

Portable yards solve growing flock problems

THE successful invention of portable, collapsible sheep-yards by a Merredin farm family could overcome one of the biggest problems associated with WA's skyrocketing sheep numbers.

The farm family: Mr V. D. Cahill and his sons Kevin, Dennis and Brian. The problem: handling difficulties with growing flocks of ewes.

For the Cahills are among those wheatbelt farmers who in the last few years have embarked on a programme of pasture improvement and heavy-rate set stocking.

This is a sign of the times. Cropping is still the big income earner for wheatbelt men, but whereas a few years ago sheep were regarded as little more than a source of pin-money and a means of making use of the big areas of stubble, more and more farmers are now coming to regard them as an essential adjunct to their business.

There is no doubt that the new policies are related directly to the availability of new and better pasture legume species, and a better understanding of their use.

The Cahills decided some years ago to make use of clovers and medic between cropping years, partly to build up their flocks and partly to build up their soil fertility.

Expansion

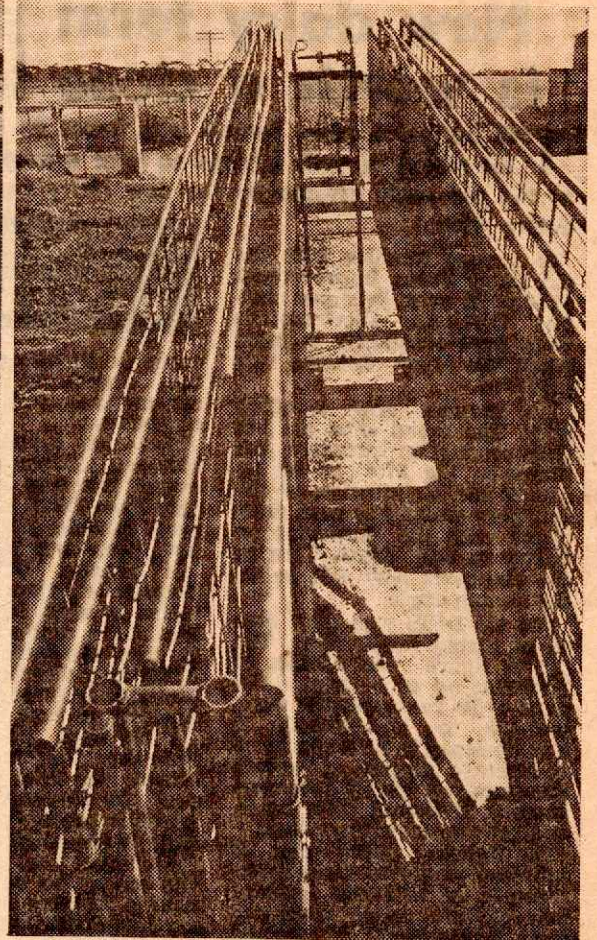
As they expanded their area of useful pasture their sheep numbers had to follow suit. They were determined to follow the heavy rate continuous stocking system to maintain the percent age of legume in their new pasture and this in turn created a need for more sheep. And this need meant buying and breeding.

They now have a total flock of 2,790, but still

have a huge breeding programme ahead of them to keep up with the pastures.

Their total holding of 8,000 acres comprises the original homestead block and a number of nearby farms recently bought. This makes the whole property somewhat scattered. Of the total area 4,400 acres are involved in a cereal cropping programme, yet 1,500 acres are unstocked because of a sheep shortage. This is an indication of the healthy state of the established pastures they now have, which, the figures show, are carrying about one and one-third sheep an acre.

Although they still buy sheep occasionally the Cahills feel that the key to their expansion will be their ewe flock but this expanded ewe flock has brought a serious management problem.



• EASILY moved, as is a light trailer, the yards are wheeled into position, then jacked up to allow the wheels to be removed. Panels are made of 1/2-inch internal diameter steel tube, and steel mesh.

(Next year they will mate 3,500).

Mobs of lambing ewes are now set-stocked in paddocks which are widely scattered. Some are long distances from yards. This has meant that yarding up for routine animal husbandry practices has become increasingly time consuming, and increasingly hard on the sheep.

Also, mobs have been increasing in size in each paddock.

At first it seemed that the obvious thing to do was to build more sets of yards in other sections of the property. Then the Cahills hit upon the idea of taking the yards to the sheep instead. But what sort of yards?

After some planning on paper they decided to weld together a prototype of what they had designed, and improve from that stage. But in fact, their prototype needed little alteration.

Basically it comprised a race, drafting gates and hinged yard panels, all of

which could be collapsed and folded together. When folded up, they could be simply jacked up at one end and a pair of wheels rolled underneath and attached by two bolts.

Lightweight

The weight of the whole thing was less than half a ton, so it could be easily towed about by any farm vehicles.

When the prototype was built (with the farm welding plant) it had to be tested. So one morning last year three men started out with it, to mark lambs in a remote paddock. When they arrived in this paddock two of them began to set up the yard along a convenient fence in the paddock, while the third man brought in the sheep. By lunch time the three had drafted 330 ewes and 274 lambs. The lambs were tailed, mulesed, marked and vaccinated.

Then the three set off for another paddock where they dealt with an-

Pictures: Bill Plowman

other 290 lambs after drafting off the ewes. They were home by six o'clock that evening.

Before the collapsible yard was built it would have taken one man until lunch time to bring the first mob of sheep to the central yards. In fact in some circumstances the Cahills found it necessary to use trucks at lamb marking. Without the trucks they were often hard pressed to have the ewes and lambs ready to mother up by nightfall.

Speedy

Preparing the portable yards for a drafting job is simple, and takes only a quarter of an hour or so.

