

The most abysmal batch outfit recorded in the shortgrass country goes hands-down to a long-ago lonesome camp south of Big Lake, Texas – the sequence where two trappers rendered hog fat in a bunkhouse bathtub.

Close runner-up names the summer a piece of sheetrock falling on the kitchen table at the bunkhouse met the hands' housekeeping standards until the Big Boss and his cook bought an oilcloth cover to open the fall work.

Serious individual contestants developed when my sons began to batch at the ranch. John, the artist, still holds the title for longest-soaked roaster pan. His temperament complemented the stillness that panned water lent to the cabinet top for 26 days – 26 summer days – long ones.

The windmill man who ate with us on rare trips to grease the mills showed more interest in kitchen work than John. It's possible John may connected through him that a kitchen sink needed emptying as often as an Aermotor windmill requires its annual oil change.

He, like my other children, made a good audience in those days. Nowadays, they butt in with over-dramatized courtroom episodes experienced as fixers and arrangers, or overblown incidents on the way through an airport from

meetings out of state to other interruptions of the litany connected to the never-changing shortgrass country.

Appreciate that the reports to the old man at the ranch may be far different than the exchange between Ben, at work in a Miami bank, to Lea at his law office in Austin, to Paula over at the clinic blocks away, to a summary in which George closes by juggling Brownie and Boy Scout events, for a wrap-up to John up in Connecticut on art, and back to Ralph over northeast of Mertzon on his grandfather's old place. (Sentences like this are unavoidable – believe me.)

For the '09 Divide, the abandoned patriarch rolls the reel back in shadows and darkness to a humble setting in a ranch kitchen his mother used. There the old herder eats boiled beans on cornbread off a tin plate.

Alone in memories of glorious roundups and splintering pens bulging with woolies and hollow-horns, the nickel plated spoon strikes the tin plate to cadence the beat for the verse: Yore roundup days are done, little cowboy.

He has perfected openings to all family calls with such bucolic rituals as: "We only had three-tenths over at the Devil's River." Pause: "Seen a horehound weed growing in a dead prickly pear cactus in the horse trap on a ride

today." Pause: "Guess horehound is gonna' take the country before prickly pear does."

But for a big switch, eavesdrop over the wire 10 minutes later to his pal on her outfit 12 miles south of the Devil's River gauge: "Six-tenths in the closest gauge to you. You betcha! I can meet you tomorrow in time to take the 10 o'clock to Dallas. Whether or not we stay home isn't going to make it rain."

Back specific to batching, five years or maybe longer passed before I admitted I couldn't clean the ranch house like Mother. The location 21 miles from Mertzon marked off hiring help.

Curiously, the habit of carrying a stick on walks adapts the grip to broom and mop handles. Until the kitchen linoleum began to grate to footfalls, I was unaware how often a floor needed to be swept.

Big break came with learning to use a cup towel on a broom to sweep down spider webs. Up here on top, spiders weave strands thick enough to withstand March gales. Dominant characteristic of all the species is to cloud light fixtures in strands and strands of webbing. If you are going to be able to see after dark on places like the Divide, better attack the spider webs before nightfall. Black widows and brown recluses are sure hard to see in

web-dimmed light. In this altitude, too, those beasts make stinging scorpions' poison rank with a sugar ant's sting.

One international story from the Internet outdoes all ranch bachelor feats. The Reuters news item has been on my desk since May 30. Titled "Japan man discovers woman living in his closet," the article claims a 57 year-old unemployed Tokyo man, mystified by food disappearing from his kitchen, discovered an unknown woman had been living in his closet for five and a half months. He called the police after he found a mattress and plastic bottles on the closet floor.

He sure won my sympathy. I haven't forgotten the shame of a ringtail being discovered sleeping in my guest room closet. Life on batch outfits can go to extremes in excess of West Point standards, or to states of disrepute equal to a swine herder's life.

Sure hard to pin old scoundrels down after they have lived alone. Wish I could report what my kids say among themselves, but your guess is good as mine...