

Four Weavers on a May Adventure

by
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What better way to spend a May weekend, than gallivanting across the countryside.

For several years, Lois Wyndham annually drove alone to the Weaving History Conference in Clayton, New York. However, over the last four years, Lois managed to pick up three extra weavers to accompany her on the trip. This May, Marian Riach, Irene Consack and I were the lucky companions. Before we left, Marian told us that on CBC radio, she had heard about a unique farm called Topsy Farms. With little effort, she convinced us to take the side trip.

The farm is located on Amherst Island at the eastern end of Lake Ontario, which meant we had to take a ferry boat and drive on winding country roads to get to the farm.

The history of the farm is an interesting read on their web page: www.topsyfarms.com.

The farm was bought in 1971 by five people who planned to create a commune, tear down the barn and build a geodesic dome. A man from the municipal government thankfully stepped in and discouraged them from destroying the barn. This same man sold the group some heifers and the group got into farming. Over the next four years they bought goats, chickens, pigs and sheep. They also had a huge garden and a root cellar. Use your imagination in thinking about the great meals, parties and fascinating people who were inhabiting the farm in the early seventies.

The commune officially disbanded in June 1975, and three commune members, plus a friend, bought the farm. After a couple of difficult years, in 1977 a bank manager advised the group to decide between beef and sheep. The group felt that sheep were the most promising. The first sheep, 50 ewes, were bought in the summer of 1974 from a farmer on Manitoulin Island. In the spring of 2014, there were 1,400 lambs from 800 mature ewes and 300 yearlings, all born on pasture. Currently, the flock genetics are North County Cheviot and Suffolk with contributions from several other breeds.

From the little shop on the farm, The Wool Shed, Marian and Irene purchased fleece and pencil rovings for their upcoming course in Haliburton this summer.

Originally, the sheep farmers hoped that the wool clip (the amount of wool that comes from the shearing) would pay for



Top: Irene Consack and Marian Riach hold the new baby lambs.
Bottom: Lois Wyndham standing with farmer Ian.





Clockwise from Top Left:

Beautiful wool skeins ready to use.
 Marian Riach and Irene Consack examine the fleece.
 A hand full of little lambs with Irene Consack.
 Blankets available in The Wool Shed..
 Marian Riach getting a cuddle.



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the flock's medical expenses. Unfortunately, the wool clip did not even cover the cost of shearing.

In 1995, farmers Ian, Sally and their boys took a trip to the East Coast to visit Ian's family. The trip resulted in the first Topsy wool being shipped to the woollen mill they still use today.

In 1996, Topsy farms received the first blankets and yarn made from the farm's wool.

The day we visited the farm, we had the pleasure of seeing four tiny lambs who were only days old. It was so much fun to watch these little creatures jumping and playing. We spent about an hour in The Wool Shed making purchases and fondling products.

The farm sells quality wool and sheepskin products, hand crafted items from locals, as well as custom freezer lamb (but I do not want to think about that).

After the farm visit, we travelled on to the Weaving History Conference in Clayton, New York, but that adventure is a story for another day.

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