

New Milker Revolutionizes Lambing Season

By Heather Smith Thomas

Pearce McKinney started with Suffolks in 1954 as a 4-H project on his family's farm in western Indiana, about 150 miles south of Chicago, Illinois. The farm was established in 1832 and is one of the few 175-year-old farms still occupied by the same family. It's now six generations. "My son Noel is involved in all the computer work—with all the seedstock registrations, etc. and will eventually be taking it over," says McKinney.

"Ours is a seedstock operation and we had a big flock of Suffolks. At one time I had about 300 Idaho ewes, until about the mid-1970's," he says. A large commercial flock was a lot of work at the same time the crops were due in the field, however. So he cut down to just the Suffolks, mostly seedstock, show animals, commercial rams and breeding rams.

"We brought in some Montadales in 1989, kind of on a dare. My wife liked the white faces because the black-faced sheep were so large that they were hard to handle. My wife was out there working with me all the time and it was just a little easier to work with the white face sheep," says McKinney. He has been on the national boards for both breeds.

In 1996 he acquired five St. Croix hair sheep. "This was accidental. We made an export order, but the sheep had grown so much between the time we bought them and the time we shipped them, we couldn't get them on the airplane. So the buyer and myself got stuck with five ewes apiece, and it was one of the best things that ever happened. Right now we are running about 40 Montadale ewes (seedstock and show animals) and 70 St. Croix. The older I got, the more I appreciate the less work it takes for the St. Croix."

He likes the St. Croix because he can breed them at different intervals and have lambs for the kill market at different times.

A few years ago he tried the new Udderly EZ mare milker on his ewes at lambing, to obtain colostrum for newborn lambs. He saw one used on a mare and thought it would work on a ewe. "A close friend in the Suffolk world was a veterinary student, doing an internship on a horse farm in Kentucky. He called and told me about this new mare milker," says McKinney.

"I had a lot of big, older Suffolk ewes that were having big lambs, and it seems like the bigger the lamb, the less it wants to get up and live. I had some



Pearce McKinney using the Udderly EZ milker.

ewes with low udders and big teats and I thought this milker might work on them. It worked perfect on those big Suffolk ewes, and I'd just tube the lambs to get the milk in them. That way if you had a twin or triplet, the ewe would not be pawing trying to get the lamb up. I could get some milk in him and get him off to the side, deliver the other lamb and do the same thing with it," he explains. This would get the lambs up and going, eager to nurse their mother.

"Then she wouldn't be stepping on them and the lambs fumbling all around looking for a teat. That's how I used it initially, and now we also use it to collect extra milk. We keep a milk reservoir in the cool part of the barn, for any lambs that need it."

He had trouble with the large collection bottle collapsing due to the vacuum created by the pump, and called the inventor, Buck Wheeler, to ask about that problem. "He asked what I was using it on and I said sheep. He told me he had a newer bottle for sheep and sent me the eight ounce bottle and that works great," says McKinney.

"Using this milker, I no longer have to buy any dry milk replacer. We've bought no dry milk during the past two years for our bottle lambs. When someone told me the other day that this milker was not affordable, I asked him how much powdered milk he uses, and he told me three or four bags a year. That would pay for the milker, and it will last a long time. If you have one or two bottle lambs and can get enough milk from the actual

mother or another ewe, this will pay for it. And, you are using true milk for those lambs and it's better for them," he explains.

His Montadale ewes are now as big as his Suffolks and are show quality sheep. The big lambs, however, are often harder born than a small lamb and may just lie there awhile before they try to get up. On these, it really helps to get colostrum into them immediately and get them going.

"I've used my milker now for three years, and finally met Buck Wheeler who invented it. I am currently president of the Indiana Sheep Association and we have a big symposium every year. I talked him into coming down this year to give a presentation on his milker. He sent me the smaller bottles and the proper inserts for sheep, and they worked perfectly, and now I couldn't live without them!" Other people who come to his farm and see how the milker works are eager to get one. Last year one man came 50 miles to borrow it for overnight.

