

7SHORTGRASS.DOC

At midnight the first of April on the 09 Divide, north gales seconded the shortgrass determination to destroy and dehydrate Mother Earth to a median depth of 10 feet.

Had not the pieced-together ranch house walls been reinforced by book shelves and ballasted by stacked books, this little six-room crate would taken off in a flight that would have made the Grand Zeppelin look like a demonstrator.

Windows rattled so loud that the wind's whistles broke into staccatos. The high-powered flashlight beamed to spot heifers during nocturnal calving expeditions caught patches of the barn roof waving in shadows. I was stationed three feet out the east door, afraid to go further, when the force lifted the tassel on my nightcap and blew my nightshirt into embarrassing folds.

No one called in April Fool's jokes next morning. The man on a spring feed run to hunt cattle scattered in all parts sure wasn't a prospect for a bigger joke. Seated in an old feed wagon alone, rocked by wind and comforted by the radio report from Angelo's weatherman that wind advisories are up for areas lakes, he practiced April Fool further than he wished.

We thought the afternoon weeks ago forced by winds strong enough to spring the rollers on the biggest barn door on the west wall exceeded the limit for the Divide. Sure hit at a bad time, falling during calf marking. As soon as a door jams, you need the feed wagon out and another truck in to jack up a wheel. By midday, a panel across the space to keep the saddle horses outside facilitated passage.

Barn sparrows sure approved the new fly space without the extra delay landing and take off to go over and in between the door's top rail. Marvelous little animals, sparrows make themselves at home. You know, I'm sure they immigrated to the New World on sailing ships without ever being invited on board. They delight in alternate roosts over saddle seats and pickup hoods.

Early times on the wind-swept Divide prepared me to cross the North Atlantic from Hudson Bay over to Greenland once. Backed by all those wind-swept days on the prairie, I became the only person, besides the crew, on the whole double-hulled ship able to eat solid food for a couple of days to the sound of icebergs breaking on the prow in the dining room and porthole views of the decks awash in the gray Artic sea.

Comes back, too, that on a South American trip, I wrote the waves peaked at 36 feet instead of the correct 26 feet on a trip around Cape Horn on a Greek ship. Later (and this needed to be re-edited,) my notes revealed my handwriting wavered so much in the pitched sea that the number "2" looked like a "3." The error would have been caught if one line below, the ship hadn't lurched so bad, I stabbed a hole in the page with the pen.

For 40 years we lamed up here, storm or no storm, after the eagles left between the sixth and tenth of March. Lots of those seasons weren't much use for the eagles to stay over to eat dehydrated lambs. Dry spring combined with high west wind lowered the crop to the point where an eagle needed to carry his lunch cross the Divide, unless he was desperate enough to try to split an armadillo's shell or brave a skunk.

Visitors complain that the winds make them nervous. On windy times, I bake a batch of cornbread for breakfast for a tranquillizer. Sure settles the nerves to crumble soft cornbread in a glass of cold milk. It defrays the trauma from electric wall outlets spewing fine dust streams and windowpanes hitting a Cha-Cha beat.

Do note that cornbread browns quicker in storms, so instead of baking 25 minutes, better start watching the pan

at 18 minutes. One other precaution: check your gauges and instruments. Might be the winds caused the timer to take seven minutes to start and messed the thermometer's mercury to read defrost.

Other folk's breakfast challenges don't fit up here at the ranch. I realize that. City folks can whip over to Starbucks or McDonald's and be nourished on frosted doughnuts or egg McMuffins before we can warm a piece of cornbread.

The Weather Bureau out at Mathis Field in Angelo recorded one gust on the second of April at 58 miles per hour. I can't prove it, but I think we fielded that mother on a tad more wallop, dragging a broken-down feed wagon across the House Pasture yoked to a pickup.

But the morning dawned quiet today. Maybe the cattle can be fed before the wind deafens the old sisters and dust makes them hard to find. If their eyes keep watering, for sure they won't be able to see us; for certain as the green madness progresses, they won't be listening.