

2SHORTGRASS.DOC

One of the best stock hands in the days on the old ranch came from an unlikely beginning on a Johnson grass farm over on Spring Creek. Grass burrs and straw chaff on the irrigation ditches and turn-rows tempered him into a hard-working, hard-living hombre.

His rig fit his image. Rough, cracked leather dried over straight fork saddletree with unmatched stirrups hung to swing on baling wire-mended leathers. Girt and cinch salvaged from discards from the saddle shed walls wherever the last set broke.

Good shortcut to picture him rests in the J.R. Williams cartoons, except this cowboy I am telling you about wasn't a character for a cartoon. Before any young button swung his saddle on a rack, he sensed to respect the black-whiskered brute way to one side in the pens, or apart against the wall in the bunkhouse kitchen.

First time we met happened over on the ranch's northeast side at a neighboring watering. He rode from a brush-filled draw on a sweat-drenched gray horse at a restricted pace to pass through ground infested in prickly pear cactus.

Prickly pear cactus was the reason he and ol' Gray had such a hard life that dry, miserable summer with nothing

greened in the pastures except moss in the water troughs, mistletoe in thin-leafed trees, and thick prickly pear pads. Shortgrass woolies, in all parts, feasted on thorny pear fruit to bleed and scab their mouths perfectly for screwworms to send them to certain death before frost.

He used a tie rope to tap ol' Gray. They seemed to be well acquainted. In the dust-tinged air, his black-bearded face resembled the mask riders depicted in the pulp pages in shoot-em-up magazines. Had I not been so lonesome, I might have ridden off.

First thing, he asked if I had a smoke or a chew. Second, he told his horse, "You better not drink so much, hot as you are." They seemed so connected, I expected the horse to stop drinking.

What I didn't expect was when he dropped on his hand and knees and drank right by his horse in plunges deep enough to wet his short-brimmed hat. When he finished, he jerked ol' Gray's head up with one rein. In the same motion, he said, "If I don't get some nicotine, I'm gonna' drown myself in the tank."

I handed the can of pipe tobacco across the fenceline. He dug sack paper from a shirt pocket to roll a smoke. Lighted up, after three drags, said, "Gosh-a-mighty, thank you. I ain't seen the boss lady in weeks."

More drags – long, deep ones. "She don't like to come to the ranch, afraid I'll want something fancy like a can of peaches, or a big treat like salt pork."

We messed around in a shack on our side until we found a sack to split my tobacco. The reason his horse and he were so weary was that his boss ordered him to drive the sheep off the cactus to keep them from eating the fruit.

Unfamiliar as folks are of sheep ranching, or all ranching, I better stop and explain; one man horseback can hold a thousand head of drouth-starved sheep off five sections of ripe red pear apples, if 20 mounted men come to his rescue good enough to make extra time to drag the dead sheep out of the way of the work.

Next time we met, the Big Boss hired him at shearing. The sheep ran in big pastures and big bunches. Every time an ol' lone wolf line camp sort named Elton and he worked together, we'd have less trouble crossing the railroad right of way or the brushy draws with the sheep than with other hands. In short, "They were always there at the time needed" is the cowboy way to say it.

Now, don't entertain the notion that these two men resembled sprinkles of petals in a rose festival. On one jaunt, the Big Boss sent the three of us to round up the purebred flock on a June afternoon to be sheared at his

pens after a five-mile drive, plus 65 critical feet to cross the Highway 67 right of way.

With the herd halfway across the pavement, a Dr Pepper truck drove through the sheep, spooking part back over Elton and myself, the rest west up the highway. All that was audible was metallic crashes off the truck cab onto the hood. All that was visible in the lane was our partner dismounted on the east end, hurling softball-sized rocks at the Dr Pepper truck in absolute disregard to the sheep milling around the truck.

Darkness overtook us as we herded the last ewes and lambs together. Going back, Elton sang "Nearer Our Heart to Thee." The old ponies knew the way home.

Our partner spoke once at the last gate, "Monte, that Dr Pepper man better pray I die before I git a chance to get off to go find him in Angelo."