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The Clothespin Trade War Situation

IN TIMES PAST no household could operate very long without adequate supplies of clothespins. There were plain wooden ones with deep slots and various kinds of spring clip pins, usually more expensive.

When automatic washers and dryers became commonplace, clothespins became less so. They serve purposes other than pinning clothes to dry on outside lines, but for most of us clothespins became relics.

A couple of recently published items indicate they are not quite as obsolete as we had supposed.

First, we read in The Daily Oklahoman about Phil Hussey of Edmond who hopes to make money with an improved plastic clothespin he has invented. He anticipates it may be sold in thousands of stores and comments that "clothespins are a multimillion-dollar industry."

Then a magazine titled "Europe" arrived. It featured an article on "Protectionism" and portrayed the clothespin industry as a leading figure in international trade that could

affect Oklahoma beef sales.

It was claimed that four years ago the U.S. clothespin industry, which employs some 400 people in four plants in Maine and Vermont, "mounted a classic lobbying effort against cheap imports from places like Poland, China, Hong Kong and Taiwan."

"The U.S. government, though ostensibly an advocate of free and fair trade, used its power to restrict the foreign competition," the article stated. "Quotas were imposed on clothespin imports for three years. A year ago President Reagan extended the quotas two years more."

The point made was that by restricting the importation of clothespins the U.S. government had set a pattern for the Japanese government to impose import quotas on beef and citrus.

Oklahoma cattlemen probably haven't given a thought to clothespins as a part of their beef export problem, but they have been trying to find ways for years to crack the Japanese market with all of the high-priced beef the people want.

It appears that nearly every country in the world favors free trade, according to its own definitions. In general, this means that nation should be allowed to export or import freely as much of any product or commodity as it chooses, but that quotas are in order when local industries object to the competition.

When foreign compact cars began flooding the American market after World War II, photographers took pictures of parking lots at American automobile factories. Many employees drove foreign-made cars to work, reflecting buying trends that eventually contributed to the shutdown of U.S. factories.

Last December when Congress was considering legislation to require autos sold in the United States to be built mainly by American labor from American parts, farm organizations opposed it. Spokesmen said they feared retaliation against American farm commodities.

The clothespin situation is further indication that international trade is a complex business that can hang up on small items.