

Award-winning fleece taken from area farmer

BY TERRY BEIGIE
Record Editor

A Stanardsville shepherdess said someone recently took a national title winning fleece from her home, valued at \$1,000, and she just wants it back.

"The nicest thing I can say is at least they didn't take the animal," said Stormy Stark.

The fleece won best in show for uncoated fleece at nationals in Maryland in 2018. It also won third place in the country against coated and uncoated fleece, Stark said.

But the journey to get there started in 2012. At that time her mom had purebred Lincoln sheep—Stark has since taken over the business from her—and was selling fleece at a show. Spinners purchase the fleece, wash it and spin it into yarn for their projects.

"I bought a Wensleydale ram seven years ago because I fell in love with the animal, not because I wanted to crossbreed," she said. "I walked past him at the national fleece show and he baaed. The breeder said he'd never made a sound. I started petting him and then walked away and he baaed. Every time I left, he cried. I said, 'mom we're buying that ram.'"

Once they'd sold all the fleeces that day, Stark took the proceeds and purchased the ram, which the breeder was set to show the next day. Stark showed the ram and he took second in

the country.

"Everybody laughed because I bought him the day before and his price quadrupled the next day," Stark said. "So, I spent a lot of time looking up genetics and breeding after that."

Wensleydales have fine, almost silken fleece and lower lanolin, she said. Lincolns have higher lanolin, a bit thicker fleece and a longer lock.

"We managed to get the long lock with the fine silken fleece," she said. "That's what we brought to nationals."

And that's the fleece that's missing from her home now, she said.

Stark sells her fleece online, so she has them all numbered and set aside. This way she knows for sure which ones to ship out, and most run between \$40-\$150. However, she keeps special ones separate on an upper floor, such as the title fleece and those that were the last taken before an animal died.

Some farmers will cull the herd, but she doesn't.

"I just have this deep feeling that I won't reward a lifetime of beautiful fleeces and healthy lambs with the last year of their life being terrified and hauled off and killed. They can live out the rest of their days fat, happy and lazing in the pasture; that's just a personal choice. And if it's their last fleece, it stays with me," she said. "The national title fleece was the biggest fleece up there."

In fact, it weighed



nearly 10 pounds, she said.

The title came with a monetary prize and Stark donated it to AshWin Bronc Jesse, then 6, of Stanardsville, in his run for the national title in the International Miniature Bullrider's Association world finals.

"I really wanted to put it back into youth in agriculture and I thought let's see if we can get two national titles in the same year, and we did," Stark said.

Stark has had other items go missing at her home, especially recently when little things, like bottles of rubbing alcohol or bleach went missing. At first she thought they were being misplaced but it was too many to be coincidental, she said, and then her mom found the freezer door open one day when she arrived home.

Stark said she didn't keep the ribbons with the title fleece so she isn't sure if the per-

son who took it knew its value, placing it at grand larceny, which is a felony.

"I'm trying to remind myself it's just a thing, but it's an irreplaceable thing," she said. "The word everybody keeps using is 'despicable.' It took us five years of breeding and planning and work, years of studying and keeping pastures clean, and it's gone."

Stark said the missing fleece is white and anyone with information is asked to call the Greene County Sheriff's Office at (434) 985-2222.

"I would love for people to know this happened and keep an eye out not just for that, but for themselves," she said. "Farmers have enough to deal with; they don't need to deal with missing animals or products."



PHOTOS BY TERRY BEIGIE/GREENE COUNTY RECORD

Top left, Stormy Stark shows off the ribbons the missing fleece won in 2018, including a best in show in the country and a third place award. Top right, Stark bottle feeds Esther, one of the lambs on her Stanardsville farm. Above, fleece from one of her other sheep on her farm. The missing fleece is white and would look similar to this. The value of the missing fleece is \$1,000 and because it's special to her she just wants it back.