

AUGUST 20, 1981

While the cowmen were crying about the discounts on over-fleshy calves, a severe outbreak of internal parasites on the sheep ranges of the Shortgrass Country was effectively controlling the weight of the lambs. Woolies operators were never once faced by a weight problem after the spring rains spawned an abundance of stomach and tape worms.

All the sheep herders had to do was avoid over-doctoring their flocks. A keen line had to be held to allow enough worm control to trim the fats to feeders to knotheads to peewees. Without spending a dime on research, long black boned, thin ribcage lambs were produced to do exactly what market specialists have been saying needed to be done to satisfy the consumers.

Early spring rains started the process. By May, auction rings were quoting a new category of lambs to classify the wormies. Marketing was on an orderly scale. No big runs were possible as the number of lambs strong enough to climb on the top deck of a truck were gradually blended into the trade. Some outfits were able to sort off lights was into the summer where normally they would have been part of the spring glut that hurts so bad.

Here at the ranch, we started out drenching the sheep to fit the cow work. Stomach worms were cycling every 21 days and hornflies were hatching at somewhere on the same schedule. However, we were losing enough sheep in every pasture to ease the volume of the work, so keeping up was of little problem.

Along about July, I began to tally the medicine bill. In the big rush, I'd lost my sense of values. Squirting and fogging the new prescriptions on four-bit muttens and 60-cent steers was working out about like trying to save the blubber off a dead whale that'd been six weeks floating to shore.

The flurry of the work and daily drama of death had kept me from realizing that we were like a sailor that was throwing a life preserver to a fat man with the life line tied to his own waist.

Right then I gave orders to start diluting the medication and start using the pickups for a hearse instead of an ambulance.

Over in the hospital trap, we had gathered enough patients to underwrite the expansion of any of the large veterinary medicine houses. From the way the siege was looking, if anyone was going to need any special care it was going to be the owner and operator when he went into the bank for his next note rollover.

But like I started out telling you, we turned a lemon into lemonade. Last week, we sorted back 35 percent lights on our first shipment.

These lambs may stay at 45 pounds all fall unless the weather dries up enough to bring a turnaround. By October, the sick lamb market should have peaked and run it's course. With the 70-pounders out of the way, these hardy survivors of the wet summer ought to really reap the coin.

Sheep ranching is difficult for outsiders to understand. We have so many outlets compared to other trades. It's hard to believe that our luck has been so good. The greybeards have always said that sheep were desert animals. What they didn't know was that wet weather can work, too.