

Not much action occurs nowadays on rogue bulls knocking down water gaps so runaway billy goats and fugitive woolies can escape. At least not much goes on in our neighborhood over unclaimed, unbranded livestock. The neighborhood has a good reputation of returning strays.

With labor so short, it's remarkable the policy continues. Hard also to spot a brand in a big corral with barely enough help to hold the cattle for an accurate count, or catch an off mark down a dusty chute from a balky old sister sulking with her head down. But if we come up short a cow in the winter, and after the neighborhood has been cased to no avail, the buzzards generally find her in the spring. Few mysteries are left unsolved.

Before goats became valuable, the wild Spanish variety caused more trouble among neighbors than partnership water, spoiled teenagers and party line telephone etiquette put together. Unbranded and unmarked, worth fractions of what goats bring today, those brush popping "espanoles" were hard to send or find a home. On the old \$5 a head price for a young nanny, not many f.o.b. deals could be arranged to have goats picked up by the owner.

Too, Spanish goats can't be caught on flypaper. Young dogs and young men had the stamina but lacked the judgement

to reach the pens with the herd. And old hands' enthusiasm for racing across slick ledge rocks to head wild goats spilling through brush and cactus dimmed once the cost of setting a hind leg in an Angelo doctor's office was charged against the once upon a time price of \$3 a head for a kid goat.

The scrapie law offers a new way to trace the previous owners of sheep. All ewes sold in Texas have to have a white eartag coded with the seller's name and flock's location. The Animal Health Commission in Austin links the sheep to the rancher with a click on the computer. The way sheep numbers are dwindling, however, it won't be long until the commission gives the information by memory.

Last month, while taking up the bucks, we found a numbered case in the form of a coming four year-old ewe. The adjoining ranch disclaimed ownership. An hombre's wife to the north checked and said the number in the sheep's white tag didn't fit her records. On the next step, the Animal Health Commission in Austin traced the ewe's point of origin to a banker in Sanderson, Texas, some 200 miles from my South Pasture.

Once I gave up finding the owner close by, I called the bank in Sanderson. He sounded like a young guy, touched by my honesty. Not soured by time and experience like

jugkeepers around other parts of the shortgrass country, who might kill the connection the first time "sheep" was mentioned in a conversation. Also, he felt safe talking to a herder over 200 miles away. Makes a big difference to have that much buffer zone between the needy and the needed.

The banker said the sheep had been sold to a buyer in Fort Stockton. The buyer handles thousands of head of ewes and lambs. Once I reached him, he thought of two countries where he might have sold the ewes from Sanderson, leaving me only about 5000 square miles or thereabouts to find the owner. He agreed the best solution was to sell the ewe in the name of the Boys' Ranch. (I once shipped quite a number of livestock to be sold on behalf of the Boys' Ranch when I ranched next to railroad shipping pens that had a very active lost and found department. Worst experience was when the owner of a pug-nosed Berkshire boar remembered it was his after the hog was sold.)

There'll be worse mix-ups after the bulls are turned out this winter. One neighbor already promises added excitement by buying two Longhorn bulls. Takes more than an administrative office computer to trail those rascals. But we will be able to trace their path next year by the abundance of pinto calves.

Postscript: The ewe is in the horse trap on the Divide in case an owner comes forth. Wouldn't be a bad idea to claim her, as she's bred to lamb in March.