

JULY 16, 1987

One of the fast trains of the British Railways whisked us up from London to Edinburgh in a few hours. We arrived in a cold rain, one day ahead of the opening of the International Mohair Convention.

It was obvious from the way the goat herders were hovering underneath their umbrellas and wrapping their raincoat collars around their necks that they are as susceptible to dampness as their flocks are after shearing. Once we were unloaded at the hotel and their shivering became even more intense, I considered prescribing an emergency bracer of the fine whiskey that is distilled in Scotland to keep them from chilling down. A cold rain on fresh sheared goats was what put me out of that business. But judging from the speed in which the herders disappeared from the lobby, I suspect that over the counter fortifications were close at hand.

Edinburgh, I found, exists in an aura of antiquity. High on a hill above the modern settlement, red cobblestone streets encircle churches 1000 years old. Above those wobbly streets, a castle reigns high above an embankment. Banners unfurl from tall, stone watch towers; at noon, a guardsman fires a cannon blast to salute the past and herald the future. And to polish this dramatic setting, the news is spread that Her Majesty the Queen of the British Kingdom is due in town for a summer visit.

Down the hillside, the new part of the city is well stocked in monuments, statues and modern shops. Traffic in wool sweaters dominates the tourist trade. Fine crystalware and colorful kilts and handsome black jackets are also top runners.

At one of these stores the manager was able to associate me with a recently served team of lady shoppers from our delegation. Credit card slips, travelers checks, odd pieces of coin and bank notes were still strewn across her checkout counter. Before I caught on to what had happened she had seized my right hand and kissed my fingers. Tears were welling up in her eyes and benedictions were flowing from her mouth. She was awash in her gratitude.

All of these Scottish and English chaps must be very sensitive people. At one of the big parties a toast to the English Charter Bank for hosting the mohair affair over rode the toast to the Queen. I thought perhaps the high pitch of emotion was caused by the bagpipe solos and the wild dancing, but then I recalled once long ago of being at a cattlemen's convention in the states when tribute was made to a Denver bank. I feared that the floor was going to break out into a wild cossack dance or some sort of aborigines exhibition. Like those cowboys, these wool and mohair spinners were well aware who was backing their action.

To catch up with the times, Scottish sweater merchants are going to have to get hold of themselves if they are going to be able to check the out of country buying sprees. The last I heard of the market, the sweater inventory is down to the patterns being held at the woolen mills. Edinburgh is going to have a hard time working out from under this many U.S. dollars.