

24SHORTGRASS.DOC

*(Note: Monte Noelke is recuperating from major surgery, so until he mans the keyboard again, we thought we would pull some Shortgrass Country from the files.)*

It's hard to say whether it was the drouth of the 1950s or a smaller calamity such as the summer of 1964 that paralyzed the portion of my boss's brain where the impulse to spend money is located.

Either way, it was a historic lick because it left a permanent change in his attitude toward ranch expenses.

Probably it was the shipwreck of '64. If I recall correctly, that was when he began throwing such monumental hissies over matters that should have gone unnoticed. Yes, I believe it was that tragic summer because, prior to that time, he didn't raise the roof over every sack of oats we bought for the saddle horses; and if six bottles of catsup on the grocery charge account cause him to thrash about in the manner of a Berkeley, Calif., college riot, I had not been present when that particular item was on the bill.

Whatever damaged his brain, it should have been reported to the keepers of medical history. The experience changed him so that it is doubtful if the frugal guardian

of the lights in the White House has ever reached such a passion for strict budgeting as my boss now displays.

Therefore, when he informed me last week that we were going to make the annual ram sale in San Angelo, I wouldn't have been more surprised to learn that Cassius Clay had stood up in a Moslem meeting and told them that being Abdul the Boxing Champion was for the birds and he was off to Hollywood to join the legitimate toe-dancing profession.

Not only did we attend the sale, we bought five stud bucks with gay abandon — just as if he hadn't missed the crest of this year's good lamb market by failing to call our lamb buyer 25 seconds before the market broke.

And as if it were merely myth that every high-priced sire we had ever purchased had either died from charging his reflection in a water trough or became so crippled and exhausted in quarreling with his pasture mates that he passed on without leaving more than a dozen heirs, we sat among the buyers right at ringside.

We bought bucks with fleeces so long that, if the wool could have been transferred to the Hunchback of Notre Dame, he would have looked smoother than a watermelon, and there would have been enough wool left over to make two Navajo ewes look like finewool champions.

It was quite a sale, with the auctioneer chattering in his foreign tongue and my boss far removed from the violent role he assumes at the ranch when he finds that one of us has charged a small length of rope to his account.

Two of my contemporaries were among the consignors — gents who had attended the same kind of country school as myself. But when they began selling bucks for \$150 up to \$500 easier than I'd peddled some cutback lambs for 15 cents a pound, I began to wonder if they hadn't gone to a night school in later years.

Anyway, we bought the bucks and conned a neighbor into hauling them back to the ranch free of charge. I am still astounded at the change in my boss, but not enough to suggest that, since we own so much high-priced stock, he surely will want to pay better wages to the man who looks after the valuable animals.

As a matter of fact, instead of thinking of a raise, I am more concerned about how he plans to absorb so much capital investment outlay by cutting down on his operational expense.

As you may have gathered, there isn't much left to cut on, unless he takes up the habit of another member of the family who used to winter his hands on woodpeckers killed with a BB gun. —(06/24/65)