

MARCH 11, 1982

Our neighbor, Goat Whiskers the Younger, uses our shearing operation to finish his sheep. Every year Whiskers sends over his remnants to be peeled along with ours. The deal is never a large one. Just a few head of old sisters that his cowboys have missed in the flurry of rounding up the big bunches.

It's become so routine that the shearing captain and myself include the margin in our plans. I order more sacks and strings; the shearers allow for a shut-down pen to anticipate the loss of time. Wool graders and wool packers are alerted to separate the fleeces to proper ownership. I doubt if our full service costs me over \$6 a head extra. Much of this I recover by killing the long hours around the shearing pens scraping the blue branding paint the Whiskers' ranch uses off my chaps and gate latches.

Until this year, I hadn't thought the matter through. Inflation brought it to my attention. In the past 10 years, shearing has risen from about 65 cents a head to a buck and a half. Without keeping any score, I realized that we were absorbing the cost for the Whiskers' outfit. The more I figured, the more I doubted that he was actually missing the sheep we were shearing. The books looked like what had happened was that he'd added a late shearing program that was fully subsidized.

To test my facts, on the day after shearing was over I told him that when we'd hauled in the wool, we'd found an extra bag. The squelch hadn't clicked on the radio before he was claiming that sack of wool. He knew within a pound of how much wool he was supposed to have. Just as I had suspected, the gooseneck load of woolies was the exact amount needed to absorb the shearing crew's latest price hike.

Wily as that old boy is, I still had cards to play. I let him soak for an hour's worth of radio time. Then I reported that the rightful owner of wool had been found. In direct terms, I informed that crook that the unclaimed bag had been donated to the West Texas Boy's Ranch in hopes that small contribution would keep the youth of America from turning into small cheats and petty swindlers.

His recovery time was short. In a few minutes, he asked whether I'd paid the captain for shearing his woolies. He even offered to radio his secretary and have her mail me a check. I told him no, that since the captain and myself had been such charitable men for the past 10 seasons, we were accustomed to giving away our time and money.

Whether you are interested or not, I am going to report that the wool market is as sour as any other agricultural trade. Big government contracts have been given to the mills, so we've heard, but buyers haven't responded to fit the growers' needs.

We thought that when the oil boom raised the cost of synthetic and Mr. Carter started plugging sweaters, natural fiber would recover. However, as it turned out, I think the increased price in oil added about 14 cents to every 1000 yards of synthetics; and as you know, Mr. Carter got beat and went back to Georgia where the winters aren't so cold.

Whiskers is bound to know we were joking. Giving a foster home a sack of wool would be the lowest form of humor in my opinion. He'll make up for that sack of wool before spring. I'll bet at this very moment he's working on another deal.