



“ON A SUNNY DAY IN MAY”

Over 150 years ago, on warm, bright, sunshiny days in May, sheep owners would drive their flock to the Ballston Lake outlet creek, called the Sheep Hole, about midway between Ballston Lake and Round Lake. This was an annual event that took place in various locations all over Saratoga County in the spring of the year, generally in early May. This was the time to get the sheep's wool as clean as possible; the cleaner the wool the better the price if the farmer wanted to sell some of his wool to make money.

Washing the sheep was no small task, when one thinks that back in the 1860s there were over ninety thousand sheep in Saratoga County. The Town of Malta, the location of the Sheep Hole, had nearly four thousand sheep at that time.

“ . . . the sheep were held in the creek by the boys and washed by kneading and squeezing the wool with their hands to get the dirt out;

many times the sheep got the best of the one doing the washing and the tables were turned when the sheep got away and the washer received a cold bath,” relates one older county resident.

So went the story, year after year. When the birds began chirping, when wildflowers were peeking out of the ground, when the grass has turned bright green, farm families were ready for a very busy season of cleaning the sheep, shearing the sheep, washing and carding the wool, spinning the wool into yarn, dyeing the yarn, weaving the yarn into cloth, and finally, sewing the cloth into new clothes.

The very earliest residents of Saratoga County made most of their own clothing. They probably made some of their clothes from the skins of animals like the raccoon, deer, squirrel, rabbit, and bear. Breeches, buckskin coats, mittens, and raccoon hats kept the early people warm. But wool from the sheep was really the more popular item for making cloth. The wool cloth would eventually be made into clothing.

The day after the sheep were washed in the outdoor waterhole, the wool was sheared from the sheep. Shearing was usually done on the farm where the sheep were raised, and most often the shearing was done by the farmer who owned the sheep. Reverend Silas Constant, a Presbyterian minister at Yorktown, Westchester County, sheared his own sheep, according to his diary. Between 1791 and 1901, he or his son George sheared between May 19 and May 23. On two occasions he wrote in his diary about washing the sheep and both times it took place two days before the shearing.¹ Another good source of information about shearing is household inventories of people who had died. In Westchester County up to 1795, about 12% of all inventories list “sheep shears.”¹

After shearing, the wool was carded or untangled. In the earliest time, carding was a household chore, performed mainly by women and children. Most early households had carding boards through which wool was pulled to get it clean. By the early nineteenth century, machines for carding were available, thus taking the task out of the home. In 1809 three Town of Milton residents advertised in a Ballston Spa newspaper that they owned carding machines.¹