"Wendy Feller lives about 20 miles from me and had a big Hampshire ewe step on a baby lamb and she called me. My wife Alice is as good as any vet for fixing broken legs. So Alice set the leg, and I sent the milker home with Wendy to use, since I was about done lambing. That lamb was soon up and walking but the mother wouldn't take it back, so Wendy was using the EZ milker and keeping that lamb alive on its mother's milk. She's also saving that ewe's udder," says McKinney.



Wendy Feller bottle feeding lamb with broken leg.

"That's another thing about using the milker. A ewe's udder and teats are not well correlated with the size of a man's hand. If you try to strip out a ewe, the udder is vulnerable to damage and scar tissue. One the virtues of the Udderly EZ milker is how easy it is on the udder," he says.

"When you see how a ewe reacts when you put it on her, you're convinced that it's more comfortable to her than milking by hand. One man told me he'd have to wire his ewe to a gate to milk her. I told him to try this, and watch her relax. The immediate release of pressure, especially if she has a big udder, makes her feel better," he says.

"I've never once had a ewe that I started to milk that didn't just freeze and stand quietly, once the milk started flowing. This really impressed me. If a good milking ewe has a small lamb and it doesn't get going right away, her udder is full and uncomfortable. But her instinct is to feel better once she starts being nursed, so when you start drawing that milk out she relaxes. This impressed me, watching the reaction of that mother as the milk flows. I've never had one take a step, once I had milk flowing," he explains.

"Any ewe will be a little nervous when you first start up to the udder, but I do it differently than most people. I basically work my way up onto the full teat. I start the bottom of the teat into the mouth of the milker and pump about three times as I go up onto the teat. That gets it locked in. Instead of just putting it on like you would a dairy milker, I work it up with the pump itself. That may be why the ewe responds with a relaxed freeze because it's probably the same action

as a lamb first looking for the teat and mouthing it and then finally getting it into its mouth," he says.

"I've never had to halter a ewe, even the first time I milk her with this pump. I had one ewe whose lamb was really going backward and I milked her at least five different times, and her reaction was if she was ready for it. By contrast, if I was going to milk her by hand, into a lamb tuber, I'd have to put feed in front of her, halter her, and bend down to do it. I'm 68 years old and have terribly arthritic knees. My wife Alice said if I can use it, anyone can. I'm not very flexible at leaning down and getting under a sheep. The first time Alice used it she was fascinated because she had success that first time and it's so much easier on both the ewe and the person milking."

It's especially helpful with the little St. Croix ewes if you ever have to milk one of those, says McKinney. "If they are lambing in late September and have been on dry grass, the udder may be the size of a grapefruit, and the teats are only the size of a good pimple. With the very small teats, you can't even tell if they are going to lamb or not, looking behind them. But I've used the EZ milker a few times on young St. Croix ewes. The teat may have the

equivalent of a quarter inch of plug in it. A big man can't reach down there and pull that plug out. So I'll set that ewe up like I was shearing her and use a small dilator made for sheep. I'll work that plug out, get a couple of squirts out of there, then set her up so I have her in the right position, and use the milker. Then I can easily get enough to tube that lamb if it's backward, or enough to at least get the milk flowing from both sides. I've only had to do that a few times because the St. Croix usually don't need any help or management. With them, I have to catch a baby lamb before it's a half hour old, to tag it. They are like antelope. If they are out in a pasture, I've seen them up and following the mother within five minutes," he says.

Most of the instances he needs the milker are with the other sheep, and he credits it with saving a lot of lambs. In one situation last January a ewe lambed outside, when the temperature was 10 degrees. She had twins, and brought the female lamb into the barn, but left the male lamb outside. "I came home from my office at dusk but could still see enough to notice the lamb outside. I ran out and picked him up. In another hour he would have been dead. I put the lamb and ewe in the heated lambing stall, got the milker and milked some colostrum from her and tubed him, and he lived," says McKinney.

