

Five years ago, a casual comment from one of my sons noted that his girlfriend stooped to pick up pennies scattered and left on the sidewalks in Austin. It highlighted how I scooped up coppers on walks in Mertzon and pointed out the way I pounced on a stray dime or lost nickel embedded in the roadbed in a sweep once reserved to playing marbles for keeps.

His observation struck a sensitive spot. Younger people always cause self-consciousness. I could be juggling Indian clubs in the air with one hand on the New York stage and blanch from a side remark by a green kid on the front row spotting that my socks failed to match.

Herders actually don't have a choice nowadays on today's livestock margins whether to collect pennies or not. Optimistic predictions say deer hunters will be the only parties able to buy feed the coming winter from the jolt \$8-plus bushel corn costs today.

On our first venture in the new order, we bought 15 percent range cubes instead of "twenties" to wean our heifer calves last month. By dropping the protein in the ration and substituting cheaper sources of protein and grain, the feed in bulk loads cost \$323.50 a ton delivered on a 10-day discount for cash that week.

The day the truck brought the feed, north breezes spreading the slight tinge of cottonseed smell triggered old sisters to bawling a chorus of phony starvation as far away as two miles to a south fenceline. The cubes thumping on the steel of the empty overhead tank drummed the eternal lament of the Noelke tribe: "Yes, yes, yes, little cowboy, seal yore springtime fate in high-dollar, low-protein cake, cake, cake."

Hunched over forward looking toward the wall, I peered into aerial maps of the pastures over the desk. Questions reeled through my mind. How, oh how, had I talked myself into keeping the top end of the heifers? Is there no hope? No cure is a better way to phrase it. Who first said, "Those little ladies will shore make a good set of cows?" Charles Goodnight?

Reared back in the chair, reflections bounced into swirls off the ceiling: You hit this cold earth cursed with an insatiable, insane, inherited desire to own good sheep and cattle - lots of them." "Boy," it flashed, "for once go look at the clock and the calendar. Yore granddads' eras ended eons ago. If you must live in the past, ask for a job mowing the cemetery over at Mertzon with a hand-propelled mower."

The trucker ran the long auger slow to keep from grinding up the soft cubes. The saddle horses grabbed every chip spilled off the spout. The south side mourners hit low notes that rose into bellowing outbursts. And I began to rock in my desk chair to the rhythm of the low rumble of motor and rattling of the cake in the spout.

The projection on the scratch pad, or in an image brain-fevered by bovine-itis, shows heifers can be roughed through a dry winter cheaper than a cow. She, the heifer calf, takes less country. Now, an old cow requires higher maintenance, perhaps double the amount of feed. It takes a range management class one session to learn this rule. But once out of school, it may not take a week after graduation for the student to start testing his own theories. (Forgive me for repeating such widely accepted facts, but I need to show a little sense now and then.)

The tough part is that the market is the jumping-off place for the better hollow horn and woolie operator. So few of us are informed or lucky enough to punch the right button in the board in the fall on an 1150-pound cow, or make the right move to ship her 550-pound daughter to town before frost changes the shrink on the calf and ol' granny loses more teeth and weight.

One of the curses of mankind is how dumb age and experience makes him. I knew a lot more about stocking ratios and numbers, for example, when I worked for my father as a young buck. Not forgotten, also, the law that drawing wages makes one smarter than paying wages is a second lesson that had to be learned.

Perhaps the penny-picking girlfriend of my son's goes back longer than five years ago. Jet age values convert slowly to the times when cowboys made a dollar a day. Indian head coins minted thicker in those days. And there weren't enough lost through holes in our pockets to discuss picking them up.