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Labor shortages and the cover of dense mesquite thickets in the spring forced shortgrass herders to switch their wool harvest from post-lambing dates of April and May to pre-lambing operations in February. On the more severe bitterweed ranges, the winter date worked better than putting the poisoned sheep under stress in the warmer months of spring and early summer.

Most of our neighbors adopted the winter shearing. Goat Whiskers the Younger was the only one who built a special barn. The rest of us continue to rely on the natural cover of juniper cedars for a windbreak and plastic sheets from Wal-Mart to shade the shearing pens. The economics of raising buck and a half a pound wool are a big limiter on ranch improvements.

February shearing is risky in the shortgrass country. Fierce blizzards roar in from the Panhandle in a few hours, surprising everyone including the most astute professional weathermen. Last week during our work, I called every morning for a recorded forecast. Rain chances increased the closer we came to the appointed time. (Note to hollow-horn operators: wool must be dry to be sacked or baled. Please try getting something in your head besides cancer-eyed cows and lumpy-jawed bulls.) The day before the crew arrived, the San Angelo station missed the forecast so bad, they must have left their telephone off the hook, because the line stayed busy.

The shearers came to us from Goat Whiskers the Younger's outfit. Along with a couple of days of sheep shearing, the Whiskers ranch peeled the hair from over a thousand head of goats, daring a cold rain to chill down his whole flock.

However, weather wasn't the only risk involved in the project. When Whiskers rounds up sheep or cattle, he invites whoever stops to allow his livestock to cross Highway 67, or whoever waves back going down the road, to come eat lunch. At any break during the morning, he might call half a dozen more folks to come join them. His friend Aunt Annie feeds all comers, and has fed up close to 30 people during shearing. About half of the setting are unexpected guests and the rest is a collection of workers from herders to wool graders.

But this year a big transport loaded with sulfuric acids turned over and closed Interstate 10 down south, diverting part of the traffic onto Highway 67 through Whiskers' ranch. I knew the increased volume was going to put Aunt Annie's kitchen in a bind; plus, if she grew sick and tired of running an open-ended ranch cafeteria, she was going to be limited in her choice of escape routes.

Without Whiskers being the wiser, I declined his daily invitations to lunch and telephoned Aunt Annie afterwards for her report. We whispered in Spanish to deceive the loafers sprawled in her kitchen: "*Cuantos?*" (How many?) I'd ask. She'd reply, "*Ahora solamente once.*" (Now there are

only 11.) We then switched to a normal tone in English, perhaps a casual observation of the weather, or maybe a review of a new book over at the library.

Once I was free to come by to talk to Whiskers and the shearers, I found he had hired the kids living on the ranch able to eat at the bunkhouse and two cowgirls from town who were bound to have lighter appetites than males for a horseback crew. It appeared Whiskers was going in for assistants more prone to eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and sip strawberry Kool-aid than match a midday free-for-all over a platter of fried round steak.

He reigned in the greatest of spirits. Classers and wool graders rushed over and around floor sweepers and fleece handlers to bring off a modern wool harvest only matched by the huge wool marketing center in Sydney, Australia. The shearing crew had a good cook, too. Whiskers gave them enough goats to assure that if Aunt Annie lost her patience running a modern-day Harvey House, he had the shearing capitan's kitchen as a backup.

In the times of dutch oven bread and barbecue goat cooked in pits, odors wafting from the campfires of shearing crews stimulated the men's appetites to wild proportions. In particular, this was true when breakfast was served about three hours before daylight and lunch came off at two in the afternoon.

The Interstate stayed closed for three days. The cross-country travelers barely decelerated for livestock crossing

the road. Before I finished shearing, the manager at the Mertzson wool house brought a wool buyer from South Carolina and the head of the Wool Co-op by the pens. The main theme of the visit centered on how much they wished they had made Goat Whiskers the Younger's ranch at the middle of the day

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