

shortgrass country

Mid-May wool sales stunned producers and commission house operators. At a San Angelo offering of a million and a half pounds, top clips on a clean basis brought 40 to 60 cents per pound higher than previous levels. The wool sold by sealed bids in big lots and few growers attended, relying on their wool houses to relay the rights of refusal.

I'd grown a beard this spring under a doctor's orders. The wool sale was the first gathering of shearers I had been to since I stopped shaving. I'd forgotten how sensitive sheepmen are to woolly faces and how quick a wool buyer looks for defects in any sample of fiber, be it a core from a 10 year-old ram, or off a yearling ewe.

The ranch is 60 miles from the hotel in San Angelo. Post office traffic through Mertzon cost 10 minutes. The sale opened at 10 a.m. Just as I reached the floor, a gruff wool house manager holding a dead cigar in his mouth burst open the door and announced: "Lot One, top bid Burlington, bid refused."

Instead of averting their gazes to follow the bid taker from the room, the whole audience started looking me over like they hadn't ever seen a picture of Price Albert wearing

a chin piece, or one of the oldtime actors playing a Shakesperean role in a Van Dyke.

No one offered a sale sheet and no one made extra room. I sat down in front of two hombres who had been around the sheep business for 40 years. They probably had thousands of pounds of wool on the line, but all they cared about was why I'd quit shaving.

I was so nervous about whether Lot One was my clip that I shortened the answer to saying the present stand of whiskers took 72 hours to grow. Furthermore, the dermatologist, monitoring the growth, said allowed to go untrimmed for 144 hours, I'd be taking a chance of being strangled by my own beard.

After the sale results were announced, the telephones in the hall erupted in calls to the wool houses and back to home bases of the ranchers. I lunched with an old friend and the head of the commission house at Mertzon to celebrate the good fortune.

The end of the wool and mohair incentive program in two years makes a lot of herders doubt whether to keep raising sheep or change to long-legged birds or fat goats.

Some pretty heavy stuff was circulating about nominations and resignations of industry leaders, and I was way behind on the news. After listening to how old so-and-so ramped and raged at the ex presidents' breakfast of the Sheep and Goat Raiser's Association and how upset old such-and-such became at the big sheep council conclave, I

suggested that as small as our numbers are, we might be more effective dividing into small cells of sheep and goat men.

At least fighting among ourselves handicaps better than trying to match 10 million foreign sheepmen and five times that many environmentalists to a battle.

Sterling County and Irion County Texas, for example, have the same land mass and about the same amount of ranchers. For my part, Sterling sounds like a pushover compared to being run over so badly by the Dominions of Australia and New Zealand that the only way of identifying us is to have a doctor check the tooth marks on the green sticks we'd used to keep from swallowing our tongues.

The lunch ended on the quiet side. I drove home plenty pleased about the wool money. Beards itch in hot weather, but they sure beat being at the mercy of a skin doctor's needle.

JM