

After an unusually good early maple syrup season, it is winter once more, -1F. this morning. The ground is white again, and I had two pairs of yellow work gloves to keep my hands warm while I opened up a bale of hay for the cows today.

A lull in syrup cooking doesn't mean we have leisure time waiting for the next sap "run." We are shearing our sheep flock this week.

We shear just a pen or two each day when there are no other pressing farm chores. With watering livestock, feeding, cleaning, and everything that goes along with keeping sheep and cattle satisfied as they wait for spring, that is about all the time we have to clip the flock.

I like to shear sheep. As most people know who are familiar with how we live, we shear by hand with the "unmechanized" sheep shearing blades. It is hard work, but it is very interesting. "Interesting" is a strange word, because it can mean so many things. But in this case, I mean it in the strictest sense. I find it fascinating to see the wool fall from the sheep as I rotate the blades to keep from cutting skin and flesh instead of wool.

Knowing something of the physical structure of the sheep is essential. One must be cognizant of the places where a body part protrudes, where loose skin is apt to present an all too easy place to nip the sheep, and where tendons that could be cut must be avoided. The udder must be carefully protected—a ewe with a snipped off teat is nothing we want to see or have to deal with.

But, almost as essential, I think—and professional sheep shearers would probably dispute this—is navigating around the various personalities of the sheep. Probably because we shear only our own flock, we "know" these ewes a little more than if we were clipping unknown ovines. It is not so much that we recognize each individual sheep, though we have a few ewes that are tame and, to some degree, pets—but, when we get them in position to shear, we often have a pretty good idea which ones are going to present problems.

Even the best sheep shearers sometimes fail to control a ewe. Given an opportunity—often presented by a mistake in position or a lack of concentration on the shearer's part—a sheep will flip itself very quickly into an upright position. This is not fun for the shearer. Professional shearers often refer to these troublesome ewes as "active," though we have some less printable words to describe them.

We have also noticed, and this is just observational with no supporting facts to back it up, that in a group of sheep, those that hang back from the front of the pen and are the last to shear in the bunch, are often the most "active."

Mostly, though, the job goes pretty well. Without the noise of the shearing machine, it is quiet as we work, with only a "snick, snick" of the blades and an occasional comment from one of us to punctuate the silence. I might note that the ewe I have sitting up for beginning the task has a pretty well developed udder. She won't be one of the last to lamb

this year. Runo might remark that the sheep he is shearing has a nice fleece. Or, he might ask how my blades are cutting.

Runo does all the blade maintenance. By rights, I should look after my own blades, but I have no expertise in grinding and whetting, and he does such a good job that he takes care of it for both of us.

I only wish I had had the opportunity to learn blade shearing when I was young. Still, I am not disappointed to be able to help shear our flock now, either. And having a little experience with this major job for flock owners, I can appreciate the skill that is involved in becoming a master shearer.

