

DYED — and Enduring — IN THE WOOL

Shearing sheep is an art with a long history, and Sonnie Gustamantes, an Apache who travels the Four Corners to shear-for-hire, is one of its longest-lasting — and perhaps one of its last — artists.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY STINA SIEG

WITH HIS WHITE PONYTAIL and wrinkled, sun-soaked face, Sonnie Gustamantes looks all of his 70 years. But that's before he starts to shear.

With hardly any help, he wrangles a 300-pound sheep and pins it to the dirt with the force of his lean frame. He starts to methodically shave off its fleece with a loud, electric razor. He whistles as he flips the creature over and hogties it. After about 10 minutes, he pulls off its fuzz in one big, gray and brown mass. By the time the sheep leaps up and shakes off the experience, Gustamantes seems much younger and nimbler than a few minutes before. He looks in his element.

And no wonder.

"I've been shearing for . . ." he says, taking a moment. "Since I was 14. That's 56 years."

An Apache from Cortez, Colo., Gustamantes is one of the very few Native Americans shearing-for-hire in the Four Corners. He thinks he might be the only traveling one, to boot. From mid-February to mid-July, he hits the road frequently and is always in demand. It's hard to find a shearer these days, he insists. Like many in the rural world of sheep and shearing, he can see his line of work waning.

Not that he dwells on that. No, in this moment, on this morning, he's focusing all his energy on his work at Moab's Cunningham Farms.

"This is Sonnie, and he can shear anything that moves," says owner Sam Cunningham, nearly laughing.

As Gustamantes shears, she watches the sheep buck and fight him until finally submitting to their fate. After they're shorn, she stuffs their giant webs of wool into plastic bags. Soon, the fluff will be shipped off to a mill in Frankenworth, Mich., where it will become roving (carded wool), which Cunningham can use herself or sell.

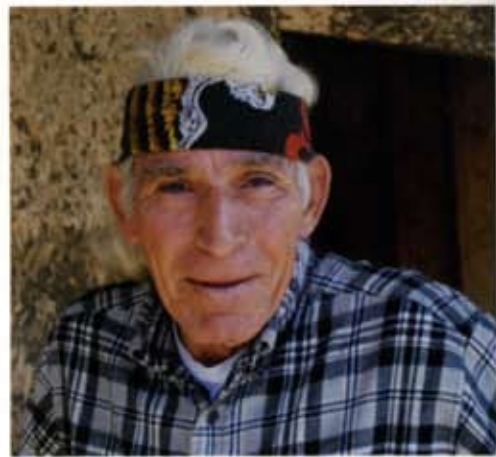
Before any of that happens, though, Cunningham has to entrust Gustamantes with her animals. But she has no worries.

"He's so gentle with them," Cunningham says. "He's as good as it gets."

In his low-key way, Gustamantes seems to know it.

"A lot of people try, but they quit real quick," he says. "You've got to have a talent for this."

Perhaps you have to have it in your blood, as well. His great-grandfather, grandfather and father all did this, even as sheep-herding started to lessen in their tribe. Gustamantes has even taught his children and grandchildren to do the same. Growing up in Roswell, N.M., Gustamantes picked up the electric shears as a kid. By 14, he decided he was done with school, and he took up shearing fulltime. In the decades since, it has been his sole livelihood, save a few years of construction somewhere in his past. Nowadays, he



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travels to about 30 ranches and farms with flocks of all sizes. He likes visiting with the people he meets, and he likes the hard work. And while he's jovial and overly polite as he explains all this, there is a sad pride to his voice, as he knows he's describing what could become a lost art.

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This shift might be larger than he realizes.

For other Native Americans in the Four Corners region, it's not just the shearing of sheep that's dying but the raising of them as well. While those in the Navajo Nation may not be kin to Gustamantes, their dedication and sense custom surrounding sheep is similar, historically, to his family's. In the past, many Navajos continued to raise sheep even when other tribes had given up on the animals. Even now, with modernity biting at the ankles of the most rural of regions, there are still Navajo families that raise and eat — and shear — their own sheep and have for generations.

But those numbers are relatively small.

"The kids used to shear sheep. Everybody used to shear sheep," said Suzanne Jamison in a recent phone interview. "The days of thousands and thousands and thousands of sheep are over."

Jamison, who lives in Southwest New Mexico but works in community development in the Navajo Nation, gave historical perspective on this changing world of sheep. Raising the hearty, Southwestern-born Navajo-Churro was a way of life for Navajos for centuries, she said, but that was before the U.S. government instituted strict grazing permits and killed off about half the Navajo-Churros in an audacious attempt to introduce new breeds of sheep with finer wool. The substituted sheep never did catch on.

Now, estimated Jamison, about 45 percent of those in the Navajo Nation still raise sheep. Most of them are older folks trying to keep the culture alive.

"It's not just out of nostalgia for sheep," she said. "It really pertains to the whole culture and philosophy of the people."

That's why, every year, a group she works with puts on a festival in dedication to this woolly culture. Diné be' iiná (known as DBI), a grassroots organization aimed at preserving Navajo-Churros, will host the annual Sheep is Life celebration from June 16-20 in Farmington, N.M. There, the public can see demonstrations on subjects like dyeing and weaving, eat Navajo food and meet Navajo-Churros and their owners face-to-face. Yes, there will even be how-to workshops on shearing.

Though community development organizations and conventions dedicated to this purpose probably do a world of good, the task of carrying on tradition is really left to individual shepherds and shearers themselves. Gustamantes is one such person. By shearing and teaching his family to do the same, he's continuing customs that transcend tribal boundaries.

He would never describe his work in such a wordy fashion, however.

"We just like it. That's all there is to it," he says, as if it's no big thing. "It's a way to make a living."



For an expanded version of this story, visit our Web site InsideOutsideMag.com where you can find it on the homepage.

For more information on DBI and its annual Sheep is Life celebration, visit navajolifeway.org.

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