

SEPTEMBER 30, 1993

Stuck away in an old cigar box of my stepfather's was a yellow contract of sale dated Sept. 11, 1939 for 2000 mixed lambs at seven cents a pound to be delivered on the 16th of September, issued by a Drake Commission Company in the Cactus Hotel in San Angelo. A column of classes was preceded by a blank for numbers and weight limits, plus a description in parenthesis of the culls to be taken out.

The lambs' owner joined our ranch to the east in those days. We helped him drive the sheep 12 miles to a set of scales on the railroad. I was doing so well in school that I was allowed to spend from Friday afternoon at 3 p.m. to Monday morning at 8 a.m. on legal furlough.

Always a high achiever, the teacher, a Miss Greengrouch, told Mother I'd be about as well off driving sheep out on the range as I was staying in after school dusting the erasers and dumping the pencil sharpeners.

But of course in 1939 fifth grade school teachers didn't know the fate of the sheep business for the next 54 years, or the changes blackboards and pencil sharpeners were to undergo in five decades. The details of how much it took to spring me are lost; however, I remember clearly what a shock it was to see how short the afternoons were when you didn't have to stay in after school, and how pretty the sunsets were in the fall.

Coming back from the scales, my stepfather kept falling behind, figuring and refiguring how much the lambs cost. The herd traveled easier headed back toward the same fenceline they'd left the day before. Headwinds put them to drifting; late rains green the country; and the days were far enough away from winter that monarch butterflies flickered in oranges and black flashes of light, across a back trail of tracks in silvery dew.

I remember checking to see how close the shadow of my bay horse was and I resembled the mounted men in the drawings in Will James's Smoky The Cow Horse book. The closer we came to the ranch the farther the lambs strung out to graze, looking like 10,000 head instead of a couple of thousand. The terrain altitude gains from 50 to 75 feet from the railroad to the ranch, but after the chalk dust cleared from my nostrils and my stopped blinking from the bright sunlight, I felt I'd found the top of the world.

Last week my mixed lambs brought 68 cents delivered off 55-foot trailers in San Angelo. I wish Miss Greengrouch had been around to see how much progress has been made in 50 years.

Thanks to her lessons in mathematics and the family's natural instinct to be businessmen, I was able to calculate the lambs cost \$52.50 to raise. Also, to ascertain 100 percent of their mothers sheared a fleece of wool worth five or six bucks, and 90 percent of them raised a \$45 lamb.

I don't know how my step-dad's lambs wintered in 1939, but I sure was pleased to cash out a \$2.50 a head loss before my luck failed.

Looks like the sheep business is going to make a big comeback after all. In 10 years we'll be recovered from the double-cross the government pulled, breaking their deal on the incentive program. I look for the ones left by 2004 to start breaking over heavily in the black.