

The shod and the shorn (Best of)

I suppose that the two men sitting at the lunch counter were what raunchy stage comedians would refer to as “rednecks.” You’ve probably heard all the redneck jokes that seem to have replaced ethnic humor as a result of political correctness. As if they aren’t just as demeaning.

The redneck shops for groceries at a gas station and paints his car with house paint; the passenger window in his old truck is covered by a plastic trash bag; his mail box is made out of old auto parts; and his dog doubles as a dishwasher. He still refers to fifth grade as his senior year. Ha, ha.

Admittedly all very funny. Yes indeed. But consider, if you will, the origin of the term. People were initially referred to as “rednecks” because their necks were burned from working hard for hours on end in the glaring sun, day after day. Doesn’t it say something about our society that such a person is now the subject of jokes and ridicule?

The horseshoer and the sheep shearer I know were sharing coffee and sparse conversation at a cafe that definitely has a redneck tilt to it. I suppose that’s why I like it. Both the men’s necks were definitely red and the texture of old leather. The skin on their hardened hands was cracked and calloused, and both were slightly stooped—the shoer from countless horses leaning on him and the shearer from years of bending over fleecy objects.

The men talked little, out of practice, I suppose. The horseshoer seldom opened his mouth because usually when he did horseshoe nails would fall out. And anyway, he wasn’t the talkative type, this man who could gentle a horse with a whisper.

The shearer’s work boots had been shined to a glossy sheen by the lanolin in the fleeces of one ewe after another. One endless mob of mutton. Although the shearer weighed less than 150 pounds dripping wet (which he often was), he could effortlessly throw a ram twice his weight. The Mexican spoke with a quiet dignity, his vocabulary the blending of two cultures. After working hard all day, no doubt he sleeps well at night, with no need for counting sheep.

Both men wore scars. The shearer had an eight-inch scar running down his forearm where his clippers once took on a mind of their own, and the hoof shaper wore the imprint of a well-aimed horseshoe, no doubt delivered by a cold-jawed wring tail.

They made their living doing honest labor. Two words that seldom find themselves in the same sentence these days. Theirs is the dirty drudgery of piece work. When their backs give out they'll retire without a pension, but their reputations will be intact. They are responsible for their own medical insurance and their own equipment, which they keep well honed.

They have not been ruined by the luxury of a steady pay check nor have they been in the habit of stockpiling luxury goods. After a long hard day they enjoy just sitting back with a beer making jokes about what they'll do with the profits from their labor. Maybe start a bank or buy a ranch.

Fat chance of that.

Someday these men will probably be replaced by a chemical that makes fleece fall off and a super glue for horseshoes.

As the two said goodbye they shook hands. It was a handshake that would crush rock. The shoer departed to get under yet another horse and the shearer to sharpen his blades for another full day in the shearing shed.

Sitting there I got the feeling of a penny amongst dimes. A mice among men. And the thought occurred to me that we have no right to measure any man by the color of his collar, nor the skin on his neck.

It's the Pitts

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