

Noble G. Wheeler, A Man of Distinction

By K.T. Jones

As a writer, often times I have the great privilege to learn about the influential men and women who over the years worked diligently to form the backbone of the purebred sheep industry. Through hard work and dedication these individuals set in place a strong foundation that still guides many of our practices today.

It is a foundation built on producing high quality sheep, nurturing and developing strong organizations, and building lasting relationships between producers from around the nation. So far, the majority of the influential historical figures have had a few things in common. They are generally progressive folks with a passion for raising sheep and a genuine interest in the future of the sheep industry. But more over, most of these gentlemen and ladies carry themselves with a level of class and integrity that is a cut above the rest. They truly become men and women of distinction.

In short, they can be remembered for their

from around the region, and Mr. Wheeler himself.

At the age of ninety-six, Noble Wheeler is still going strong. Living in Boise, Idaho with his son Bruce's family, he works out daily at a local gym, keeping both his mind and body in great shape. Although no longer in the sheep business, he is still active in his church, explaining, "I have been very active in church ever since I was two weeks old."

In addition to his daily routine, Wheeler makes an annual trek to attend his beloved Lane County Fair held in Eugene, Oregon. As a past long-term superintendent, Wheeler now attends to reminisce with old friends, celebrate his birthday, and assist his daughter in putting on a tremendous sheep show. Wheeler pointed out, "The Lane County Fair is one of the best county fairs I have been to."

Known primarily for their fine quality Corriedales, the Wheeler family also raised Romneys, Lincolns and Horned Dorsets at their home place in Noti, Oregon. For Noble Wheeler, raising sheep in the Willamette Valley of Oregon came naturally as his family had homesteaded in the area generations earlier.

Noble's son, Glenn Wheeler, explained his family originally settled in the area in 1863 and his grandfather, C.B. Wheeler, was born at the homestead in 1889. C.B.



Noble Wheeler with his first Oregon State Fair Champion Corriedale Yearling Ewe in 1948.

role in molding the industry because of their ability to take a stand on key issues. They have seen the trends come and go, but in the long run their sheep are imprinted with their style. Such is the case with former Oregon shepherd Noble G. Wheeler.

Known by many as a quiet gentleman who loves to visit about his sheep, Mr. Wheeler is also known for the tremendous quality sheep he produced. Fellow Corriedale breeder Phil Reister from Washougal, Washington admired Wheeler's breeding program extolling, "The thing that really stood out is that he built quality Corriedales his whole life." Reister followed up his praise for Wheeler by stating "He was ahead of his time in his thought process."

One might wonder what set this retired log scaler's flock apart from the rest. To find out, I spoke with his sons, well-respected breeders

perhaps started the family on their road to raising sheep and showed Cotswolds and later Columbias at a number of local fairs.

In addition, Glenn's great grandfather, Halivar Wheeler, who was a state representative and senator for a number of years, raised Lincolns in the area. Perhaps best known for his role in keeping the University of Oregon in Eugene, he also showed at a number of fairs in the region.



Noble grew up working the family farm with draft horses, raising crops, and working in the timber. He went to school in Pleasant Hill and started showing his sheep in open class at a very young age.

He married his wife Eleanor in 1938 and went to work driving a feed delivery truck for Lane County Feed and Seed. After renting in Pleasant Hill, the couple decided to purchase 105 acres in nearby Noti, Oregon.

A year later Wheeler purchased his first set of five bred Corriedale ewes from the Talbott flock in Canyonville, Oregon. His first ram came from Perry Johnson out of Enterprise, Oregon and Noble later added a few Kassner bloodlines from McMinnville, Oregon. As he continued to grow his flock, Wheeler added a few more Johnson sheep and some Leffler genetics from Jefferson, Oregon.

By the 1950's, Noble Wheeler was a regular, showing at both the Oregon State Fair and the Pacific International Livestock Exposition in Portland as well as his local county fair. Throughout that time Wheeler focused on a strong line-breeding program adding outside



Noble's son Grant is shown holding their Reserve Champion Ewe at the 1966 National Corriedale Show. Standing, left to right, is Noble's son Glenn, Noble's wife Eleanor and Noble himself.

rams occasionally. Such was the case in the 1960's when he purchased a few sheep from the Lee Crane flock in McArthur, California.

In the early 1960's Wheeler helped form the Oregon Corriedale Association and became their first chairman. He played an instrumental role in swaying the national association to hold their National Corriedale Show at the Pacific International in 1966.

Although Wheeler's sheep had never been shown outside of the Northwest, he fared well in the competition, earning Reserve Champion Ewe and Champion Ram honors. To Phil Reister, this accomplishment did not come as a surprise as he noted, "Competing against Noble at the Oregon State Fair made it one of the toughest Corriedale events in the nation."

