

Intermittent sleet is hitting my hotel window. I'm in Austin for a directors meeting of The Texas Sheep and Goat Raisers Assn. Winter rains cover the state. The capital is no exception. I'd guess a couple of inches have fallen in the past 24 hours.

First, I want to clarify that we aren't here to hold a demonstration. Television news just flashed coverage of the farmers' riots in Washington. I rode down here with Mr. and Mrs. Goat Whiskers the Younger in a carriage class German automobile. I haven't the slightest intention of testing the skill of some honor graduate from the state's police academy, or riding around the statehouse in anything any more uncomfortable than Mrs. Whisker's car. As closest I plan to demonstrate is perhaps to scold room service for being slow with my coffee or to remind the room clerk not to ring his bell while I'm telling stories in the lobby.

Enough bad news came from this afternoon's predator animal hearing to put the herders to trading their pick-ups for parade-gear tractors. A legislator from the El Paso district spoke to the committee. He is proposing a bill to extend the federal protection of eagles to the state level.

He explained that the 440 game wardens of the State Park and Wildlife Department will be able to bring the lamb versus the eagle question out of limbo where the three or four federal agents have failed. I suppose his idea is that by having the wardens obtain fingerprints and mugshots of all the sheep herders that put making a living over observing the law, once the final day of execution for sheepdom arrives, a lot of innocent folks won't be harmed. The wardens, he said, will be able to evaluate the situation by making surveys and contacts. "Surveys" and "contracts" by this definition, being the type of surveying and contacting that county judges and high sheriffs used to use for dice shooters when I was a kid.

Another topic discussed was "Operation Dead Lamb." This program was instituted by the sheep and goat people to have losses from predators documented by experts such as animal research centers. Ranchers bring in the kills; the centers perform an autopsy determining the cause of death.

Results have been slow and Eagles and coyotes and cats prey and on the more remote areas of the country. Ranchers are so short of help that hotels hate to see them coming for fear they'll hire the bellboys and housemaids. Furthermore, victims nearly have to be found by riding horseback. Most of us are so old and stove up that dismounting for the body functions is enough of a problem without adding range detective work to the process.

One good point was made. The chairman said that documenting predator losses prior to being hauled into court would make a plea of plea of self preservation more admissible as evidence. I thought of my compadre and neighbor Goat Whiskers the Younger. After the meeting, I told him if he'd get his doctors to diagnose his trouble as itchy fingers, the ones of us joining him wouldn't be so intolerant of his habit of packing off our windmill rods and other light supplies.

Any offender would profit from that advice. It is logical to me that a judge, or a judge and a jury, or a wife and her mother would be more likely to accept an excuse six months before a mistake happened than they would be after it happened. During prohibition, thirsty fellows who bought prescription whiskey had a good act. Whiskers ignored my

suggestions. Last I saw of him he was carrying on in a big way in the coffee shop close to the meeting room.

Those sign bearing tractor burning farmers up in Washington are sure a contrast to the sheep and goat herder's style. In a couple of hours the association is hosting an iced drink and hot appetizer demonstration to gain the attention of the legislators. Billy clubs and picketing may appeal to the planter's taste, but my vote goes for the calm and peaceful. German cars ride a lot better than a John Deere.