

NOVEMBER 25, 1982

Within the week's work, I came across a news article that claimed the Department of Agriculture was considering paying off farmers in kind. In place of spending 12 billion or so in cash for acre reductions in 1983, surplus corn and wheat was going to be the tender.

Critics of the new idea, so the story said, were afraid that the futures market would go crazy under such a far out deal. Since there aren't eight head of farmers in our entire county, I wasn't able to gain any first hand information.

The only place I investigated was at the courthouse, at the USDA office. In case they had any trades to be made I wanted to lead the list in hopes of bartering off my old ewes for a bin full of corn or wheat from the Mid West.

Corn and other grains, I knew, had been fluctuating something awful, but not to the extent that the sheep market had been failing. Sheepmen had been put through a grinder that'd make the best rock saw in all of Brussels cut like a pen knife. Two or three hombres that I trust were comparing the fall market to the dreadful days of the 1950s. It looked like we were going back to the times when none of us came to town except to buy feed and renew our notes. I wasn't even sure that the government had enough corn in storage to cover all the sheep deals that were available.

I knew better than to be direct. Government employees are sensitive souls and highly excitable. Also, this particular clerk was an old friend of mine. We'd served on the school board together; she knew every trick I had plus four or five that I didn't have listed myself.

So I acted like I was interested in finding the amount of aerial acres in an outfit my mother operates. As dry as it is, the ranch was about out of grass. Space allotment or stocking amounts didn't make much difference. I suppose the main excuse for wanting to know how big the pastures and traps are was to be sure the standing room was correct for the daily feed runs. I'd have been hard pressed to give a better explanation.

We spent a couple of hours measuring the maps. I was real cagey. Every time she'd stop, I was careful not to ask for an advance on the wool program, or any of those big jokes we used to have in the days when the county knew a modicum of solvency.

But none of the acts paid off. I didn't want to blurt it out that I had 2000 ewes that I was willing to swap to peanut butter. I didn't want the government to know how eager I was to dump those old sisters before winter forced me to start feeding them the very corn that was under discussion. I knew that'd weaken my argument, because the reason the government was considering the plan was to get rid of the grain surplus and solve their cash shortage. Actually, we were thinking along similar lines except that as it was I had a grain shortage and a worse cash position than anybody around, including the Department of Agriculture of all the third world countries in the universe.

Her responses didn't fit the topics at hand. The trouble was that she'd had a bad case of the walking and working pneumonia and had completely lost her hearing. There I'd spent a whole morning dropping hints to a deaf lady. Once I caught onto her problem, I waved goodbye in sign language. I left a note to mail the maps whenever it was convenient.

Granted, it was a long shot. However, as dull as this last quarter has been, my mornings are very important. I do hate to see that \$12 billion withdrawn from the game. One thing about it, I'll bet those farmers are having second thoughts. They will really get a cure if they're paid in sheep and cattle.