

**Mr. Harold Brenner:**

**"We're about the only sheep  
ranchers left in the valley."**

**By Renae May**

The author of the following story has been a "cow"girl most of her life and lived on ranches in such small western Colorado towns as Milner and Steamboat Springs. Growing up around animals and living the "country" life has led to a deep-seated love for searching into the world of sheep ranching.



**Let me ask you a question,**

**"What kills coyotes but man?"**

Renae: How long have you lived in this part of the country?

Mr. Brenner: Since 1944, we came here from Kansas when I was sixteen. We had started raising sheep in Kansas about 1940. I've worked sheep all the time since then, except when I was in the service.

Renae: Was it easier to raise them in Kansas?

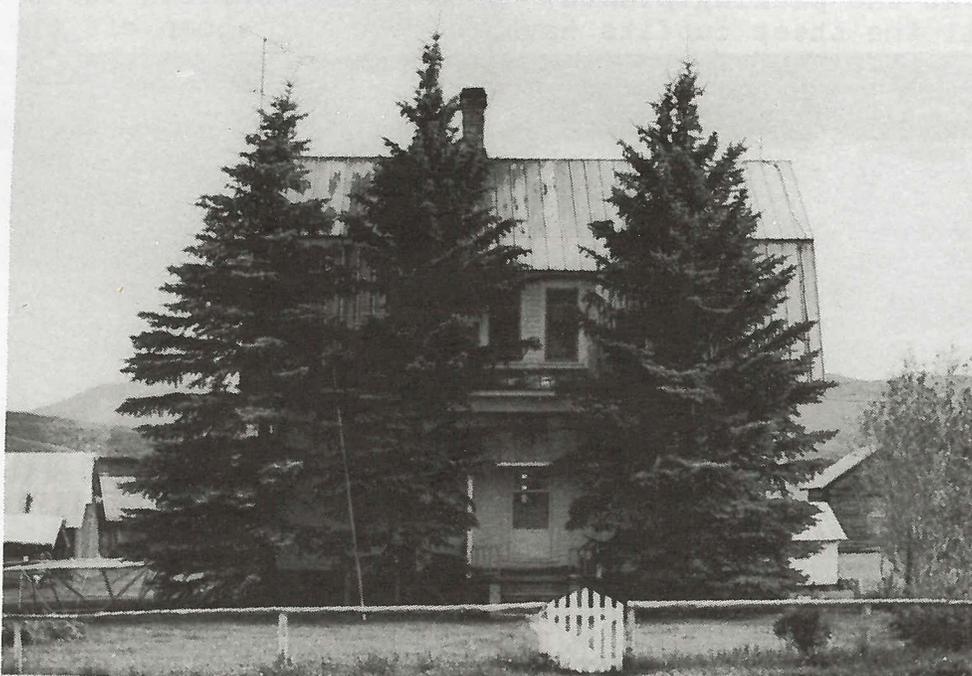
Mr. Brenner: Oh, it was different in the plains country. We, of course, started out like anybody, none of us knew anything about lambing or sheep. It was a start.

Renae: Did you bring your sheep from Kansas to here?

Mr. Brenner: No, we sold what we had back there and bought more when we got here.

Renae: You've been in the sheep business ever since you got to this area?

Mr. Brenner: Since I got out of the service in 1949. I got some sheep and have had sheep ever since.



The Brenner home on Highway #131 going towards Oak Creek.

Renae: When did you marry?

Mr. Brenner: In 1952, October 20.

Renae: Does your wife like sheep too?

Mr. Brenner: Yes, there were quite a few years when I done the lambing by myself exceptionally. But then after the kids grew up more, why, they started helping a lot. The last twelve or fifteen years I've had kids to help me. And it's been real good for them, very good, but anyone can work around sheep. Cows, why, be a little more careful! Why, there hasn't been a one of the kids out a grainin' the sheep or pickin' up the wrong lamb who got butted. Oh, it's not uncommon for a ewe to get quite cranky when the lambs come. Kenny (Mr. Brenner's oldest son) I can remember the first time he ever got butted by a ewe. I think he was standin' in the way, and she knocked him down and, boy, he screamed, 'Kill her, Dad! Kill'er! Another time, oh, I suppose, Kenny was about four or five years old and Barbara (Mr. Brenner's oldest daughter) was scared to walk across the corral. Kenny was carrying Barbara from the barn to the house so the ewes couldn't get her. But the ewes do knock 'em down, it's only a case of getting dirty, a little scared and mad. But definitely no harm done.

