Rearing Orphan Lambs By Using Adoption Stalls

J. V. Whiteman and J. Fields

Story in Brief

During the 1977 winter and following fall lambing seasons a system of adoption stalls were tried to determine whether orphan or extra lambs could be grafted on ewes that only had one lamb or had lost their lambs. The winter lambing season involved 438 live lambs (many twins, triplets and quadruplets) from which there are records of 29 attempts to have lambs adopted. The fall lambing season involved 130 live lambs with six recorded adoption attempts. Most of the ewes used as foster mothers were ewes with a single lamb although a few were ewes that had lost a lamb or lambs.

The system described was usually quite successful if the lamb involved was strong and the ewe had sufficient milk. This method requires less labor and is probably more "foolproof" than most methods of rearing orphans or extra lambs. It is also cheaper and more successful.

Introduction

Anyone with much experience in raising sheep has gone through the ordeal of trying to raise the orphan lambs that result from ewes with no milk or too many lambs, ewes that will not claim their lambs or ewes that die. Many schemes have been tried for rearing these orphans or getting other ewes to adopt them. Recently there have been excellent but expensive powdered milks available and lamb nursery methods have been developed. Most if not all previous methods of rearing these lambs have one or both of two drawbacks, ie., they are expensive in time and/or money.

During the summer of 1976, an acquaintance told of seeing a scheme in Europe that was highly successful. It involved an adoption stall or crate where a ewe was placed with the lamb(s) that she was to raise. The stall had a stanchion to control the ewe's position and to prevent her from knowing what lamb was attempting to nurse. The ewe and lamb(s) remained in the stall for five days during which time the ewe was fed and watered but the animals were

otherwise left alone. Supposedly the system worked well if started within five days after a ewe lambed or within five days after orphans were born.

This report describes the experiences with one of these systems at the Southwest Livestock and Forage Research Station during two lambing seasons.

Materials and Methods

A battery of nine adoption stalls were designed and built prior to the February-March 1977 lambing season. (The estimate was made that nine stalls would be sufficient for the 250 ewe flock. It was adequate.) Each stall was 32″ wide by 48″ long and constructed of plywood. The front of the stall was solid except for a vertical section (8″ × 36″) which was removed. One side of this opening became the permanent side of the stanchion and an adjustable ¾ inch pipe was the movable side of the stanchion (Figure 1). A 4′ × 8′ plywood served as the front for three stalls. The partitions between stalls were hinged to the front. The partitions were 48″ long and 32″ high. A door was hinged to the back of each partition to serve as the back of the stall.

During the lambing season from February 10 until March 27 there were 238 ewes that lambed with 65 singles, 148 sets of twins, 26 sets of triplets and 5 sets of quadruplets. The plan was to use the stalls to get ewes with single or no live lambs to accept and raise extra lambs. Ewes that did not want to raise their lambs were also put in the stalls.

Ewes were fed and watered in containers in front of their stalls and were tethered in their stanchions for four days. After four days they were released from the stanchion but remained in their stalls. If they appeared to accept their lambs, they were turned into a small pen with a few other ewes and their lambs after the fifth day. Ewes that did not want to accept lambs were stanchioned again.

During the October-November 1977 lambing season the stalls were again utilized but there were only 137 lambs born from 99 ewes lambing. With fall lambing there are less multiple births (one set of triplets and 36 sets of twins), lambs are smaller (fall born lambs average two lb less at birth) and more ewes do not have much milk at lambing time as compared to the same kind of ewes lambing during the spring. Of 438 lambs born alive during the February-March lambing we lost five percent during the first two weeks and we lost nine percent of the 130 live lambs born during the October-November lambing.

Results and Discussion

It is difficult to summarize experiences such as these. Each lamb and ewe where an adoption was attempted represented a unique situation. The following statements best characterize our experiences.

