



## Illinois Wool and Fiber Mill



The Illinois Wool and Fiber Mill in Belvidere, IL is owned by Jane Zeien and her husband Paul. The family business started out as a small 4-H project for their children, Nathan and Nicole, and that is when the Zeien family's interest in the fiber process really began, with just two Hampshire Ewes. Since that time, they have expanded and have raised Hampshire, Cheviots, Shetlands, Leicester Long wool and now Scottish Blackface sheep. "As we have seen our flock grow we wanted to utilize the wool that we were collecting," said Jane Zeien, "As time went on we decided that we love the sheep business and want to offer a service that promotes the industry."

Wool and fiber are shipped in from across the country and the process of skirting, washing, drying, picking, carding, pin drafting, dyeing, blending, and eventually spinning begins. This process makes it possible for the Illinois Wool and Fiber Mill (ILWFM) to offer yarn and batts from the wool and fiber from various animals to their customers.

Five years ago, the ILWFM purchased The Complete Sheep Shoppe and relocated it from Sycamore, IL to their farm. "The Sheep Shoppe specializes in wool and sheepskin products from major companies such as EMU, Woolrich, and Minnetonka," said Zeien. They offer products from slippers and blankets to mittens and socks, all made from sheep wool and fiber.

The Zeiens flock is now up to about 35 head of sheep from several different breeds. The varieties in the sheep offer variances in fiber. Some fiber dyes easier and some make better yarn, having a diversity of breeds allows the Zeiens to offer their customers a larger variety of products. "A lot of people come out and look at the sheep," said Zeien, "so we like to have a variety not only for the different products, but so people can see different sheep and lambs as well." The Zeiens have

lambs every year in the first part of May. They sell some of their animals to local 4-Hers to use as projects but harvest the wool of the majority of their animals. The ILWFM offers tours of their facilities to groups. They have a strong passion for promoting the wool and fiber industry.

As far as the harvesting of the wool and fiber goes, Jane explains it as a painless, harmless process. The Zeien family shears their sheep once a year. “We like to shear before the lambs are born,” Zeien explained. The family hires a professional shearer to come in and harvest the wool from their sheep. “They can do our whole flock in one morning,” said Zeien. “It is just like giving them a haircut; it doesn’t hurt the sheep at all,” said Zeien. The wool is sheared off all the way; similar to a “buzz cut” for men and it grows back extremely quickly. “The sheep enjoy this process, getting rid of a year’s worth of wool is pretty refreshing,” said Zeien.

“Wool is of course warm, but it also breathes with your body, just like it does on the sheep,” said Zeien. There are many benefits to wool and fiber products. “If for some reason, we did not get the sheep sheared, they would end up being just fine, even in the summer,” explained Zeien. Wool adjusts to your body temperature and it wicks moisture away. “Most people think that wool is only to be worn in the winter, but really, you can wear wool products all year long,” said Zeien. Wool is durable, strong, renewable, and is flame resistant. “There are a lot of new processing techniques in the wool industry,” said Zeien, “and wool products are not as scratchy as people tend to think, it is a great fiber to work with.”

When the family started this adventure, they were the only wool and fiber mill in Illinois. Even though that has changed, they still take pride in providing the best quality product for their customers who come from near and far to enjoy the numerous products and services of the wool and fiber industry. You can find out more about the Illinois Wool and Fiber Mill and The Complete Sheep Shoppe at [www.ilwoolfibermill.com](http://www.ilwoolfibermill.com) and [www.completesheepshoppe.com](http://www.completesheepshoppe.com) (Published January 7, 2016)