

“The Everest Sweater”

By Jim Chastain, Whistlestop Farm, Hillsboro, Oregon

On May 29, 1953, Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay reached the summit of Mount Everest. In doing so, they became the first humans to set foot on the highest point on earth.

Well, sure, everybody knows that. But do you know what they were wearing? Besides the usual climbing gear of that era, Hillary and Tenzing were wearing sweaters of pure Shetland wool that were specially commissioned for the expedition.

In preparing for the climb, the Everest Expedition was looking for a sweater that was extremely lightweight, yet would have the high heat-retention properties needed for the climbers to survive in Everest’s extreme cold. An outfitter for the expedition, W. Bill Ltd. on Bond Street in London (still there today), was tasked with providing the sweaters, and they turned to T. M. Adie & Sons, of Voe, to make them.

This was a long-established (since 1803) maker of knitted Shetland garments, having provided warm knitted clothing for many years to North Sea fishermen who work in the worst winter conditions possible. So Adie & Sons understood just what the Everest climbers needed, and designed the ideal solution, which they called “The Everest Sweater.” These sweaters were provided for each member of the expedition and both Hillary and Tenzing wore them to the summit on their historic climb.

The Everest sweaters were made from specially selected wool of purebred Shetland sheep. For these special sweaters, Shetland wool of the first grade was again sorted and selected to yield the very finest wool from the fleeces. The wool was then spun into yarn in a mill in Scotland to meet Adie’s exacting specifications. It was then returned to Shetland for knitting. Adie & Sons’ knitters made the sweaters on a very old style of hand framed, hand-operated knitting machine. The joining of sleeves, necks, cuffs, and welts was all then done by hand. The sweaters for the Everest expedition were all made in a natural fawn shade. The weights varied from five ounces for a size 38” to seven ounces for a size 44”.

“They were asked to supply 24 knitted jumpers, two for each mem-

ber of the team.” *A plain knitted, lightweight jumper in Shetland wool was wanted, to serve as a layer, over two vests and under a woollen shirt and two jackets.*

To conform to the strict specification, Adie’s developed a 2ply Shetland yarn, finer than lace knitting yarn. It was specially spun in a Scottish mill, using the highest grade of Shetland fleece, plucked from the neck area of sheep. The samples were loosely machine knitted, finished by hand then overwashed, to give a very light fabric.” The design was retained and marketed as ‘Everest’ sweaters by Adie, and since their closure has continued to be marketed by other local knitwear companies, most recently by Anderson & Co. of Lerwick.*



Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary on Everest in the jumpers made by T.M. Adie & Sons.

Subsequently, numerous other Himalayan climbing and polar expeditions have also been outfitted with the Everest sweater.

That’s the historical part. The non-historical part is that Anderson & Co., established 1873 on Commercial Street in Lerwick, are still making the Everest Sweater in the same way it was made in 1953. The first grade of purebred Shetland wool is still sorted specially, the yarn is now spun in Shetland, and then it is still knitted on ancient hand-frame knitting machines and hand-finished by

highly skilled knitters.

I know this to be a fact because I have two Everest sweaters myself, which I bought from Anderson & Co. on a trip to Shetland. I wear them as frequently as possible in the cold of winter and they certainly live up to the billing for warmth. They are also lightweight and have proved to be very durable. But what I like most about them is the softness. These sweaters are truly “next to the skin” soft. And that is what Shetland wool garments are famous for.

Anderson & Co. says:

“This natural characteristic of wool is at its highest level when knitted fairly loosely with an easy body shape. At the same time a sweater has to be strong enough to withstand hard wear. This is best achieved by knitting the garment without seams on a hand frame. Our Everest sweaters are made to a very similar specification to the Shetland sweaters supplied to the first successful Ever-

est expedition in 1953. They are hand frame knitted in the homes of Shetlanders, using finest purebred Shetland wool. There is a limited supply of the particular quality of wool from which it is knitted, and there are only a few knitters in the Shetland Islands with the skill to knit to the high standard required."

There is one feature of these sweaters that I find very unusual. If you examine an Everest sweater, you notice that there is no seam on the body or the arms. Completely seamless. I asked Evelyn Leask, present joint owner of Anderson & Co., how this is accomplished. She said it was due to the old style of hand-frame knitting machine used to make the first Everest sweater. When I pressed her further as to exactly how you could knit something round with no seam, she replied, "We have some very clever knitters on Shetland."

Anderson & Co. is justifiably proud of its continued production of the Everest Sweater, and are quick to point out that their high quality standards for it have not changed in over 50 years. Because of this adherence to high standards for the wool and use of the old hand-operated knitting machines, the supply is somewhat limited.

I mentioned Evelyn Leask, who with her husband Norman own Anderson & Co. The Leasks are very active people and well-known throughout Shetland. Evelyn's shop is in Lerwick on Commercial Street and specializes in fine Shetland knitwear. Besides the Everest Sweater, they make several other lines of sweaters, hats, scarves, etc., all from purebred Shetland wool. She also has some of the finest hand-knit patterned sweaters you will see anywhere. Those are just amazing. Both types of sweater are available from Anderson & Co.'s website, www.shetlandknitwear.com.

Besides Anderson & Co., the Leasks have a large crofting operation on the west side of Shetland mainland, about 20 miles from Lerwick. This is Norman's part of the business and he runs several flocks of Shetland sheep on various crofts and three small uninhabited islands.

The Leasks' crofting areas are some of the most rugged and scenic on the islands and I have spent many wonderful days with Norman walking those hills gathering sheep. The most interesting days, though, are the one when we have gathered the wee islands. Each of these islands will pasture from 15 to 30 ewes and a ram, and all are rich productive grazing which produces excellent lamb crops. Gathering these islands gets interesting because you can only reach them in a small boat. There are no beaches to land on, only rocks to tie up to, which you then have to climb up and down on. And there are no pens for the sheep so you bring your own. Oh, and did I mention that these sheep are seen only a couple times a year, so they are wild and not easy to pen. Somehow it always gets done, they get sheared, and we bring back a boatload of lambs. It is an interesting experience in doing things the old way, but it is not for the faint of heart.

The Leasks have long been active in the preservation of Shetlands native livestock breeds of sheep, cattle, and ponies. They are prominent Shetland cattle breeders and both are active in the Shetland Cattle Herd Book Society. Like Shetland sheep, Shetland cattle are a multi-purpose breed, good at producing both beef and dairy products. This breed seems to be making a bit of a come-back, due mainly to the efforts of people like the Leasks.

FFSSA FOUNDING MEMBERS

The FFSSA was founded by the following people to **produce, preserve, and promote** the 1927 Breed Standard Shetland Sheep as clarified by Appendix A in the United States and Canada.

- **Kelly Bartels**, OK Acres Shetlands, Monroe, WI
- **Juliann Budde**, Little Country Acres, Wilmington, IL
- **Jim and Brandy Chastain**, Whistlestop Farm, Hillsboro, OR
- **Sabrina Wille Erickson**, Boston Lake Farm, Puposky, MN
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