

AUGUST 12, 1982

Toward the end of the spring shearing season one of the wool buyers said that even in the most primitive of countries, wool clips are put up better than they are in the U.S. Later on at the Sheep and Goat Herders convention the buyer's remarks were expanded on by a former warehouseman, who claimed that in his day he had once found a 48-pound rock in a sack of domestic mohair.

At the same meeting, growers were scolded by committeemen for failing to stay around the shearing pens, superintending the work. I missed the meeting, but since that's been the theme of every wool marketing article and seminar for the past 30 years, I doubt whether I missed anything new.

Contacting a primitive wool producing country on such short notice was impossible. I supposed that the buyer was referring to some African country that abounded in six-drop machines, supervised by expert wool graders that rolled fleeces the likes of which the Boston trade had never seen come from Texas.

Once I had toured the sheep outfits in New Zealand and Australia. However, those two dominions would be my last vote as a primitive land. I couldn't recall whether any of the islands in the Southern Hemisphere besides Tasmania and the Falklands had sheep. I'd read enough about New Guinea to know that they qualified for being primitive, but I think that their main interest was cannibalism over sheep ranching.

What I think the buyer might have wanted to say was that if primitive countries were to shear any sheep, they'd do a better job than we do here in Texas. I don't think he meant that Mexico or Uruguay sack their wool better. I just think he was hot and tired and maybe a little sore thumbed from hitting a cocklebur in a fleece and thought he'd found a way to make us shepherders feel bad.

I did find out about the 48-pound rock in the sack of mohair. It really happened about 10 or 12 years ago. I may be off on the time, but I think I'm right because one of the witnesses said that hair was bringing about 30 cents on a slow market, so that sounds like the early 70s.

Anyhow, after I'd investigated the full story, it turned out to be less of a crime than was presented. By checking with a gift shop in the same area that the mohair originated, I learned that rocks were selling for more than goat hair. The lady said that in 1970 she was getting six-bits for little old pieces of shiny quartz to the tourist trade. Without checking back with the injured warehouseman, I know for sure that he wasn't able to sell hair in pieces or handfuls at that price. Whoever had put that rock in the sack had probably done it by mistake. In the 30s, we put plenty of bones in the dead wool we sold. I sure can't recall trying to add rocks that big to anything except beds of pickups that were stuck in mud holes.

The wool buyers and the county agents are right. We need to improve our wool handling techniques. As cheap as wool is, we could afford to carry on different experiments like washing the fleeces in laundry soap, or maybe dyeing some of the fibers with coloring from the grocery store.

I agree also that we shouldn't put 48-pound rocks in the sacks. The price of rocks is not the point. It's the fact that we are representing our product as fiber and not minerals. In the future, I'd be in favor of fining growers who threw rocks in their sacks, especially growers who use such big rocks.

Not much wool is left in Texas. Fancy tricks like deferred payments slowed down a few sales. It's mighty tough to know that primitive countries reign over privileged countries. I wonder how they settled the commission on that rock deal. Time can sure make a story good.