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EC227 A Flock of Sheep on the Farm

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SHEEP
ON THE FARM

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A FLOCK OF SHEEP ON THE FARM

BY H. D. FOX

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

From the standpoint of the sheep industry, Nebraska is considered primarily as a sheep-feeding state, as thousands of western lambs are fed annually. However, during the past year or two decidedly more attention has been given to the breeding and raising of sheep. In general, this change has been most apparent in those sections where diversified farming is practiced. Most farmers in these sections could increase materially their annual income by maintaining a flock of sheep. During the past few years, sheep raising has been very profitable and present conditions indicate that for some time to come there will be a healthy demand for both mutton and wool at prices remunerative to the producer.

ADVANTAGES OF SHEEP ON THE FARM

A well managed flock of sheep will produce two marketable products, namely, mutton and wool. The ewe's fleece usually pays for her keep, so that the money received for lambs is practically clear profit. The first cost of a small flock is so moderate that almost every farmer can afford the investment. Sheep are the best weed destroyers, it being estimated that they will eat over 90 per cent of the numerous plants regarded as weeds, while cattle and horses eat only about 50 per cent of them. The improvement of soil fertility by pasturing sheep is a phase of sheep raising that is of considerable importance, especially to the intensive farmer. The natural habits of sheep make them particularly useful in this respect. The flock will usually be found on the knolls during the hours of rest, thus leaving a large portion of the droppings in the parts of the field where they are most needed. Sheep require little attention, except during the shearing and lambing seasons.

HOW TO BEGIN

The most logical plan for the man to follow who has had but little or no experience in raising sheep is to begin with a small or moderate sized flock of good grade ewes and a purebred ram. By this method a person can gradually work into the business and learn about the care and management of sheep before taking extreme risks with large numbers, as it would be decidedly unwise for an inexperienced person to undertake sheep farming on a large scale at the beginning. Grade ewes which are mated to a purebred mutton ram will produce very satisfactory market lambs. In buying sheep, examine their mouths so as to secure young ewes; yearlings or two-year-olds being most desirable. However, it is sometimes possible to buy old,

broken-mouthed ewes very reasonably from rangemen or at one of the central markets during the late summer months when the sheep from the western ranges are coming to market in large numbers. These ewes might not be able to withstand another winter on the range but when kept in small numbers under farm conditions could well raise another lamb. When this class of ewes is purchased, it is usually advisable to feed them liberally after lambing and send them to market with the lambs.

The most profitable breeding ewes are active, healthy, and well grown. They should be uniform in size and breeding, straight in body lines, show capacity for feed, and be well covered with dense fleeces of bright, salable wool. It is especially important that they have good teeth and sound udders.

The ram should be a purebred, for on him depends to a great extent the improvement of the flock. He should be from one to three years of age, and it is especially important that he be masculine, vigorous, and active. His body should be compact, deep, broad, full and massive, covered with firm flesh and placed on strong, straight legs.

MATING AND BREEDING

The natural breeding season of sheep is in the fall. The exact time to breed will depend on conditions for shelter and general facilities for lambing, as well as the feeding conditions and market demand. In most sections of Nebraska, the production of early lambs should give quite satisfactory results; that is, lambs which are dropped during the months of February and March. By liberal feeding, lambs dropped at this time should be ready for market not later than the middle of July. It is possible, by following this practice, to avoid hot weather and stomach worm infestation with the lambs, and furthermore, they will ordinarily bring a higher price at this time than later when the heavy runs are coming in from the west.

The period of pregnancy (from the date of conception till the date of lambing) is about 147 days. If it is desirable to have lambs dropped in February and March, the ewes must be bred in September and October. Ewes should not be bred until they are fifteen to eighteen months old. Breeding them the first fall or when they are only eight to ten months old, checks their growth and development. It is advisable to shear around the rear parts of the ewes so the dung will not collect there. If the ewes and ram have ticks or lice, they should be dipped. A good, vigorous, mature ram should satisfactorily breed from 35 to 50 ewes. If a ram lamb must be used, he probably should not be expected to serve more than 15 or 20 ewes. The ewes and ram should be in a healthy condition and it is desirable to have them gaining in flesh. This may usually be done by putting them on fresh pasture and by feeding a little grain in addition, a week or two before they are to be bred.

