

25SHORT.DOC 03-15-99

Depending on the season, four out of 10 lambchops in the supermarkets are imported from Australia or New Zealand, or that's the way it comes out, figuring the Southern Hemisphere's dominions take an average of more than 40 percent of our domestic market. The competition grates on the ones of us still trying to raise sheep in the midst of weather failures and banner coyote whelping years.

However, taking a closer look, producers' share in the retail value of lamb is 30 percent of the sale, so actually we are only involved in two of the 10 chops.

I don't know if my information is reliable. Sheep organizations keep thick files on discouraging news. Membership drives are based on the dreariest of predictions. I used to come back from the woolie conclaves so downcast, I'd spend the rest of the year recovering from the tri-annual reports in time to be dragged back down in the dumps by the annual convention.

It wasn't anyone's fault but mine for being so sensitive. The executive secretary of the Texas sheep and goat herder's association in those days had strong ties to Mertzon. He did more than his part to liven up the meetings, being so happy over his new job. You see, he moved from being county agent out here to becoming the chief officer in the association, right on to later becoming a state senator. However, the lessons he learned as our county agent are what put him over the top.

At a critical stage in his career as county agent, two Mertzon cowboys taught him to be able to think on his feet and speak impromptu by tying a rattlesnake underneath the seat of his pickup while he ate lunch in the café with his district supervisor. Little did he realize that after disposing of the rattler with a tire tool, he'd never be blind-sided by man or beast again. After that experience, the political reporter would not be born capable of misquoting him or corrupting his purpose.

He sidestepped the trickery of D.C. while representing the association and was reelected numerous terms to the State Senate after fierce campaign debates. All his successes go back to once having been within a pickup door's width of a furious rattlesnake tied only by number 14 stay wire. (I am sorry, but I can't report what happened to the district supervisor. He has never been back to Mertzon to this day.)

For the longest time, like from 1950 on, I supported the sheep and goat herders and the woolgrowers' organization programs. I wrote the worthies in Austin and Washington letters of displeasure and profiled the grief and suffering out here in the sheep country. (Ninety percent of the sheep in Texas are raised in the shortgrass country and only 17 percent of the coyotes.) I made most of the meetings and paid my dues on time. Seemed like I had hardly gotten started when, at a district meeting in Mertzon a year or so ago, the secretary read out my name as one of the directors

subject to retirement. The tone of her voice made me think how the coroner must sound reading off tags from the unclaimed bodies at the morgue during a meeting of the commissioner's court.

Being retired from a woolie organization is nowhere near as traumatic as, say, finding a rattlesnake tied under a pickup seat at the turning point of a young county agent's career. However, the first impact does cause the head to drop like a chill hitting an ostrich her first day away from the outback of Australia.

Retired directors are still allowed to vote on resolutions to send to Washington and give the wool house authority to deduct the dues from your wool check. PAC organizations, I learned, will accept donations from any age group. Also, as the lady over in the office in San Angelo explained, the association signs on my ranch gates didn't have to be changed to "Monte Noelke, retired."

So I think the main reason for retiring graybeards was to remind us to limit our observations to 30 seconds and found them in this century. Nobody actually minded the stumbling over folding chairs or spilling coffee down the front of the shirt. Those habits start in sheepmen way before retirement age.

In last week's post, the Texas and Southwest Cattle Raisers in Fort Worth billed the ranch for annual dues. Copies of brands and earmarks on the form go on the same picture of a horned bull the association used the first time

I ever joined the outfit. I like drawing in the brand and earmark better than writing a check. However, the timing was good. Fat cattle closed at 65 bucks last week on a small showlist. I don't think 100,000 pounds of wool has sold this year in Texas, so I'm going to hold back on the cattleman dues and send it to the sheepherders.