

Happy New Year! That may seem a strange opening for our newsletter of November second. But, it really is not. Yesterday, on the first of the month, we sorted sheep and sent the ewe flock out with the rams. This is the beginning of our year on the sheep farm. What happens during the next few weeks will determine, to a great extent, how the winter, spring, summer, and early fall to come will develop. Everything that affects our livestock has an important effect on us.

When we sorted sheep yesterday morning, we worked in mud. A layer of straw in the sorting chute helped a great deal, but we have had rain for several days, and everything is wet. The ewes were wet, too, but we needed to do this job yesterday so that we could sort out the ewes that would be sent to auction this week as a result of the necessary culling to keep a healthy and relatively youthful flock of mother sheep. We also sorted out the group of ewe lambs that will be our "replacements" for those that had to be sold. We will keep them separate from the mature ewes.

We usually cull a ewe for one of two reasons. When sheep begin to lose their teeth as they age, they can no longer process their feed effectively. This is not usually a factor with our sheep until they reach the age of nine or ten. Udder health is our other primary concern. If a ewe develops mastitis, her milking ability is often reduced to one side of her udder. We hope to have mostly twin lambs, and a healthy ewe with a lamb nursing on each side is the goal.

There are a few other reasons for culling ewes. Sometimes, they just don't milk enough. If we are as vigilant as we hope to be during the lambing season, we cut off half of the ear tag on any poor milker. We do the same with a ewe that has some other problem we recognize at that time. Then, when fall comes, we know that for some reason--we don't second guess ourselves at this point--a ewe with a cut tag must be sold.

Once in a while, we have to cull a ewe that is a good looking sheep, is healthy, and milks well. She is likely one that is either not a good mother or one who is so possessive of her lambs and violent against all other lambs that she is a danger to the flock.

If a sheep does not lamb, we usually cull her the same year. It does

happen that a ewe slips by once in a while without a lamb and stays with the flock. But if there are no lambs two years in a row, there is no chance she will escape detection. She will nearly always be exceedingly fat, putting all the calories on her own body that the other ewes are converting to milk for their lambs. And we do keep lambing records, so we have a double check, as well.

There are usually a few favorites that escape culling, even when they have become old, have lost teeth, and are certainly "beyond their prime." They are those old faithfuls who live out their lives here where they were born. Petty is one of these. We have very few named ewes, but Petty has gradually acquired this moniker. She was a "pet" lamb, one that had been a "bottle" lamb for some reason. We don't usually keep these lambs, because the very fact that they were raised on the bottle indicates that the ewe had not been able to feed her lamb for some reason. That might well mean that the lamb would not turn out to be a good ewe. But, we missed Petty when we sold lambs that year, and she's been here ever since.

She's a good ewe, too. She usually has twins, is very maternal, and is not aggressive. She is also tame, something that is unusual in our flock. Petty will come up for a scratch under her jaw or just to say hello. She will live out her days here, whether she has lambs or not.

Helga will also stay here for the rest of her life. She is not really tame, but she knows her name and will acknowledge us when we talk to her. She is an Icelandic ewe, and she has twins each year that end the summer nearly as big as she is. She has a little brown face, beige wool, and an intelligent expression.

Twins Åsa and Agda are here for the duration, too. They are also Icelandics, both black with white markings around their necks. Åsa has horns, and Agda is polled. I don't know if they are outstanding in any way except in their looks, but they have wool I like for spinning and felting, and they amuse us. Like the other Icelandic ewes we have-- a very small percentage of the flock--they are "rustlers," always finding a source of feed on the outskirts of the paddock. They are also the ones that find their way under a fence to graze in the unsullied grass of the

ditch or adjoining paddock.

Now, our winter flock is back on the pasture, rams in with the ewes. As we go on to other fall work, we know that the beginnings of next year's flock are already underway. So, you see that it really is an occasion for "Happy New Year."