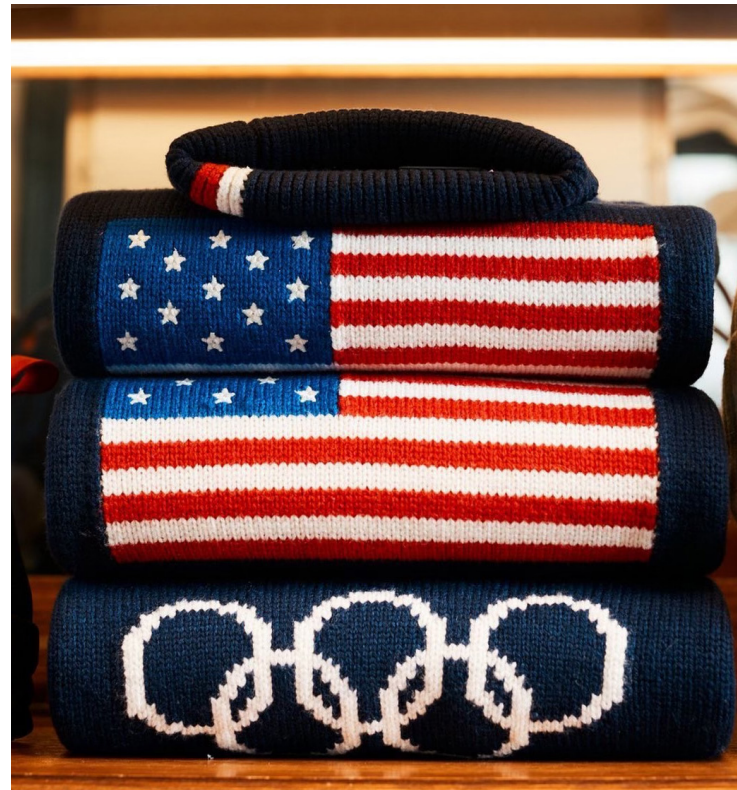


Setting the standard

From a rural ranch in Oregon, the highly certified Shaniko Wool Company is fighting for the revival of the US textile industry



“Before Charles became King, my husband and I used to say, ‘Who will be the Prince Charles of America?’ Who will help us save our wool production in America, because it’s been devastated,” says Jeanne Carver, founder and President of Shaniko Wool Company, located in the high-desert interior of Oregon. Carver launched Shaniko Wool to scale the supply of wool produced in the US certified by the Responsible Wool Standard (RWS). In 2017, her Imperial Stock Ranch, of which Carver is an impassioned steward, became the first ranch in the world to be certified by this highly rigorous comprehensive benchmark.

Since 2020, Carver has worked with academics to develop a research model to measure the environmental impacts of the Shaniko Wool Farm Group ranches, confirming the positive impact on the ecosystems provided by their farming methods. “On Imperial Stock Ranch, we harvest beef, lamb and wool, while capturing 60,000 tonnes of carbon a year, putting that into our soil while producing the commodities that feed and clothe humankind,” she says. “We have a net-positive impact on nature and now, through these measurements on each Shaniko Farm Group ranch, our customers can understand our impact. They can pair that knowledge with our high-quality merino wool to give a verified positive story to tell their customers, showing how we can all have a positive impact on nature.”

Carver, working with her late husband Dan who passed away in 2021, has farmed the historic ranch since the 1980s. The ranch had been founded by the pioneering Richard Hinton, who was born in a wagon on the Oregon Trail in 1852, as his family headed to the fertile valleys west of the Cascade Mountains in what was then the Oregon Territory. Wanting to be a stockman instead of a farmer, in 1871 Hinton headed back east across the mountains to Oregon’s high-desert interior. Here, he established a homestead claim, brought in sheep and cattle, established farm fields and constructed assorted buildings as his holdings grew. By 1900, he was the largest individual owner of land and livestock in Oregon and one of the biggest sheep operations in America. He established sheep, cattle, grain and hay production – four commodities that remain integral



“On our family ranches, we produce the commodities that feed and clothe humankind”

to the ranch more than 150 years later. The Carvers still farm every field he created and the historic headquarters are a National Historic District.

This was the legacy that the Carvers sought to maintain when they acquired Hinton's Imperial Stock Ranch. They also understood the importance of nature and introduced farming techniques to preserve the soil, encourage plant growth and maintain the delicate balance of a healthy ecosystem. This included allowing animals to forage and graze, but controlling where they did so, to prepare and fertilise fallow fields naturally. “Grazing animals stimulate plant communities and growth, which, through photosynthesis, draws CO₂ back into the soil from the atmosphere,” explains Carver. “We need grazing animals, so we began to devise and implement a total conservation management plan. This is now called regenerative farming, and we've been doing it since 1989.” Another important element was protecting the creeks, precious sources of water in this semiarid region. Such was the success that salmon started to return to the creeks in greater numbers each year to spawn.

The Carvers' livelihood was threatened in the late 1990s when their long-standing wool buyer closed processing to go “offshore”. From then on, it was a fight to keep sheep on the land, not just for them but for the entire US sheep industry. “The infrastructure for textiles in the US was devastated. Between 1996 and 2000, 26,000 sheep producers went out of the sheep business, and we now have less than ten per cent of the textile industry we once had,” she says. “Sheep give us food, clothing and shelter, and ask for nothing in return. Wool is a miracle fibre that has been at the core of textiles for more than 10,000 years. That matters. And it's no accident that sheep and lambs are so symbolic in religions throughout the world. These are things we must honour.”

Carver set about developing local networks, finding weavers, spinners and knitters around Oregon who could add value to her wool. She also found outlets for the meat through local restaurants. “I began

the journey,” she says. “I didn't know anything, but I persevered. Mainly, I didn't know I couldn't do it. At the time, wool had little market value. Textiles had largely migrated to cotton and synthetics, but, within a year, I put my first wool product on the market. I found regional textile artisans, women within 120 miles, who were creating items I could sell. I found local chefs to buy our lamb. We never looked back. These products, attached to place, resonated with authenticity.”

Thirteen years after Carver picked up the challenge to preserve sheep on their ranch, she received a call from Ralph Lauren in New York. The company sent representatives cross-country to Oregon to meet her and learn about the historic ranch and her wool. As a result, her wool was used in the Team USA uniforms at the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi. She was also recognised by the Pratt Institute of New York as a female farmer changing the fashion industry. More recently, in 2023, Carver received the American Sheep Industry Association's Innovation Award.

Shaniko Wool Company expands Carver's work, and now provides wool from ten long-established ranches, partnering with multiple brands and providing the finest certified merino and merino-cross wool to the market in a range of microns. “We are the first and, so far, only farm group in North America that meets the Responsible Wool Standard,” she says. “In 2022, we also aligned with the Chargeurs Group standard, and are now certified to NATIVA Regen, as well as to the RWS.” More and more brands are demanding the wool they source be third-party-audited to these global standards. And grower groups around the world are responding. Carver says, “These wool production standards de-risk brands from association with animal abuse and even degradation to landscapes. As a champion of wool, these values align perfectly with what King Charles has espoused his whole life.”

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