Renae: When do you put your rams in with the ewes?

Mr. Brenner: I put them normally in at about this time, the 20th of April is when I'll expect my first lamb. I put the bucks in at about the 10th of November. I figure five months less five days for accuracy. It comes very close within a day or two.

Tanna: (THREE WIRE WINTER teacher) Do most of the sheepmen lamb about the same time of the year?

Mr. Brenner: The range operations, depending on where they are, lamb sometime from the first of April, I suppose, till the first of May.

Renae: Is that real common among the sheep raisers?

Mr. Brenner: Yes, if you keep watch on the markets the bulk of the lambs hit the market in the fall. From about the first of September until the first of October the market is glutted and the market drops, the meat packers are snowed under, they try to keep help year round at the packing plants. There's one stretch for a month or so where all the sheep outfits have to move the sheep off the forest.



Lamb and ewe

The forest service gives them a deadline to be off the mountain. So when they come down, most of them don't have places to go except to market. In my situation I lamb, oh, a month or so prior to grass, to get 'em started good and then go on grass, and whenever it starts freezing the grass quality drops, and your lambs start going downhill. Why, if you don't sell them by about the right time you don't have top lambs.

Tanna: Is that just around here because it's so cold, or is that a common breeding time for all?

Mr. Brenner: Well, no, I'm speaking of around here. Kansas and some areas like that try to breed in the fall and get their lambs on market in the first of the year. Around Denver there's some operations that try it, but it's too hard in our situation here. I put the bucks in about the 31st of October, along in there, but I take the bucks out then around the first part of August. Now there's no danger of those ewes gettin' bred in this country till it starts to frosting and getting cool.



Mr. Brenner and Renae

Renae: So you pull your rams out when?

Mr. Brenner: I only have the rams separated through August, September and October, about three months, is all I have the rams separated, all of my lambs fall from a period of April and May. One or two percent may go on beyond that, but the cycle is the best way to explain to you. They hit a cycle, when it's warm they just don't come into heat and consequently they aren't bred. It's an easy way, a lazy man's way, I guess. Then I just let the bucks run tight with the ewes, but there can be no harm done whatsoever by doing it that way.

Renae: About how many breeding ewes do you have?

Mr. Brenner: I'm down to about 200 now. I was running four hundred and the coyotes just chewing all the time. I haven't saved replacements for quite a few years. Just letting 'em slip down, and if things don't change, why, I can't see staying in the business too much longer.

Renae: Coyotes have gotten pretty bad then?

Mr. Brenner: We've had a steady ten percent loss at least the last four or five years, and I've only held it to that by corralling at nights, really fighting them. I went from 1950 to 1970 almost with no coyote loss at all. At least in fifteen years I never had one lamb killed by a coyote.

Renae: How come so much of an increase?

Mr. Brenner: Well, we had too many people who were afraid the poisons were killing off all the other animals, which is not the case. Let me ask you a question. What kills coyotes except man? And if there isn't anything killing them off they just keep populating to the extent that sheep numbers have dropped consistently.

Renae: Pretty soon they'll start going to calves.

Mr. Brenner. They already have.

Renae: You can't set traps or anything, can you?

Mr. Brenner: I've tried to trap coyotes a little. I've had trappers come in and try to trap coyotes, but I'm more apt to catch sheep than coyotes. Poison 24 D has always been a real good poison for coyotes. Of course, that kills dogs, but what business do dogs have in your pasture?



Mr. Brenner and ram

Renae: Do you have sheep die because of dogs?

Mr. Brenner: Yes, very definitely. Not as often as coyotes normally by any means. The coyotes normally will come in and kill one lamb. And they will in most cases eat the heart, the lungs, the liver and go. Where dogs will tear 'em up just for the fun of it.

