

1SHORT.DOC

The Big Boss said Uncle Will Noelke threw open 12-foot gates to count sheep as fast and thick as woolies can run. He and his son Billy worked for the San Angelo National Bank in the desperate times of the 1930s. Jugs hired inspectors to go the ranches' shearing and shipping pens to count the collateral.

Down on the highway today, a rancher named Howard Parks has a photograph of a hillside covered in thousands of sheep for further proof of the lost skill involved in tallying so many head. In the lower foreground, three men count by a wide gap, streaming with racing sheep.

Howard knows all about this sort of life. He was birthed in 1918 to be a cowboy and herder the rest of his life. Howard said the photograph came from the old Cactus Hotel. But from the casual way Howard says "Lone Joe" or "Rocky Creek", you know he's *puro ranchero* – pure rancher; the real thing.

Other sheep counters have to be manufactured by lore. Old Uncle Hosea McManus, they said, always turned his sheep out through a cutting chute to count to the pasture. His ewes trailed right through the narrow chute, aware it meant freedom. Uncle Hosea is bound to have had the most accurate

count in the country. Most likely the thrifty Scotsman didn't have to have bank inspectors count his sheep.

One of the summers off from college, the Big Boss ordered four of us to roundup a 12-section pasture of yearling ewes. All of us had been in school, except an old Irish fence builder temporarily assigned to boss us young hands. Neither record nor reason will explain why the Big Boss thought four men could gather and load that many ewes to be shipped to another ranch.

"Pop" was a good hand on foot; miserable in the air on a horse. You may have run across hombres like him. After they rode a few miles, their pant legs climbed up below their knees. Not one owned a pair of chaps or wore boots. Needless to add, we young hands spent a lot of time looking at our shadows to see how our hat brims rolled, contemptuous of a fence builder's costume.

All went well for a summer sheep work. Then we discovered none of us had ever counted a herd that big. By sheer luck, the sheep crossed the county road and the railroad tracks without a mishap, but we couldn't tell how many head we were out.

Only the run-around at the railroad pens was big enough to hold the herd. "Pop" wasn't about to admit this

late in life that his mathematical skill was limited to two dollars a day for 30 chalk marks on the saddle house door.

After we'd got a drink and watered our horses, a cowboy named Pete looked my way. I never will forget his words, because I heard them so many times later: "Monte, you're the Boss's son; count them sheep."

I guess being the Boss's son qualified me to count over 2000 head of yearling ewes with only three men to help hold them up. I had counted 50 cows before. I'd counted the horses coming in from the trap. I was 18 years old. Had, (and have to this day,) a D-minus average in every math course offered in school. If it'd taken addition or subtraction, I could have been the Boss's twin brother and couldn't have done the task (Note: the reason Uncle Hosea's chute method mentioned above wouldn't have worked for us was that some of the ewes would come through backwards and brought up the challenge of spur-of-the-moment subtraction or addition. Plus, 2000 ewes aren't going go through a chute in one day, anyway.)

After an hour or so in blinding dust, we began counting 200 ewes to the pen. I'm not sure, but by the time the trucks came, we thought we'd missed a hundred ewes on the roundup.

The last load was after dark. The Boss's son couldn't read his figures in the dim light and thick dust riding back to the house.

Last weekend, this laptop wouldn't go on line or off line. One of my left-brained sons straightened the machine out from Austin without ever leaving his desk. The whole procedure took less than an hour. Logarithm freaks like him are the reason the world has gotten so complicated, with twitter instruments to carry in your shirt pocket where a count book belongs.

I told him what sheep counters Uncle Will and Billy Noelke were in the other Depression with nothing more than a feed store tablet and bullet pencil. I didn't get around to the yearling ewe story, so I wrote it here for you.