



SHEARING THE SHEEP

By Alice Baker

It was May, a warm May, back at the turn of the Century.

"Tomorrow we're going down to the mill to wash sheep. How does that suit you, John Earl?"

"Down to Wambolds?"

"Yeh, that's the nearest place to wash sheep".

This dialogue brought sparkle to John Earl Baker's eyes. New happenings always did on the Francis Baker farm, south of Eagle.

Five o'clock the next morning saw Earl up with the hired man. At seven o'clock all the chores were done and he was whooping the sheep out of the yard on their four mile trip to Eagle Lake to the sheep wash.

"Get to the corner and drive them east", the Hired Man yelled. Sheep were easy to guide if only you got there first.

Earl was already rounding the flock to the right. He would have to watch a big bell wether to keep him out of open field gates and farm yards. After a couple miles of chasing, Earl found that if he threw a stone into the gap a little ahead of the wether, he did not need to be Johnny-on-the-Spot.

Three miles of off-and-on running would have tired most boys, but the goal of the pond of water where the men would wash the sheep was a spot of interest which blotted out any feeling of fatigue he might have had.

Finally they reached the mill pond. The miller had already made two pens: one for the unwashed, one for the washed. Each man grabbed a sheep, walked into the water waist deep, scrubbed each animal thoroughly, and shunted her into the 'washed' pen. This segment of the process was repeated with each sheep and constituted a laborious job, for the flock was big. The return trip at four o'clock was more tiring for the men than the out-ward journey. If they had had foresight to bring a change of clothing, home coming could have been fairly comfortable, otherwise it was a hazardous happening.

The day after the sheep-washing, father swept the big barn floor, so clean one could almost eat off it. He also fenced in a yard in front of the barn with sheep-racks and fence panels.

Two days later Tom Burton and his two or more helpers came into the farm yard. His arrival was always announced by cries of horror, a round of swearing by some new hired man, and uncontrollable laughter by Tom. Tom never varied in springing a new practical joke. His top-notch was to lead his trick pony close up to an unsuspecting victim; the pony would rear and the victim, thinking to save himself from being crushed by the animal, would scramble away shouting terror-stricken, and blood curdling yells.

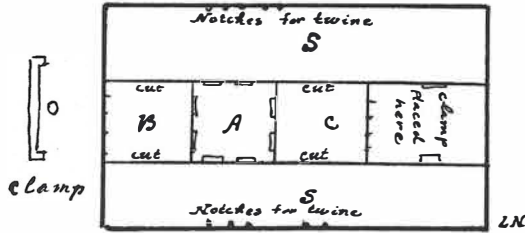
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Baker, John Earl

People
Sept 13-1854

Now the sheep were brought into the small yard. Each shearer grabbed a sheep, took her into the barn, sat her down and began to shear. Each man had his own method of shearing. Some sheared the belly, legs, and head first; others sheared round and round.

When each sheep was sheared, she ran bleating to her equally vocal lamb. After several sheep had been clipped of their coats, the bleating became a pandemonium that drove hearers almost as frantic as the frightened sheep.



If there were three or four shearers, one man was kept busy tying up the fleeces. Every sheep-man kept a wool-box. It was threaded up with wool-twine. The fleece was carefully picked up, inverted on section (A) of the box, Scraps of wool from the legs and head put on the fleece, sides (S and S) brought up, clamped with a special fastener (D), fleece punched down in the box that was now formed, white wool brought over the scraps of wool, the twine tightened, and tied tightly to make a cube-shaped bundle.

Sheep-shearing was a tiring job, hence at ten A.M. and at three P.M. time was taken out for lunch. John Earl's mother or the hired-girl brought sandwiches, ginger-bread, and coffee and the shearers rested their tense, cramped muscles.

Five o'clock brought relief to all members of the sheep shearing drama: the shearers stood, stretched, shook themselves; the farmer smiled a grin of pure satisfaction at the prospect of a good money crop; the neglected lamb bunted his mother's udder to satisfy his hour-long hunger, twitched his stub of a tail in a paroxym of joy in gratitude for this reunion; and the listeners in the country-side gave a sigh of relief at the ceasing of that incessant, infernal, maddening bleating. Sheep-shearing was ended for another spring.

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"North Prairie is reached by travelling on the Milwaukee and Mississippi Railroad till you get there; that is, it is as far and perhaps farther by railroad than any other way. North Prairie comprises all the prairie and a good distance into the openings on three sides and a large marsh on the other. It was settled, that is after the Indians had left it, by the Yankees of Yorkshire, and on the outer edges by a few Irish Germans, and Scotch Prussians in the center to fill in the gaps."

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