Renae: They may not even eat them, right?

Mr. Brenner: Right. Maybe one, then they'll kill maybe a half a dozen or maybe ten to fifteen, or more.

Renae: It's just a game then? They do it just to run them to death?

Mr. Brenner: Yes, I never hesitate to try to kill the dogs. Well, actually, if I almost see them on the place, it's a matter of survival, the dog should stay at home. I've had too many sad experiences, too many of the sheep were the kids lambs that they raised, they're the kids pets. What's more important to me, the kid's pets or a stray dog? So, it isn't hard for me to make the choice.

Renae: About how many rams do you have?

Mr. Brenner: You figure anywhere from one buck to twenty-five ewes, on up to one buck to fifty. Is a rule of thumb. A few years ago I had a hundred head I wanted bred early. In a different pasture. I had another two hundred head. I had one buck get out, I don't think he was out more than a day or two, but he bred seventy of those ewes that was to have been bred later.

Renae: One buck can breed seventy ewes?

Mr. Brenner: It bred the seventy ewes, he might have been out for maybe three days. But I've had bucks get out over night and breed twenty head. If you're using a buck with twenty-five ewes, why, that should be conditions while you're up in the brush and scattered out quite well. You need a lot less bucks under a controlled condition where they're held close.

Renae: Do you keep records on your ewes and if they lambed easy, or what they had? Male? Female? Whatever?

Mr. Brenner: Not much on any replacements I keep. If they don't lamb I mark the ear, and if they ever come up again and don't lamb I mark the ear again and I ship 'em. Bad bags I can do that by feel. I ship those kind and the poor doers, I can cull by sight. The bucks, I prefer a buck that was out of a twin because they will throw more twins. Your ewes, you can definitely get ewes that are more prolific and will have a lot more twins.

Renae: Do you ever have ewes that have accidentally got in-bred?

Mr. Brenner: We've had a few freaks, very few. I had a lamb a couple years ago without a lower jaw. And Shirley wasn't it one year we had a lamb with eight legs?

Mrs. Brenner: It was two bodies and one head: it was weird, really a freak.

Renae: Did it live?

Mr. Brenner: It was dead when we finally got it out; it was very confusing getting it out. I help with a lot of lambs, and normally you feel in and immediately feel the head and the legs and bring 'em right on out, with a little help from the ewe. But when you cannot shove back that one set of legs, why, that was the most confusing delivery I had, and it's terribly hard on the ewe too. The ewe lived, but the lamb died shortly after birth.

Renae: Most of the freaks do die anyway, don't they?

Mr. Brenner: Yes, that one without the jaw was breathing, but it never lived.

Renae: I know there is a type of sheep that is black, but can you ever have a ewe mate a Columbia ewe and a Suffolk ram and come up with a little black lamb? Can that happen?

Mr. Brenner: Quite easily, you can come up with a black lamb occasionally, out of a white buck and a white ewe even. It isn't common, quite uncommon to get a black lamb. I very rarely do. All of the Suffolk crosses, all of the Suffolks are black at birth, but they soon lose their black pigmentation.

Renae: Do you have any registered sheep?

Mr. Brenner: We have just a few registered Suffolks.

Renae: Are they bucks or ewes?

Mr. Brenner: We have mostly ewes, part of our bucks are registered. Last year we had probably thirty or forty Suffolk ewes out here, mixed in with the white face, the very best lambs. When I docked there were two I really liked, so I held back two of those. One of them now looks like a real nice buck. I feel like I've raised sheep long enough, with what I have here to do, it's just as good to save my own sheep.

Renae: What kind of sheep do you mostly have?

Mr. Brenner: Columbias.

Renae: Are they meat type or wool type?

Mr. Brenner: Columbias are a wool type. I like them quite well, they're a good bulky ewe, good wool producer, excellent mothers, they range well. I also like a Suffolk Columbia cross.

