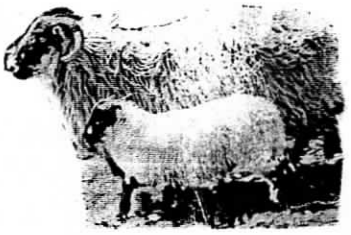
When Shepherds had a Washday.



By Frances Marginson.

Up to the middle of the last century, washing sheep at the beginning of June was a regular annual task for farmers. It involved the damming up of a suitable stream to create a washing dub (pool) to the depth of about four feet. The following day the sheep were gathered and penned close to the dub, from where they were thrown into the water in turn. The man in the stream, whose job it was to dunk the sheep and rub the fleece to thoroughly clean it, had to stand for hours in the often icy cold water of a moorland stream. Several neighbours would join together to wash each other's sheep, creating in part a social occasion, with farmers' wives providing ample refreshments. Purpose built pens were erected close to the water, or sometimes makeshift temporary ones were constructed. Something in the washing water affected the fish in the brooks. They were paralysed, and floated to the surface, where they were collected to be eaten.

For centuries past sheep were washed every year, until it was discontinued, mostly around 1930-1940, although it did continue in a way on some farms for another two decades.

Its origins seem to lie in another process, done in October the previous year, called salving. A salve was made from a mixture of whale grease (which looked like scrambled eggs) white Stockholm tar and rancid butter. These were all warmed and mixed together to form a kind of light brown grease. The salver would sit astride a sheep stock, a kind of bench with slats on the top, with the sheep facing him with its legs through the slats so that it could not move. The handle of a bowl of salve was slotted into the stock, near to the salver. The sheep's fleece was parted all along its body, and a good index finger full of salve was smeared along the exposed skin. This done, a further parting was made two inches away, and the process was repeated, and this continued all round the sheep. None of it was missed, often boys would be kept away from school to help and would salve the faces and tails. In all it took about an hour just to salve one sheep.

The reason for this time consuming job would seem to be two-fold. First it was done to protect the sheep from scab, a highly contagious debilitating disease caused by a biting mite, which made sheep rub and bite themselves incessantly. Secondly, the salve formed a waterproof barrier to help the sheep through the worst of the winter weather, particularly important for the sheep that wintered out on the fells. The annual wash, done about a fortnight before shearing, would help to wash out the remains of the salve, and contamination with peat and heather picked up during the winter. Many farmers believed it helped the rise, (the new growth of wool) so making them easier to clip. Also, the wool merchants preferred clean wool, and paid extra for it.

Salving, pronounced locally 'sovin' or 'saavin', seems to have been mostly discontinued early in the 20th Century. In 1905 the first of many Compulsory Sheep Dipping Orders was introduced to control scab. The first purpose-built dippers were wooden box-like affairs. Sheep were lifted into them, or pushed up a ramp and dropped in. They were soaked in an insecticidal solution designed to kill the scab mite. Early dip solutions contained arsenic, and later organo-phosphorus compounds were used among a variety of other chemicals over the years. In spite of all these, scab has still not been eradicated, and persists to this day.