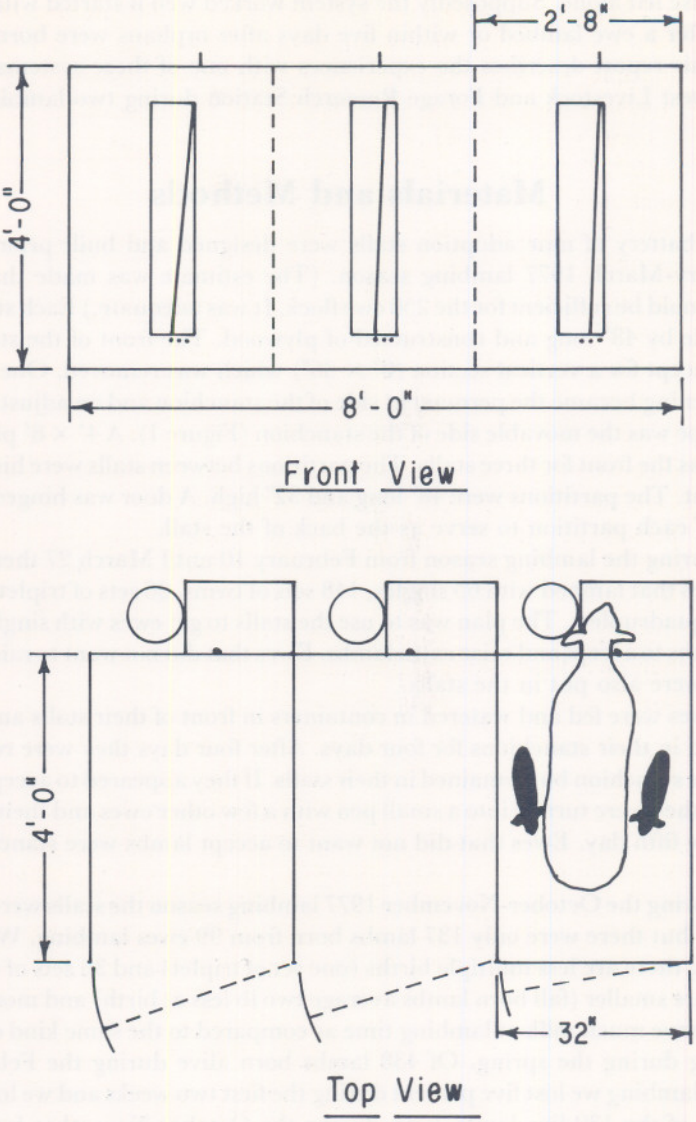

Figure 1. TOP: View of 4′ × 8′ plywood ¾ inches thick which serves as the front for three stalls. Openings hold a ¾ inch pipe bolted at the bottom to serve as the movable side of the stanchion.
BOTTOM: Top view of three stalls showing feed and water location and hinged gate at back of stall.

1. In 29 cases ewes with a single lamb were used as foster mothers for a second lamb usually smaller than hers because it was a multiple. These differences in birth weight were a great as 7-8 lb in some cases. Three of these lambs were apparently accepted but later rejected and in two of these cases there was a mismatch in size. Two of the foster lambs were laid on in the stall, one was a weak multiple and the other appeared to be an accident. The other 24 lambs were accepted and reared in what varied from an adequate manner to an excellent manner.
2. In three cases ewes that had lost a single lamb took another with no apparent problem.
3. Two out of three ewes that had produced multiples and lost one or more did not succeed as foster mothers.
4. The stalls were used to get several ewes to accept their lambs but we have no records to show how many such cases there were.
5. Generally the adopted lambs did not gain as well to weaning as did the foster mothers' own lambs. However, the adopted lambs were smaller in most cases and thus expected to gain at a slower rate.
6. The saving in labor by using this system is far more important than any disadvantages encountered.

Comments

Experience with this system will no doubt further improve its effectiveness. Probably there should not be a hard and fast procedure for all lambs. A good shepherd will recognize the individual problems that will exist in individual cases and make necessary procedural adjustments.

This general system but with different stall or stanchion plans has been tried in other experimental flocks and the results have been as good or better than ours. It would appear that the only lambs which should be bottle reared or put in a nursery on artificial milk are where ewes with adequate milk and spare nipples are not available.