You've retained most of your wool, the bigger percentage yielded on your first cross, you've improved the milk a lot, and I believe you're improving your mothering instinct. You've hurt your ability for the ewe to band together some. Your Suffolks are a lot worse for finding the holes in the fence and scatterin' off. We do round up sheep all the time due to coyotes. And the Suffolks you're more apt to find a few of them slipping off a gully over here. There are ones that will stay out there, then they lose their lambs.

Renae: Would a purebred Suffolk ewe find the hole in the fence? And a Suffolk Columbia cross stay with the flock?

Mr. Brenner: Pretty well.

Renae: So you prefer a cross breed rather than a straight?

Mr. Brenner: We have a lot of both, I like both. If I usually raise a Suffolk I can keep them at home without any trouble. I bought some Suffolks a year ago, and, gosh, they were terrible. They'd been operated under less than ideal conditions. Fences that weren't really meant to hold sheep, and they got used to going through all the fences. I had very few get out, but they were looking all the time. And they were that kind. Always trying to get from one pasture to another.

Renae: What kind of problems do you run into during lambing?

Mr. Brenner: If they're single you have no problems except for the size. And if you have a good buck and a ewe that lasts a few weeks it is crucial on the both of the lambs. I lose far more (I don't lose many lambs through birth.) by a higher percentage of big singles than I do twins, I seldom have weak twins. But the ewe can have 'em by herself. If it's the ewes first lamb, and she's been overly fed, why, singles can be so big the ewe can try forever to have 'em. And if you want that, then you can get into more trouble. Just a nice good set of twins will normally come without any problems. Oh, one of 'em may be backward, but you can tell after you've looked so long. You can see the hind legs, but you have to check if the ewe's been in labor an hour or two. If you don't see feet you just reach a couple inches till you feel a tail or feel a nose. If you feel the tail you can pull 'em through, if you can. Within reason.

Renae: What do you do after the lamb is born? Do you just make sure the ewe has accepted the lamb?

Mr. Brenner: I always, well, immediately after it's born I clean the nose, making sure the sack isn't over the nose. I lose just a few because the sack is in a wet slimy condition. The lamb may come out and not break the sack. Normally it does.

Renae: You just break the sack then?

Mr. Brenner: I'll break the sack, and I'll slap the lamb, making sure it's breathing. If it ever causes any trouble at all I just force the air several times out of the lamb.

Renae: In cattle that are calving they'll take the calf and swing it back and forth to get the mucus to run out. Do you ever have to do that with sheep, or is it just mainly breaking the sack of birth?

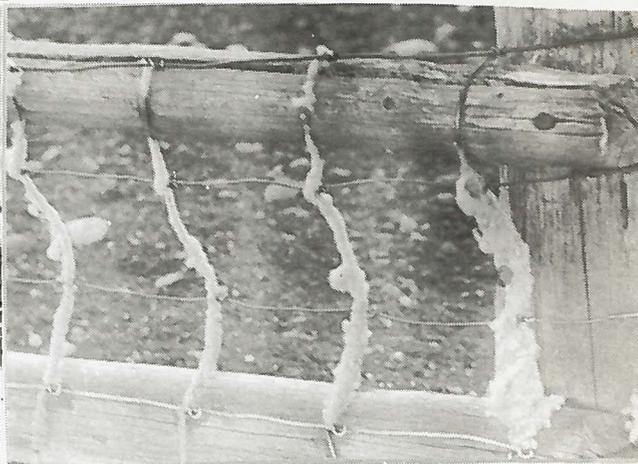
Mr. Brenner: What you say is ideal at times mostly with lambs that come backwards. I always just wipe their nose and mouth several times while holding them upside down. But a normal delivery there's no problem with mucus.

Renae: What are the chances of triplets? Is it just the buck or what?

Mr. Brenner: One study they made many years ago was about a ten percent factor. But I personally feel the buck is twenty or thirty percent responsible. The better condition the buck is in, is a factor. I got hold on one bunch of Columbia ewes probably fifteen years ago that twined out better than anything I'd ever had before. And since, I've always kept replacements out of them. But your twins, a lot of it is the condition of the ewe, what the ewe is doing ten days before they actually take the buck, what the ewe eats helps determine the number of twins. Am I confusing you?

