SHEEP

By Barbara Merriam

The sound of the generator that sends power to the shears drowns out everything but the startled cries of the sheep as they are dragged into the line-up by their legs. It is June and the traveling band of sheep shearers are beginning their work of relieving a thousand sheep of their woolly coats. The men, probably a group of Mormons up from Utah, wear black aprons which are slippery with lanolin from the woolly backs that have leaned against them as the clippers made a path from chest to belly and down to groin. The men are silent, intent on the task. They seem to be in an informal competition to determine who can shear the most sheep. The air is close. It smells of sweat and sheep manure but also of the long sisal bags waiting to receive the shorn wool.

Each bag is held open at the top by a frame so the person filling it can gather up a fleece quickly and throw it in. When the bag seems nearly full, that person, often a local boy hired for the specific job, climbs into the bag and stomps it down. The shearers try to keep each fleece intact, which makes the stomper's job easier.

The sheep, happy to be liberated from their ordeal, waste no time trotting through an open door to the pen where their fellows are already cropping the short June grass. Sometimes sheep look as if they have been clipped by a drunken barber; they show patches of bright blood where the shearer came too close. Such a sight is unusual today; these men are professionals.

Sheep and herders with their dogs will soon be on their way to the high country where the sheep will spend a summer gorging on the sweet grasses that grow at high elevations. The herder will pass the summer mostly outdoors, his only home a canvas topped wagon with room for only a bed and a shelf for a wash basin. His is a solitary life, and one of great responsibility. The price of wool could often save a rancher from bankruptcy if his other crops had a bad year.

The myth that sheep and cattle can't be raised on the same ranch is just that, but there must be enough land for both because sheep crop the grass close to the ground.

As a child of five or six, I visited a sheepherder's camp with my cousin, whose job as a camp tender involved bringing mail and groceries every week or two. We visited Valier Pfescu, one of a number of Romanian herders who worked for my father during the 1920s and 30s. His groceries included a jar of fiery hot pickles which he passed to me with a mischievous grin. Unsuspecting, I took a big bite and soon felt my mouth on fire. I knew I was the victim of a joke and I was determined not to cry, but I will never forget the power of that pickle.

At the high point of our sheep ranching, we had 30 bands of 1,000 sheep in each band. This translated to a lot of sheepherders. They had their own bunkhouse at the home ranch because like sheep and cattle, they did not mix with the cowboys. There is cowboy poetry describing sheepherders having gone crazy trying to figure out which
side of their quilt was the longer of the two. Perhaps they were more likely to be peculiar because of their solitary life.

Sheepherders eventually became scarce and the American sheep industry suffered from foreign competition. On one of my visits to the ranch as an adult I learned that my family was no longer in the sheep business - there was not a sheep on the place. “What became of the last sheep,” I asked. “Did you eat it?” No one remembered. The sheep’s place had been taken by fancy cattle and a few bison. I wondered if the sheepherders had gone extinct, too, and what had become of the Mormon sheep shearers. I suppose the shearers were now wealthy businessmen. I know what became of Valier Pfescu. He saved his pay, sent for his wife in Romania and bought a lavender Cadillac!