What's In a Name?
The Value of a Naming Theme for Lambs

Kathie Miller
April 2006

This article first appeared in the Soay Sheep Society Newsletter, Issue 14, May 2005, (www.soaysheepsociety.org.uk), and is reprinted here with permission

"Very cute lamb" my friend said. "Pity about the name" she went on. I could hardly contain my laughter. It happened I had been taking a computer class at the junior college and what better idea for that season's naming theme than computer terminology. Adobe, Excel, Hewlett and HP, Kilobyte—you get the drift. We had inherited the name theming tradition with the flock of Soay sheep we had imported from Canada and the Canadians had inherited it from the English who had originally exported the sheep to North America. In the UK a lot of keepers name their lambs based on a letter in the alphabet. All names begin with A the farmer's first lambing season, B the second, C the third, etc. But Canadian George Berci liked pizzazz and started his first year with herbs: Chamomile, Rosemary, Rue, Basil, etc. The second year it was gems: Diamond, Emerald, Saphire (his spelling). The third dances, Bebop, Reggae, Samba, Polka, Jive and so on. George was a very colorful character, a swami-looking fellow with bushy gray hair and a massive, long silver beard. He had been paralyzed a quarter-century earlier by a thirty-five foot fall from a tree which had broken his back and confined him to a wheel chair. In spite of having lived in Quebec for forty years, his strong Hungarian accent had never softened and his command of the English language…well he never commanded the English language; one just had to concentrate very hard to understand what he said. He also typed with just one finger, the keyboard teetering on a lapboard across his wheelchair and this in combination with the phonetic spelling of his version of English led to some unusual monikers for his lambs. Names like "Poppy" became "Puppy" and "Mohawk" became "Mohack".

Val and I were going to manage and market our flock as if it were a single unit, but from two locations, (our two farms are fifty miles apart) and so we felt George's idea of a naming theme would be a very practical one for us. But we added a couple of twists of our own which have proved very useful over the years. Those were the use of an alphabetical order within the theme and the use of two names both beginning with the same letter for the naming of twins. American automobile models may have been one of our more inventive themes and it dated us pretty well too. No one under fifty would realize that "Tucker", one of our first lambs, was named for an automobile from the 1940s. One year we chose Scottish names, Thurso (a town we visited in northern

Scotland) and so his twin sister was Thobar Childa (the well on St. Kilda). Some years we would make it almost to the end of the alphabet, Argyll to Wick; others we would not. What we discovered was that this was an extremely useful plan. Val managed our entire marketing scheme and directed husbandry from her farm and I took care of records and documents from mine. She could tell from our birth roster that all the lambs from "Edsel" to "Isuzu" for example, no matter which farm, were due for their first shots or were now old enough to be weaned from their mothers but "Jetta" to "Triumph" were still too young. This became crucial when trying to combine pairs of lambs from our two farms. With the alphabetical naming system we could immediately tell if both were old enough or if we had to wait until the younger one came of age before they could be shipped to their new homes.

As the sheep have gotten older I have discovered some other advantages to this system that I would never have dreamed of. The theme idea gave us a check and balance system with our new database and made catching data entry errors very easy. This didn't sound like much, but when one is tracking the twinning record of a ewe it is important to recognize that while Chehalem (Oregon names) and Pistachio (trees) were full brother and sister, their names were from different years and therefore they could not be twins as we had listed them. Another even more unexpected use for the system was ability to recognize social behavior within the flock. When I put the rams back together after the rut this spring I realized that it was Excel who was tussling with Flash and Cedar with Ulmus. I suddenly recognized that these pairings were all the same ages, that they were establishing an order, not just within the flock, but within their own age group within the flock. I have yet to pursue this idea, I am certain some animal behaviorist has a logical explanation. If I had not known that Excel and Flash were both the year of the computer and that Cedar and Ulmus were the year of trees I would not have realized there was a pattern to their establishment of rank within the flock.

The choosing of the next year's theme and its roster of names has become a fall ritual for us now, an excuse to get together to talk about sheep. Usually over a glass of wine we brainstorm and create a list of two to four names for each letter of the alphabet, all within our chosen theme. Then when the lambs start to arrive we pick a name from the list in order of their birth. For the coming spring we are leaning toward famous scientists so our pastures will be brimming with frolicking lambs with names like Ampere, Darwin, Mendel, Hypatia, Pavlov and Theano. I can only imagine what my friend will have to say about these. By the way, in spite of his funny name, Excel turned out to be her favorite of all of my rams.