

The Great Karoo stretches along the southern tip of Africa, a parched landscape interrupted by hilltops cackling with baboons and rivers begging for a drink. Divided by the Swartberg Mountain range into the Great Karoo and the Little Karoo, the total area is about the size of California. At one time, about 100 million years ago—give or take ten million—the Karoo was home to the bradysaurus, a logy herbivore that grew as tall as a man's waist, stretching eight feet in length and weighing half a ton. Cloaked in a bony plate like a tortoise shell, and accented with menacing horns, what the bradysaurus lacked in speed it overcame with a barbed armor defense that successfully kept predators at bay. With only fossils to record its existence, the bradysaurus was ultimately replaced by herds of swift-moving springbok and kudu, and eventually the Hottentots (the early settlers of the Karoo), who gave the region its name "karoo" meaning "thirst-land" in their native tongue.

Eve Palmer described the Karoo best in her autobiography, *The Plains of Camdeboo*. She said that this formidable landscape, an impenetrable barrier, is known for, "great heat, great frosts, great floods, and great droughts."

Today, it's also known for great sheep.

The Merino, a treasured sheep of the Spanish throne from the 1700s and regarded as a wool factory on four legs, could only be acquired through royal connections. As such, it was the King of Spain who decided to gift some of his prized Merino stock to The House of Orange, the Netherlands royal family founded in the 1500s by William I, Prince of Orange, aka, "William the Silent."

[Interesting to note: Modern-day royals and plutocrats are noted for gifts of oil and nuclear armament. Back in the day, it was sheep.]

The sheep did not fare well on the Netherlands' soggy soil. Two rams, together with six ewes, were soon sent sailing southward to Col. Jacob Gordon, the Dutch military commander of the Cape Colony (now South Africa). The Colonel received the re-gifted sheep in 1789 and realizing their potential, placed them at a farm in Groenkloof outside of Cape Town.

It was not only bad form, but in this case also illegal, to re-gift a present from the King, as the sheep were originally exported to the Netherlands—not South Africa.

In 1791, Col. Gordon was notified to return the sheep and so he did. But, only the original six.

Col. Gordon's career as the over-



seer of the cleverly, if not covertly, retained Merino progeny ended abruptly when the Dutch surrendered to the British in 1795 during the Invasion of the Cape. Gordon soon committed suicide, leaving his wife widowed, and in charge of the sheep.

The sheep had to go.

Some sheep were shipped “down under,” becoming ancestors of Australia’s wool industry. However, the Van Reenen brothers, friends of the late Colonel and already well-established farmers, bought three pure-bred rams.

It took six generations of selective breeding between the Merinos and the native Cape sheep, a fat-tailed variety noted for producing meat, before the Van Reenens created a sheep that could withstand the climate and still produce fine wool.

But was just the beginning.

Following the British takeover, the wild and the woolly, the saintly and the scorned began migrating to the arid interior. Armed with unremitting determination, some of these early settlers evolved into bona fide Merino farmers.

Andries du Toit Pienaar is the owner of Klipplaatsfontein (Afrikaans for “Stone Fountain”), a Merino farm in the upper Karoo town of Colesberg. Andries’ family has been raising Merinos since the 1880s, and have become known as prize-winning stud breeders. The family’s success was propelled, in part, by a secure market selling wool to the English, concurrent with the demand for military uniforms that were rapidly churned-out on the newly-introduced power looms.

The other important element—Colesberg’s dirt.

Due to its great expanse, an agronomist could spend a lifetime digging around the Karoo. Colesberg’s soil, however, boasts an optimal ratio of protein, calcium and phosphorous that has served the sheep far better than the Netherlands fertile ground. The soil also benefits horses, thus giving



Above: The Kimberly Mine (aka 'The Big Hole'). From mid-July 1871 to 1914, 50,000 miners dug the hole with picks and shovels, yielding 2,722 kg of diamonds.

The Merino, a treasure of the Spanish throne from the 1700s and regarded as a wool factory on four legs, could only be acquired through royal connections.

Opposite page: Two Mega Merinos.

Opening page: The sign by the side of the road leading into Klipplaatsfontein.

In 1907, the Pienaar's registered their first stud and a business was born.

"The Merino is the greatest animal God ever created and man developed!"

rise to the industry that Colesberg is now most often associated with—thoroughbreds.