Renae: No, not at all, it all makes sense to me.

Mr. Brenner: In other words if their rations are grain or alfalfa or good grass you're going to get a lot more twins. Also when it turns into fall anytime before it starts freezing you'll get more twins. If the ewes are skinny or underfed, or the younger the ewes, the less chance there are of twins. If you get a four or five year old ewe you'll probably get twins.



woven wool fence ?

Mrs. Brenner, Mr. Brenner and Renae

Renae: Can a ewe just get pregnant by one buck or can she have two lambs out of two different bucks?

Mr. Brenner: I understand they can get pregnant by two bucks, but normally it is just one?

Renae: If a ewe has three lambs and doesn't have enough milk, what do you do with the extra lamb?

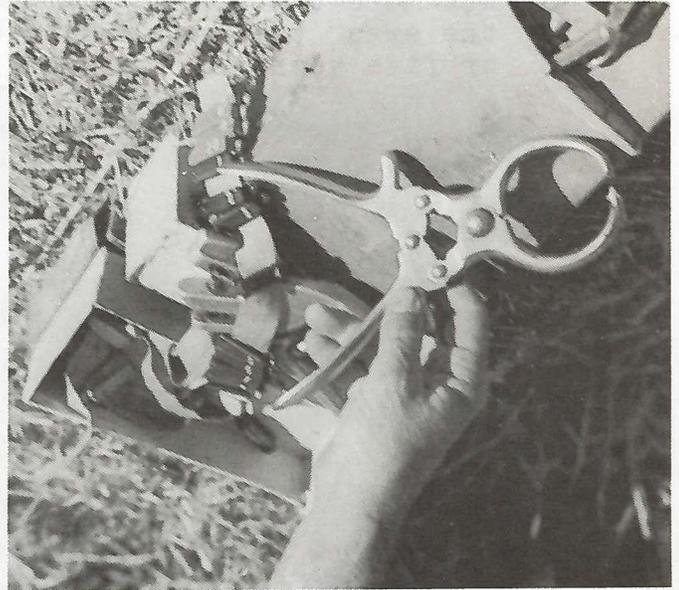
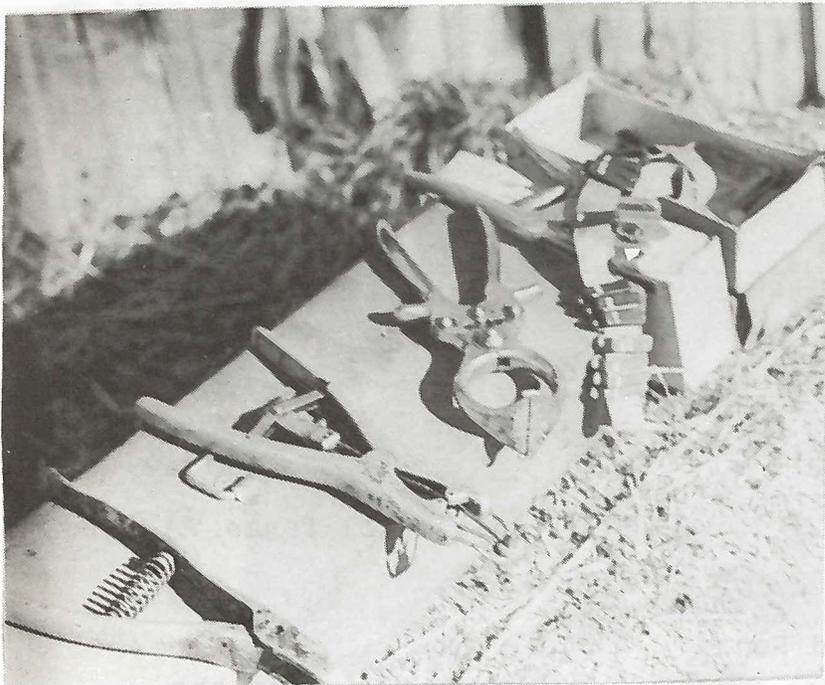
Mr. Brenner: I graft in various ways. The most popular way is keeping the ewe that's ready to lamb all the time, if she don't have much of a stomach and a big, big bag. I just quickly think of what ewe don't have enough milk. Then I grab the lamb from her. And just as the other ewe is lambing, why I just smear them together perfectly and tie a couple of legs together, so they can't get up. Then the ewe gets up, and she had two new wet slimy lambs, and she licks them, and the graft is done. But not always.

