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Wool production in Texas dropped 20 percent last year. Sheep numbers are so low in Irion County that woolie operators can be audited on a finger count. If any deals on yearling ewes or solidmouths occur, the news sure misses Mertzon.

The labor shortage is one factor hurting sheep ranching. During shearing over at Goat Whiskers the Younger's ranch, a crew of 10 men dropped to seven in one morning. Two shearers demanded more money. The capitan, the shearing contractor, stopped shearing to settle the dispute at lunch. The matter didn't settle. The two shearers packed their gear and left. The capitan disappeared, we thought to hunt replacements.

Short three men, output changed from over 900 head a day to under 700 head. Repercussions extended to prolonging the work, thus increasing the overhead and overloading the small pastures gathered ahead of time to stay up with a full crew.

Young Whiskers allowed me to shear the small herd of sheep on the highway in his pens to save moving the contractor's crew and equipment to my outfit. The plan was to finish mine, then while Whiskers peeled his sheep and goats, we'd gather the sheep on the Divide. To accomplish

the roundup with no extra help, we had to be in contact every night. "We" being the Capitan, Whiskers and myself.

As all these details come together, I have to hope the reader's compassion for a sheep herder's woes hasn't dropped below the 20 percent figure for wool production. But to continue the story, after the Capitan left at lunch on the fateful day the two men quit, he no longer answered his cell phone. Whiskers, I knew, was in no humor to chat as part of his workforce had departed for a stock show in San Antonio.

Somewhere in the timeframe of two days, the Capitan's wife reported her husband was attending a fence builder's convention in Las Vegas, Nevada. All I remember about the rest of the phone call was staring at a hole in the toe of my right work boot. I have no recollection if she gave his return date, only that I was hypnotized by the small oval hole on the toe of my right boot. For some strange reason, I started rolling the rowel of the spur buckled to my left boot against the floor tiles. Must have been a reaction to "hang on" or "dig in".

My coffee grew cold. Dawn broke enough to make the frost on the dead grass out the kitchen window sparkle. Our saddle horses walked by the cattleguard going to the barn. The old wound under my right shoulder blade from a long ago horse wreck took a sharp stab at the right nerve to make me flinch. Without dialing, I lifted the telephone and said,

"Whiskers, our great grandfather Ferdinand Noelke sheared 800 ewes in the spring of 1871 at Georgetown, Texas. A cold rain killed every sheep the next night. He was so broke, he had to let the tutor go, schooling our grandfather and great uncles. Cousin Whiskers, looks like the choice now is whether we cry like babies or fire the tutor."

In the period, the crew came onto the Divide. The smallest wool harvest here since 1955 took one day. I didn't ask about Las Vegas. I did my part and minded my business. I am thankful Whiskers was a good enough neighbor to let me shear in his pens. I forgot to ask where the workers went who struck for higher pay. Might be they were off to Las Vegas, too.