

# Little woolies make entrance

## Lambing season descends on Palmer farm

By **VICKI NAEGELE**

Frontiersman managing editor

Daryl Jones waits patiently in her maternity ward of sorts for the new arrival. It is imminent.

Jones, her cap pulled down over her graying hair, watches like a midwife as the expectant mother paces nervously around her small space.

"Ideally you want two front hooves and a nose between them," Jones explains. But at this moment, the only things visible are two tiny hooves.

Suffolk Station North ewe

number 112 is lambing.

Just on the other side of the wall of the small lambing pen are another 20-25 ewes, well-rounded by their unborn lambs. Each in her own turn, the ewes will be put in one of the small lambing pens so that Jones can monitor them day and night, until and immediately after their lambs are born. Some will give birth to one; some will have twins.

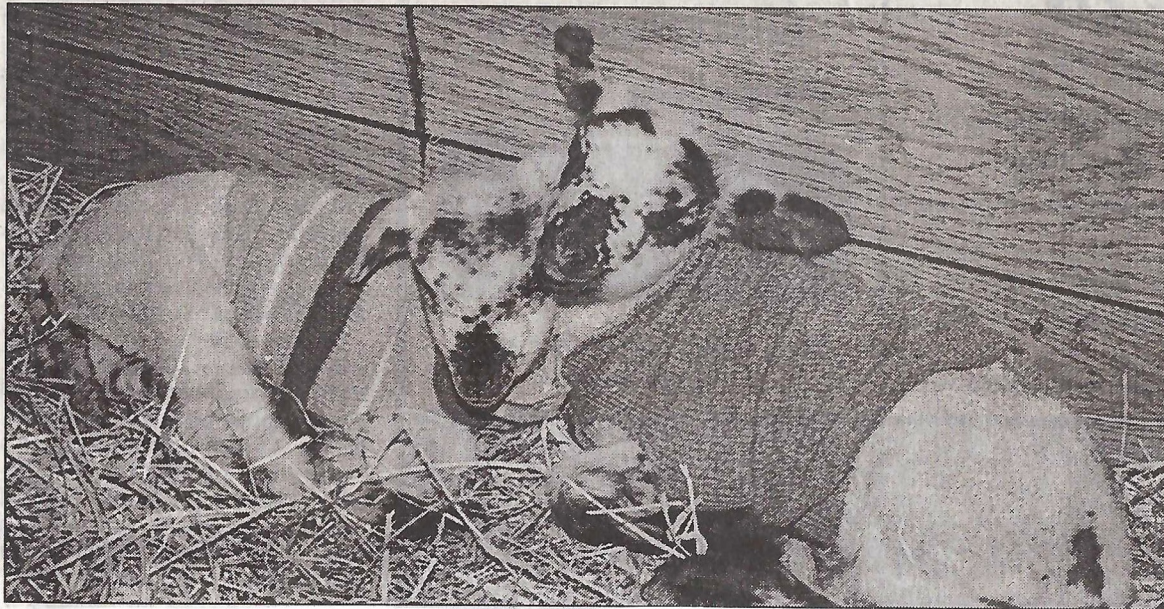
After 40 years of raising sheep, Jones knows the signs: going off feed, looking at their sides, a discharge. Some of the older sheep make such a ruckus when she

tries to leave the barn, she knows their time is near.

If lambing means spring, then spring comes early to Suffolk Station North near Palmer. The lambs are born in January and February. They have to be, if Jones is to have the lambs the right size by May 16, a magic day for 4-H and FFA'ers who want to enter market lambs in the fair. They must have their lambs by then, and they must meet a 40-pound size requirement.

So that is why Jones is outside

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Above, sheep number 112 nuzzles her newborn ram at Suffolk Station North in Palmer. The ram, number 74, was one of two lambs born Friday afternoon at the Palmer farm. Right, sweated 3-day-old twin lambs nestle together against the February cold. Lambs must be born early in Alaska to be ready for the fair in the fall.



# LAMBS: Life can be harsh for newborns

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in a snowstorm checking inside 112 to make sure the lamb is positioned correctly. It is. The ewe utters no protest.

"Most of my sheep are pretty tame," Jones explains. As she hangs her fleece-lined coat over the pallet that forms the gate of the lambing pen, her sturdy bare arms goosebump against the chilly air in the barn. But Jones seems oblivious to the cold.

