

Producer Profile: Alys sheep, Olds, AB



Photo by Miles Driedger

**Story and photos by
Peggy Johnson, B.Sc., B.Ed.**

It's fun to look back and see where our life's journeys have taken us. When I visited Miles Driedger at his farm east of Olds on a blustery November day, he told me he was originally from Russell, Manitoba. He came to this community to work for the father of a young lady named Alyssa, who is now his wife. Shortly after they met, Alyssa purchased an aging flock of bred Cheviot ewes. This was followed a year later by a purchase of Rideau-cross ewes from her father. These two groups were the foundation of the well-managed intensive flock I saw on my visit, and the beginning of a dream to start a family that would work together on the farm.

In their first year of raising sheep, Miles and Alyssa lambed on pasture, without benefit of a barn, but that

situation has changed dramatically. In September 2009 they purchased land up the road from where Alyssa was raised. Although cattle had been housed on the site previously, a development application through the Alberta Natural Resources Conservation Board was still required. After working through that process, Miles and Alyssa began construction in 2010 of a barn that would shelter 1,000 ewes

and their lambs. The flock is still expanding, with 700 ewes now in place.

The barn is a repurposed broiler barn that was dismantled at Alyssa's parents' farm, moved to its present location and reconstructed on a new concrete foundation. It has a timber frame, metal roof and metal cladding inside and out, and is insulated with fiberglass batts.

The barn measures 250' long and

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Previous page: The Alysheap barn measures 250' x 80' with a 30' extension. Top left: Equipment dating from when the barn was used to raise broiler chickens allows Miles to monitor water consumption in different parts of the barn; Centre left: Lights, fans and feeding equipment controls; Bottom left: The barn entrance houses an office with sinks, bathrooms, boot changing area and the mechanical room; Top right: The auger bucket allows Miles to weigh the grain delivered to each pen in the barn. Bottom right: The conveyer belt on the side of the bale buster is used to put hay into the bunk feeders lining the alleyway. The chute at the top blows straw into the centre of the pens; Opposite page: The alleyway in the barn is wide enough to accomodate the tractor and bale buster.



Photo by Miles Driedger

80' wide, with 10' walls and a vaulted ceiling that supports cool air inlets for the negative pressure ventilation system. Electric fans in the outside walls exhaust moist or dusty air and maintain the barn temperature at 60°F. Fresh cool air enters through ducts located at the peak of the roof. Thermostats control four natural gas furnaces, each with a capacity of 250,000 BTUs, suspended from the ceiling.

A 30' extension on the barn houses the handling system and provides a place to park the tractor on cold winter nights. It also contains an entryway with a boot change area, bathrooms, vet supplies, a deep sink, a mechan-

ical room and a tool storage area. The mechanical room has retained all the environmental monitoring features the barn had as a broiler barn. It has the capacity to monitor and record daily water consumption in four different locations. It is also equipped to monitor barn temperatures and send this

data to the house.

The Driedgers are cooperators on the Alberta Lamb Traceability pilot project, and have found it very helpful in choosing and using RFID technology, such as the ear tags, scale, handling system and software that they use to run their farm.

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The sheep handling area consists of a wide curved alleyway made of solid-sided metal panels, bolted into the cement floor. The metal panels were salvaged from a dismantled hog barn and work very well for sheep. The curved alley leads to a narrower double alley terminating at a Racewell handling crate and Tru-test scale. The Racewell is fitted with a panel reader that sends RFID numbers to a Psion data recorder running FarmWorks software. The Tru-test scale runs a three-way sorting gate, so that Miles can weigh and sort the lambs frequently, without any assistance. The comprehensive growth data that he collects and downloads to his computer allows him to accurately predict how many lambs he will be shipping in the follow-



Photo by Miles Driedger

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ing weeks and months, and also to ensure that they dress out in the targeted weight range.

Near the handling system is the bottle lamb pen, with a Nursomat machine capable of feeding 60 lambs. Miles says the machine works very well, but that the smaller capacity machine designed for 35 lambs would probably suit their operation better.

As we step off the cement floor of the extension into the main barn, I note that the rest of the barn has a compact clay floor. A wide centre alley runs the length of the barn.

The feed bunks that line each side of the alley are built of steel pipe taken from the original broiler barn. Inside the bunk, welded-wire hog panels are positioned with the small openings at the bottom to keep lambs in, while the ewes eat hay through the larger openings at the top. Grain is fed from an

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Top left: The widest part of the chute is made from solid sided panels out of an old hog barn, bolted into the floor. Left: From there, the sheep move into this double chute. Above: The Racewell scale/sorting system can also catch the sheep and hold them when required.

auger bucket transported by a skid steer loader. The auger bucket has a scale, allowing Miles to weigh the grain fed into each pen.

After the grain is fed, a tractor and bale buster is used to feed hay. The bale buster is one of a new design with a conveyer on the side that delivers hay into the feed bunks. The bale buster is also used to blow straw into the center of the pens for bedding. The fans in the barn are equipped with an override switch, and the dust resulting from bedding the pens clears within a short time.

On the day I visited, a group of 150 ewes was finishing lambing in a large pen on one side of the alley. As the ewes lamb, they are moved into one of a bank of jugs positioned in the middle of the pen. Approximately 48 hours after birth, the ewes and lambs are moved out of the jugs, into a hardening area at the back of the pen.

Processing of lambs includes ear-tagging, tail docking with rubber rings and injections of selenium and Vitamin ADE. Ram lambs are left intact. Ewes are injected with an 8-way clostridial vaccine about two weeks before lambing, so that lambs will have a strong immune system from the start.

