

AUGUST 17, 1978

Several years ago, an unpapered alien who helped us roundup one fall was definitely of unsound mind. It was about this time of year that he started to work. I think he stayed on for three or four months into the winter.

By saying that his mind was unsound, I don't mean he was like those funny old boys around auction rings that keep coming back for doses of stocker calf fever or cases of light heifer disease. I mean that even compared to them he'd seem peculiar.

Before I hired him, I knew he was an oddball. His brother had been a steady hand. While he was working for us, he'd sent the fellow money in care of a jail in Mexico. My understanding was that the hombre had buried one of his compadres in a cave in a canyon wall along the Rio Grande. But you know how gossip travels between the two countries on the ranches that use wet Mexicans. For all I know, some Mexican judge may simply have decided that the guy has some bad habits, like burying his friends in caves, that 10 years in an adobe cell on flour tortillas and water would perhaps cure. I don't pretend to be an expert on the customs and laws of the Republic of Mexico. Past giving advice on not drinking their beer hot, I try to avoid the subject of Mexico.

Anyhow, he loved the ranch. I never saw a wet that fit in so well. He'd tell big stories about witchcraft and bogeymen to the other Mexicans. However, other than keeping wasps in his camp and picking up polecats and rattlesnakes in the pasture, he wasn't any more problem than the other men.

But as I started out saying he was of unsound mind. I didn't object to the snakes or the wasps or the polecats. What bothered me was that he dug a hole and buried anything that displeased him. Like if a pot of beans spoiled in camp, he'd dig three feet in the ground to cover them up. Once I brought out a bottle of vitamin pills that caused him to break out in a rash: Instead of demanding his money back, he pecked out a rock hole on the side of a hill and tamped those pills in as deep as an anchor post.

After he buried the vitamin pills, I told him we'd better break our contract. Not much of the land in the Shortgrass Country will grow anything but six minute grama and bitterweed; nevertheless, I was beginning to be uneasy that his campsite was going to be contaminated.

We have enough obnoxious plants and diseases without a nut sowing pills and burned beans in the soil. Suppose those vitamins were as strong as the white coated television actors said they were in the commercials. From the way they make it sound, a couple of tablets dissolved in the Indian Ocean would be enough to make the water churn from one coastline to the other. I don't believe one-tenth of what the drug companies claim, but I didn't want a \$150 a month cowboy causing a big earthquake.

Facing the fall work this year, I wouldn't cull back an orangutan even if he ate up his own tie ropes. Every shipping season, the scene becomes more lonesome. I wonder if we are all going to end up burying pills and beans in the hillside.