THE PROCESS

The wool

The sheep that have been produced by the Navaho over the long period of time, are small, are resistant to the desert heat and sudden changes of weather, can survive cold winters, and can exist on a minimum of food and water. Consequently the fleeces from these sheep are light, and comparatively free from grease. The staple of the wool is long and wavy, and is particularly suited to Navaho methods of hand spinning.

Under the adverse conditions of raising sheep on most of the reservation, where flocks range over great distances in order to find enough to eat, heavier breeds,like the Rambouillet have difficulty in surviving. The crimpy wool from the Rambouillet is very difficult to spin by hand, and when it has been used it is apt to producedlumpy strands. The traders and the commercial wool buyers, however, have wanted heavier meat-producing animals and heavier fleeces. The difference in the character of the wool between the old type sheep and new heavier breeds, has been on of the major factors in the controversy over introducing the newer strains,for it is the Navaho women who usually control the sheep and they want the old type wool. While only 10% of the wool crop is used for spinning, and 40% for sale to wool buyers, still that 10%, by the time it has been transformed into fine rugs, brings a greater return that the wool that is sold.

Nevertheless, so much Rambouillet blood had been introduced into the Navaho flocks by 1936 in order to satisfy the demands of both traders and commercial wool buyers. that the type of wool needed by the weavers was in danger of extinction.

the Rambouillet sheep, though heavier and better meat and fleece producers did not thrive on reservation pasture. To meet this situation, the Department of Agriculture commenced a project at Fort Wingate, known as the Sheep Breeding Laboratory, under the direction of Grandstaff. Its purpose was to develop a breed of sheep that would have the conformation of the Rambouillet and the wool quality of the old Navaho sheep, while at the same time have the ability to subsist on reservation pasture. During the more than twenty five years since its inception, this Laboratory has succeeded in fulfilling its purpose. Not only has the mutton conformation been achieved while retaining the subsistanve hardiness of the old sheep, but also it has actually improved the quality of the wool.

The Bureau of Indian affairs was working with the Laboratory during part of this time, endeavoring to interest the Navaho in improving their flocks. To accomplish this it was necessary to keep these new sheep separated from other stock, and this proved to be a very difficult matter to accomplish. Wherever Navaho breeders would agree to this program, they were loaned three bucks of this new breed. The Bureau, however, did not have the personel, nor did the Laboratory to do this much needed field work. The Navaho themselves as yet have not shown sufficient interest in the project. Perhaps ot followed too closely on the sheep reduction program for them to realize what the benefits really were. The Sheep Breeding Laboratory still exists, furnishing bucks to a few Navaho and Zuni breeders, and at the present time there are some one thousand head of this new breed. What seems to be needed is an effort on the part of the Navaho themselves to profit from this long experiment.

The Laboratory furnishes wool from these sheep, already washed and carded, to the Arts nd Crafts Guild, ready to be hand spun, but many of the weavers think it is too costly. It is hoped that where there are a number of ~~xxxx~~ weavers in a given area that they will unite to improve the~~ir~~ weaving wool for their own looms. The benefit they would receive would repay them many times over, but changes such as this, take time to bring about.