicer's sheep barn. He pulled out a red calico kerchief from the pocket of his blue denim overalls and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"Some of the sheep won't mind getting sheared one day and the next day, they'll kick like the dickens."

FAULHAVER WATCHED as his neighbor Bill Ames took a turn shearing one of the sheep. Ames, a Washtenaw County Extension agent, was enjoying a busman's holiday.

"It's his vacation," Faulhaber said, before continuing his narration on the hazards of shearing sheep.

"Some of them will bite you. Fattening lambs will try to nip you but sheep aren't dangerous creatures."

Most of the sheep in Mrs. Spicer's flock will have lambs this spring. Distrustful of the noise from the generator Faulhaber rigged up for his electric shears in the barn, they tried to wrestle away from the shearer's grip.

Faulhaber, who sells the wool to a Saginaw mill, and Ames used teamwork to deal with their reluctant clients. Both grabbed two legs each and pulled the sheep from the rear of the waiting flock. The choppy-sheep was then turned on his back-belly up, and the shearing began at the front legs.

Children from the Novi Christian School, Novi's Maple Elementary School and the Honey Tree Nursery in Farmington, jockeyed for better positions in the barn to watch the operation. The fortunate ones hung on the wooden fence that separated the shearing area from the rest of the small barn. Tykes waiting for a good position entertained themselves by staring at two lambs born that morning. The ewe hovered over her offspring and

gazed at the small intruders.

UNMINDFUL OF HIS audience, Faulhaber continued his chore.

The secret to shearing is in the handling of the knives on the shearer.

"You have to point them down on your hand and if they tear up your hand a little, you know they're too sharp for the sheep. And you never shear straight across. You shear on an angle, so you don't hurt the sheep."

Faulhaber, though retired, estimates that he'll shear about 200 sheep this spring. That 200 seems a small number to him. In 1951, he contracted to shear 10,000 sheep.

"I could do 35 a day, then," he remembered with a grin.

Mrs. Spicer estimates that her small flock will produce about 400 pounds of wool this spring. Each sheep should give about eight or nine pounds of wool.

"It was a cold winter and if you

feed them with the right grain there'll be more lanolin in the wool," she said, as she rested in her dining room between visits from students.

"At one time I had 65 sheep here. I like them. They're productive. This is a working farm. I don't make my living from it but we have sheep and we raise hay here," she said.

Meanwhile, the youngsters had different ideas about the whole business.

"I'D LIKE TO TAKE A sheep home with me," said Scott Hall, 7, of Novi.

"I'd keep it in my mom's closet and when she'd open it up she'd scream. She doesn't like snakes, either."

Another young man who wanted to have an unusual pet, Shawn Schult, 6, of Novi, decided he'd keep his sheep in a shed in the backyard.

"I liked watching the sheep get shaved," he said.

Janel Zabkiewicz wanted to stay in Mrs. Spicer's house. "It's really pretty. I wish I could live here."



Alan Faulhaber concentrates on shearing the wool from one of Mrs. Spicer's sheep. (Staff photo by Harry Mauthe)



Sheep shearers Alan Faulhaber (right) and his neighbor, Bill Ames, coax their next client into the shear's range. (Staff photo by Harry Mauthe)



Youngsters stare as Alan Faulhaber demonstrates his shearing skills.



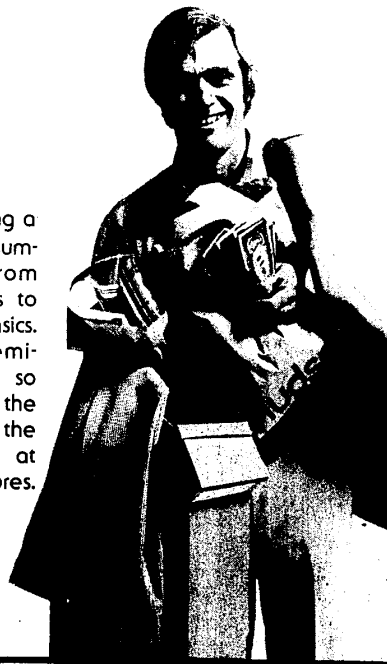
Mrs. Eleanor Spicer discusses sheep raising with three young visitors from Novi. Pat Murphy, Tim Murphy (left to right) and Danny Yoder enjoy some punch and conversation.

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