

11SHORTGRASS.DOC

In the wet spring 1947 at an old ranch party, the Big Boss and one of his cousins, Lake Tankersley, dared each other to go ahead mark and dehorn their whiteface calves in April in the face of certain screwworm infestation in the wounds. Terms of the dare have disappeared except that the long, wet summer of doctoring cattle three times a week marked a lot of cowboys.

The two herds were split, 75 pair in the Upper Gillis Trap and 120 pair in Monument Trap (traps are small pastures). That meant two roundups per doctoring. More acute cases ran in a hospital trap for more immediate care.

Black buzzards, in feather and heart, hovered on phone lines. High humidity left cowboys and horses gasping for air at the slightest exertion. Sunrises opened long days; by midday, men and the mounts needed rest. By nightfall, we rode back to the ranch without a word above the range of a grunt. Nobody sang and nobody spun a loop. We smelled the salt from hard, hard work and a taint of fly repellent from the screwworm medicines.

Twice a hand asked, "You're the Boss's son, Kid; why'd he do it?"

Once, perhaps twice, I replied, "'Cause he and Lake been playing together for over 40 years, ever since they were kids."

Our pants became hard to keep up from weight loss wrestling and heeling big calves to the ground. The ones we flanked hung hooves in the waistlines. Sure, it was funny to see an old boy with his pants jerked off in a pen full of bawling, wormy calves. Yes, it was hard luck to break a belt or tear those heavy Levi jeans.

All the ground work occurred in the railroad pens at Noelke Switch. The only crowd-pen small enough to hem in a calf to save loops fed the loading docks to the rails. Railroad men climbed up on the docks to watch and comment loud enough for us to hear: "Them Noelke hands ought to be in the Carter's Little Liver Pills ad."

The passenger train called the "Doodlebug" honked and trumpeted a several-note musical warning a mile before reaching the crossing. Horses no longer fell back to break bridle reins; cowboys seemed to wade deeper into the calves as the diesel locomotive rumbled by the pens.

In the bleakness, the horn echoing put us harder to work. The engineer would have resigned if he'd known his train whistle was the only pleasant distraction in a

cowboy's morning. Railroad hands held cowboys in contempt, because of our free life, I suppose.

By the first of August, the calves became too heavy and too salty to throw except by the rope or bulldogging. Numbers started down. A bacon grease formula the foreman concocted began to heal the dehorn wounds.

I quit the end of August to go back to college. Summer students collected in San Angelo for the same purpose. Two brothers came in from a ranch in the vastness of Kent County who had not had a haircut all summer.

The last time any humans had been that wild in the Big Bend were the Jumano Indians. While I had been doctoring calves, they had been driving mules and breaking horses. In hours, we were off to the Border at Del Rio to celebrate Labor Day in Ciudad Acuña.

Now look up and close your eyes for a few seconds to imagine three young cowboys swaggering up the sidewalk in a wide-open border town, a guitarist hired to play, pants stuffed in boot tops shined black to perfection. Add *gritos* in Spanish and sweeping bows to passing cars by three-inch brim felt hats. Throw in an Anglo or a Mexican or two in every cantina to buy a drink.

Not easy, but the next is impossible. On the final bullfight on Sunday, find one of the three seated on a

protective buffer inside the ring. The band plays notes the same as the doodlebug train horn. He drops from the wall onto the neck of a fighting bull too mean to die, but no match for a bulldogger. The matador kicks the bull, spits on the cowboy.

Soldiers charge into the arena. He releases the bull in time to escape to a back room in the adjoining restaurant's kitchen. Protection for the evening cost \$5 Americano, including beverage refreshments.

Potatoes and onions begin to smell the same in Mexico as they do the States. Imagine one more time all that is gone in Acuña. The town, they think, is 150,000. The bull ring, they know, is leveled. And we all know that surely young men will never be that wild again.