

# The Karakul's Journey to the United States

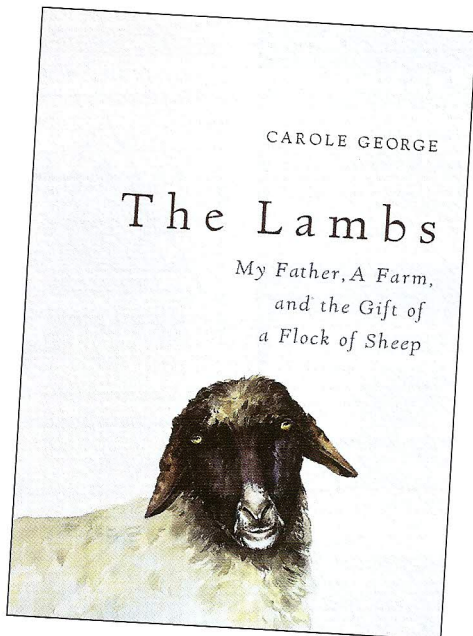
By Carole George

*In our last issue, we offered a brief sketch of the history of the Karakul sheep in their native Central Asia homeland. Their entrance into the United States is similarly dramatic, and below is that story, as excerpted from *The Lambs*, which was just released by St. Martin's Press this spring.*

When I go to visit the lambs, if the breeder is feeling generous, he might hand me a copy of an article about Karakul sheep. Today he produces a 1919 *National Geographic* feature entitled "The Land of Lambskins," which describes the origin of these exotic sheep. The author states, "All camel trails in the Emirate of Bokhara, like the roads to Rome, lead to the marketplace in Bokhara City." There is an image of the Karakul bazaar, where piles of lambskins line one wall in stacks as tall as the men standing beside them.

One afternoon, he gives me a copy of an industry pamphlet that refers to the Karakuls' arrival in America in 1909. This inspires me to visit the library of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, where I find enough old newspaper articles to trace their introduction into this country.

Dr. C. C. Young, a Chicago dentist



whose father and grandfather had raised Karakuls in Bessarabia, decided that he wanted to raise the sheep of the Russian nobility on his Texas farm. Apparently he liked challenges.

In 1909 the emirate of Bokhara had been a semidependency of Russia for fifty years, and the Russian government, which controlled nearly the entire Karakul international fur trade, was fully aware of the value of the lambskins. One author states that a coat made of purebred Karakul pelts cost (in 1909) from \$500,000 to \$1 million.

Pure Karakul sheep were hidden on the farms of Russian noblemen and guarded by Cossacks. Foreigners could enter these fortresses only on permits granted by

the war minister. Moreover, as Dr. Young learned, the sheep were considered sacred by the local Islamic tribes. They were not available to the "infidel."

Dr. Young persisted. Through a congressman, he appealed to President Theodore Roosevelt. This connection produced a letter of introduction to the Russian czar. But what really mattered was his contact with the former minister of agriculture, who knew how the system worked. The process dragged on, but eventually, the Poltava Agricultural Society approved Dr. Young's request. He would be permitted to take his three rams and twelve ewes to America. This was just the beginning.

He had the sheep driven on foot, *one thousand miles* through the desert to Libau, their Baltic Sea port of embarkation. The two-week transatlantic voyage may have seemed like a rest. But then the fifteen sheep were refused entrance into the United States. They were from Asia; undoubtedly they carried "all kinds of Asiatic diseases."

So Dr. Young went back to his Congressional allies. Just hours before the Karakuls were to be turned back to Bokhara, they were allowed to enter the United States on the condition that they undergo months of blood testing and other analyses. They all managed to survive these ordeals and eventually arrived at Dr. Young's Texas farm. ❖

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**Bach and Saint-Saëns, two Karakul sheep featured in *The Lambs*. Photo courtesy of Carole George.**