

AUGUST 21, 1980

Hurricane Allen dropped good rains to the southern and western portions of the state. Herders in these parts scored in inches what the rest of us counted in tenths. Here at the ranch we measured nine-tenths plus 36 hours of cloud cover from the storm. I got so excited over the moisture that I cancelled a lamb shipping date and postponed a shearing operation. All of which turned out to be wrong moves.

Delaying a lamb shipment, in particular, is a hard decision. Dry weather sheep ranching in the Shortgrass area takes precision timing. Lambs need to be rolled just as the last mesquite bean is eaten and right before the fruit of the prickly pear ripens into a sugary delight that ruins the sheep's mouths with thorns.

In dry years like this one, the margin may not be three hours. It takes a mighty swift gooseneck jockey to market a drouth lamb. The stressful rancher has to be looking up in the trees at the beans and watching the cactus apples at the same time. Woe be it for an hombre that stays too long. For he is caught in a jam that all the banks this side of the Mississippi River can't save from disaster.

Sheep do their best to talk their owners into liquidating the herds. They'll do nearly anything to point out that it's too dry to ranch. An old ewe will eat poison weed and die. She'll shade up in dust eight inches deep and ruin her wool. And it's uncanny how her built-in drouth indicator will prematurely wean lambs, or even reject being bred.

But not any of these signals reach sheep herders. Woolie operators can run an acre foot of six minute grama grass into a restocking program that'd squeeze the boundaries of a 16,000 acre sheep outfit. We get just as foolish over a yearling ewe as a hollow horn addict does over a tiger striped cow, or a bald faced calf. Saving grace for us is that there aren't enough of us left to corrupt the young, or to lead new people into the game. That sure can't be said for the cowboys.

Two days ago I talked to a wool warehouseman in the eastern part of the Shortgrass Country that said as long as calves will bring over 60 cents a pound, nobody was going to run sheep in his area. Though it wasn't a new idea, it sure broke my heart, because, right at that moment, the foremost topic on my mind was moving a few ewes.

As I drove on eastward, my mood dropped to about the height of my two front pickup tires. Without a winter sheep market east of San Angelo, those old ewes at the ranch were about as hot an item as a shot of insulin around a sugar cane mill. About halfway from my destination I stopped and called the last guy that had wintered any solidmouths of ours. I wished I'd saved the call. His wife said he was out at the barn wetting down the corral so it wouldn't be too dusty to shear his goats.

The scattered rains and renewed hope have perked the lamb market up a dollar or so a hundredweight. The only drouth insurance we ever collected was from wool and lambs. I think it's going to rain in the fall. The next time a hurricane comes up the Rio Grande, it's gonna take more than a hunch to get me to call off the trucks and send the shearers home.