

23SHORTGRASS.DOC

Word comes now that cattle inhaled too much smoke in and off the huge grass fires over the state last month. Never before had we heard in the shortgrass country of that kind of loss.

Way back in World War II bombing range days, one 40-section outfit lost a big bunch of yearling ewes. With practice bombs scattering on and off targets in the daylight and flares floating on parachutes over the countryside in darkness, grass fires occurred over a big scope of pasturelands. But with so many ranchers and cowboys around, few livestock were hemmed in to be killed by the flames or choked by the smoke.

Whole classes of Mertzon boys volunteered to go to fight fire in the pastures. The way we volunteered was that the sheriff walked into the classroom and pointed out the volunteers. Our enlistment lasted until the fire was out.

Boys then sure didn't choke, considering the protection our lungs received from smoking Bull Durham or Duke's tobacco. Grass doesn't grow or burn rank enough to suffocate a smoker who rolls his own cigarettes, especially one whose habit goes back to the third grade.

Cows ate lots of burned prickly pear cactus in those hard days, which might be why those old sisters were not

asphyxiated by prairie fires. Smoke off a grass fire mixed with burned cactus whets a habitual pear eater's appetite instead of choking her. Long as she could hold her head up high enough to drain the slobber down her chin to keep from drowning, she'd winter on a pound of 41 percent cottonseed cake a day and raise a calf.

Now the cowboy swinging the burner from a strap around his neck might have done poorly. Nevertheless, he's bound to have been grateful being able to hear the birds singing come spring instead of hearing a burner roaring and having cow brutes running behind him, tripping on the hose to jerk him around in the soot and the dust.

From the looks of the goosenecks running on the highway through Mertzon, the ranch isn't the only one selling out early. We shipped the oldest cows two months ago. Next week we will have all the calves gone three months early with no heifers kept for replacements.

The bad part of drouth sell-off is by the time one move finishes, you need to find another way to escape. When we started weaning calves and shipping the old cows, the move made more space at the line camp. By the time we shaped around in those pastures, however, we needed to start making room up on the Divide.

The north side up there was the driest then, so we weaned those calves and sent them to town. A little shower fell during the work, but only enough rain to stall the shipping, not enough to do much good.

Every Monday morning's plan focuses on lightening up some place. Feed jumped \$75 a ton the last load to hit \$350 a ton delivered in the bulk, so supplemental feeding is ending as a stall.

After coyotes and multitudes of labor difficulties connected to the wooly business drove us to the hollow horn trade, we lost our drouth insurance. Our old ewes would raise a lamb and a fleece of wool in spite of hard times; maybe not very heavy lambs or the cleanest fleeces, but enough of each product to feed us and the old cows.

Another feature as tenacious as the sheep was the oldtime livestock bankers. During the Fifties drouth, shortgrass jugs, big and small, paid feed bills for ranches way west of Fort Stockton and farther east than Kerrville, on up north of Abilene, Texas.

Our whole world revolved on 180-day notes and emptying feed sacks. "Renewal" became a ranch word. You knew every old pickup parked around the jugs. Some of us had to sit a spell to recover before we drove back to the ranch.

Meteorologists promise the summer will be dry and hot. One thinks this may be the beginning of a 50-year drouth. My contemporaries spread the gloom further by pointing out the insects and animals that are extinct or becoming scarce from the climate changes.

Until I tried to forget about the drouth by visiting a group in Angelo, I didn't know horned toads and dung beetles could generate that much love. It would have been my guess from observing the table's habits that a double scoop of chocolate ice cream or a cream-filled brownie would have aroused more passion among those oldtimers than a lizard or a bug.

The scientists don't know that warning herders is fruitless. If we'd had any business judgment or foresight, we could have done something useful with our lives a long time ago.