Historian will talk about Vermont's long-ago sheep industry on Sunday

By Aaron Rubin
Standard Correspondent

The public is welcome to hear about a unique chapter in Vermont's history at the Bridgewater Grange Hall this Sunday, July 27, when historian Jan Albers will talk about when Vermont was the epicenter of the Merino sheep industry in the 19th century.

"It's a fun thing to speak on because if you live in Vermont, you always hear about the Merino sheep boom, but you don't know what it really was," Albers told the Standard. "I've gotten a lot of questions when I gave [this talk] before, and so people are very interested in this subject."

Albers is well-versed in Vermont history. She was the former director of the Henry Sheldon Museum in Middlebury and is the current president of the Vermont Historical Society. She is also the author of "Hands on the Land: A History of the Vermont Landscape," in which she writes that what ultimately forms Vermont's landscape and the surrounding environment are the decisions made by human beings. As the public will learn at the talk on Sunday, the Merino sheep industry has shaped the heavily forested environment that currently exists in Vermont.

"The first half of the 19th century coincided with the Merino sheep boom," said Albers. "Vermont became 75 percent deforested, which is very hard to picture."

Merino sheep were introduced in Spain in the Middle Ages and were brought to Vermont by financier and diplomat William Jarvis, who had a farm in Weathersfield. The breed of sheep was sought after for its "special properties," as a soft, warm, and itchless type of wool, said Alber.

With a mountainous landscape suitable for sheep farming and most of its forests cleared, there was now fertile ground for what many hoped would be a perpetually prosperous future in Vermont. The state was now the epicenter of a global Merino sheep market that was so tremendous in scale that at its height in 1840, there were around 1,681,000 sheep in Vermont — six sheep for every person in the state, according to Albers.

Tens of thousands of sheep were in numerous towns before most became concentrated at a handful of the most industrious farms located in Addison County. These farms made "huge amounts," said Albers, with a focus on breeding "the perfect Merino."

But for the captains of the Merino industry, the good times couldn't last forever. As a result of crushing national tariff policies and the realization that it was cheaper to raise sheep in the Midwest, "the bottom of the market fell out for Merino sheep," said Albers. Consequently, up to two-thirds of Vermont's sheep were slaughtered between 1846 to 1850.

"It was incredible how fast it collapsed," she said. "Vermonters had to scramble looking for other ways to make a living, and a lot of them didn't. A lot of them just had to leave. It was a time of struggle."

Agriculture didn't end in Vermont, of course. Dairy farming filled the void, including in the strategic location of the Connecticut River Valley, and the industry was found to be "more lucrative," said Albers.

"[Dairy farming] is better suited to the flatter valleys like the Champlain Valley and the Connecticut Valley here in Vermont, and that's where the railroads were coming up as well, that could take some milk to Boston and Connecticut. That was a huge landscape transformation," she said.

The transformation led to Vermont becoming famous for its history of dairy

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farming and its production of cheeses and a global ice cream empire.

The regrowth of trees on cleared farmland may have also played a significant role in the abundance of maple syrup found to be produced across the state, as many maple trees grew on the land, added Albers. Forestation may "have helped a lot for tourism," she added, bringing in recreation like hiking and skiing around beautiful canopied landscapes.

These subsequences can serve as lessons about how a population's landscape could be better understood and utilized for more sustainable practices in industry and land stewardship. In the face of current challenges like climate change, those lessons are still relevant today.

"I think people did gradually come to appreciate the forested landscape in a way that they hadn't understood a reason for in the first half of the 19th century," said Albers. "Whatever landscape we have today, it's not going to be the same 50 years from now. We'll hope we're learning the environmental lessons we need to learn to have a healthier Earth as we go forward."

Albers' talk will begin at 2 p.m. Audiences will have the opportunity to ask questions following her speaking portion.