

7SHORTGRASS.doc

Sixty years ago, reports an excerpt from the files of the *Livestock Weekly*, "Sonny Noelke, Mertzon, bought a load of Angus heifers." In those days, the Big Boss joined a group of daring shortgrass herders willing to run "black muleys" to replace the traditional whiteface cattle – the Herefords.

One big objection to black cattle went back to the bulls. In the old days, went one widespread story, Sugg Brothers, a big operation, bought Angus bulls to try as an experiment. The 50 head he turned in one pasture lay around the waterings all breeding season. "Never left out to breed the cows," or so said the often-repeated story that lived on around the hotel lobbies and coffee joints for decades.

Other sources claimed you couldn't pair a black cow to her calf. "Throw a herd together and the mommas allowed any calf that walked up to suck." In those horseback days, cowmen worked off the late calvers at shipping in the pastures to ship later in the season or winter at the ranch. Herd grounds, roundups and cutting horses made up common use, common setting and normal tools.

The young sat around bunkhouses in awe of the storied gray horse Uncle Tom Murphy rode to the cut so quietly that cattle bedded down on his side of the herd. Eyes widened at

the tale of Uncle Fayette Tankersley's ferocious ride on a big sorrel to such exertion that he cut his saddle off after the big brute crumpled in exhaustion. In the evening stillness, you could hear the fierce old cowman slashing the girt chords with a four-inch steel blade.

Another objection was that being muleys, (polled) you couldn't keep them in a pasture with water gaps to crawl under, especially the bulls. Dry Spring Creek ran through the Old Ranch. We sure fenced plenty of draws and swags to test that theory, but the big one to come, in all these bogeys, was that black heifers could be bred to calve nine months to a year earlier than a Hereford heifer.

The load of black heifers the Big Boss bought made up part of 200 head he brought from Central Texas. He turned in 10 spectacular knothead two year-old Angus bulls from Missouri after Christmas to breed his heifers.

The next fall, three of us rank kids started a calving operation that'd make the horrors of the worst nightmare to ever occur in a bunkhouse dream seem like a visit to your Aunt Molly's ice cream supper. With no chute at the line camp pens, every patient required at least 10 loops at the head and 10 more at the heels. Out in the pasture, the scores ran worse.

No one came to our rescue. Every day, we left the headquarters carrying a lunch in our chap pockets. We didn't botch the job - the job wouldn't have worked at Texas A&M college on a blackboard, much less in open pasture or in those big corrals.

This newspaper's confirmation that the family has been in the Angus business 60 years caused uneasiness. Been more shortgrassers go broke determined to keep Grandpa's bovine bloodlines during drouths than all the feed mills and hay fields that made the downfall possible.

In that awful dry scourge in the 1950s, a lady adjoining the ranch on the east fed a herd of inbred Hereford cows so long that their chin whiskers turned the same color as cottonseed meal to preserve her grandfather's bloodline. She used the same bull family for so many years that her calves' noses began to point exactly like a possum's.

Hospital and doctor business prevented being able to help work the heifer calves at weaning this summer. Replacements had to be stocked on schedule to be sure the herd's ages staggered in the next decade.

Doctors prior to the bovine tissue heart valve transplant predicted one more year of life without the operation and three more years to live if they operated.

(The healers neglected to mention that one of the three years was going to be charged off to recovery.) But if the doctors turned out wrong, I didn't want to leave a bunch of old toothless sisters in case I expired going into a hard winter. Also, the year branding irons hanging in the saddle house showed "Oh Ten" to be in line, and keeping the years straight is a big burden on a herder's bookkeeping talents.

An old boy with the Angelo auction company came out to sort the cattle according to weight and quality. He told the cowboys helping that the only thing wrong with Angus cattle was the number of bulls injured every year.

What I am waiting for is a cow expert who knows the solution to the bull problem. I already knew that if there are more than one in a pasture, a donation to the hot dog business is soon to be. Does make you wonder how many bulls Mr. Sugg gathered at the end of his long-ago experiment. We never heard that part.