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For the few woolie operators left in the shortgrass country, February opens the shearing season. Pasture-wise, prospects look good for spring lambing. Winter weeds cling close to the ground. After 11 years of dry weather, sheep and cow's lips and teeth calibrate down to skimming the dirt line to harvest the tiniest fragments of nourishment. Cattle are few, yet the survivors know how to conserve strength by not bending over to graze in the long empty spaces, but to go direct to the prickly pear cactus to salivate over the thorny pads and build balls of indigestible fiber.

The shortgrass saying goes, "Sheep are the poor man's animal." Today the adage has changed to: "Man shouldn't have to be this poor to run sheep." Government aid of 40 cents a pound on wool pays the shearing expense, however, leaving about six-bits over to trim a \$15 per head feed bill. The \$3 a head subsidy on feeder lambs covers, or should cover, predator control if the herder runs his own trap lines and skimps on baits and equipment.

"Dues and subscriptions" expenses changed this year, too. Livestock associations have to charge more because of declining membership. Also, the dramatic shift of power to urban interests in the state legislatures forebodes a decrease in salaries of rural schoolteachers, the very vanguard of the ranch economy. Without ol' Mom or Granny's salary or pension, the hollow horn and woolie business

resembles a marine salvage company looking for treasure, but catching nothing but barnacles on the iron claws.

Over the holidays, my protégés and I searched for sidelines to continue the ranch. North of the place on the highway, coyotes den on the once bountiful sheep ranges, threatened only be a severe epidemic of sharp-fanged bobcats pushing the hungry eagles and ravenous prairie wolves to the south in search of food. Eighty miles from the headquarters, the boundaries of the Big Bend Park are marked by mountain lion and black bear tracks in the sandbars of the Pecos River, ever increasing the size of the huge federal breeding ground for beasts of prey.

Sitting around a holiday table, or hooked together on the wire service, my protégés see no farther than memory. Memory of those big dust-boiling lamb shipments we pulled off at the old ranch, or memory of drifting black cows up the railroad and driving the mothers away from corrals full of autumn fat calves. Off in the city, they can't conceive of us ever being without a dual-purpose operation, or perhaps being with a "no-purpose operation."

I hit upon my first idea at Christmas while turning the guest bird dog Buck out in the morning for a romp in the yard. Confined in the closed-in back porch, the pungency of wet dog hair filled the air space. Mother's rubber gasket, wire clamp jars rested on the top shelf above Buck's bed. The higher the humidity rose, the stronger the smell became.

Distracted by the clutter, I clamped the lids on four of the jars.

The idea hit as the first breath of the crisp winter air rushed in the open door to release Buck. "Pet lovers, dog lovers in all forms and fashion, adore their canine companions to the very core of affection held between the two species. Up on those shelves sits a fortune in pure Black Lab Retriever odor captured in a glass jar. Marketed through the right channels, man will never be far away from a comforting vial of the most important presence in his life."

Additional inspiration came from the carpet cleaner kept on hand for the holiday activity. A tag on the spray bottle read, "We donate part of every sale to the North Texas Animal Shelter." Brilliant business minds linked the rug cleaner to an animal shelter. Next thing, the rug cleaner will be donating to "Unplanned Parenthood," a subsidiary of "Multi-birth of America." Toddlers give pooches and tabbies a close race at soiling carpets. The only sensible rug to have around either party is the hanging variety, and that won't work in households where the cat has claws.

I rushed back in the kitchen to awaken my son John, a professional bird dog trainer and an artist. I asked him to work on the idea of designing an atomizer to spray dog scent at his kennel club meetings. Implored him to design a label for the jars while the idea was fresh. I told him I thought

we could capture a hundred samples during this one storm; plus when he returned home to Connecticut, we could use the champion bloodlines of his dog to expand our business.

Compared to the carpet cleaner, my plan is amateur. Yet every time I pass the crowded pet food aisle in the grocery store, I yearn for more of the action than shipping an occasional old soaper horse. I'd sure like to partner with the rug cleaner guy. He might know a way to sidestep Australia and revive the wool business in Texas.