WINTER CARE AND FEED FOR BREEDING EWES

Breeding ewes need very little attention after the mating season, but in order to insure a crop of strong, healthy lambs they should receive a sufficient amount of care during this time to keep them in a thrifty condition. On many farms, stubble and stalk fields can form the chief feed for the band of ewes at this time. It is the best policy to make use of the stubble and stalks as early as possible before they have deteriorated in feeding value thru exposure to rains and freezes. Sheep will clean up such fields, eating the grass along

the fence rows and the weeds and waste forage that was not gathered in harvesting. This will utilize feeds which might otherwise be wasted and will materially reduce the cost of maintaining the flock. Blue grass or timothy pasture or any other suitable pasture grass can usually be used later to a good advantage.

Breeding ewes that come into winter quarters in good condition need very little grain. The aim should be to bring them to lambing in medium flesh and vigorous condition, thus insuring a good milk flow for the new-born lambs. As a matter of economy, the winter feed of the ewes should consist largely of roughages, the legume hays easily leading in value. Sheep like variety in their feed; perhaps more so than most other farm animals. Alfalfa, red clover, and other leguminous hays are especially liked by them. Blue grass hay, nice corn fodder, oat hay, and bright, fine oat straw are also relished by sheep as a change. Timothy and wild hay are not very desirable sheep feeds. As a matter of fact, timothy hay should not be fed to sheep for any appreciable length of time because it usually causes constipation. Another objection to timothy hay feeding is the fact that the heads get into the wool, thus making shearing difficult, and causing wool buyers to discriminate against it.

Not only the amount of concentrates required for breeding ewes but also the kind which should be supplied will depend upon the kind of roughages fed. If they are fed plenty of good legume hay, such as alfalfa, clover, cowpea, etc., which is rich in protein and lime, they will need less concentrates than when inferior roughage is used. The concentrates fed may then be chiefly or entirely the farm grown grains, such as oats, corn, barley, kafir, or milo. Whole oats are highly esteemed as a feed for ewes, while corn is considered too fattening by many shepherds to be used as the principal concentrate. However, if plenty of protein is furnished by legume hay or other protein-rich feeds and the ewes are not overfed on corn so that they become unduly fat, corn is a satisfactory feed.

The following concentrate mixtures are satisfactory for pregnant ewes: (1) oats 1.5 parts, wheat bran 1 part; (2) shelled corn 3 parts, oats 3 parts, wheat bran 2 parts, linseed meal 1 part. One-half pound per day of either of these mixtures should be sufficient for a ewe weighing 150 to 170 pounds. When good alfalfa or clover hay is fed, no grain is needed until about a month before lambing time. At this time, however, it is usually advisable to feed some grain in order to insure a good milk flow for the young lambs.

Ideal winter quarters for sheep are those that keep the sheep dry both from above and underfoot. A sheep barn or shed should therefore be located on a spot of elevated ground which provides good drainage on all sides. If sheep are compelled, contrary to their nature, to lie down on a wet floor, rheumatism and stiffness in legs and body are likely to develop. Dry, well-ventilated, sunny quarters that are free from drafts are ideal for the flock in winter. Warm quarters are not only unnecessary but inadvisable. From 10 to 15 square feet of ground space should be provided, for each ewe. Wide doorways should be provided as less injury is likely to occur than where the ewes attempt to crowd thru a narrow opening. Feed racks should be conveniently located which provide from 15 to 24 inches of space per head. Salt and plenty of water should also be provided.

Too much emphasis cannot be placed on the importance of exercise for pregnant ewes, since if they have plenty of exercise less difficulty is likely to be experienced at lambing time. One of the most satisfactory ways to get them to take a sufficient amount of exercise is to haul their roughage out into the field and spread it in small bunches so that they will have to go from one place to another in order to pick it up. When the weather is favorable, breeding ewes should be out of doors for exercise, but on wet, rainy, or stormy days they should be kept inside, because it is a mistake to allow them to get their fleeces soaking wet in the winter time.

