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J. D. Robb

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SHEEP SHEARING IN NEW MEXICO 1956

*By J. D. ROBB**

THE methods of shearing sheep have not, it seems, changed very greatly in New Mexico since the introduction of mechanical clippers in the decade from 1895 to 1905. It was the writer's good fortune to be a visitor at the McWilliams Ranch for two good days during the 1956 shearing. This had been going on for several days before my wife and I arrived and would continue after we left. The daily procedure was as follows:

At about 5-5:30 in the morning four or five men go out on horseback in order to bring in the sheep from a certain section of the range or a certain pasture. The sheep thus collected average about 500 to 600 a day. Sometime between 7 and 8 a.m. the sheep gang and attendants go down to the shearing floor, an area floored with concrete so that the fleeces, as they fall, do not become mixed with dirt. This floor is constantly kept swept by one man during the shearing. A truck is drawn up alongside this concrete floor. Attached to it and operating from the motor of the truck through the mechanical means of a belt rotating shaft and gears are 8 pairs of clippers. The 8 shearers stand side by side. A number of the sheep are kept penned up from the day before in order to be ready for shearing when operations begin in the morning. These sheep are led through an ingenious system of small and smaller corrals to the shearing floor. When the shearers are ready to commence operations a number of sheep, usually around 30 or 40, are led, or prodded with much shouting and flourishing of sticks or rubber hoses, into the shearing area. Each of the shearers seizes an unshorn sheep by the hind leg and starting in the region of the udders, which he trims carefully, trims the legs, the belly and then around the left side, over the head, and back down the right side. The entire operation of shearing a ewe consumes not over five minutes, sometimes as little as three minutes. A ram, especially if he has

* With the collaboration of Frank and Tura McWilliams.

horns, takes longer. The sheep are held carefully with their feet off the ground so that held by the shearer with two legs and a spare hand their struggles are ineffectual and they quickly give up, except for a convulsive start when nipped occasionally by the clippers.

As the sheep is released the attendant, who picks up and ties the fleece, hands a brass counter (two, if it is a ram fleece) to the sheep shearer who then puts it in his pocket and selects another sheep for shearing.

The fleece is then carried by an attendant to one end of the shearing floor, where a platform is erected. On the far side of this platform two frames are erected, on each of which is a large wool sack fastened by means of a large steel ring. The fleeces are dumped into this sack by another man who, with his feet, tramps the fleeces down into the bag so that they fill all the available space within the bag tightly.

As the shorn sheep accumulate within the shearing floor area they are permitted to escape into a small adjoining pen by an attendant who is very clever at opening the gate and closing it after the shorn sheep and before any of the unshorn sheep can escape.

In this smaller pen the sheep are marked with bright colored paint, a cold brand being placed on the sheep's side by means of a branding iron like those used in branding cattle. In the case of the McWilliams sheep, the brand is a red letter "B". This brand is simply for quick and long range identification. Adjoining ranch owners use different colors of paint, or make their brands on a different portion of the sheep's anatomy. For close and final identification the sheep are earmarked, the earmark in the case of the McWilliams Ranch being a wedge-shaped cut in the end of the left ear. The sheep are also further identified by a horizontal scar across the nose.

Although the shearing here is scheduled to take place before lambing, there are usually a few prematurely born lambs. Since large numbers of sheep are handled, the sheep of a day's or morning's shearing are kept penned in for some time after the shearing in order that in the midst of the

relatively small group of penned sheep, these lambs may find their mothers and vice-versa.

The activity on the shearing floor is difficult to describe. It is like a noisy factory in full operation. There is great clatter of machinery and whirring of the shears. The shearers work with almost incredible speed and concentration. There are many men at work at different tasks. Some, like the herders, are employees of the rancher. The shearing crew, however, are employees of the boss, Lorenzo Villa. There were engaged at this shearing beside Frank McWilliams, who supervised and helped at various tasks, five herdsmen, eight shearers, a tramper, two fleece collectors, a sweeper. Mr. McWilliams did the branding but was relieved by one of the herdsmen on his arrival. Every one of these men has a task which he executes with great skill. There is a feeling of sociability and excitement, competition and pleasure. There is also fatigue as was apparent when one of the shearers would straighten up to give his tense back muscles a rest.

The shearing starts at about 8 in the morning and continues until noon. At about 10 o'clock the rancher begins to examine a certain portion of the horizon with field glasses mentally calculating whether the expected flock from the range will arrive in time to prevent the interruption of shearing operations. Finally a faint cloud of dust drifts up from one of the arroyos and presently an almost imperceptible streak of white will show itself against the side of the hill, which, on closer inspection, proves to be the flock of sheep coming through a gate or saddle in the hills. As the sheep near the enclosure, particularly if they are old sheep which have been sheared before, they show great reluctance to be herded into the corral and individuals or groups of sheep will bolt and there is great shouting and excitement as the riders spur their horses at a gallop after the recalcitrant animals.

Such is a sheep shearing on a big New Mexico ranch in the year 1956, as it has gone on for many years and as I suspect will go on for many more.

An interesting feature of sheep shearing is the use of counters. The three counters illustrated in the photograph are of a type that have been used in New Mexico for many

years when large flocks of sheep are sheared. One of these counters bearing the initials of the patron of the sheep shearing crews (in this case, Lorenzo Villa, of Carlsbad, New Mexico) is given to each shearer as he completes the shearing of a fleece. The small circular counter represents credit for one fleece, the octagonal counter represents 25 fleeces, and the large circular counter represents 100 fleeces. They are convertible into cash at the current rate when presented to the issuer. The current rate is 30¢ for a ewe fleece, 60¢ for a ram fleece, of which one half goes to Villa and the rest to the shearer. At night after the shearing is over, the shearers frequently gamble, using these counters in place of money, and it is said that sometimes one man will end up a sheep shearing season with a goodly portion of the earnings of the entire crew in his pocket.

