

Museum News: The Good Pastore

By C. W. (Bill) Smith

The ranching industry in the future Terrell County began with one man, Charles Downie, a Scotsman who arrived in the area in 1881 and set up the first sheep ranch. Even though today the sheep ranching industry in Texas and Terrell County has fallen on hard times due to the elimination of the wool and mohair subsidy in the 1990s, there are still a few sheep being run in the area.

Mr. Downie and others in the beginning did sheepherding in the traditional European method, with shepherds leading small flocks to pasture. For decades the area was largely unfenced with predators roaming the land. Unguarded sheep would have been easy-pickings for the coyotes, wolves and panthers, so shepherds were necessary to move the flocks, protect them and bring them to the scarce water sources. Dogs were not used much in Terrell County so the job was up to one man for each flock. Large herds were divided up into many flocks and big ranches employed an army of shepherds.

Like all armies the sheep ranch was structured with different levels of command and duties. According to Charles Downie's grandson, Walter "G" Downie in the Terrell County History book, "Terrell County, Its Past, Its People," (Alice Evans Downie. Sanderson, Texas: Terrell Co. Heritage Commission, 1978) the army of shepherds on his grandfather's ranch consisted of the shepherd (or pastore,) the rustler (vaciero,) the wagon-man (waginer,) the sheep boss (mayerdomo,) and during the lambing season extra workers, herders, lamb bosses (ahijadores) and "tailers" (coleros.) There was usually a Spanish name for these jobs because most of the shepherds were Hispanics from Mexico or of Mexican heritage and many could not speak English. It was a labor-intensive operation requiring careful planning and a good eye for logistics for most of the year. And, the larger the size of the ranch, the more complex was the task for running it.

"G" Downie was a real expert about sheep operations, having been raised on one of the larger ranches in the region, and he was happy to tell you anything you wanted to know. Some of the ranches in the area had upwards of 90,000 head of sheep, not to mention cattle and huge strings of horses to keep the ranch running properly. Large herds of goats were also maintained for meat to feed the workers. For many years more sheep, goats, cattle and boxcar loads of wool and mohair were shipped from Terrell County than any other place in the world. Terrell County wool and mohair sold for a premium price on the world markets.

Mr. Downie said that the base of the sheep pyramid consisted of the pastores, or shepherds. They lived with the flock, which consisted of 1000 to 2000 sheep. Unlike cowboys, who drive the herd of cattle across the country, the shepherd leads the sheep, taking them into the areas and pastures for the day. If sheep wandered off the path they were controlled by voice or by hurling rocks with a slingshot to bring them back. A few black sheep and sheep with bells were included in the flocks to help the herder keep track of the flock. A good shepherd knew his sheep and was constantly counting them to make sure there were no strays.

The sheep were herded and grazed from sunrise to sunset. During the heat of the day the pastore led them to water where they (and he) rested and sought shade from the hot sun. After noon they grazed their way back to the bedding ground for the night. Some shepherds spent the whole year with their sheep, only venturing to headquarters at shearing or lambing time.



Man on the Pard Schupbach Ranch with one of his mohair goats, 1915. Schupbach ranched in eastern Brewster County, but did business in Terrell County.

Photo: Schupbach Collection, Terrell County Museum

The pastore slept in a one-man tent and cooked over a campfire with skillets, Dutch ovens and a coffeepot, and carried a water barrel, a coffee grinder and a bedroll. He also carried a slingshot and water bottle or canteen for the day. To stay with his flock for that long a period the ranch had to deliver supplies by wagon about every two weeks.

To light their camp fires the pastore used a steel implement (eslabon) and flint, which is abundant in Terrell County. The eslabon was horseshoe-shaped strip of steel with small holes in the tips of the legs to tie it up or keep around the pastore's neck for easy use.

The sheep camps were set up in summer and fall on the eastern or southeastern slope of hills to get the breeze and in the winter and spring in canyons for protection from the cold wind. They were careful to set up camp on high ground due to unexpected flooding.

Just above the pastore was the rustler, or vaciero. His job was to manage three or four pastores and their flocks. He traveled by horse to each camp to count the sheep and to retrieve strays that the pastore could not find. The vaciero was talented at counting and managing the sheep, an expert shepherd. Another vaciero duty was to assist herders in moving their camps when the range conditions required relocation.

The vaciero needed the help of another man, the wagon-man or wagnero. His job was to bring supplies to the sheep camps and assist in moving a camp to new pasturage. Supplies were apportioned at the ranch commissary, basically a general store, and sent out to each camp with enough to last about two weeks. Each camp was given basic staples: flour, salt pork, sugar, coffee beans, baking powder, lard, salt and chile pepper. Sheep camps also were given half a goat or mutton every two weeks.

The general of the sheep ranch was the sheep boss, the mayordomo. He ran the sheep operation and especially had to plan the shearing season on large ranches. Shearing or clips usually occurred in May or June, with some shearing also done in the fall. Originally all clipping was done by hand with scissor-like shears, but larger ranches invested in shearing machines powered by steam engines and set up in a shearing shed. Some of the larger operations had two shearing sheds with 80 or 100 shearing machines. Large operations required many machines to get the job done in a reasonable amount of time. D. Hart in the Dryden area ran 90,000 head of sheep at one time...others had 20,000 or 30,000 head and to bring in that many flocks required careful planning and execution.

Another busy period was lambing season in March and April and required extra help: herders, lamb bosses (ahijadores) and "tailers" (coleros.) At just a couple of days old the lambs had to be ear-marked, docked (tails cut off) and castrated. The lambing boss would separate the ewes and their new lambs from the main flock to create a new flock, the "wet" flock. The "tailers" (coleros) helped bring up the new lambs at the back of the flock. The ewes which didn't lamb or had lost their lamb were separated into a "dry" flock for re-breeding for a fall lamb crop or to be sold. Dry flocks also were composed of castrated males and young ewes to be fattened for sale.

The shepherd's life was a lonely one. Occasionally peddlers would go to the sheep camps in their wagons to sell sundries to the herder: needles, thread, writing paper, envelopes, and various trinkets. Sometimes other peddlers would bring alcohol and girls and a hand-cranked phonograph to entertain for a price.

With the fencing of the country beginning about 1928 traditional shepherding fell by the wayside. Flocks were turned loose to graze in fenced pastures at their discretion. With the elimination of the wool and mohair subsidy by the US government in the 1990s and droughty times the sheep industry in Terrell County and across Texas took a nosedive. Many small ranchers sold out and larger ranches switched from sheep and mohair goats to meat goats, or went to exotic game hunting operations. The days of having 30,000 or 40,000 head of sheep on a ranch are gone, but the romance of history is still there, even though those who performed the task probably never saw it as romantic or historical. As old King Solomon said, "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven..." It seems that the time for big sheep ranching is past, but the land is there, waiting for its return.