Shearing Machine Encyclopedia Article

Shearing Machine

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Contents

Shearing Machine Encyclopedia Article.....1

Contents.....2

Shearing Machine.....3

Shearing Machine

Wool, one of the most important materials for making warm-weather clothing, blankets, and yarn, is produced from the thick coats of domesticated sheep.

Early shearing was done with sharpened stone or metal cutting implements. Sometimes wool was simply ripped off the sheep's skin. Hand shears, developed later, were large scissors that resembled garden shears. With development of the shearing machine, use of hand shears declined considerably during the twentieth century.

S. G. Dorr of Albany, New York, invented the first mechanical shearing machine in 1792. It was referred to as the wheel of knives and was not commercially successful. Australian James Higham of Melbourne invented a shearing machine in 1868, but it, too, failed to sell well.

In 1872 Frederick Wolsely, a British inventor who immigrated to Australia, created a prototype of a shearing machine. He and his assistants continued to work on improving the device until 1885, when another British immigrant, John Howard, a mechanic, helped achieve the final breakthrough.

The new mechanical shears were demonstrated at shearing competitions. The machines not only sheared faster, but left less wool on the sheep. However, skillful hand-shearing required years to perfect and was a source of pride among the workers who composed the shearing teams. It was not until 1888, when the Dunlop sheep station of New South Wales equipped its shearing sheds with the machines, that commercial success began for Wolsely and Howard.

Sheep stations in Australia, New Zealand, America, and other parts of the world gradually adopted the machines. By 1900, their use was widespread. However, in areas where spring came late, like Wyoming, hand-shearing continued until about 1940 because some wool had to be left on the sheep to protect them from the cold. Eventually, the high cost of shearing forced the total adoption of the machines in the United States by the 1940s and worldwide acceptance by the 1960s.