



WOOL'S JOURNEY IS A LONG AND PROVEN ONE.

Since the Stone Age, primitive humans have valued sheep as a diverse resource. Achieving our three basic needs—food, clothing and shelter—sheep have been considered one of society's most valuable, renewable resources for 10,000 years. As humans learned to spin and weave, woolens became paramount in growing the wealth of Babylon. And as the warmth of wool spread, along with the knowledge of sheep's unmatched mobility, it granted civilization the ability to spread civilization beyond the warm climate of Mesopotamia. News of the value of this woolly creature traveled fast, and by 3000 BC, the Persians, Greeks and Romans were distributing sheep and wool throughout Europe.

THE WOOL TRADE BEGINS

The Romans took sheep everywhere as they built their Empire in what is now Spain, North Africa and the British Isles. They established a wool plant in what is now Winchester, England as early as 50 AD. The Saracens, nomadic people of the Syrian-Arabian deserts, established a widespread wool export trade with North Africa, Greece, Egypt and Constantinople. During the twelfth century, the Norman conquest of Greece encouraged weaving in Florence, Genoa and Venice. The conquerors sent Greek weavers to Palermo as slaves, and their extraordinary work was mimicked at once by Italian weavers.

Meanwhile, in Spain, the thriving wool industry helped finance the voyages of Columbus and the Conquistadors. Guarding its wealth closely, Spain levied the death penalty on anyone exporting sheep until 1786. That year, King Louis XVI imported 386 Merino ewes to cross with sheep on his estate at Rambouillet in Northern France. And even today, the resulting Rambouillet breed is highly desired due to its fine and long staple wool. In 1377, England's King Edward III, "the royal wool merchant," stopped the imports of woven goods and the domestic weaving of foreign wools. He also invited Flemish weavers, who were fleeing the Spanish invasion, to settle in England where the industry thrived.

ENGLAND'S "EMPIRE OF WOOL"

Although pelts may have been worn in Britain as early as the late Bronze Age (3000 BC), England's "empire of wool" peaked during the 1509-1547 reign of King Henry VIII when he seized the flocks of the monasteries and redistributed them to court favorites. This sent shepherds to prison and was one of the first unfair treatments that incited immigration to America. And by 1660, wool textile exports were two-thirds of England's foreign commerce.



WOOL COMES TO THE AMERICAS

Christopher Columbus brought sheep to Cuba and Santo Domingo on his second voyage in 1493; Cortez took their descendants along when he explored what is now Mexico and the southwestern United States. And despite the fact that England tried to discourage a wool industry in North America, a few smuggled sheep had multiplied to about 100,000 by 1665.

Traditions and folklore grew with the industry, and spinning duties fell to the eldest unmarried daughter in the family, hence the term “spinster.” Spun yarn was wound on a reel (weasel), which made a popping sound when a given yardage was reached. (That’s right, “Pop goes the weasel!”)

THE INFLUENCE OF WOOL GROWS GLOBALLY

King George III of England made wool trading in the Colonies a punishable offense, threatening to cut off the offender’s right hand. This policy, together along with other oppressive actions including the Stamp Act of 1765, which required that revenue stamps be affixed to all printed matter, helped incite the Revolutionary War.

Both Washington and Jefferson maintained flocks of sheep and were inaugurated in woolen suits. New inventions like the spinning jenny, combing machines and water-powered looms further progressed the industry’s rapid expansion. Sheep moved west with civilization, and at the turn of the 18th century, small flocks in the hands of pioneers expanded the wool the industry to Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.