They are wheeled into a position parallel to a fence, and about 15 feet away from it. Then the hinged panels (which are about 15 feet long) are swung out to make up a suitable yard arrangement. If a big mob is to be held while drafting is in progress, a strip of weld mesh (similar to that used in construction of the panels) is unrolled and used as a temporary fence to hold them alongside the crush yards. Steel spikes are some-

times used to hold the hinged panels in position if any stress is expected against them.

The mobility of the yards gives them some special advantages, quite apart from the time-saving involved.

Cleanly

Their use allows the selection of a clean site for the marking, mulesing etc., of each mob. And since the panels are hinged, the yard in which lambs are ultimately confined for marking can be reduced in size as the lambs are caught and placed in the cradle. This makes the catcher's job much easier, as farmers will be quick to realise.

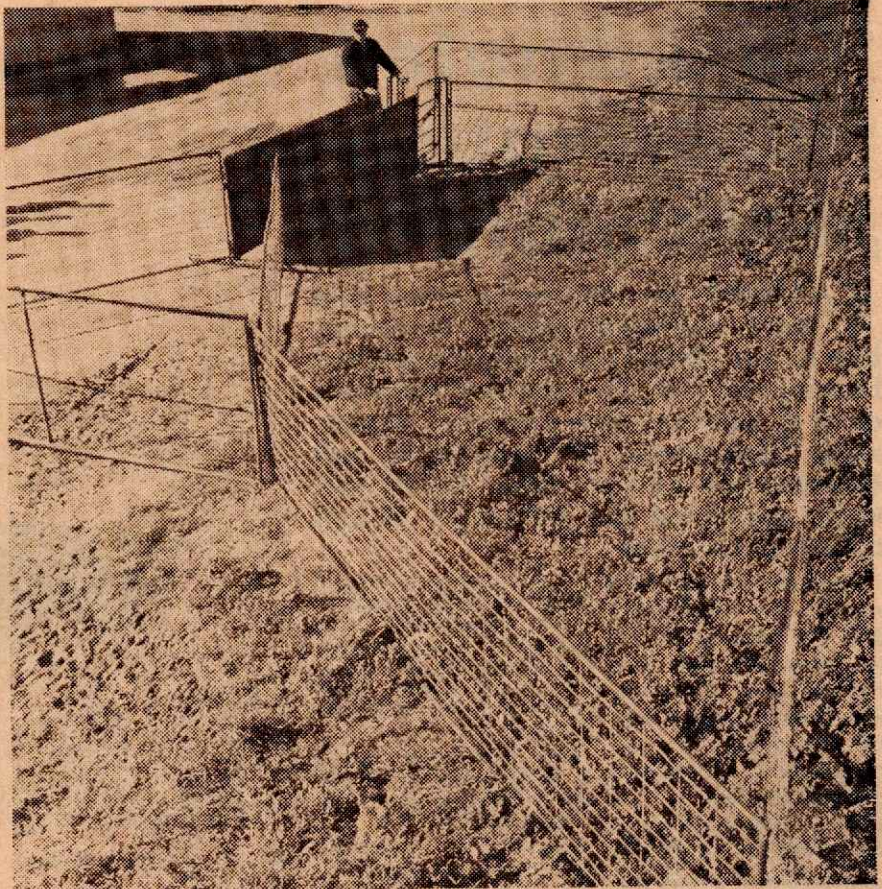
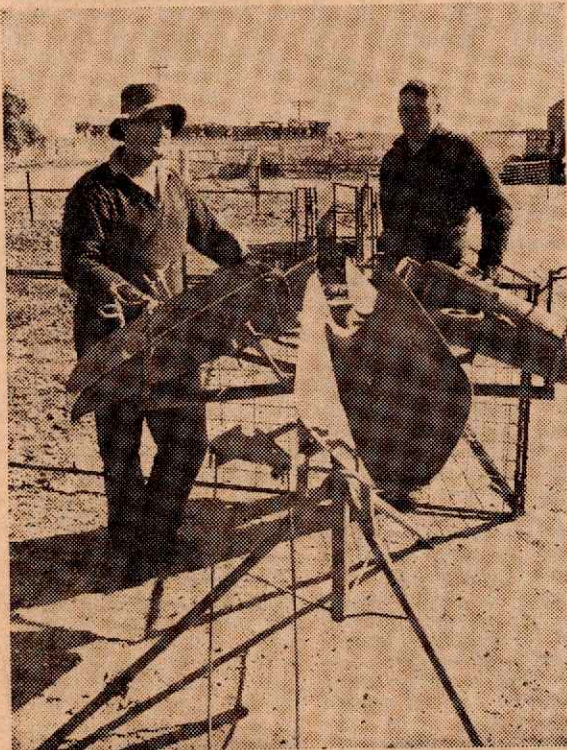
The hinged panels at the drafting gate end can also be set up to make one long race which will take 60 sheep at a time. This is ideal for drenching work.

Using a roll of mesh as a temporary fence the Cahills have recently worked on mobs of 600-700 sheep at a time.

They now have a provisional patent on their invention.

—John Lawson

• SET UP for marking, the yards are fixed in position with steel spikes if necessary, and the rotary cradle is placed alongside one of the panels. Kevin Cahill is pictured on the left. Cahill senior is standing inside the collapsible lamb pen.



• USING a strong fence as one side of the yard for adult sheep needing attention, the operators swing out the 15-foot hinged panels to form crushes and lamb-holding yards of the shape they require.

• THREE-WAY drafting gates at the end of the race send ewes back into their home paddock, lambs into the end pen, and adult sheep needing treatment into the side pen.

