

Sturgis Couple Honored for Service to Sheep Industry

by Bev Berens

Max and Beverly Benne of Sturgis, were honored by Michigan Sheep Producers Assn. for their service to the industry and its members during the annual shepherd's conference in January. The award is the highest honor bestowed by the organization to a member or family annually.

Max and Beverly started with one lamb in 1965.

"It's easy to remember the date because it was the year of the Palm Sunday tornadoes," Max said. His brother, a veterinarian, brought home an orphaned lamb from a farm and his daughter raised it.

"It was a pet then, so we ended up with it at our farm

when it grew up. I found out I kind of liked sheep and it went from there."

Their commercial sheep operation grew to a high of 180 ewes, and currently stands at about fifty ewes.

The Bennes have been active members of Michigan Sheep Producers Assn. for four decades, receiving the Commercial Producer of the Year award in 1984.

Max helped create the Michigan Sheep Producers website in 2001, (misheep.org) one of the earliest state associations to develop a website.

"Doyle Dingman was president at the time, and he assigned me that job," Max said.

"Max was a visionary recognizing the importance of the internet and established the MSPA website many years ago and continued to manage the website until just the last year," said Brenda Reau, MSPA president. "Ours was one of the premier sheep association websites in the country and continues to be an excellent



MAX AND BEVERLEY Benne were recently honored with Michigan Sheep Producers Assn. Service to Industry award, the organization's highest award. (submitted photo)

communication tool for the organization."

Max served on the board of directors for at least two terms, serving as president and vice president during his tenure.

Beverly annually contributed a water-color painting to be sold at the annual auction benefitting youth activities and scholarships. Her paintings had many admirers, and often landed the most income from the

annual sale donations. Her highest selling painting brought \$700 into the youth fund, and over the years, her paintings have accumulated a large amount of money for scholarships.

At least four Service to Industry recipients have received one of Beverly's paintings as a congratulatory gift. She also painted stationery postcards to sell during the annual shepherd weekend event. The card

packets always sold out quickly. She is an active wool spinner and started a spinning group in St. Joseph County. She left the group to become more active in art and is president of Open Door Art Gallery cooperative in Sturgis. Most of her paintings available through the gallery include sheep.

Max has seen and been a part of many changes during the last forty years within the organization, sharing both sad and fond memories of the people, places, and events surrounding Michigan Sheep Producers. He was part of leadership when Duane Tirrell was killed in a farm accident while serving as executive secretary for MSPA.

"After that, it was Pat (Duane's wife) and I for a while," Max said. "After she discontinued, I recommended Maury Kaercher for the job. He wasn't a sheep guy, but he knew everyone and was good for the organization."

He was also part of the committee that

recommended Richard Ehrhardt as head of small ruminant programs at MSU.

A favorite memory involves an exchange trip with sheep producers in New Zealand. Joe Rook and Margaret Benson of Michigan State University coordinated the trip and tours to New Zealand, which Max initiated. Eventually, New Zealand hosts, Robert and Susan Carter visited Michigan, putting on workshops in both upper and lower peninsulas.

"They really helped some people with pasture and parasite control," Max added.

"Joe later told me that he was burned out with sheep, but this trip reinvigorated him."

The best part of the exchange was the relationship that grew between the couples, who continue to correspond twenty years later.

Max has observed a gradual membership decline in MSPA. But while membership numbers have dropped, he has witnessed a concurrent development of some large and productive Michigan flock.

The Bennes have also been recognized for their conservation work, receiving top awards from American Sheep Industry and Michigan Farm Bureau. He was an early no-till practitioner and planted cover crops and windbreaks long before they became conservation buzzwords.

A humbled recipient, Max said, "We were honored, very pleased, to be selected for this award."

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