It was about this time that Wheeler decided to start sending his sheep to Canada and a number of the larger American shows with some of the best showmen of the time including Don Kessi, Art Ohling and Carl Depping. Wheeler continued having his sheep exhibited at the larger venues and Oregon State Fair up through the late 1980's and at the local county fair up through the early 2000's.

Although the Wheeler sheep garnered a number of awards over the years, including another set of national titles in 1975, he is perhaps best known for his world record setting ram in 1979. Sold through the Midwest Stud Ram Sale, Wheeler's Corriedale Ram went for an astounding dollar figure at the time and set the World Record for a Corriedale. As Phil Reister explained, "When Noble Wheeler sold the ram in Sedalia, there wasn't another ram that came within 50 lbs." The astounding part of the story is this phenomenal event all happened on Wheeler's first trip back to Sedalia.

Although Noble Wheeler is probably best known for producing structurally correct, big-bodied sheep that were steeped in breed character, his own character made him a beloved institution and strong leader. Noble Wheeler counted among his close friends, infamous sheep men, such as Don Kessi, Lynn Barnes, and John Hill.

Known for his integrity as a winner or loser, Wheeler explained his philosophy about his fellow shepherds saying, "There are a lot of fine people in the sheep industry." Also noting, "I wouldn't trade my involvement in the sheep industry for anything."

Fellow Lincoln producer Delbert Kessi from Harlan, Oregon summed up Noble Wheeler with several strong statements attesting to his character. He explained Noble was a very close friend of his father Don. The two gentlemen were some of the last few people to exhibit Angora goats in the early days before they were popularized with many of the fiber enthusiasts. Delbert explained, "Noble was like my

dad, they both enjoyed showing their sheep and goats."

The younger Kessi also went on to praise Noble for being a positive role model in the industry. He expounded by saying, "He was a strong competitor in the show ring, but never demeaning." Kessi topped off his praise by noting, "Noble was always an extremely polite and pleasant gentleman. He always had a smile on his face."

Other noted shepherds in the region chimed in with similar praise for Noble Wheeler including Suffolk board member Jake Fallesen from Crabtree, Oregon. He remembers Wheeler as "Always being a nice fellow." He chuckled as he reminisced about watching Don Kessi and Noble Wheeler sort out the Angora goat shows. Fallesen explained he watched a number of judges stand by over the years as the two highly respected men talked out their placings knowing full well their combined knowledge about the goats generally exceeded the judges.

Fellow Lane County resident Karole Willie



Noble is shown holding the trophy awarded for the Champion Yearling Ram at the 1966 National Corriedale Show held at the Pacific International Livestock Show. His son Glenn is shown holding the winning ram.

grew up around Noble Wheeler. Willie and her father, John Hill, showed against the Wheeler family on a number of occasions and Karole commended Noble for his behavior in the ring saying, "He liked to win, but if he didn't it was OK." Karole always enjoyed his company explaining, "He was always really interested in the sheep and the people." She also praised Wheeler for never being negative.



Champion Yearling Ewe at the 1975 National Corriedale Show held at the Oregon State Fair. Pictured is Susan Crane, National Corriedale Queen, Noble Wheeler and Glenn Wheeler.

Respected Horned Dorset Breeder Monte Forrester may have best summed up Mr. Wheeler's influence on the industry when he described Wheeler as being a true breeder of sheep. Forrester went on to explain he based his statement on an article written by noted Shropshire producer Doug Chambers. In the article Chambers classified most of the producers in the purebred sheep industry into two categories, either producers or multipliers. Forrester pointed out in his mind, Wheeler would clearly fall under the first category, producing sheep that would clearly withstand the test of time.

Forrester further went on to commend Noble Wheeler stating, "He was an upstanding type of guy, who appreciated good quality sheep."

Whether coming by it naturally or from his father, over the years Noble Wheeler proved himself to be a leader in a variety of arenas. From serving on a regional educational service district board to chairing a number of sheep organizations, Wheeler was a well-respected gentleman. His leadership and character garnered him a number of outstanding shepherd awards on both regional and national levels, including the National Guy Green award bestowed upon him by the American Corriedale Association.

Noble Wheeler certainly came from an era of shepherds when integrity and class mattered. It was a time when a man's reputation was built on his word and character mattered. It was also a time when shepherds carried themselves as gentleman and their legacy meant more than a blue ribbon. The producers of this era left a distinct footprint on our industry.

In the case of Noble Wheeler, he has left a tremendous impact on our industry. He has been a wonderful leader, a fellow friend to many, and above all an outstanding breeder of sheep. It is a legacy that will be tough to follow, which in the big picture truly makes Noble G. Wheeler a man of distinction!