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One more bastion against the prairie wolf for the shortgrass country fell last year the day Bob Johnson sold all his sheep up on the Middle Concho River in Irion County. Bob had fought coyotes from back in the '50s.

"Fought" meaning steel traps, cable snares, cyanide guns, fixed wing and helicopters – the whole defense. Meant and means also, no need to couch the language here to divert the city folks' position that any weapon against coyotes heavier than a fly swatter ranked as cruel and inhumane.

Around the coffee joint and wool house table, the basic saucer and cup handicappers are sure to begin to chorus: "Yep, the day ol' Bob Johnson quit fighting 'em ends running sheep for good in this county."

Currents reached the 09 Divide that he sold out before the official news arrived. Large increases in bounties paid for predator kills countywide gave the clue. But the tragic part was that the report proved coyotes ranged numerous enough that professionals on down to dilettantes showed big kills.

From the readout came the clear message that if all those trappers and amateurs accounted for a hundred sixty coyotes in one year in a thousand square-mile area, the

five-pup rule to whelp four times a year meant nine times that many prairie wolves lived, making 1440 bloodthirsty animals alive and roaming the area. The thought of so many fanged beasts loose on the countryside set off a chill colder than a sleigh dog's bedground.

Included in the report was a request for \$35 per section annual dues. The check felt good to write. It felt good in the main to help protect the Angus herd up here. Unlike horned cow brutes in calendar pictures hooking a wolf high in the air, the only blood drawn on the entire 09 Divide by the black muleys is when they chance to step on a tick.

Offhand, nothing comes to mind more helpless than these near black invalids, unless a moth's cocoon enters the contest. The most powerful organ in their whole makeup stretches deep in the lungs to bawl strong, mournful notes out at the first slight emptiness in a stomach. (Remember, they have four stomachs.)

Driving back to the ranch the night after mailing the check, one fresh-shorn sheep shone in the headlights the entire 22-mile trip from Mertzon. Five years ago, a hundred or two woolies bedded down on a north slope close to the last cattleguard any night of the week.

In the same neighborhood a few years back, one shearing crew might contract to shear four or five thousand ewes in February within a 10-mile radius. Last month, a commission wool warehouseman east of San Angelo, proud of a two million-pound tonnage in '03, admitted to be down below 700,000 pounds. Such a precipitous plunge makes skydiving seem like calculating a weaning spoon's drop from a highchair.

The hard part comes when facing the truth that not one ranch out of 10 on the eastern edge of the Chihuahuan Desert – no, not one out of 20 ranches on the eastern edge of the Chihuahuan Desert on to the Big Bend turns enough cattle income for 10 consecutive years to provide a decent sign on the entrance gate, much less to afford one announcing membership in the cattlemen's association.

First morning home after the January trip, outdoors on the sunny side of the ranch house, the feed wagon to the south stirred the cows to bawling in mad stampedes. Frost-killed grass broke off in a boot scuff. A loose aerial wire popped against an attic vent in a creaky chorus. And my old rusty lawn chair leaned too whomper-jawed to relax.

(Whomper-jawed is the only way to describe a lawn chair bent to one side after being left outside for 20 years.

Webster's won't help. It'd take a diagram to show you what "whomper-jawed" means.)

Behind clinched eyes, my drouth banker in the 1950s came into focus. Believe it or not, here's what he said: "Monte, the party is over. Store those suitcases and cancel the credit cards. You are destined to rejoin the soil."

And, whop! That's what's going to happen if modern medicine doesn't discover a cure for running cattle in a country infested with coyotes.