CARE OF EWES AT LAMBING TIME.

Experienced sheep men know that their success and the percentage of lambs raised depend in a great measure upon how closely they watch their flocks during the lambing season. Several days before the ewes are expected to lamb, they should be separated from the rest of the flock so they can be given special attention. But little grain should now be fed, since too generous feeding may cause milk fever to develop just after the ewe has lambed. However, young ewes that have not produced lambs, frequently do not at first give a sufficient amount of milk for their lambs, in which event more liberal feeding is justified. Just before or after lambing, it is good practice to remove all tags of long and loose wool about the udder of each ewe, as a new-born lamb will frequently suck a lock of wool as readily as it will the teat.

If lambs are born in late winter or early spring when the weather is likely to be cold, adequate shelter should be provided for the flock. Warm quarters are a necessity for a young lamb that comes when the weather is very cold, and he is most in need of a warm place immediately after birth. At this time he is wet, and not having had a fill of his mother's milk, is more susceptible to the cold than at any other time. When the weather is cold, the ewes almost ready to lamb should be placed in the warmest part of the barn and watched closely. It is best to place each ewe in a lambing pen, four to six feet square, shortly before lambing or soon afterwards. In this small pen the ewe and her lamb become acquainted and accustomed to each other much more quickly than they do when they are with the flock.

A newborn lamb is inclined to wander wherever its legs will take it, and unless it is confined in a small pen with its mother it may not get sufficiently acquainted with her, that it will nurse her and receive her protection. It may be bunted over or trampled by other ewes, or it may get under a trough or wander thru an opening and become chilled. Should the ewe have two lambs, they may wander apart so that she cannot give adequate attention to either. Under such conditions she is likely to abandon one and give all her attention to the other, the result usually being that one of the lambs will be disowned. Another advantage from using the lambing pen is that the attention of the shepherd is directed to the ewe and her lamb in case anything goes wrong with them. If they need special attention, it can more easily be given than if they were with the whole flock or a portion of it. The length of time which it is advisable to keep the ewe and her lamb in the lambing pen will depend on the strength of the lamb and the readiness with which they become accustomed to each other. Usually they can be placed with the other ewes and lambs when the lamb is three or four days old.

Lambs need the closest attention when they are first born, this being the critical time of their life. Unless a lamb is fairly strong just after it is born, the mucus should be cleaned from the nostrils and mouth. After the

lamb has nursed its mother, it is usually able to care for itself. However, a lamb that is unable to nurse within a few minutes after birth should receive assistance. Sometimes, a ewe tries to disown her lamb because she does not give sufficient milk to support it. Young ewes that have their first lambs belong to this class in particular. If such is the case, the ewe should be put by herself with her lamb and fed a good grain mixture and milk-producing succulent feeds to start the milk flow. If the lamb does not get enough milk from its dam in the meantime, it should be given some cow's milk until its mother is giving enough milk to care for it.

A newborn lamb that has become chilled can often be revived by immersing all the body except the head in water that is as hot as the hand can bear. After it is well warmed, it should be wiped dry and taken to its mother and supplied with her milk. If the barn is very cold it may be necessary to keep the lamb wrapped in dry, warm cloths for a few hours.

Shortly after lambing, the ewe should be given water that has been warmed, but she should not be allowed to drink too much at first. It is usually advisable to feed but little grain for two or three days to avoid udder troubles, but she should be given plenty of dry roughage. Close attention should be given for several days to see that the lamb is taking milk from both sides of the udder, because if surplus milk is not removed, the udder is likely to become caked and sore.

As the lamb gets older and can use more milk, it pays to increase the ewe's ration, because lambs make their most economical gains when suckling. It is a good plan to utilize the coarser feeds before the ewes lamb, with the idea of using the most choice feeds after lambing, as it is highly important that palatable feeds be fed in order that the ewes will give enough milk to properly nourish their lambs. A pound to a pound and a half of the following grain mixture fed per ewe per day - depending on the size of the ewe - should give satisfactory results: Corn, 3 parts; oats, 6 parts; and linseed oilmeal, 1 part. Until pasture is available, it is well to feed, in addition to the above mentioned feeds, about all the legume hay that the ewes will clean up; and if good silage is available, it can be fed to advantage, giving $1\frac{1}{2}$ to $3\frac{1}{2}$ pounds per ewe per day.