Renae: You tie their legs together, why?

Mr. Brenner: Yes, if you don't tie their legs, after two or three hours old, once he's suckled, he knows what he's doing. He'll get up and go back to the old ewe, and he'll 'bang, bang, bang' (start sucking) and the ewe will send him sprawling and that's the end of that. Because being smeared with the other lamb he's got a different smell. The ewe goes by smell.

Renae: Do you tie the lamb to the ewe?

Mr. Brenner: I usually tie one front leg and one back leg on the same side, and I have the new lamb (one of the other ewe) completely saturated with each other. I usually stick the new born lamb's head between the place where they've been connected. That way the older lamb can't get away. If the ewe licks them both equally I usually will tie only the front legs. That way if the older lamb tries to go somewhere she can't. If the lamb is more than four days old it will never work anyway. but if, say, it's two or three days old, if you tie those front legs the lamb has a tendency to back up all the time. And it will move around, and, of course, it can't go because the new lamb is tied on. So it falls down time after time and soon it starts to lose energy and get tired. Then you can untie the front legs and there's a big chance the ewe will take them both. If you fail you haven't lost anything and of course, if I have a ewe that loses a single lamb, then I skin the lamb and put it on another lamb about the equal age and size. That can work at two or three weeks.



Above: The docking tool. (clamp)

Left: Ear tagging, docking and castrating tools.

Renae: Do you just tie the skin on the other lamb?

Mr. Brenner: I peel it kinda. I just slit the hind legs and just peel it off. Then I stick the front legs through the front leg holes and the head through the head hole and just drape it over. I don't tie it on, it just hangs over the back end. The ewe normally smells the lamb's tail to get the smell of the lamb.

Renae: What is a bummer lamb?

Mr. Brenner: A bum is one that don't have a mother.

Renae: Do you usually keep yours?

Mr. Brenner: Yes, I very seldom sell one. I usually have a bum pen with three or four lambs in it. And we just work it continually. If we have a ewe that's getting ready to lamb, I look in the bum pen to what will graft best and go for the graft. I get, oh, maybe ten or twenty lambs a year grafting. The graft is so easy to do. I don't even hesitate. I found it a lot better to take the easy way out. It's kind of hard on you at times when you bum it. You graft it and the graft don't work, then you have to keep it in the bum pen.

Renae: What do you feed your bums?

Mr. Brenner: Cow milk normally, canned milk or powdered milk, either will work. I always have certain ewes as we lamb I keep in a pen. When a ewe has too much milk, I take the bums over to nurse 'em out. No, I don't have to have a ewe's bag spoil. The bums can be fed, and just biding time when a single will die, then I can skin it and put on a big bum. After the ewe's been in the pen and its lamb can handle her milk supply, then I'll kick 'em out. Then I won't have any spoiled bags.

Renae: Do you have cases where one ewe will steal another's lamb?

Mr. Brenner: Seldom, but it happens. Very confusing, but it does.

Renae: When you take the lambs away for the ewe, does their milk supply just dry up?

Mr. Brenner: Yes, they do.



This tool is used for castration, squeeze the handles together and spread the rubber band and slip it over the sacks, thus cutting off blood circulation. In about a month or so the testicles fall off with no danger of infection.

Renae: What all do you do to your lambs?

Mr. Brenner: The first day in the lambing pen we brand and vaccinate.

Renae: Do you dock your lambs?