"Now he's probably one of my best potential stud rams. In honor of Buck Wheeler, whose invention was instrumental in saving this lamb, I named him Wheeler Dealerr. When Buck was here visiting us in early March, we took a picture of him, holding Wheeler Dealerr. The quickness of getting that milk is what saved him. If I had run to the house, I would have taken time to change clothes and the lamb might not have survived. The way it was, I was still



Pearce McKinney with "Wheeler Dealerr".



Tom Slack's lambing barn.

in office attire (suit and tie), but I grabbed the lambs and took them into the heated stall and milked the ewe." It's so easy to use this milker, he says he could even milk a ewe in a tuxedo.

McKinney is very enthusiastic about the EZ milker and so is his wife. "We've spoken so highly of it that we've probably sold 20 units since January!" That's the best endorsement for any product—word of mouth by people who are happy with it.

ANOTHER TRUE BELIEVER—Tom Slack and his family have a large Suffolk seedstock and club lamb program at North Manchester, Indiana. For the past 31 years they've had a club lamb sale every spring.

Tom started using the EZ milker after Pearce McKinney brought Buck Wheeler to meet him, following the sheep symposium. "I had never used one of these, but after trying it I realized it is a super good invention. Now the biggest problem I have is that my son and the boy who works for me are fighting over it, wanting to use it!" says Slack.

He has 350 ewes that milk really well. "We've always pulled some milk off occasionally to relieve pressure on those udders. I have wether-type Suffolks and they have a lot of extra milk. We also have Dorsets and some of the yearling ewes have small teats. The milker is much easier on those teats than trying to milk them by hand," he says.

"I've milked ewes all my life and didn't think much about it, but there are times those ewes have such a small

teat and small teat opening they are hard to milk, so this EZ milker is perfect," says Slack.

Other instances, it's handy when a ewe has mastitis and you need to strip the udder completely. "If you are doing this by hand, there are times you get tired or the bag is so sore the ewe is fighting, so you don't get it all milked out. By contrast, with the milk pump, it's fast and easy, not so uncomfortable to the ewe, and you can always get it milked out. It's a lot easier on the udder and on the person doing it," he explains.

The ewe doesn't mind it nearly as much. "You don't have the stripping motion which creates friction and pressure and can damage the vulnerable teat. The ewe hardly knows it's on there," says Slack.

Sometimes a lamb might scrape the bottom-side of a teat with his teeth and make it sore. "This might happen if two lambs are fighting over a teat, or if the ewe starts to walk away and the lamb is still trying to hang onto the teat," he explains. The ewe may develop a sore in the raw tissue and won't let the lambs suck. You need to take the pressure off or she'll get mastitis, but if

you try to milk her by hand it's painful to the ewe. The EZ milker makes that task a lot easier.

During lambing season he generally has 10 or 12 ewes lambing every day and collects a little extra milk for tubing lambs. "If we have a ewe that had a single, and a lot of milk, we steal from her. If a ewe loses a lamb we milk her to feed some other lambs. Why turn her out and dry her up and then buy powdered milk?"

He grafts most of his extra lambs onto ewes that lose theirs, however, and doesn't have very many lamb bar babies, but he takes milk from heavy milking ewes to tube some of the newborns to get them going quicker. "I also have need for extra milk to feed an orphan for awhile until I have an opportunity to graft that lamb," says Slack.

"I don't spend time trying to get a slow lamb sucking a teat. I don't have the time and patience for that. I'd rather just tube the lamb as soon as he's born and go on to my next task. This gives him the energy (and buys him some time) to find it on his own." The colostrum gives him antibodies, and a chance to get dried off, get his feet under him, and go find the udder.

"If I tube him as soon as he hits the ground, I know the milk is in him and he's good to go. Otherwise it might take several hours for a lamb to suck eight ounces. He might get up and take a few swigs and fall back down and have to try again. In a matter of seconds I can pop that milk into him and go on to the next lamb or go do my chores at the other barn." The EZ milker makes it quick and simple to have the milk, and you can tube any lamb that needs it. Tubing is sometimes the only way to save a lamb that's born out in the cold and too chilled to suck.



Brett and Tom Slack.