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By: Roberta Heiman

Photos by: James M. Patterson

THE SHEAR JOY OF SHEEP

When shearer Roger Dove trims sheep, it's like 'watching a ballet'

By **ROBERTA HEIMAN** Courier & Press staff writer 464-7432 or rheiman@evansville.net
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Barnyard behavior just sort of goes berserk when Roger Dove shows up. At least, it seemed to entrance the two beefalo - half cow, half buffalo - that calmly chewed their cud as they watched all the action one day last week.

Peacocks strutted in full bloom. The geese honked. Horses ran to the far side of the field. The five llamas pranced nervously and the 21 sheep and 27 baby lambs bleated, loudly, nonstop - as if they all knew something was about to happen.

And they were right.

When Dove appears at this time of year it means only one thing: It's time for the annual shearing.

Dove is a sheep shearer from New Zealand who has worked all over the world. As unlikely as it sometimes seems to him, he ended up in Evansville in the early '80s and made it his home. Some people here know him from his commercial roofing business. But owners of sheep and llamas and alpacas know Dove as the shearer - one of few in this part of the country - and every spring they call him to tend their woolly flocks.

"Watching him is like watching a ballet. It's an art form," said Sue Motz, manager of the Anderson Woods farm and camp in Spencer County, one of his annual customers.

Motz and the camp are stories in themselves. She's a doctor who became disillusioned, dropped out of the practice of medicine, had "a big giveaway, like a free garage sale" to get rid of her stuff, and for two years has managed the 175-acre farm with a summer camp for children and adults with disabilities.

"People either think I'm nuts or the best thing since sliced bread," she laughed. The farm, near St. Meinrad Archabbey, is owned by Judy and David Colby. They established the nonprofit Anderson Woods camp in 1978 to provide an opportunity for kids and adults with disabilities to experience life on a farm.

In addition to the lambs, llamas, horses, beefalo and fowl, there are wild turkeys, Jenny the mule, Lassie the 20-year-old collie, cats and dogs galore, plus various and sundry wild things, a swimming hole and an organic garden.

Motz said she's learning a lot from it all.

The sheep are spotted Jacob sheep - according to legend, direct descendants of the flock acquired by Jacob when he worked for

Sue Motz, an Anderson Woods worker, leads a freshly sheared sheep out into a pen while Roger Dove closes the clippers he uses to trim hooves. Dove, originally from New Zealand and now living in Evansville, has been shearing sheep for 40 years. He spent Tuesday shearing 21 sheep and three llamas in Spencer County at Anderson Woods, a camp for the mentally and physically handicapped. "I've worked with sheep all over the world most of my life," Dove said. "I found that sheep people tend to be a breed that I can get along with." James M. Patterson / Courier & Press
 Roger Dove shears the fleece from one of the spotted Jacob sheep kept at Anderson Woods, a farm and camp for the mentally and physically disabled in Spencer County, Ind.

Roger Dove shears the fleece from one of the spotted Jacob sheep kept at Anderson Woods, a farm and camp for the mentally and physically disabled in Spencer County, Ind.



Naomi, the oldest ewe of the flock, stands in the pen after her spring grooming. Shearing the fleece helps them keep cool and avoid parasites in the summer.

descendants of the flock acquired by Jacob when he worked for his father-in-law, as told in the Bible. They have black and white spots. They also have horns. "And they know how to use them," Dove said. In his years of sheep shearing, he has had teeth kicked out, a thumb bitten in half, bones broken and shins bruised. Watching him work is sort of like watching a cross between an action-adventure movie and "The Horse Whisperer." He grabs the horns of a 120-pound ewe that doesn't want to be held, flips it over onto its backside so that all four feet are off the ground, and then the animal just gives up - lying there while Dove gently turns the body and shears off the wool.

He said the trick is to "keep them comfy and let them know you're in control." Also, to never let them get one foot on the ground. Motz watched in amazement. "He's really gentle with them, and I think they know it," she said. It took him about five minutes per sheep to do the Colbys' 20 ewes and one ram. That included trimming their hoofs.

The five llamas, however, were an entirely different challenge.

"This could turn into a circus," Dove predicted. And it did. Only three of the llamas got sheared, because the other two refused to be caught. And while Dove was trying to catch the one named Meddie, the feistier one, Crowfoot, came up and spit in Dove's face. More than once.

"Stop it!" Dove ordered.

"Stop acting like idiots," he told the two renegades. They ignored the order and will have to suffer through the heat this summer.

Motz said the llamas' wool would be donated to a nonprofit organization that makes hats for cancer patients. The sheep wool will go to Ohio Valley Fibers, east of Cincinnati, to be spun into fiber. And the lambs will be sold at the area's Amish auction to raise funds for the Anderson Woods summer camp.

Motz, a specialist in geriatrics medicine, said she'll be sorry to see the lambs go. She helped with the births of some of them - her first experience at birthing. As for Dove, he was heading next to a flock of sheep in Lexington, Ky., then on to a flock in Memphis. Last year he was called as far away as Baltimore, where a local shearer had become ill and the owners were in a bind. About 10 years ago he went to the Soviet Union with the U.S. State Department's farmer-to-farmer program, visiting rural villages in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to "teach about shearing and wool handling and the international market."

For several years he tended a flock of 600 sheep at the Kentucky Down Under tourist attraction near Bowling Green. That's what brought him to the Evansville area.

In New Zealand, he said, the flocks are huge - up to 120,000 sheep. "It would take at least 2,000 sheep to support one man and his family."

Dove grew up in New Plymouth, New Zealand, a dairy farm area, and has been shearing sheep since he was 15 years old. He went to college, got a degree in agriculture and livestock management, then went to a shearing school operated by the New Zealand Wool Board. He came to this country in the early '70s, intending to just visit, but "there was so much freedom and trust, it was just unreal. It was pretty awesome." So he stayed, traveling around the country to state meetings, making acquaintances and getting job offers.

Now 55, he has stayed at the trade for longer than most shearers. And he has no plans to quit.

"I enjoy doing it," he said. "I've worked with sheep all over the world all my life, and I've found sheep people everywhere to be a breed I can get along with."

A point he makes is that, "If you've got sheep in this country, you've got to be a little different than everybody else."

His problem is that there are no apprentices to learn the trade from him.

"There's no young guys interested in getting in this business; no new blood coming along," Dove said. "There's not a lot of money in it, and no way to learn it without a lot of sweat and bruises. And these kids today, it's hard enough to get them out of bed ..."

With a dry New Zealand wit, he advises anybody who might consider the trade, "The first 30,000 to 40,000 sheep are the worst."