

It's Been A Long Hot Summer In The Shortgrass Country, Too

By Monte Noelke

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MERTZON — A book the size of the jubilee issue of a Sears-Roebuck catalog would barely outline the high points of catastrophes that have struck at the ranch this summer. No soap opera that ever saddened the hearts of men could match the disasters of the season now passing.

What could have been the driest spring in six or seven hundred years set the stage for this trouble-stricken period. As the pains of doing without any rain became, even more aggravated by the wind and dust in the scorched countryside, the scene was perfect for a man and his material wealth to fall together into a heap of bad luck.

The first casualty was a fellow at the line camp. Along toward the end of May, he was overcome by a case of human distemper that would have made history at Mayo Brother's Clinic. The rattle in his chest, plus his constant snorting and coughing, were audible some 200 yards upwind. The secondary symptoms alone would have felled a championship wrestler.

To further complicate matters, he refused to accept anyone's advice except that of doctors over in San Angelo. Had he only used the ancient, stable-tested distemper remedy of inhaling the smoke off burning chicken feathers, he would have been ready for a deep sea diving endurance test in less than a fortnight. But somehow or other, the forces of modernism had driven him into the clutches of the healers in the Wool Capital. He seemed determined to forsake the old fashioned paths to good health.

Then, as if having this key man on the lift wasn't grief enough, more misfortune followed.

Internal and external parasites began to flourish in the pasture. A thunder cloud about 40 feet wide and six inches thick produced sufficient lightening to burn out the water pump and hot water heater. On the same day, an apprentice chauffeur chose to crash our new pickup into the yard fence.

Before the dust and ashes of these costly events had settled, a \$700 bull expired in his first year of service. The newly replaced water pump malfunctioned and put the hot water heater back on the blink; and the lady at headquarters became so out-of-sorts from doing without both hot and cold water that she wrenched her back while kicking the dog out the front door.

If an insurance peddler had dropped by at this point, I would have given him \$90 a day just to farm out the risk of the side effects.

After that, things really began to fall to pieces. In a single afternoon, the hydrant in the ranch house kitchen broke off and fell into the backwash of stopped-up sink drain; while I was outside cutting off the water, the best-bred tomcat that ever ruffled a whisker on this ranch fell off the roof and broke his back; and in the wake of all this excitement, one of my kids charged through the front door so hard that the blast from the recoil knocked the back screen off its hinges. (I'm still a bit fuzzy about this incident. It could be that the door slamming was what knocked old Tom off the house. Things were happening so fast, I'm uncertain.)

From there on, a trouble shooter capable of settling the crisis in the Middle East would have been lucky to pick up the fragments.

As of this writing, I'm still at a loss to explain what is wrong. It may be a conspiracy. However, the oldtimers have always claimed that this country is too dry to support any kind of underground activity. The great distance involved makes an explanation based on African Voodoo illogical. For once, no agency of the government can be blamed, because it's common knowledge that bureaucrats are interested mainly in hexing larger operations.

It looks as though we're simply going to have to wear this curse out. Maybe a good rain will come this fall and wash our cars away.