

roots & folks: meet your local farmer



Gathering the flock. The Morry family has been pasturing sheep on small islands off the southeast coast of Newfoundland since the 1800s.

# The good shepherds

Newfoundland's "first family" of sheep farmers

By Denise Flint

photography: Greg Locke

IT WAS IN southeast Newfoundland that Lord Baltimore established the Colony of Avalon in the early 1600s before heading south to warmer climes. But even before he arrived, fishermen were already familiar with these shores, and long after he left others made their living from the harsh country and sea around the town that came to be known as Ferryland.

Though the ocean has always been bountiful, the earth is less so on



Howie Morry, on his farm in Kilbride, NL, feeding the "protector" llama.

Newfoundland and over the generations the people of Ferryland have learned to use every means at their disposal to keep body and soul together.

Just off the coast, easily visible from shore, a string of small islands called the Cribbies juts out of the Atlantic like vertebrae. Once or twice in the fall visitors to the shore can witness what anywhere else would be considered a strange sight indeed: a small boat stuffed to the gunnels with sheep coming back from Isle



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aux Bois, the largest of the Cribbies.

The sheep have been spending the summer grazing on the harsh pickings of the island away from predators and traffic, roaming at will and fattening up. They're taken over by a specially constructed flat-bottomed boat in the spring, periodically checked on over the course of the summer, and then brought back to shore before winter strikes.

The sheep belong to an informal co-op of part-time shepherds who share the sparse pasturing the island affords. The number of sheep transported to the island is closely regulated, and the number of people allowed to use the island is similarly restricted. On a trip out to collect a few boatloads of young rams Keith Morry explains that it was his great-grandfather who started using the island sometime in the 1800s. As such, Keith's not just any member of the co-op; he's part of what might be considered the first family of sheep holding in Newfoundland and the son of its patriarch, Howard Morry.

**Dyed in the wool farmer**

Howard's known far and wide for his expertise on the subject. He was given his first sheep as a reward for passing grade one. That was 75 years ago and he's been farming sheep ever since.

As a young man, when his contempo-



aries were learning the fishing industry from their fathers, he headed off to the mainland to attend agricultural college in Nova Scotia. He spent his working career as an entomologist at the federal agricultural research station in St. John's (naturally, he also tended the station's flock of sheep) and was a long-time president of the Sheep Producers Association of Newfoundland and Labrador. In 2005 he was inducted into the Atlantic Agricultural Hall of Fame.

At 81 he still has about 60 sheep in a mixed flock he shares with Keith. Some of the rams that have come back from the island are his. He no longer participates in the roundup after breaking his tailbone slipping on ice a few years ago, but that doesn't mean Howard has any intention of handing over the reins.

"He's still very much the boss," Keith readily acknowledges.





Clockwise from top left: Howie Morry with his wife Jackie and sons Jamie and Matthew, at their home in Kilbride, where they raise sheep on 15 acres; Keith Morry (orange jacket) surveys the flock; the sheep spend the summer grazing on the harsh pickings of the islands known as the Cribbies, off the southeast coast of Newfoundland; the sheep are taken over to the island in the spring and brought back to shore before winter.



### Of salty sheep, and salty dogs

Howard remembers a time when every family had a few sheep. They were looked down upon—his own father called them a necessary evil—but they provided a family with meat and wool and didn't need lush pasture land the way cows did. He figures there were probably about 150,000 breeding ewes in Newfoundland at one time, compared to roughly 5,000 now.

These days the wool the Morrays' sheep provide is almost worthless, but the meat, usually lamb, is featured in high-end restaurants and select grocery stores in St. John's. It's held in high esteem because of its salty taste, the result of pasturing on a sea-swept island in the mid-Atlantic. Keith compares it to *agneau de pré salé* (salt meadow lamb), the prized French lamb raised in Normandy, with one big difference.

"They get \$40 a pound for that," he rues. "It's all marketing."

But the flavour of the meat is a happy accident, not the principal reason why

the sheep spend their "summer vacation" on the islands off the coast. Sheep have always wandered freely and when anti-roaming laws began to be enacted, pasturing them on the islands kept them out of vegetable gardens. In recent times, though, the small islands have been a safe haven against predators. Over the last 30 years coyotes have invaded Newfoundland and they've developed a taste for lamb. These wily hunters can wreak devastation on a flock, as can their tamer brethren, domestic dogs. Though most dogs in the St. John's region are restrained, the problem persists, especially in rural areas.

### Raising sheep (on a hill that's steep!)

Another of Howard's sons, Howie, is also involved in the family business. Many of the sheep on the island belong to him and he has 15 acres in Kilbride, down the road from his dad and just outside of St. John's, where the breeding ewes spend the winter. He explains

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back. They'll jump right off the boat and immediately start to clamber up the steep path to the grass above, leaving their lambs behind.

It sounds like an idyllic life for both shepherd and sheep and Howie sounds regretful as he admits that "sheep farming is a full-time commitment for part-time compensation. I wouldn't want either of my children to try to make a living farming, especially here."

Nonetheless, he thinks it's a good sideline. "There are lots of opportunities in vegetable production. Our root crops—turnips, carrots—are the best tasting from everywhere. And there's great potential for sheep farming here. You don't need groomed pasture and you can start off small and grow."

Whether raising sheep is a practical business or not, Howie can't seem to imagine not doing it. When asked what the most challenging aspect of the job is, he stares blankly into space for a minute before a (dare we say sheepish?) grin crosses his face.

"I can't come up with anything," he finally says, almost apologetically. "It's a labour of love. If you're at it as a job you'd probably choose another way to make a living. But I've had sheep all my life: they grow on you. I got an orphan lamb as a child. I'd feed him his bottle before I went to school and pluck

how the sheep are raised.

After the sheep come back from the islands in the fall the young rams are culled and "tupping season" starts. (That's when the rams go to work to ensure there'll be plenty of lambs around in the following year.)

"They have to be in good shape," Howie explains. "Rams can lose up to 100 pounds chasing ewes in breeding season."

Lambs are born in the late winter and are ready to head to the island with their moms a couple of months later. The ewes returning to the island can smell the grass and are eager to get



Left: The sheep are transported by a specially constructed flat-bottomed boat; the number of sheep transported to the island each season is closely regulated.

**“Too big to call a hobby  
and not big enough to  
make a living”  
~Keith Morry**

grass for him on the way home. It’s a lifestyle and I enjoy everything about it.”

Howie thinks for another minute and eventually manages to dredge up a small complaint. “I’ve seen the sun come up when I’ve waited for a lamb and wondered why I’m doing this. I wish I could get them all to lamb at six in the evening after I’ve got home from work and had a bit of supper.”


Howie’s 21-year-old son Matthew is in his final year studying electrical engineering at a local college. Like his father, grandfather and uncle, though, that seems to just be his day job.

He was one of the crew collecting sheep off Isle aux Bois and is clearly an old hand.

“Pigwee was probably my first sheep,” he remembers. “I was about four or five and I called it Pigwee because I couldn’t pronounce Piggly.”

Last year his dad gave him 10 Cheviots from Nova Scotia and he plans to breed the ewes, which because of their pure breed are more valuable than regular meat stock, and sell the lambs.

When asked if he plans on continuing the family sheep business his response is quick and sure. “I got sheep on the go and I’m always looking for a piece of land. Short answer? Definitely!”

It’s clear that for the Morry family of Ferryland, the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, or perhaps that should read, the lamb doesn’t roam far from the flock. 



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