Why did thoroughbreds gain popularity in an area that was traditionally eschewed by many?

Diamonds.

In 1871, Kimberly, the richest diamond field in the world, was discovered 100 miles north of Colesberg. Just two years later, the first South African gold fields were discovered 400 miles to the northeast in Pilgrim's Rest. The proliferation of riches brought an explosion of the rich—or soon to be. The former digs of missionaries, floaters, farmers and fighters then welcomed a congregation of affluent who hailed from Europe, Australia and North America, and brought their rarified lifestyles, including horse breeding.

To this day, Colesberg produces some of South Africa's finest thoroughbreds.

When I arrived at Klipplaatsfontein on a day in early spring, Andries' wife Nora greeted me at the door with a refined but welcoming smile. She was wearing a long dusty-rose chiffon suit and her hair was elegantly permed. She was every bit as charming as she was beautiful. A few minutes after I arrived, having spotted my car from his office, Andries ambled across the yard to greet me, a bad back now preventing him from

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being as spry as he once was. He was ready to talk about sheep—*his* sheep.

“This is the best place to raise Merinos. I’m telling you, young lady, our Merinos have been winning trophies for years!” Andries asserted. “Now, follow me, and I’ll show you.”

Nora had just left for the kitchen to bring me tea and cakes after my five-hour drive from Port Elizabeth, but Andries decided that tea can wait. Sheep first; all else second.

Andries led me down the long hallway that connects the main wing of the house to the sleeping quarters. The walls on both sides held countless pictures of Andries and his Merinos with a trophy; Andries, his father and his Merinos with a trophy; Andries, his son and his Merinos also with a trophy. And so it went, eventually capturing six generations of the Pienaar family and their sheep, including the youngest, Andries’ grandson, who (not surprisingly) is also named Andries.

In 1907, the Pienaar family registered its first stud, and a business was born. “The Merino is the greatest animal God ever created and man developed!” Andries announces.

Given Andries’s great dedication to Merinos, it is clear that this is not a place where one mentions the other “M” word equally prized in the Karoo—mohair! South Africa and Lesotho combined produce more than 65% of the world’s mohair clip. By comparison, South Africa produces about 15% of the world’s Merino clip, still entitling them second place.

Andries’ Merinos are divided into two categories, flock ewes and stud ewes, which can be a puzzling distinction to the average fiber enthusiast. Typically, the flock ewe’s wool is not as fine as that of the stud ewes. However, the flock ewes are better able to withstand the fluctuation in grazing conditions. They are hearty creatures, well-suited for the Karoo and supply much of the meat, which Andries markets as *Shepherd’s Select*. Kept under constant supervision and a controlled setting, the stud ewes are the ones who have earned Andries standing in the “breeding hall of fame.”

Klipplaatsfontein is comprised of more than 12,000 hectares with 436 plant species, so the location where the animals are kept at any given



Top: Andries du Toit Pienaar.  
Above: A small section from the hall of fame.

time directly impacts their body growth and wool production. Seven thousand flock ewes are rotationally grazed on the veld without significant intervention beyond fencing and assuring water access. Another 3,000 stud ewes are kept on prime irrigated land controlled by a pivoting watering system. This system, which consists of a massive sprinkler that rotates around a pie-shaped pasture divided into slices, keeps the stud ewes well-fed on prime pasture. As one slice is being grazed, the next slice is being watered,

readied for the flock to move forward. And so it continues, round and around they go.

From back in the living room, Nora sweetly called out that the tea was getting cold. Andries and I returned, and once again, we were surrounded by ovine ephemera along with a lovely serving of high tea. In between Andries' recitation of "one-hundred-reasons-to-raise-Merinos," fearing

I might doubt his conviction, Nora encouraged me to have another helping of cake, softly clucking her tongue and

saying, "Such a long drive you've had from Port Elizabeth. You need your strength." Prompting the plate of cakes and sweets to be passed my direction, yet again.

"You know why most farmers fail, young lady?" Andries asked, sensing the sweets may have temporarily distracted me. "Marketing! If you don't market your business, you'll never make any money! We don't sell wool, that's a terrible word. We call our fleece 'Charisma.' We had it trademarked.

"Our Charisma Fleece is used in some of the best clothing in South Africa. Now come with me and I'll show you."

