

## Moving Stock Across Highway Is Hazard Of Modern Ranching

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1-28-65

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MERTZON — In 1934 a highway was completed through our ranch, cutting off three pastures from the shearing and shipping pens. At the time no one gave the matter much thought, for traffic worries in those days were limited to fear that travelers would, from sheer boredom, fall to sleep on the roads.

Today, however, the situation is much different. People from the East Coast take off for California with less forethought than they once devoted to planning a trip of 100 miles or so. Diesel trucks tear up and down the road at speeds once considered necessary only for rushing troops to battle. Natives join in this 60 to 80-mph rush by charging toward the nearby city as if the fate of the nation depended on their making a pre-inventory double-stamp sale before lunch.

And unfortunately for us simple tenders of flocks, the congestion speedway is filled 24 hours per day all year long. The only slack times is on rare days when ice is two inches thick on the pavement, or in periods of national calamity when citizens are too stunned to unsheathe their speed demons and move about — as, for instance, when they heard about the assassination of President Kennedy.

With the growth of high-speed traffic we have developed, along with a horror of crossing livestock over the highway, a powerful desire to find some way of interrupting the traffic long enough to pass a small bunch of sheep or cows from one side of the road to the other. To date, our study and effort in this direction could hardly have been less fruitful. We might better have tried merely to find a soft place through which we could have burrowed a safe underpass beneath the road.

At first we thought of enlisting the aid of the Department of Public Safety. The idea was tabled for fear that, although this is an efficient organization, staffed by men trained to handle all sorts of police work, the boys might be tried to the point of resigning their jobs or so angered that they would violate their code of conduct.

Then the Highway Department was asked to provide permanent warning signs at each of the livestock crossings. The signs were placed at about twice the length of a football field from each passageway. Our first crossing attempt revealed that travelers heeded these signs in the same manner that a high school graduating class follows the advice of a commencement speaker.

Since the signs were an obvious failure, we accepted a neighbor's suggestion that we place a pickup in the road with its headlights burning. This resulted in traffic being so distracted by the pickup that cars and trucks almost ran over our fence on several occasions. One man went so far as to stop and courteously inform one of the cowboys that the pickup's lights had been left burning. Except for this polite traveler, most drivers seemed to grow suspicious and pressed even harder on the accelerator.

The defeat of the light pickup stratagem made us return to the Highway Department for help. If there is any organization in the world that knows the perils of the machine age, it is this group of brave men. Not only do they have to worry about driving back and forth to work on the highway all the time; they must often spend the day on the road with only a broom to fend off the swift traffic moving through their work areas. We felt these intrepid (almost foolhardy) men could still supply a solution to the problem: how to move our stock across the road without worrying about what a thousand-pound black cow would look like splattered from the radiator to the streamlined windshield of a late model car — or what would happen when a dozen ewes became lodged beneath and inside a sleek Thunderbird whose owner was trying to get across the state of Texas in record time.

The Highway Department's district superintendent came up with what looked like a foolproof plan. He provided us with two folding signs which bore bright orange flags to attract travelers' attention. Included with the signs were two sets of inner tubes filled with sand to make the signs more stable.

However, we discovered after the first crossing that more sand was needed in the inner tubes to withstand the violent slipstreams of the passing vehicle. Needless to say, many voyagers on the highway gave the signs the same respect as is accorded the "Don't Feed the Animals" sign in a zoo.

This exhausted our attempts to halt traffic. We still use the portable signs when we move livestock across the highway, but we do so more as a lark than with expectations of any real benefit. Now we gloomily discuss what things will be like by 1970 when kindergartens will need elevated parking ramps and the old folks' home will have a two-car garage for each resident. But even in these dark moments, we see some hope. Many people are taking to the skies; the highway death toll is growing to the point that an atomic war seems a minor threat compared with a holiday automobile trip, and a few people appear

genuinely concerned about it; and thus far no one has come up with a workable triple-stamp promotion in conjunction with a pre-inventory sale.