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Battenkill Fibers Carding and Spinning Mill Ready to Open

GREENWICH, NY – A new fiber mill soon will be opening in this Washington County town, providing a key link in the magical process of transforming the wool of animals into beautiful pieces of clothing and other fiber products.

Battenkill Valley Fibers will be using fleeces purchased from area sheep, alpaca, llama and goat farms. These animal shearings will be processed into yarns for hand-knitters and weavers; batting for quilters, and rovings for hand-spinners, owner Mary Jeanne Packer said.

“After 50 years of knitting and 30 years of looking at sheep, I’m ready for this,” said Packer who owns several businesses in New York State’s Finger Lakes Region including a yarn shop in Watkins Glen, Finger Lakes Fibers. She also has a part interest in Green Mountain Fibers, a yarn shop in Rutland, VT.

“My experience with owning yarn stores helps me know what customers want. I’m going to be able to showcase farmers’ products in the best possible way in this market,” Packer said.

Now buying fleeces

With most equipment in place, and the rest soon to be delivered, at the new carding and spinning mill, Packer is now focusing on finding farmers with fleeces to sell.

“I’ve seen fleeces stacked to the rafters in barns, so I know there are farmers out there who would be interested in talking to me. The Greenwich mill will mean a lot for farmers who have not had a market for selling their fleeces,” she said.

Not only will Packer be offering to buy fleeces, she also will be discussing with farmers the concept of returning their finished yarn so it can be sold at its place of origin, under the farm’s own name.

Yarns sold directly by Battenkill Fibers will be offered to retail yarn shops, through the company's website, and at a small shop in the mill building, Packer said. The yarns will be named after Washington County communities, she said.

Packer said many farmers in the region now send their sheep and alpaca shearings to mills as far away as Maine and Michigan, and they often wait more than a year for the finished products to be returned to them. She's confident that Battenkill Fibers will be well-positioned to take advantage of the national trend to sell and buy locally.

According to the USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service, New York Field Office, wool production in the state during 2007 totaled 320,000 pounds. In addition to local farmers, Packer will be contacting farmers in the rest of the Northeastern United States via trade publication advertising and a planned presence at seasonal fiber festivals and wool pools.

"The advantages of buying raw material from local sources versus using international wool brokers are that this fiber is close to the mill resulting in considerable transportation cost savings, has a large percentage of high quality fleeces, and is available in smaller quantities which will lessen the cash flow impact," Packer said.

Battenkill Fibers also will be looking for fleeces from alpacas, llamas and goats. New York is one of the largest producers of alpaca fleece in the United States, Packer noted.

"Alpaca breeding continues to grow across the state, and with additional alpacas comes an increase in demand for local custom carding and spinning services," she said.

Kate Ziehm of Alpaca's of Easton in Washington County doesn't have a regular destination for fleeces from her herd of 19 alpacas. She's looking at Battenkill Fibers as a welcome local option.

"I think Washington County is the perfect place to have a mill. There are so many suppliers of fleece in the county. It's going to be nice to send the fleece locally," Ziehm said.

Ziehm said a lot of fleeces are wasted because farmers don't always have their own outlets for selling the final product. Knowing that Packer will buy fleeces outright because she has stores to sell the yarn and other products is encouraging, Ziehm said.

'Perfect space, perfect location'

Battenkill Fibers is located in 4,400 square feet of former warehouse space, leased from Aubuchon Hardware. The building, at 511 New York State Route 29, has excellent visibility

from the highway and the intersection of Routes 29 and 40 south. It's also within sight of the Battenkill, a tributary of the Hudson River.

Many years ago the space was a bowling alley. The long and narrow configuration is perfect for a fiber mill and its equipment, Packer said.

The perfect space combines with a perfect location, Packer said.

"It's really serendipitous to have found this place," she said.

Location is important because Packer sees Battenkill Valley Fibers becoming an agri-tourism destination, and with years of experience as experiential tourism professional, Packer knows what she's talking about.

"Agri-tourism is already well established in Washington County and continues to grow through efforts such as the annual Fiber Tour, now in its 18th year, and the new Southern Adirondack Fiber Festival that is held within a mile of the mill at the Washington County Fairgrounds," she said.

Renovation plans for the building include a large observation platform in the manufacturing space that will allow visitors to the sales area to get the sense of being out on the spinning and carding room floor, while still not being too close to the large machines.

"I can send people there, and they'll be able to see firsthand how the fleeces are processed at a mill," alpaca farmer Ziehm said.

Packer's plans also include areas designated for classes, demonstrations and other community uses, she said. A retail shop selling mill products as well as basic fiber arts supplies is on the list for the future.

Packer said the mill will bring five new jobs to Washington County at start-up, with more jobs added as the business grows. She hopes some of the jobs will be filled by local fiber farmers who have the skills she can use.

Mill manager Dan Kimball brings to his job 35 years machine experience in area mills and factories.

Packer received a loan from the Washington County Local Development Corp. for machinery purchases.

"It's an honor that the LDC put that kind of trust in this business," Packer said, praising the LDC for its continuing strong support of agriculture and agricultural-related enterprises.

"The Washington County Local Development Corporation welcomes Battenkill Valley Fibers with open arms," said Tori J.E. Riley, executive director of the LDC.

"We feel fortunate to have such an operation as this calling Washington County home. To have the different grades and colors named after Washington County towns and natural attractions is more than a compliment; this is what creates a destination! Combining a process with educational and retail audiences is just too exciting! This is a great blend of agriculture and manufacturing; which is exactly what we hope to see more of," Riley said.

Experience, love of the art add up

In addition to her involvement in the fiber arts, Packer has had a successful consulting business for more than 15 years, specializing in agriculture-related industries and tourism.

Her consulting business, Ghostwriters Communications, has worked with clients throughout New York and New England providing an array of services under the banner "A Natural Resource for Creative Solutions." The business's home base is Rutland, VT, with an office in Watkins Glen.

Her client list has included the New York State Maple Producers Association, the Vermont Woodlands Association, the New York Forest Owners and the Vermont Wood Manufacturers Association.

Before opening Ghostwriters, Packer was for 16 years director of planning and public relations for the U.S. Forest Service, covering the Green Mountain and Finger Lakes National Forests.

Establishing Battenkill Valley Fibers is a culmination of honing a variety of business skills and finding the perfect project for a lifelong interest in fiber arts.

"I've been knitting since I was 5 years old, and I always had an interest in sheep," Packer said. "At one point, I thought I wanted to raise sheep, but then I realized what kind of commitment that would be."

But the process of turning raw wool into yarn and yarn into something beautiful didn't lose its fascination.

"About 30 years ago, when my oldest son was a baby, he and I visited a mill in Vermont. That's when I began thinking about having my own mill," she said.

The mill was the Green Mountain Spinnery that still operates today in Putney, VT; and its owners have been instrumental in the opening of Battenkill Valley Fibers decades later. And the baby is now an independent painting contractor who has lent a hand with building renovations as his work schedule allows.

“The Spinnery folks have been a great resource to us,” Packer said.

Encouragement and support have also been strong locally, she said.

“The people in Greenwich and Washington County have been exceptionally welcoming. The outpouring of support is really delightful,” Packer said.

“There are some days I wake up and wonder if I’m dreaming,” Packer said.

But with a mid-summer production start on the calendar, the results of years of hard work, and accumulating the information and experience necessary, are about to be Packer’s reality.

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