

9SHORTGRASS.DOC

Cell phones are zoned now in public buildings. More and more signs pop up every day forbidding phones.

Medical science, in particular, appears to be sensitive to the hand-held craze. Doctors must not want to compete for patients' attentions hooked to Aunt Bessie's kitchen for the morning. You do see ones in waiting rooms jump up to converse down a hall in a free speech zone.

As a country, we seem to be on an oral binge to stay in contact. Out over rangeland, where once crank dry cell battery phones connected by a single wire linked ranch to town, calls from out of state or even overseas reach you under a windmill tower.

Country air used to make city folks eager to talk to Cairo, Egypt, or at least Cairo, Illinois over the land wire. Now the Farm Bureau sponsors a long distance service that costs a nickel a minute. Rarely is a guest today long-winded enough to run much tab at that rate.

Thing is, the true essence of ranch life is being able to hear natural sounds, not subscribe to introduced sounds. The first summer back on the 09 Divide 35 years ago, a bedroll and cot furnished an extra bedroom out on the front walk.

Hoot owls and turkey hens fussed over the tree limbs in the pecan trees on moonlit nights. Way off at the Devils River Mill, cows bawled mournful calls for calves to nurse in the twilight, or old bulls bellowed deep-throated, heaving pitched rumbles to match a fight. Closer by, mother ewes bleated for lambs and nighthawks sang. (I'm gonna' say "sang," because nighthawks make the "wahing" sound and drag their wings on the ground, fooled every time into thinking they can sing sweeter than an oriole.)

Had the telephone rang, the sound wouldn't reached the sidewalk. The lawnmower only interrupted long enough to cut a swath around to the garage. Old Angel, the Mexican witch, came by walking north and stayed long enough to thin the rattlesnakes around and under the house. Skunks and raccoons avoided the space; car lights were an oddity on the public road.

Next summer, the ranch house was reconditioned and air-conditioned with new wallpapers and ceiling fans and such like. The Border Patrol caught Angel before he reached the ranch that spring. Five big snakes crawled out from under the house the first warm day.

It began to be too dangerous to bed down outdoors and next morning arise to do a flat-footed broad jump away from

a rattling grasshopper. (Before you ask, yes, I am scared of rattlesnakes.)

Communication progressed between ranches. Goat Whiskers the Younger set up a system on a tower. Six or seven outfits subscribed to connect with battery phones. This party line system provided lots of eavesdropping on lamb and calf crop reports and rain measurements given the wire.

Sometime later the cell phones developed. The telephone company also put the few residences left on satellite phone and abandoned the old lines. One or the other service had 900 minutes for three phones and the ranch a \$140 a month bill, or maybe it was the other way around, a \$900 bill and 140 minutes.

I remember I was so despondent by the extra expense and no return that the sales lady said, "Mr. Noelke, don't feel bad. These phones might save your life from raging prairie fire flames or swirling flash flood water." Then I really felt bad. The thought hadn't hit about loss of life along with loss of money.

Today everything has to work fast. A guy spent all morning last week making this computer what he said was "faster." I wanted to show him the old Royal office model

typewriter of the newspaper's at the ranch to define fast, but he was in too big a hurry.

The lady who does the laundry goes way back to the kids' days here in school. She keeps promising to take my cell phone down to the Catholic Church to be blessed by the Bishop. Not anything to it but staying alert when he turns to face the audience and says a blessing in Latin, then holding the phone up real quick, pointed toward the altar. A few signs of the cross or a splat of holy water, and presto, a phone that'd lap the Vatican in Rome twice in power.

How I know is that back when one of the reddest-haired boys was little, we gave up trying to christen him. He'd howl so bad every time we walked up front that we had to hold him up at the right time, pointed the right direction, and skip the christening ceremony. It wouldn't take nearly so much effort to blessing a cell phone.