



FOREWORD

The life of a shepherd is a temptation I have resisted so far, and when I see sheep at a fair I suppress the urge to make them a part of my life, for which those sheep ought to feel mighty grateful. My pasture in the city would be no more than a light snack for a small flock, and my life is too comical for sheep and too fastidious. City life has bred in me an instinct to travel with herds while keeping my distance and avoiding eye contact, and the idea of grabbing someone and prying open his mouth or examining the hindquarters is very far from my mind.

Still, it's good to examine a life one doesn't choose and to see what was missed, which is why my son and I drove up to visit the Parkers in the summer of 1982. My journal for Monday, July 12, reads, in part:

Got to Ron and Teresa Parker's place at one. They have 93 acres on which they raise sheep bred especially for their fine long wool which the P's sell (by mail) to woolspinners and knitters. Moved here six years ago, lived in an Airstream trailer for six months with infant son, then moved

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into one-room workshop with solar panel roof temporarily while building large circular solar home nearby which they are still building.

RP: “I grew up in L.A., Teresa in Wichita, neither of us on a farm, so when we came out here we had never handled animals before, other than dogs and cats. At first we tried to drive the sheep from pasture to barn and barn to pasture—running at them and clapping our hands and barking like we imagined sheepdogs bark—and we just about ran ourselves silly. The sheep would move a little ways, turn around, and stare at us. Finally we discovered that sheep can be led. They’re out there wandering around and looking for a leader. You walk up to them and at the right moment you turn and they will follow you, especially if you reward them with grain now and then. I say, ‘Sheep sheep sheep’ to call them, or if they’re a ways off, I call ‘o-VEE’ which is slang Latin and which I read in Thomas Hardy’s *Far from the Madding Crowd* and which works.

“Sheep are stoics. We perform operations on them that would put a human in bed for a week, but the sheep get right up and walk away from it. One of Joshua’s little rams had kidney stones, so we opened up his belly, cut off a few inches of the urethra, and strung it out below his anus, which is a handy thing to know. He’s up and walking.

“All the sheep have names, and the triplets we try to name in series, such as Good, Bad, and Indifferent, or Shirley, Goodness, and Mercy. We lamb in April and by now we’re ready to ship some to market. We breed them for wool, which we sell for \$4.00 or so a pound (ordinary wool goes for 50 cents/lb. or less), but still, wool accounts for only a quarter of our income; meat provides the rest. We slaughter a couple of sheep a year for ourselves, which is hard to do but you just steel yourself and do it.”

The P’s have a fine little sheep dog, Spot, black with white chest markings, who climbed all over us, since she had been chained up for two days while the P’s were in Mpls. After lunch we baled hay with them, using an antique Minneapolis-Moline tractor and John Deere baler, then had supper (bok choy).

RP: “It’s almost cheaper to buy hay than raise your own; in fact it is. You can get hay for \$1.25/bale, which is close to what it costs me to bale, or

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less, but—I'm a farmer and I like to do it myself. Most of the farmers around here don't earn much. It'd be much smarter to invest money in government bonds than in a farm; you'd earn more—but we're farmers. That's what we like to do. So we do it."

RP is also a writer. Sold article on sheep to *Country Journal* and is writing a book about sheep-raising for Scribners. Has written some short fiction with a sheep farm setting which he sends to *Atlantic* and *NYer* and collects rejection slips.

Were invited to spend night in Airstream but declined due to highway fever & also felt if we stayed one night we might want to stay for the summer and beyond. They are gentle & attentive people & good company, which I find true of most farmers. Wonder if, in all the technical writing on animal husbandry, anyone notes the civilizing influence animal raising may have on people. Maybe it's simply understood by all—that for all the modern discoveries, shepherding is an ancient scientific culture & teaches people more than they intended to learn & brings out qualities in them they might not attain directly through moral ambition.

I THOUGHT SO then and think about it now as I sit at home in the city, worn out after a day of trying to rush a piece of fiction to a state of perfection and beating it to death in the process. Nobody rushes sheep—to perfection or anywhere else. Perhaps if sheep were part of my life, they would impose an order on it and bring out in me the calm patience and good humor so evident in this book. Perhaps you, dear readers who raise sheep or are thinking about it (or raise sheep *and* are thinking about it), can take some pleasure in knowing someone envies you and your enterprise. It's a pleasure to envy you and imagine what sheep raising is like, and if I'm all wrong—well, no sheep will ever suffer as a result.

—GARRISON KELLOR