

News Column

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SHEARING SHEEP WITH MY DAD

Sheep shearing used to be about the most dreaded farm chore I would tackle each year — it ranked right up there with chopping thistles and scooping manure. Recently though, I have come to enjoy shearing sheep.

Shearing is still a physically demanding task,... one an intelligent man of my age would hire someone else to do. Interestingly though, the job has gotten easier the last two years, and the memories of my dad that are stirred up each time I shear make it almost enjoyable.

Here's the back story – the reason shearing sheep stirs up memories of my dad.

Dad was a semi professional sheep shearer when I was a very young child. Farming was his real profession, but he sheared sheep for others each spring to earn money to put food on our table. He was good at it and would shear as many sheep in a day as I care to shear in 10 days.

There were three of us boys and I was the youngest. On shearing days we would spend all day together in the barn, actually working hard enough that we didn't have time to fight. I was probably 5 or 6 years old when I got to start helping.

My favorite job on the shearing crew was in the wool bag. After three or four fleeces had been tied and dropped in the bag, then it was time for a kid. The kid's job was to pack the wool in the bag, making a nice, tight, heavy bag of wool.

Once in the bag, my only hope was that there would be enough sheep sheared before noon that I would be able to climb out for lunch. My brother would throw a fleece in on top of me and

I would claw my way on top of it and pack it in with the others. Because it was about seven feet to the bottom of the bag, I sometimes couldn't make it out by lunch time and had to have help from my oldest brother.

The middle brother, by the way, would have just left me in the bag.

I wasn't always in the bag – Steve (the middle brother) liked that job too. Sometimes I tied the fleeces and threw them in on top of him. Our oldest brother, Gary, was almost four years older than me, and he was big enough to catch the ewes and knock them down for dad. He never got the fun job in the bag.

We spent a lot of hours in barns shearing sheep, so that is still the picture in my mind when I think of my dad — I see a handsome, athletically built, slender man bent over a white-faced ewe, methodically and skillfully removing her wool stroke by stroke.

There wasn't a lot of conversation while the sheep were being sheared because Dad was working too hard to do any more than bark orders. However, I have lots of conversations with him now – in my mind – as I try to mimic the shearing moves I saw him make thousands of times when I was a child.

One conversation that has stuck with me for 40 years now happened in the pickup instead of the sheep barn. I remember admiring a neighbor's no-till milo in the early 80s and wondering out loud what he did that we weren't doing, to make it look so good.

Dad's response was short, but to the point, "Ask him. He'll tell you."

Wheat Plot Tour – May 25

As I prepare for another wheat variety plot tour – Wednesday, May 25 at the SAVE Farm on North 52nd Street – Dad's comment to me 40 years ago reminds me of the value of learning from our neighbors. We will provide a featured speaker, an expert on wheat varieties, but the

real learning at our plot tours occurs neighbor to neighbor.

You are invited to attend this year's Riley County Extension wheat plot tour on May 25, starting with a free supper at 6:30 p.m. The address for the SAVE Farm is 9680 North 52nd Street. From Riley, the SAVE Farm is 3 miles east on highway 24, 2 ½ miles south on Anderson Avenue, then 1 mile east on North 52nd Street.

Romulo Lollato, K-State Research and Extension Wheat and Forages Agronomist, will be the featured speaker. But,....don't be surprised if you learn just as much or more during supper as you do during the tour.

Reservations are needed by Monday, May 23. Register online at www.riley.ksu.edu.

If you have questions, or if you prefer to make your reservations by phone, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmcclure@ksu.edu.

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