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Uncle Goat Whiskers always marked lambs on the 25th of April, or close to that date. In the late season of Uncle Whiskers' life, "close to that date" meant plus or minus the 35-second difference between his watch and the Greenwich Meridian on the 25th of April.

Also, had one of his cedar hilltops erupted with the volcanic force of Mount Vesuvius, sending lava boiling into the valleys, Goat Whiskers would have found a way of cooling the wagon tongue enough to hitch up the mules and conduct the first lamb marking operation held over steaming lava beds. It would have been the same had the peak of the Ice Age, the descent of the ancient sea beds, or the height of the Great Plagues of Europe fallen on the 25th.

Uncle Goat Whiskers knew to be strict about marking his lambs young. Yet strangely, he had us throwing whiteface calves to castrate and dehorn when they were close to being large enough to wean. Whiskers, in short, did not have a turn-back switch. Plus, he propounded and perpetuated the range boss's litany: "If the blast of a northern dust storm, the snowflakes from Artic fronts, or the ashes from prairie fires threaten to choke you, 'little cowboy,' tie a bandanna over your mouth and learn to be quick to shut yore eyes."

This April is the first spring in 60-plus years that I haven't helped mark lambs. (Mark means dock the tails, castrate the males, and notch the ears – put in an "earmark.") Have had two invitations. Young Whiskers asked me over to eat lunch with his crew, a later-in-the-day version of the one that goes, "Why not join us for a ranch breakfast a couple of hours before daylight and stay over for 11 or 12 hours of physical exertion, broken by a mid-day picnic on the marking grounds?"

An eavesdropper unaccustomed to Young Whiskers' charm might have mistaken the tone of the lunch invitation to be for a fox hunt on tall black jumping Thoroughbreds behind a pack of liver-spotted dogs, followed by a grouse shoot over an estate adorned in golden sunlight over plush meadows. However, first-time losers examined in district court, awed by the very force of Caesar's power, enjoined by fear of swearing such a oath before the image of God almighty, might blurt denial that he or she fell for such a trap over a vague promise of a free meal.

Let's say my dossier shows falling for the same story 10 times in a row – 10 spring works at the Whiskers Holiday Inn Ranch. Should I be allowed to vote in the free elections of Irion County? Be granted the right to serve on a jury of my peers? Or should I be suspect of early

symptoms of advanced mental deterioration common in old sheep ranchers bogged in a mire of memories of dry springs, poor lamb crops, bad shearing crews, and miserable wool markets?

Put another way, the two lead lawyers of the defense of the two Enron scoundrels on trial in Houston might win a stay or postponement on those charges. Say, settle for voting in general elections with the understanding not to vote in close races or runoffs. As to jury service, only a few judges alive in the country remember when I was young enough to serve on a jury. Those Houston fixers are plenty sly, yet even those tricksters can't overcome time.

The second invitation to help mark lambs stemmed from the common practice all over the shortgrass country today to ask anyone we meet if they want to work. Doesn't matter if the prospect is an old granny who fumbles so bad she drops her thimble underneath a bench at the bus stop, or her grandkid sitting by her winding up his yo-yo. Neither is under-qualified for the task. As long as she is limber enough to bend over and able to see well enough to retrieve her thimble, and the kid knows enough to wind up a yo-yo string straight, they become prospects for day working on a ranch.

When this guy asked, he didn't wait for an answer. Been so long since he'd hired extra help, he'd probably forget to pick them up, or might go off and leave them at the ranch. Be tedious, too, to tell his wife that he hired an extra hand, as she had been working sheep as long as the rest of us without knowing there was such a luxury.

The truth is that making a comeback is going to be the problem. I don't even know which side to mount a roundup four-wheeler, or hold her in the right place driving sheep. Coyotes and bobcats causing the lamb crops to be smaller is going to make the works easier. So the time may return when I can once again be part of the Young Whiskers' Holiday Inn Ranch crew.