

3SHORTGRASS.DOC

On an early morning walk on the Divide, the answer hit as to why our luck turned so bad on our bulls. Struck like a blow from a door slamming in a high wind – the dry year I promised the Holy Father that if he'd free me from this dry ranch, I'd honor Him by doing something useful the rest of my life.

You may know, but I sure didn't; parables aren't always written on thin paper to be bound in the Big Book. When He saw the heifer calves all but pushing down the pasture fences instead of me selling all females, He struck the bull herd to control such nonsense.

How many died or became crippled under His rule? Eight maybe nine bulls seems right so far. Points you need to pick up: you better not bother the Maker on such trivialities as missing spring and fall rains for two winters, located 50 miles from an accessible central market, without doing more for a solution than watching the weather maps on TV and hunting for more grass to run more cattle. And instead of staying out on the dry prairie until the red ants struggle to find grass seeds for the queen, for once, you might consider sending those old sisters to the sausage mills and not expect miraculous resurrection of the turf in 35 minutes after the first rains.

Before going further on the subject of intervention, it would be interesting to tally fellow herders who, to keep a woolie, a hollowhorn, a broomtail or a big herd of same in spite of weather failure, used or use the excuse that the beasts continue or continued Grandpa's bloodlines.

Family history sure fits "the keeper" pattern. The Big Boss pastured sheep all over the shortgrass country and afar to keep the big, smooth-bodied, finewool Noelke ewes in the Dry Scourge of the 1950s.

The Big Boss, however, took care to preserve himself by wintering with the polo crowd in Florida and summering in Colorado Springs for the tournaments until rains came.

Self-reliant is the best way to describe the Boss. If he got cornered by a practicing missionary, like one of those leaflet-spreading hombres scouring the countryside, his stock answer was "Stud, my Uncle Joe Dubose down at Cuero never missed Sunday School a day in his life." No doubt those pamphleteers felt complimented to meet Uncle Joe's nephew. On top of that, to be called "Stud" out of the clear blue was bound to have added to the mission.

The Maker makes allowances dealing with herders. Good guess is that He expects us to pray that our calves and lambs weigh more than our neighbors'. He more than likely

anticipates requests that the Border Patrol stay away until after goat or sheep shearing are over.

In a recent experience, I ran into a Mertzon minister down at the wool house. He wore a western-style straw hat and work jeans, or did the day I met him. On a wild chance that he might be a day worker to help ship, or a calf buyer to invigorate the shipment in disguise, I poked my right hand his way in a "glad to meet you" effort in keeping with a Washington lobbyist's style.

His reaction signaled he wasn't at the wool house to save hopeless cases or rescue hopeless causes, like hollowhorn and woolie operators follow. Some hombres are easier to read than others. By the way, he said he had been in Mertzon four years, which cleared the notion that he might be a prospect dumb enough to sign on with a broke-down cow outfit's calf shipping.

Later, a man of the cloth in a cowboy hat image brought back Uncle Goat Whiskers' times. Whiskers used to hire a preacher every spring to help mark lambs. He made a good catcher - caught two to one more lambs than the other helpers. He knew how to hold a lamb right to be marked, too.

Whiskers theorized that his skills developed from the practice gained baptizing babies that seemed to crop in the

early spring like the lambs. The Faith he led escapes memory. He could have been a sprinkler or an immersioner. Out on Uncle Goat Whiskers' ranges, six-hour nights and 18-hour days dimmed the importance of denominations, unless one appeared that offered a 30-minute nap after lunch.

Stuff like Cowboy Ivan's claim that the fishes died downstream from the low water crossing on Spring Creek after a revival dunked big bunches meant: "Mertzson kids, stay clear." (Reckon I will ever drop Ivan's story?) But it seems to be lost what church the preacher led, except he sure could catch lambs.

From now on, being careful what I ask for is going to be an understatement.

We have more dry country than we need in August. Were I still in the praying game, I think I'd ask for rain — but not enough to make wintering my heifer calves possible.