

It seems like farm life—here at Coe Creek, anyway—goes from one big job to another. And when that transition comes, it feels as if we don't quite know how to go about "changing gears."

After a winter of feeding sheep outside on frozen, snow-covered fields, we put the flock inside yesterday. This wasn't just a "guess we'll get those ewes in now" operation. The beginning of the project was over a week ago, when Runo began moving the 4X4 round bales from the hay/lambing barn to the old barn. The hay barn, much easier to fill and also to remove hay from, has another purpose, though, and this year, when we were fortunate enough to come through this much of the feeding season with a very good supply of hay, it meant that hay needed to be moved before the equipment for housing the ewe flock and the subsequent lambing could be installed.

This is a yearly job. The feeders and gates that divide the hay barn into large pens and—along the west wall, small lambing jugs—have spent the rest of the year stored elsewhere. This past week, Runo hauled them all back into the barn and set up our lambing facility.

The flock came in yesterday. Round and cumbersome with both wool and soon-to-be-born lambs, the ewes still have a lot of energy and a surprising amount of mobility—sometimes, to our dismay. A ewe that wants to join the other sheep in a pen already filled has, on occasion, considered me a minor impediment.

Yesterday, the weather forecast was for wet weather—rain or snow—today, and we wanted to get the sheep into the barn while they were dry. We accomplished that, filling each pen with from ten to twelve ewes. We have no rule as to which ewes go into which pens—two year olds to sheep as old as ten share quarters. But, there are three ewes that have to be in a pen at the north end of the barn. Åsa, Fina, and Joyce all have horns, and they cannot get their heads through the openings that guard the water tubs from lambs falling into them. The end pen has an unprotected water tub, so it is the only place the three Icelandic ewes can drink. Of course, only one of them was in the group of sheep that we left for that end pen. But, one out of three was better than usual. The other two we caught by the horns and propelled into the alleyway between the sheep pens and the lambing jugs, and the job was done.

Now, when they are thoroughly dry, we will begin shearing sheep. The sunny weather helped, but they still lie on the snow when they are outside, so their bellies and haunches are damp.

Shearing with hand blades, and doing the job a pen at a time between our other chores, we may take a week or more to shear the flock. But, we have ample time to finish the job before that first little "ma-a-a-a" and the accompanying "chuckle" from a ewe alerts us to the new season.

Still, it is not always easy to get oneself into a new routine, and we sometimes have to think a little more before deciding what is most important to do next. And, no matter how strange it seems to feed sheep inside instead of out on the snow, or to take those blades in our hands and begin to clip, or to move newborn lambs and their mothers to the little pens where they have a day or two of solitude, we know that it must be done, and that it will soon be

our regular schedule until the day the doors open and the flock goes out on the new spring pasture.