

FEBRUARY 12, 1981

Thursday's cattle market in San Angelo showed a little unexpected strength. One lot of baldface steers weighing in the 4s brought 81 cents. Flesh was the factor, I suppose, but after all these gloomy weeks of bad news, that small bunch of calves is bound to have helped everyone's morale.

At the time of the sale, I was standing within five feet of the ring. Tension was so high at ringside, a light flash of blue fire shot across the calves hair line.

Nobody seemed to notice the electricity except myself. All eyes were riveted on the call numbers on the TV screen above the starter's perch I sure wasn't going to mention the fire. I learned a long time ago, from being the only one that was too hot in church, to get on that limb. Who is to say in the times of grave economic catastrophes what is real and what is imaginary? Plenty of the happenings on the catwalks and around the ticker tapes defy natural explanation. I never have wanted to swap nightmares with a cattle trader and don't intend to start doing it now.

Another good reason for silence was the condition of the hombres sitting around the auction ring. The last good news most of them had heard was that the markets were closed for the Christmas holidays. January had been a rough month for all phases of the red meat business, except a few isolated cases like well managed hamburger stands, or maybe one or two chili joints that had a good recipe based on oatmeal and water.

The market expert has said the first quarter of '81 was going to start a boom that'd shake the cattle industry. Only the shaking part ended up to be correct. Two days before that sale, I'd watched a cleanup man at a stockyards cafe mop off nearly as many ashes from the table tops as he was from the floor. I overheard a waitress say that coffee cups were landing so uncertain, she was going to suggest to the manager that he start using soup bowls to serve the cow trade. Like she said, truckers and traders and ranchers alike were all muttering to themselves in groups of two's and three's in a break off that always signals the certainty of bad times.

From the sound of President Reagan's speech on Thursday night, he must have been talking to our crowd before those steers brought the 81 cents. Remember he said the economy was a "calamity." The way he said it sounded exactly like an old boy I talked to at the auction about his future contracts on June cattle. It sure would wreck Mr. Reagan's image as a businessman if it came out he played the cattle future's market. I know for sure it'd end any hope of the Angelo banks supporting his cause.

Starting today, I'm not going to write a check without a second signature by a partner outside of the industry, as an added precaution, I'm going to make two handwritten copies of everything that my wife and my banker say about my ideas. And best of all, I am going to spend the rest of '81 out at this ranch, as far away from the temptation of the hollow horn game as distance can remove me.