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As long as two weeks after the August rains, reporters continued to interview herders about the drouth. Until the road washed out going to the ranch, I filed every article on the disaster, including all the remedies and strategy. Plenty of drouth experts develop on the shortgrass scene. Not only are the survivors of the Big One of the 1950s still around, but some mighty deep-scarred younger men and women exist who have been through dreadful dry spells.

Going back to along in June, the first drouth coverage hit the urban dailies and TV channels. Then little news tidbits of the six-year weather failure began to catch the national press's attention. Notice was taken of 24 counties in West Texas holding emergency meetings to discuss water shortages. Down toward San Antonio, water rights questions boiled into the federal dockets and the state threatened to sue the courts for jurisdiction. The Department of Agriculture extended the emergency feed programs to the end of August. Frightening federal loan programs were announced at the department's local offices. Grim estimates of the summer crops rocked the commodity markets and wrecked the ranchers' hopes of cheaper feed prices in the fall.

By July 10th, the Southwest edition of the *Wall Street Journal*, in a article on the drouth and the economy (expect their spelling, d-r-o-u-g-h-t, from here on) in Texas, quoted a publication from the Center for Economic Development at the University of North Texas at Denton as

saying the following, "Sure there's a drought and some sod busters will go under. That's a shame, but that's the way farming is. The whole enterprise is predicated on the cooperation of M. Nature and she's a temperamental old biddy."

The author's name was omitted by the *Journal*, which called him only "an economist." The article further showed the center's thesis that agriculture is no longer important to the state's economy. The final direct quote from the center's report was: "Let's assume the drought is absolutely devastating and wipes out a quarter of Texas' farm product. At most we're only talking about losing a few billion (dollars not farmers) and that's, pardon the expression, chicken feed."

Sitting alone at the breakfast table at the ranch, waiting for the sun to rise on lands then scorched to the epicenter, I ducked my head and threw up the palm of my right hand in front of my face before I thought. My stance was the same mannerism that marriage counselors work so hard to cure in hardcase clients.

"Sod busters!" I lowered my guard and went back to the office. On page 1352 of *The Random House Dictionary of the American Language*, sod buster is defined in one line: "A farmer who works the soil." The dictionary doesn't say, "a sod buster is a male or female cow and sheep herder indentured to a political unit, like a republic or dominion, to raise meat and fiber to feed the citizenry on a two

percent margin." Nor did I find mention that farmers are bound to raise cereal grains and brewer's products to their final breaths for a populace holding them in contempt.

My breakfast grew cold. The Good Book says to turn the other cheek, or I think it does. So I began to search for some cheeks to turn in the direction of the appropriations for the Center for Economic Development at Denton. The chairman of the Finance Committee of the Texas Senate at the time was John Montford, a very accessible public official. Mr. Junell from San Angelo, who I knew, chaired the corresponding committee in the House. Congressman Junell gives small town folks the same treatment as the urban centers in his district. He keeps his word and does good works. And then there was Bill Sims. Senator Sims has more friends in the legislature than Hillary Clinton has alibis.

Who else was there? Two mighty potent leaders in the Farm Bureau live in Irion County. The Farm Bureau drops big slugs of dough on election years in some mighty hefty pockets. I spooned the coffee around in my cup and visualized the head of the Farm Bureau walking unannounced into the president's office at the University of North Texas and saying, "A certain party out in the shortgrass country wants us to buy you out and move the Economic Center down to Chihuahua City, Mexico, to be a six-week summer school for pole vaulting and javelin throwing."

After I realized how much influence I had to wipe the center off the map, I began to feel guilty about picking on

such a small opponent. Breakfast wasn't hard to reheat. But those guys had better watch themselves going around calling influential citizens sod busters. Good thing the d-r-o-u-t-h broke before I lowered the hammer on those wise guys...