

Focus on Fiber Series: Romney (A Drama)

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© Melissa Lines, SkyLines Farm, note that sheep has less than ½ year's growth of wool.

Introduction:

My first encounter with Romney wool may sound very familiar to you. I was a new spinner and went to my first state fiber festival. There, in the fleece tent, I fell in love with my first Romney fleece. It was from a black and silver Romney sheep named Delilah and weighed around 7 lbs. It was glimmering in the hot, summer sun making it all-the more lustrous, not that it needed any help. I bought it straight away and held onto my prize, stopping often throughout the day to admire my purchase.

Was I carried away by the heat? The long day? The pleasant sheep-scent of the fleece tent? What was it about the Romney fleece that made me swoon? As you will read, Romney wool inspires men to criminal enterprises, a whole town toward deception, and for some to even risk death! No wonder I could not resist. I never stood a chance!



Raw Romney Fleece, oh yes!

History of the Breed:

The Romney sheep is named for the area in Kent, England where it originated, the Romney Marshes. Although the area was once a desolate wetland and is still not heavily populated, some of the marsh has been reclaimed and built up. The Romney breed, locally known as Kent, has not changed significantly through the years in spite of the fact that they were reported to have been crossed with English Leicester sheep bloodlines to improve the breed. Historical records, dating back to 1796, describe the sheep in much the same way it appears in modern times.

During the 13th century, a customs tax was imposed on bags of wool leaving England. This was the start of the South Eastern Smuggling Gangs. Situated near the coastline, and in an inhospitable environment, the Romney Marsh area was riddled with smuggling gangs until the late 1800's. The most villainous group was the Hawhurst gang. Known for their cruelty and violence, the Hawhurst gang was successful in their criminal endeavors. After a run of terror in the country-side, including the crimes of horse whipping and burying officers alive, they met their match in the town of Goudhurst. The entire town enlisted the help of a militia unit to protect themselves and famously beat back an attempt by the Hawhurst gang to destroy the village.



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The Mayfield gang (1700's) was the polar opposite of the Hawhurst crew. Made up of local farmers who smuggled their own Romney wools to France, the Mayfield gang tied up their victims and believed in non-violence when committing their crimes. They were much loved by their community (Lydd and its surrounding area) for their well-behaved nefarious pursuits, but also because they shared their profits with the locals. The gang was so well received that the townsfolk of Lydd helped free two of the gang members who were being held by custom officers in the local Inn.

Unfortunately, crime did not pay even for the non-violent Mayfield smugglers. They met the same fate as the Hawhurst gang with their careers cut short by capture, hanging, or deportation.

The Romney sheep and its wool went on to further adventures. In 1853, a flock of 20 sheep boarded the *Cornwall* to begin their long voyage to New Zealand starting the exportation of the breed to the rest of the world. New Zealand was hospitable to the Romneys where they thrived becoming one of the major economic factors for the country. In 2001, there were 25 million Romneys in New Zealand.



Grey Romney, pin-drafted so you don't have too!

William Riddell of Oregon imported North America's first Romney sheep from England in 1904. Our American Romneys are mostly derived from the English blood-lines with more recent introductions of New Zealand Romneys.

Up until 1906, England was the primary source of exported Romney sheep. Romneys were sold to 43 countries before New Zealand began exporting the breed as well. Now, the Romney is found all over the world.

Breed Characteristics:



Coloured Romney sheep UK, photo taken by Sawyer12477, wikipedia, Creative Commons

The Romney sheep has a broad, clean face and a black nose. They are medium to large size sheep weighing in at 175 – 275 lbs. as yearlings. It is considered a dual-purpose sheep, giving a high wool yield as well as meat. They are known to be superb grazers who naturally spread out to graze. Romney sheep resist foot rot and parasites and, perhaps partly due to this fact, they thrive in wet conditions.

Their fleece is open, crimped, lustrous, free of kemp, and gives a high clean wool yield of 75 – 80%. Fleeces range in weight from approx. 6 – 12 lbs. Staple length is 5 – 8 inches. Wools can range from fine to strong with a micron range of 37-33. Finer Romney fleeces will be more tightly crimped than coarser fleeces but with less luster and are suitable for outer sweaters, socks, hats, mittens, and the like. Stronger Romney is suitable for bags, wall hangings, and rugs.



Organic Romney. It is incredible!

Because Romney wool is long, lustrous, easy to wash, comes in many gorgeous shades, is suited to many different yarns depending on the fleece, and raises the new spinner's confidence quickly, it is highly recommended by teachers as a perfect fiber for a new spinner. Experienced spinners appreciate the fiber as a source of infinite inspiration.

Resources:

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