Mr. Brenner: I have even docked at a day old, but usually it's three to seven days old. I usually don't dock till I'm done lambing. The lambing is an eighteen to twenty day cycle, so some of the lambs can even be a month old at docking. The very first thing I do is brand and vaccinate in the pen. Then later after three or four weeks I bring 'em in again and vaccinate again and brand with the main brand of the herd. Ear mark and I have the ewe lambs different ear marks, if I'm going to keep them, and I also dock and castrate.

Renae: How do you dock and castrate?

Mr. Brenner: I use the elastic rings on the bags and clamps on the tails. The way I do it is to crush it between joints in the tail. The bleeding is usually very minimal.

Renae: Have you always used this method?

Mr. Brenner: No, we use to use a knife on the castration.

Renae: Is it easier on the lambs with the elastics?

Mr. Brenner: Well, I've never had infection this way. They can go off and wade in the manure or whatever, and there's no infection.

Renae: The testicles just fall off, don't they?

Mr. Brenner: Yes, in about a month or so.

Renae: Is there much infection with the clamp on the tail?

Mr. Brenner: Well, it depends on the time of the year, the way I do it you can get in trouble with flies, blowing and laying eggs there, and, of course, this goes into maggots. You can lose them, and if you crimp twice they can get tetanus.

Renae: Do you dip or powder your sheep?

Mr. Brenner: I've wormed them some orally, but I never dipped in a liquid solution.

Renae: When do you shear?

Mr. Brenner: I like to shear before I lamb, not consistently, but I'd like to. But definitely I want the wool off before they're on grass and before the flies.

# HB



Mr. Brenner's brand

Mr. and Mrs. Harold Brenner

Renae: Who does your shearing?

Mr. Brenner: A man who does it for pleasure.

Renae: Does he charge per head?

Mr. Brenner: Yes, I think it was a dollar a head last year. Price of wool had dropped.

Renae: How much hay does a ewe consume in an average winter?

Mr. Brenner: I figure about a thousand pounds per winter.

Renae: What type of hay do you feed your sheep?

Mr. Brenner: Usually mixtures of alfalfa and brome-grass.

Renae: Do you give them minerals or calcium?

Mr. Brenner: I keep a mineral block in front of them some of the time and salt all the time. It's one essential mineral they must have. I never let them run out of salt.

Renae: How long is their life span?

Mr. Brenner: The oldest ewes that I know of, that I've had, is thirteen.

Renae: How can you tell their age?

Mr. Brenner: Oh, after four or five it's mostly guess. Age is determined by their teeth mostly.

Renae: Do you know how old your oldest sheep on the ranch is now?

Mr. Brenner: About thirteen.

Renae: Do you have sheep you just keep around because of sentimental value?

Mr. Brenner: Well, we have pets, we've got quite a few, many of the bums. We always try to save the ewe lambs.

Renae: Do you keep a goat with your sheep?

Mr. Brenner: I never have.

Renae: I've heard, I don't know if it's true or not, that goats pick up disease and keeps it from the sheep.

Mr. Brenner: I've never heard of it.

Renae: Do you have a sheep dog?

Mr. Brenner: No, yes, but no. I have a dog, but it's not worthy of being called a sheep dog.

Renae: Isn't that the kind of dog you have?

Mr. Brenner: Yes.

Renae: What kind of dog is it?

Mr. Brenner: It's an old English sheep dog and Australian shepard, I believe.

Renae: What about the cattlemen - Sheepmen war?

Mr. Brenner: Well, the sheepmen have conquered many battles. Now cattlemen and sheepmen will get together to combat the predators. Sometimes coyotes get 'em as soon as they hit the ground. I've tried trapping, but they are devils. We're about the only sheep rancher left in the valley, this part anyway. We've conquered lots through the years. Weather, disease, but now that we can't use the coyote poison, the coyotes will go beyond reason. I've seen a coyote work like a special trained sheep dog. It's a darn shame! Our kids will all be leaving home soon, so we've got to fight the battle while we can. We can't stand the loss by coyotes now, yet more. I have to keep sheep off ranges because of the coyote killing anymore. It's really a shame.

Renae: Put yourself in his shoes. What would you do?

**"The ewes do knock 'em down,  
but it's only a case of getting dirty and a little mad."**

