

by Andrea Leonard

Marauding dogs kill livestock in Marstons Mills

Richard Robinson waked from uneasy sleep in his River Road, Marstons Mills home at 5:30 a.m. on Thursday morning, June 2, 1983. A dog's weak bark comes to his ears in the stillness. Instantly alert, he rose and stepped to the window overlooking his property that slopes gently to a wide expanse of cranberry bog, stretching eastward.

In the early light, the sheeps' fenced pen was clearly visible. Huddled in the pen corner nearest the house stood half-a-dozen of his pure-bred Hampshires. Nearer the edge of the bog, two dogs, a boxer and a German shepherd, were fussing over something in the tall grass.

Robinson reached for his .22 rifle, hurried downstairs, and outside. His first shot hit one of the dogs, wounding it. Both dogs ran into nearby woods. In the trampled grass lay the youngest and smallest of his lambs, bleeding, badly injured and mauled.

This was not the first time roaming dogs had taken his sheep. Two years ago, he lost two others in a similar incident. That first time, Robinson's wife, Marty, was at home when another pair of dogs attacked. She pushed the dogs off the prostrate sheep, collared both, and found they wore Town of Mashpee licenses. Those dogs were seven miles from home.

The contrite dog-owners, located by the Town of Barnstable dog officer, not only reimbursed Robinson for his financial loss, but promised to keep their dogs tied and to let him know should they ever accidentally get loose.

In fact, one of the dogs did run away at a later date, and the owner telephoned to warn the Robinsons, but the dog did not appear on their property.

This past week, though, the predators escaped.

Sheep are peculiar. Although at the sight of humans, they bleat loudly, when danger threatens they don't make a sound. Defenseless, they seem to accept their fate. The sheep Robinson has raised have been family pets. His three children have named each one; his wife can recognize their voices.

Mrs. Robinson has taken lambs to school and to Sunday school classes so other children can enjoy them. For several summers Robinson's sheep have been on display at the Barnstable County Fair; their black faces, gentle dispositions, and wooly coats endear them to all who see them. To his youngsters, the animals are like members of the family.

Ever since the attack two years ago, Rick Robinson has dropped off to sleep every night worrying about his livestock. Although the sheep pen is well and sturdily fenced, dogs dig under it when the ground is rain-soft. High enough to prevent the sheeps' escape, the fence can be scaled by large dogs. Can be and is.

"If I were to spend \$1,000 on fencing," Rick said, "it still wouldn't keep out sheep-killing dogs."

After driving off the dogs last week, Robinson called four veterinarians before reaching one who would even see the animal at that hour of the day. The Barnstable dog officer's duty hours start at 8:00 a.m.; a police officer responded to his call, but no dog was to be found when he arrived.

Dr. Larry Venezia of the Hyannis Animal Clinic, and his assistant, after examining the lamb, felt it was too badly injured to be saved. To spare it further suffering, the lamb was put down.

Robinson, who owns and operates Bradford's Hardware Store in Hyannis, has advertised his remaining flock for sale.

His six-year-old daughter asks, "What good will that do? What will prevent dogs from killing them if someone else has them instead of us?"

Until a year ago, in addition to the sheep, Robinson kept a flock of hens. While the family was away one weekend, every one of his 18 chickens was slaughtered by marauding dogs. "I'd like to bring up my children to know the joys of simple living, close to the land, with livestock and farm life a part of their heritage. But it's just not possible when people permit their dogs to run."

His telephone rang. The caller, a Chatham resident responding to Robinson's advertisement, asked why he was selling the Hampshires. When Robinson explained, the caller told him he had had similar experiences in Chatham and was planning to move off the Cape, to take the sheep to Maine.

Must those who want livestock leave Cape Cod for Maine because dog-owners ignore our leash laws?

"I'm fond of dogs," Robinson said, "I don't blame them. They're doing what's natural. I do blame irresponsible owners who let their animals run loose to destroy mine."

The view down the grassy slope and across the broad flat bog is lovely. Peaceful. It hardly seems possible that, in the tall grass, a little black-faced lamb, ripped and torn, died as a result of an unknown dog-owner's carelessness.

And a little girl weeps for her sheep.