A week earlier, when the temperature was below zero, Jones struggled to keep the little lambs from freezing to death.

"I lived out here during the cold spell," Jones said. Their ears and long tails soon freeze if they are not dried off thoroughly.

This day, the temperature outside is near 20, and the temperature in the barn is closer to 30, thanks to heat lamps. But the brisk wind coming in the open barn door on the other side of the lambing enclosure means life will still be harsh for a newborn coming from the warmth of the womb.

Jones has waited long enough for 112. She is concerned about the lamb. Since it is in proper alignment, she gives the two front legs a tug. That's all the help 112 needs. A slimy, dark lamb slides out onto the clean straw at Jones' bunny boot-clad feet. The time is 1:15 a.m. Number 74 is born. Before it is even to-



VICKI NAEGELE/Frontiersman

**Old Star Wars-design sheet is fashioned into a coat for this pregnant ewe at Daryl Jones' Palmer sheep farm. The coats keep the sheep's wool in better condition for sale.**

tally out of the womb, Jones hitches up the legs of her overalls and kneels down to wipe the lamb off with old towels. It is a little ram.

A little 4-H market livestock ram, Jones surmises.

112 licks off her little ram, but he still looks little like his Suffolk parents. The black hair he was born with will soon give way to white wool to contrast with the characteristically black Suffolk face. And soon Jones will put a bag-like coat over the lamb, like the ones worn by the rest of the flock. But the coats, which Jones makes from old curtains, scrap

cloth and the like, don't keep the sheep warm. Their own woolly coats do that. The bags keep the wool cleaner. Jones sells wool, lambs and sheep for mutton.

The wool brings anywhere from 50 cents to \$12 a pound. She has been trying to improve the wool of her sheep by crossing rambouillet ewes with her Suffolk ram that has uncharacteristically fine wool. Suffolk are not known for their wool. Her ram was the grand champion at the Alaska State Fair last year.

Jones also washes, picks, cards and spins wool to make raw wool quilts.

For Jones, a native of Bay City, Mich., it is all part of the sheep business.

This former state director of the Alaska Sheep & Wool Association, a member organization of the American Sheep Industry, said the sheep industry in the United States is on the decline.

There is little profit margin in sheep. While the mortality rate among Outside range-run sheep herds is 10-15 percent, Jones won't settle for it.

"I don't accept it," she said. "Ten percent is my profit."

Some losses, however, are unavoidable. She expects about 40 lambs to be born in her flock this winter or early spring. Some will die. A couple of ewes, like the mother of a 3-day-old "bummer" in another small pen, will die, too, she can expect. Jones feeds the little bummer, or orphan lamb, every two hours from a bottle — day and night. He should survive.

The bigger question for Jones is whether the sheep industry can survive in Alaska and in the United States. A national referendum among sheep owners to decide if they will assess them-



VICKI NAEGELE/Frontiersman

**Daryl Jones of Suffolk Station North in Palmer shows off one of this year's crop of youngsters — 3-week-old number 71, a Suffolk-rambouillet cross.**