Ewes are usually shorn a month prior to lambing. Miles did all his own shearing until recently but, as the number of sheep has grown, he is switching over to using custom shearers. The newborn lambs seem very comfortable in the 60°F barn.

When lambing is over, the jugs (which are suspended on cables) can be lifted up and stored against the ceiling, allowing all ewes in the pen to once again have access to the feed bunks. Raising the jugs also makes short work of cleaning the pen with the loader before the next group comes in to lamb.

Miles and Alyssa have lambed three times this year: once in January, once in May and this group in October/November. I asked Miles about the process he used to get the ewes to cycle for this fall lambing.

He told me that these ewes were part of the 300 ewes that lambed in January. After weaning, he flushed them with barley and Vitamin E. Many, but not all, of them were fitted with CIDRs, but several of the CIDRs were found in



Photo by Miles Driedger



Above: Rideau Arcott ram lambs are shipped to SunGold Specialty Meats, Ltd. in nearby Innisfail; Right: Lamb grower ration is delivered to self-feeders through flexible augurs.

the lamb pen next to where the ewes were housed. It seems they were pulled out by the lambs through the wire panels dividing the pens. Miles finds that ewes with a heavy fleece have better CIDR retention.

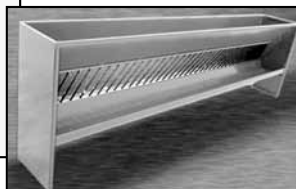
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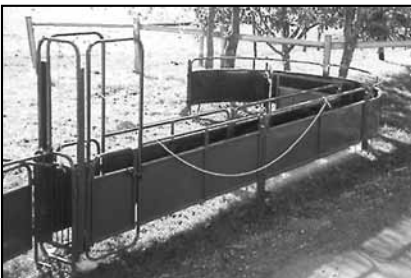
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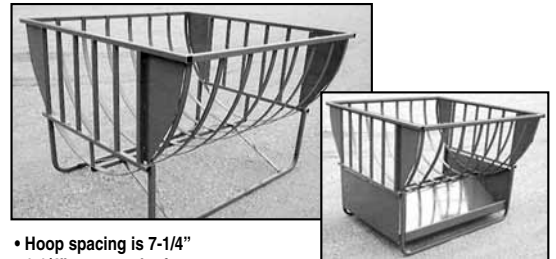
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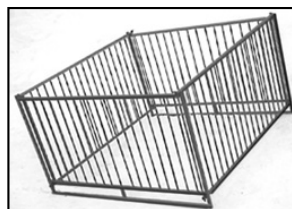


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Above: Claiming pens or 'jugs' are made from galvanized wire hog panels, cut to size. Cables allow the pens to be raised up against the ceiling (right) when not in use.



months later. Miles doesn't attempt to count lambs. He just confirms if the ewes are pregnant or open, and sorts them on that basis. Of the 300 ewes that lambed in January, about half lambed again this fall. All of the open ewes (including the ewe lambs born in January) were bred naturally in September to lamb in February of next year.

With their Rideau-based flock, the Driedgers are working toward a live birth rate of 250% at each lambing. While in expansion mode they have retained both ewe lambs and new breeding rams from their own flock, but plan to purchase outside rams in the future.

On the opposite side of the alleyway is a pen of breeding rams on hay and behind them, next to the outside wall, is a pen of lambs on concentrate that are almost ready for market. Miles is clear about his priority for these lambs: they are being self-fed to get them to market weight as quickly as possible and move them out to make room for more lambs, thereby maximizing the use of the barn. Miles' production goal is to have 100-pound ram lambs at 100 days of age.

The ration is a mixture of whole barley, soybean meal, whole canola seed and a mineral/vitamin premix, which is delivered into hopper-bottomed bins. The self-feeders are long boxes suspended from the ceiling, filled automatically from the bins. It is Miles' intention to install winches on these cables, so the feeders can be raised as the lambs grow or lifted out of the way completely for cleaning pens.

The Driedgers bale 30 acres of their own alfalfa and purchase a further 300 round bales from a neighbour, who delivers and stacks it in their hay shed. They also purchase some second-cut hay. All of the hay is feed-tested.

Miles does custom baling of straw in the fall to maximize the use of his baler. Given the rainfall in the Olds area this past summer, straw is very plentiful.

In addition to the hayland, the Driedgers have access to two pastures of 60 acres each. They have had problems with predators, so Miles does some hunting and trapping of coyotes. Losses have been low on one pasture but the far pasture has greater bush cover and is more of a challenge. If losses become unacceptable, ewes are taken off the pasture and brought back to the barn.

The Driedgers have sold some small groups of commercial ewe lambs, but have retained most of them as they increase the size of their flock. Intact ram lambs are delivered to SunGold Specialty Meats Ltd. in Innisfail (about 30 minutes away) and sold on the rail where they index 102 on average. The wool is skirted very carefully at shearing and sold to the Custom Woolen Mill in Carstairs, which is also nearby.

Miles says his biggest challenge is keeping up with everything. As they build outside corrals and continue to expand their flock, there is always something waiting to be done. To relieve some of the pressure, Miles' brother Kurt and his wife have recently relocated from Manitoba, fitting perfectly with Miles' vision of their sheep enterprise.

Peggy Johnson and her daughter Sarah raise Est à Laine Merino-cross sheep near Sundre, Alberta. Peggy also works as an instructor in the Animal Science department at nearby Olds College.