

Spring storms came late to the shortgrass country. Winter feed runs lapped into overtime. The few herders left around fled the post offices in cottonseed meal-dusted pickups without any desire for social contact.

Up on the 09 Divide, showers began to measure in late April in "tenths" and "teases." The Devil's River might measure between a tease and a dust settler; the same afternoon, the Old Barn and the 09 well showed as high as two tenths of an inch. (It's hard to explain, but one tease takes three droplets to wet the concave bottom of the gauge's tube.)

The cows kept coming to feed after the grasses began to green from the showers. By "coming to feed," understand that the old sisters galloped along by the feeder's spout, trampling the cubes into meal.

We herders call such seasons the one of heel flies, slipped hair and thin residue. Instead of passing on such needless information from a lost trade, better to spend March, April, and part of May in Miami, where lapdogs never have one flea, much less flies or a louse, and writers can shorten "thin residue" down to an earthier four-letter word.

Few are left to read the oldtime weather signs. Most herders and all city fellows quote the TV weather or the forecasts from the airfield at Angelo. The city-bound scientists and loquacious television hombres predict 20 percent chances of scattered thundershowers four days ahead. "Late evening showers" appears to be the most popular choice, yet it goes unnoticed that they reserve a margin of 80 percent.

Out in the country, the weather prophets hit chords like "You seen any rattlesnakes crawling?" or "The sun set behind the clouds Sunday." None of that 20 percent business fits a crowd attuned to stinging scorpion and black widow spider lore.

Strange how prairie life makes a man so smart. Solitude must build brain cells. The mental strain of keeping count on pastures and figuring the percentage of the calf and lamb crops sharpens us to a hone that makes sliderules fit in the abacus category. The grand old game takes a lot of arithmetic measuring windmill rods or calculating the number of posts to a mile of fence. We become mighty smart out here free from second opinions.

Along in the first week in May, the gentle showers and light east breezes dampened and cooled the country on the Divide so perfect that instead of hooking up the air

conditioner, I retrieved Grandmother's tan wicker fan spaced with peach-colored silk lining from a trunk.

Granny loved to rock and fan herself on hot evenings on the front porch. Sweet old fan, sweet old lady. She's the one who taught us grandchildren how to roll cigarettes in brown paper by a delicate pass over the lips.

Lulled by the season's gentleness, visions came of planting gladiola bulbs in front, or perhaps even grape vines to shade the sunny side. The plan and planning began to wear on until one evening darkness came early.

Darkness came early because an enormous cloudbank built in the West hid the sun and turned the horizon into purple roiling banks. Darkness became darker.

Fierce gales began to rock the ranch house to the beat common to old windowpanes and worn door latches. Rain poured under the kitchen door. Lightning bolts, 29 billion volts in a rumble and stroke, welded switches, fuses, transformers, and overload protectors into solid masses.

The flashlight used to search for calving heifers proved the barn still stood. I unplugged every appliance. Had I thought, I'd have disconnected the commodes in the bathrooms. I tried going back to bed, but was so worried about the disconnected computer that I jumped up and covered it with a rubber pastry mat.

By some phenomenon strange even for a shortgrass mystery, two tenths total fell from swirling winds and thunder claps, spaced by pelting hail and sufficient electricity to make the air dense enough to read on a voltage meter.

Twice I slid under the bed. Each time, the nostalgia for Ol' Spot, my one-time storm pal, returned too strong for me to stay.

In predawn, the only telephone connection worked through an old rotary dial phone in the hall. After two or three tries using a flashlight in one hand to dial 32 numbers, the REA answered that as soon as trucks winched free from mud holes, they'd be at the ranch.

On my last round to check, the only things left working were Grandmother's fan and her hourglass to time boiled eggs. Had Granny been around, she'd have said, "Go roll a smoke and laugh it off, kid."