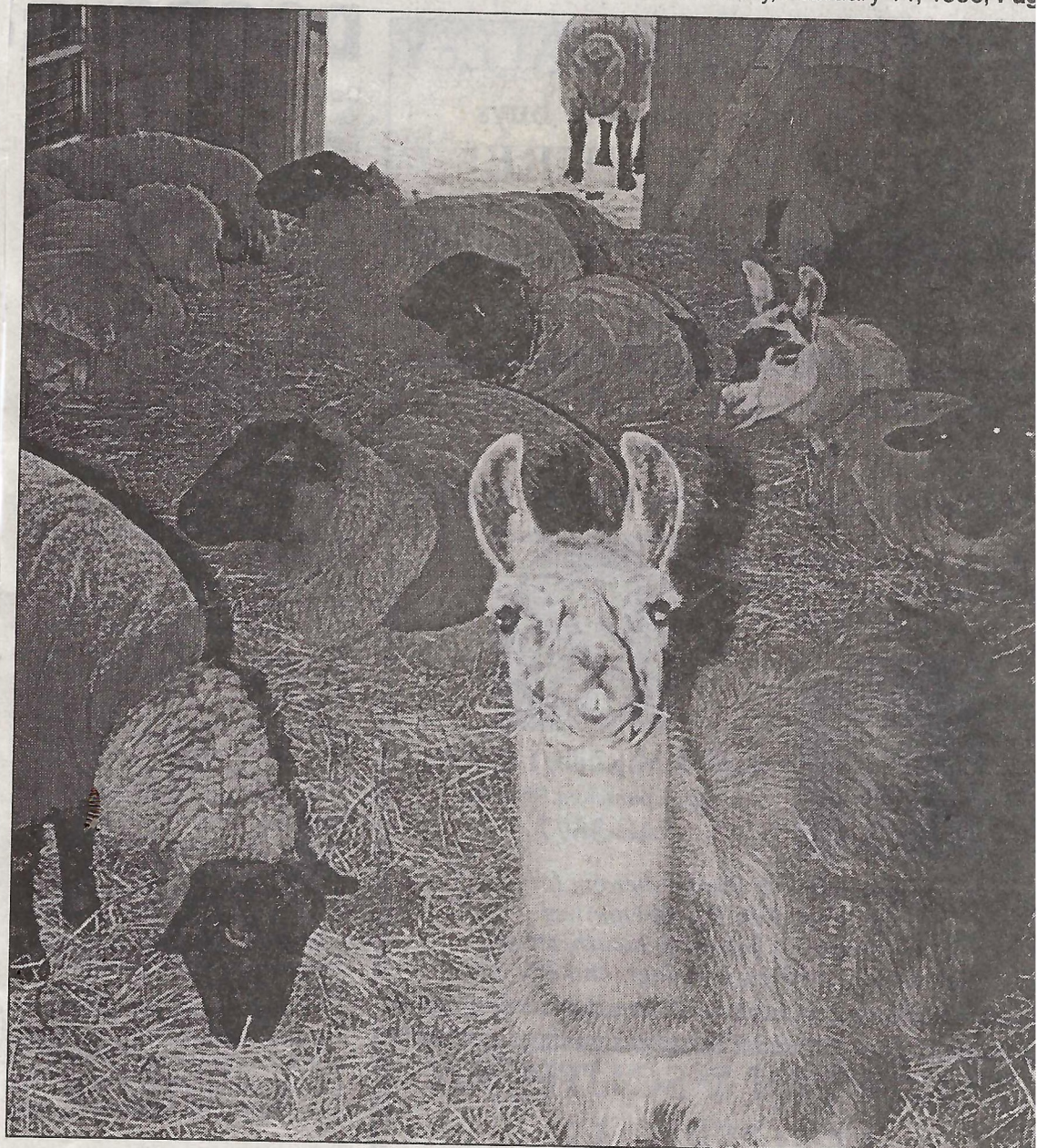
selves a tax to pay for promotion of their product — much the same as the beef or dairy industries do — will be tallied Feb. 20.

"I think it's the only choice we have," Jones said of the referendum. In the face of stiff competition from sheep growers in Australia and New Zealand, she said American sheep farmers must fight back. "We have to promote our own."

Suffolk Station North is about as far away from Australia as a sheep farm can get. While the Aussies have their dingos to worry about, the farm owned by Jones and her husband, Gene, two miles off the old Glenn Highway, has a 6-foot fence around it. Two border collies and two gelded guard llamas protect the flock against bear and other predators.

"If they get past that, then they've got to face me," said the resolute Jones. On this day, the guard llamas — Dalai and Dilly Bar — sit placidly among the pregnant harem, like long-necked eunuchs. They eye their visitor warily.

Inside the lambing pen, 74 affects a standing position, with some help from Jones, and takes his first drink of the colostrum-rich milk from 112. It could be another hour or two until 74 finds out if he is a twin, like the speckled-faced pair in the next pen. In the meantime, he will get used to the wintry air on this his birthday on Feb. 9 at Suffolk Station North, Palmer, Alaska.



Guard llamas Dalai (front) and Dilly Bar keep an eye on strangers in their barn. The llamas are very protective of the ewes and lambs, according to Daryl Jones.

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**Suffolk Station North's lamb number 74 stands on wobbly legs to find his first meal at about 30 minutes of age.**