

FEBRUARY 17, 1983

San Angelo sheep markets are continuing to improve. The sudden surge in lamb and ewe prices has sure disrupted my plans at the ranch. We had figured on roughing the old ewes through the winter, hoping for only enough survivors to control the spring weed crop. As dull as the lamb and wool market was, I was going to stop counting the sheep in the spring.

However, this new price schedule has forced a reevaluation of the sheep numbers. Instead of being overstocked, we are in a serious sheep shortage. Our yearend inventory showed we were running 35 percent sheep, 31 percent cattle, 17 percent cactus and toxic weeds, and a remaining 17 percent in deer hunters, oilmen and predatory animals.

Yesterday I had the chance to study the stocking ratio on horseback. For the first time (and this was before I'd heard the market news) I realized that the sheep that were eating the prickly pear cactus were taking up more ground space than the huge clumps of pear.

My paternal grandfather bred these ewes to be long bodied, big sheep. Placed around cactus plant, eating the leaves, less than nine head would fit to the plant; but the amount of space they were taking from the pasture was counting up in a big way.

Besides the loss of land, the ewes were crowding in on the cactus in such numbers that the old cows addicted to same diet were unable to work their way through the sheep. After some thinking on the problem, I wasn't sure that a 17 percent coverage of bitterweed and prickly pear was adequate.

I've seen the figures on the percentage of grass in a range cow's diet broken into different categories or species of grasses. But I don't believe I've ever seen any experiments that were done on how many balls of cactus thorns an old sister could swallow before she dried up into a sack of hide and bones that the packers wouldn't even use to lighten a scale lot of cattle.

Once a ewe becomes attached to prickly pear, she's like the barnacles that stick on a ship's hull. She's going to keep eating the ripe fruit or the leaves until her mouth becomes so sore that she starves for either water or feed. Unlike many range wrecks, the demise of this addict is slow enough to give plenty of time to find a replacement ewe before her death. I've invested as many as 20 bales of New Mexico hay in a hard core user. Needless to say, the amount of money recovered on the deal is a private affair between myself and an Angelo bank.

I keep looking for something to sell in this flush period. Our calves are still too small to wean and the ewes have been too busy polishing off the pear leaves to raise a lamb. Many more days of the good market is going to be hard to stand without buying a cow or a sheep. If this is the end of the big recession, I am ready for a change. Perhaps I should go to looking for some yearling ewes to join the boom.