FEEDING LAMBS THAT ARE TO BE MARKETED EARLY

Lambs that are to be marketed during the summer months should be fed grain in addition to their mother's milk, in order to get them fat before hot weather comes, which is so depressing on their growth and development. In addition to this, stomach-worm infestation may thus be avoided and the lambs will usually bring a higher price, since the market price of fat lambs is usually higher during the early summer months than it is later, especially after the middle of August when the runs from the West often begin.

Usually, when from 10 to 14 days of age, the young lamb will be found nibbling hay at the feed rack beside its mother. Since a young lamb that is suckling its mother makes such rapid and economical gains, if liberally fed, it is a wise thing to provide especially for its wants. This may best be done by having an enclosure of some kind adjacent to where the ewes are kept, in which the lambs may go and eat and not be molested by their mothers. The openings into this pen should be large enough to admit the lambs, but not large enough that the ewes will

enter and rob the lambs of the feed which has been placed in a clean trough especially for them. This enclosure is called a "lamb-creep". If all the lambs are to be fattened for market, the following ration should give good results: Ground corn, 5 parts; oats, 2 parts; and linseed oilmeal, 1 part. However, if lambs are to be retained for breeding purposes, corn should not form over half the concentrates. In such case it would be well to substitute a part of the corn with bran or ground oats. After the lambs are 5 to 6 weeks old, there is little advantage in grinding the grain.

DOCKING AND CASTRATING

Practically all successful sheep men know that there are a number of distinct advantages from docking and castrating lambs and consequently these are universal practices with them. They are both simple operations when done at the proper time. Lambs should be docked when from 10 to 14 days old. The simplest method is by means of the sharp knife, cutting the tail off about an inch and a half from the backbone. Another method commonly practiced, where sheep raising is conducted on an extensive scale, is by use of the docking iron. This is made in the form of a chisel with two jaws, with an 18-inch handle, and is used hot. It cuts and sears the arteries, thus preventing loss of blood.

Each of these methods has its merits and disadvantages. Where the first method is used, bleeding may be quite profuse, but the wound heals rapidly. If the second method is used, the wound does not heal so readily, but no blood is lost. If sheep-raising is conducted on an extensive scale, the docking iron would probably give better results; whereas if the flock is not very large and the lambs can be watched closely for several hours after being docked, and are not unduly disturbed before the operation is performed, the knife should give satisfactory results.

Castrating is usually done at the same time the lambs are docked. This operation consists in cutting off one-third of the scrotum and then simply pulling out the testicles and the adhering cords.

WEANING THE LAMBS

Lambs should be weaned when from 3 to 5 months old. It is best to place them on a good, fresh pasture just after they are separated from their mothers. However, the ewes should be placed on scant pasture for a few days as this will facilitate reducing the milk flow. If it is intended to market the lambs as soon as possible, they may be taken directly from the ewes and sold.

PASTURES

In some sections of Nebraska, the pasture problem is one that requires a considerable amount of attention. Permanent pastures are depended upon almost entirely in some sections, whereas in others, especially in the eastern part of the state, many men feel that larger returns will be secured if the land is seeded to some temporary pasture grass, such as Sudan grass, sweet clover, rye, rape, etc. In the sections of greatest rainfall, care is always necessary to

prevent infestation with stomach worms when permanent pastures are used.

Where permanent pastures cannot be relied upon, a rotation of rye and Sudan grass should prove satisfactory. Sweet clover and rape ordinarily make satisfactory forages, altho bloat occurs occasionally where these are used. Alfalfa, red clover, and white clover are especially likely to cause bloat and cannot safely be recommended as pasture plants.

Sheep prefer short, tender grass to that which is coarse and woody. They also greatly enjoy a reasonably frequent change of pasture.

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