



Carpets in Sheep's Clothing

A KORERO REPORT

WE WENT to Wanganui to find out how sheep-skins were made into rugs and carpets. We thought we'd better start at the beginning, so we paid our fourpence, and clattered out in a rheumatic tram to Aramoho suburb. The tannery was there. We met Mr. D. R. Bowie, manager, an anti-tank gunner who had been smacked up near the Sangro River, Italy.

"Glad to see you," he said. "Come right in and I'll show you over the whole shooting-box."

Straight away, your nose told you you were inside a tannery. A pungent odour permeated the place. Skins, some white, some coloured, were piled alongside great tubs filled with water, and large mangle-like machines. The concrete floor was slippery with water and clotted fragments from the skins.

Upstairs we went to where the sheep-skins arrived from North and South Island stores. One hundred and seventy were banded together in each bale, or, as it is known in tannery circles, "dump." A brown-clad middle-aged man was grading them rapidly into separate piles. According to the texture and quality of the wool and pelts (skins), they would make either rugs, slippers, or coats. Without pause, the man in brown determined the destiny of each skin.

Meanwhile, Mr. Bowie told us the works were tanning and dyeing about six thousand skins a month. He explained that in the manufacture of rugs the skin doesn't matter much, but for slippers it's important to use a sturdy skin which will

give a good suede finish. Women's coats, on the other hand, can't be heavy, so into them go light skins with attractive wool, women being what they are.

"That's fine," we said, "but we think we'd better just stick to the rugs and carpets for a while."

"Quite," said Mr. Bowie. "You'll notice the skins here are more yellow than white, and they're dirty in some places. So next we've got to clean 'em."

Downstairs we were introduced to two perpendicular wooden drums, 10 ft. in diameter. One wasn't working, but the other, one-third filled with a warm solution of soft soap and soda ash, was rotating with 125 skins inside it. After forty-five minutes the skins would be tipped out, the wool scoured and spotless. But strips of flesh still remained on the skins, so most of this would be scraped away in a fleshing machine—a large mangle which had sharp edges set along one roller.

"Now you'll find out where the smell comes from," continued Mr. Bowie, leading the way to long wooden tubs, in which revolving paddles kept the pelts moving, and hurried up the process of tanning. "The smell, of course, comes from the tanning liquid, made from wattle bark, which is imported from South Africa."

We asked what was the idea behind tanning?

Apparently skins are composed of millions of fibres containing a high percentage of water. Water means rapid decay. Tanning removes all the water from each fibre, replacing it with an anhydrous substance.