

20SHORT.DOC

U.S. sheep numbers dropped below eight million head last year. In 1950, a benchmark and banner year for the business, the count showed a sheep population of over 52 million head. In the shortgrass country alone before the Big Drouth of that decade, herders stayed so far behind in the sheep pens drenching and shearing, a meaningful tally was difficult.

I don't know who compiles the figures today. Each quarter, a state office calls the ranch about 9:30 p.m., figuring I am at my sharpest on my counts before bedtime. I used to object to the government prying into our business. Nowadays, I am thrilled someone is interested enough to wonder whether a sheep and cow scene exists apart from the murals on the walls of the Capitol building, or on an old postage stamp at the museum.

The first agriculture census the Big Boss received brought on such a torrent of derision for bureaucracies, 10 years were to pass before the USDA heard how many milk cows were milked on our farm, or how many pullets under six months of age roosted down at the barn at night. The Boss ordered me to fill out the next census. He added in the work order the following instructions, "And, Stud, strike out the word 'farm' in every question it appears. This is a sheep and cow ranch with plenty of good horseflesh."

I remember going out on the front porch to answer the questions. He'd stop reading the newspaper and shout, "Make

that Thoroughbred horseflesh, Son. Don't turn in my range hogs. Tax assessors agreed those hogs are wild animals. Cost a quart of whiskey to amend my rendition, but don't put that down, either." (Livestock was taxed in those days by the county and state.)

Another current figure related to the big decline in sheep numbers was the predator loss in Colorado for 1996 of 35,000 head of sheep and 3900 head of cattle. Coyotes scored 50 percent of the kills. I can't recall there being a second and third place listing. Panthers, bobcats and bears probably helped the coyotes, or contributed their share. Gray wolves were a little new on the job to be big killers. They should, however, become more active as they spread across the mountain ranges and penetrate the sheep country.

Less than a fortnight ago, a banker at the grocery store in Angelo shot an angle the reverse of the Boss's hog idea. He claimed he'd been offered mountain lions as collateral on a far West Texas ranch close to the border. "Lion hunting," the jugkeeper explained, "generates additional income to deer hunting on this sparsely stocked cow ranch; but I am not interested in mortgaging an animal who ranges on both sides of the Big River between the U.S. and Mexico."

I excused myself before he expanded into the fickle nature of such chattels as woolies and hollow horns. Having a name connected to ranching as long as mine makes you jumpy around the indelible, eternal memories of livestock bankers.

Next thing he'd be imagining was I was the one offering mountain lions as collateral on my financial statement.

I sure don't want to be impolite. Only about six or eight banks, counting the Production Credit, exist in the whole shortgrass country to loan money on livestock. San Angelo is overrun today with huge banking conglomerates reaching way back up in the north and all over the U.S.

When those top-heavy loans from the drouth in the 50's were paid, our credit ratings should have ranked in the range of triple A bonds and government securities. In lots of cases, I am sure our loan limits far exceeded our net worth. But today after the urbanization of the wool capital and the buyouts by the big holding banks, if a sheep and cow herder decides to join a game of pin-the-donkey down at the big jugs, he had better check ahead who is tying on the blindfold and writing the contract. True, little David bounced a rock off Goliath's head, but the brave little giant slayer didn't take 180 days worth of time to wind up his slingshot, like we ranchers do borrowing money.

When agriculture dropped below two percent of the population, the USDA ended the census program. For so few people, it was no longer important to know how many rows in the garden were planted in gooseneck squash, or how fast it was from the front step to the post box. In all those years, I never heard of a herder fined for misrepresenting the information on the forms. Maybe everybody was like the Big

Boss facing the prospect of perjury: "You go ahead and sign it, Boy. You write a prettier hand than your old dad ..."