

APRIL 1, 1993

Big storms up north a few weeks ago broke the lamb markets nationwide. It seemed like before the first snow banks formed, the dressed market weakened and feeder and fat prices followed the turn.

Heartbroken as the woolie operators felt over wool gluts and Congress's vow to cut their sharing in the wool tariff fund, the blizzard of '93 was destined, without reaching Texas, to be etched on sheepmen's minds deeper than the rings forest rangers interpret on the trunks of ancient redwoods.

Herders with youth in their favor still had a chance of a comeback, or an opportunity to enlist as soldiers of fortune in the mid-eastern wars, or as guerrilla fighters in the mountains of Yugoslavia. But those of us with shorter horizons needed a market failure added to the dry spring and hostile government policies about as much as we needed news of a fast breaking strain of rheumatism.

In the same week lamb prices collapsed, the fat cattle market soared past the \$84 mark by a half-dollar or more. At the special cow sale in San Angelo, hollow horn operators responded by bidding a set of young Angus cows to \$1410 a pair. Fellow sitting in front of me kept his hand up until he'd bought 30 whiteface cows with baby calves for \$1075.

Too stunned to relate to all this obvious good fortune among the cowmen, I asked the big buyer why his purchases acted so gentle in the ring. He must have figured only city dudes ask such stupid questions. He replied that feed made cattle gentle.

Intentional or not, the insult passed uncontested. He had no way of knowing that at 2 a.m. on sale day I'd been staring at my bedroom ceiling, agonizing over a feed bill on our outfit at close to \$48 worth of range cubes and some 28 bucks worth of cooked molasses per head, plus undetermined pickup and labor expenses.

If the guy with the big bankroll was right, and feed was the solution to improving bovine behavior in auction rings, the world's black humpy association needed to flash his prescription onto an express faxing system. About every old sister ever raised in the Shortgrass Country should be the epitome of ladylike graces, were he correct. The worry about how bad our cattle had sometimes shrunk in the sales ring hadn't appeared in my pre-dawn audit of this long winter's feed bill. Had I had time to weigh the advantages and costs beforehand, I might have chosen to send the first-calf heifers off to obedience school and cut back on so much weaning expense of teaching them to be dependent on imported sack goods and soft lick blocks for the rest of their lives.

I was going to hang around to watch all the consignments sell, but when a banker started mingling in the ringside crowd, "ohing" and "ahing" over the hollow horn dealers, the sight made me too sad to stay. I couldn't concentrate on the sales for thinking of the old ewes lambing at the ranch and my black cows standing around the waterings about as far removed from bringing \$1400 a pair as a dirigible pilot has of clearing a takeoff with a slow leak.

A few of the consignors nodded as I went out the back way. Rain-lucky herders stood out in new panama hats. Two or three sets of cows must have been temporarily off

their feed, because they put on quite an act doing shoulder spins off the steel rails and making death defying leaps for the tops of the pipe gate frames.