Andries and I walked across the front yard to his office, surrounded by beautifully maintained gardens and Jonah, a sweet dachshund puppy that kept darting through our feet. Inside the office, Andries had prepared three display tables for me. I immediately went to the table covered with wool, inspecting the length and micron count, knowing it would be every bit as beautiful as all the awards attest.

"Andries, your wool is spectacular," I said.

"Charisma!" He reminded me. "Wool is what other people make. We make 'Charisma.' Now, I want you to look at this table. This explains every step you must take to be successful!"

The table was eight-feet long and four-feet wide. It was completely covered in neat rows of single sheets of paper each one describing, just

as Andries promised, the path to success. There were charts and graphs, and page headings reading, "The Five K.P.I.s" (Key Points of Interest) and another, "Tot Agribusiness Model." (Tot is Andries' nickname, derived from Andries du Toit Pienaar.) He picked up the paper with "Tot" at the top, it was in the design of a car.

"You do understand, I love wool. But this is a business. Approximately 60 percent of our earnings comes from wool, 40 percent comes from meat."

"This model came to me in a dream one night. The headlights represent your research. The engine houses your technology..." and

so he continued through the various car parts, underscoring the tires—all four of them—are for marketing.

Andries' knowledge of and dedication to the wool industry are seismic, earning him multiple awards, including the youngest person to receive South Africa's Farmer of the Year. Yet shifting prices in the wool market have caused him to modify the farm's original breeding strategy, placing a stronger emphasis on carcass traits to garner greater profits from the meat market.

"You do understand, I love wool. But this is a business. Approximately 60% of our earnings come from wool, 40% from meat."

Part of Andries' business also includes selling breeding stock to Lesotho. Approximately a four-hour drive over 200 miles of paved road (or not), Lesotho farmers are well-positioned to prosper from raising Merinos and/or Angoras. Initiated by the Lesotho government (His Majesty King Letsie III maintains his own flock of Merinos), The Wool and Mohair Promotion Project intends to raise the level of wool production to 4 kg per animal, up from its current average of 2.7–3.5 kg. With wool prices currently enjoying an uptick, even a half kilo increase multiplied over hundreds of animals has significant consequences. [In August 2017, representatives from the Lesotho Promotion Project purchased a South African ram for R60 000



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Andries with Twelve, proudly displaying some Charisma fleece.

(\$4,600 US). It was not a Mega Merino.]

By early evening the intense heat of the day had passed and it was time to pile into the truck and look at some of Andries' award-winning Mega Merinos—the brand name for his “super sheep.” Nora waved good-bye to us from the driveway as if we were taking off on a month-long journey. But she was just being Nora, consummately polite and with a mega heart.

For the next two hours, we drove around the farm, which grew over the years as different parcels of land came up for sale. Most of the road was gravel, carving a thin path through endless acres of flat scrub land punctuated with koppies, stumpy hills that prevail over much of the Karoo. It hadn't been that long since the cold winter nights and the foliage had yet to fully blossom, underscoring the need for an irrigation system. Some people say the Karoo is like the Gobi of South Africa, but I'm not convinced. Every corner of the world has its own unique flavor and Klipplaatsfontein is no different.

The amount of land was enormous, so sheep sightings were few and far between. Freshly shorn and coated in “perfect” soil

from the wind, the sheep easily blend into the background. But my quest to sink my hands into some live “charisma” was not in vain. Andries took me to the stud pasture, the men's club if you will, to see Mega Merinos' very best. With the assistance of Twelve, Andries' farm manager who has been with him for nearly 30 years, a ram was easily wrangled for my inspection. “You see this ram, young lady?” Andries asked, beckoning me closer to the surprisingly docile 250-pound animal.

“This is a Mega Merino!”

Without hesitation, I carved my hands into the fleece and I was, without question, impressed with the density and overall conformation. I was also impressed with the ram's great willingness to patiently stand still for my fondling.

From the moment I met Andries, his passion for his sheep was self-evident. But seeing him standing next to one, and apparently an award-winning one at that, I sensed something beyond passion. As the fourth generation in a family of sheep breeders, Andries has spent seemingly every waking moment of the past 50 years not only preserving the family's tradition, but improving it. It is a heavy mantle to wear, but he clearly has done it justice.

Who says you can't thrive in a land noted for, “great heat, great frosts, great floods and great droughts”?

Not Andries Pienaar. And he has the trophies to prove it. *WF*