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In the February 15 weekly edition of the *Devils River News* published in Sonora, Texas, three articles targeted shortgrass herders. Number one at the top of the page headed as: "USDA Livestock Assistance Program Sign-Up Begins." To one side, bold black letters proclaim the next title: "Poisonous Plants, Bitterweed." And in the bottom left-hand column a parting shot reads: "Texas Farm And Ranch Financial Situation To Be Assessed."

Alone waiting in the corner booth of a Sonora steak house, the three subjects blended together. Thirty minutes before, the cowboy at the ranch reported via cell phone that 220 head of shorn ewes in the West Pasture began to wobble and knock one another down on the feed ground on the morning's run, presaging a late winter die-off from bitterweed to come during lambing. Further, in the morning post, a crisp note from the USDA office in Reagan County announced: "Your Irion County property does not qualify for payment under the 1999 Livestock Assistance Program." As fresh in mind as the letter yet 21 days in the past, a lady working for the Texas Agricultural Statistic Service tracked mud across my living room carpet one rainy night to take what I thought was an assessment of farmers and ranchers as she filled in 10 double pages of questions.

The article on bitterweed explained in detail how the poison attaches to the proteins floating in the sheep's body tissues to interfere with swallowing and causes a green

froth and slobbering around the mouth. Then came a shattering flashback: "I helped drive those sheep in a brisk trot from the shearing pens less than five says ago. Maybe if I step outside for fresh air, I'll feel better. Fanning the air with a napkin attracts too much attention." (Sonora steak houses don't need maitre D's to escort and seat the in-crowd, but the lady guarding the cash register becomes plenty skilled at marching indisposed oilfield roughnecks and rambunctious cowboys out the front door for behavior correction under the street lights.)

Proteins began to form on my ribeye. Form in the shape of fat cooling off and coagulating to the rind. Fellow up front played the latest of country western ballads, "You Were the Watch Fob of My Eye But Now You Are the Log Chain Round My Heart." Before all the sadness, I counted to be sure that 11 years had passed on the Irion County ranch without a follow-up rain. The jukebox tuned right along; "You used to be the watch fob of my life before you became my log chain heavy wife. I cherished you as the twilight in the heavens and the twinkle in the sky until you became the thunderstorm on my horizon and the earthquake in my soul."

I turned next to the financial situation of ranchers and farmers to be assessed by the Texas Agricultural Statistic Service. It said each of the 1097 farmers and ranchers to be sampled for the study represented 50 to 100 similar producers. I didn't know where that'd place my outfit. On paper, USDA must have relegated it to recovery or

remission. Part of the ranch has been resting for nine years, soaking up anywhere from three to four inches of moisture every 12 to 18 months, spaced in 12 or 13 little showers and big dews. The last hoof of cattle left there in 1993. I kept experimenting every fall, trying to find a small enough bunch of sheep to winter on the country. I didn't mean the stocking ratio as an experiment, but it always turned out to be one, a bad one.

Also, the couple living at the line camp quit the same year we moved the cattle up the Divide. The newspaper article said, farmers and ranchers had been through four drouths in the past decade. So, transposed to the highway place, the line camp had been vacant for 3.75 of the four dry spells. Oh, I did take in a deputy sheriff to chop ice and check the waterings over Christmas in exchange for free rent in January; but before he was moved in, he calculated that the long-range forecast showed more ice-chopping weather than free-rent weather.

I folded the newspaper. No customers came near the booth. The lady refilling my cup might have called me "Hon" or maybe "Son." The fellow playing the jukebox rolled a smoke from a package of Bugler. The curlicues in the water spilled on the smooth table looked just like the crumpled form of a bitterweed sheep. So, whenever the statistician assesses, he may find more than four drouths in the past 11 years. I thought the highway place was jinxed, but I didn't expect the Reagan County office to confirm it.