

Folks used to call the ranch to ask where to buy good Angus bulls. After you have been in the business for a long time, newcomers think you might know where to buy a black ox for what, say, a weaned steer calf costs delivered to their ranch.

Another explanation: if you ranch on a public road, they may see your herd and conclude you have an inside deal at a feedlot to refuse all the black bull calves before castration. It sure does hurt if the choice turns out to be a bull calf you missed a testicle at marking.

Big compliment (and bigger trap) is to pick out a yearling bull at a sale for someone else. A few years back, the better oxen peddlers began to enjoy enough demand to offer more yearling and 18 month-olds than twos. This meant you came home with a sleek youngster that looked like a run-a-way from a tent show at two.

Plenty of these yearlings' heads grew faster than anywhere else. Only parts of the body more pronounced than the legs was the way they came up in the flank or stood up in their tail-heads.

Some of the fossil fuel miners, better attuned to public relation than exploration, learn to inquire about

bulls as a ploy with herders. These wildcat prospectors don't think about 2500 bucks or maybe that many thousands dealing in a sideline.

Funny about one hombre way back; his urge to buy bulls hit on late Saturday afternoon from a place with piano music in the background. Always the same opener: "Mr. Noelke, don't reckon you'd sell one of those bulls over there on the way to the rig, would you?"

He never bought one of mine or one of anyone else's to my knowledge, but he must have frequented a watering spot that made him want to diversify. If it was the one on the west side of Angelo toward the twin mountains, the spirits made herders think they needed to drill oil wells, but not for more than one night and not long enough to buy an interest in a rig.

Too bad no one called this summer to buy my cattle or the neighbor's stock. Every sale day, we cut a little deeper. Word spread over and over about how sorry the ones who sold out are going to be once rain starts again on empty pastures. Closest I could come was when the last young bulls and bred heifers went last month. I felt too bad to go watch them walk on the truck.

How sorry depends on how sorry you were when it stopped raining. Compare the stopping and the starting; I

sure hope I don't feel as bad as gauging one to two tenths fast run-off at the line camp the August evening Mertzson measured a slow two inches 12 miles away.

The Big Boss kept his entire father's bloodline in the sheep during the drouth of the 50s. He founded the Angus herd we pastured far away as East Texas and Kansas.

You don't ever have to see your brands or earmarks tacked on a barn door and tally the death loss to learn the pasturing game. When you watch a nail come loose from an old brand hole in the saddle house door in Kansas, and you are too cold to unbuckle your chaps, the dose is big enough to last a lifetime. (Thirty-three times this summer, I repeated my oath to never move a hoof farther away from the ranch than could be done on horseback and still own her. Then I was reminded that after the heart valve swap last year, I can't ride horseback.)

August was critical in another way. Ten years had passed since our brands and earmarks were recorded at the county seats. I rushed over to Ozona one day to record mine and my son's. Good thing his was included to make the trip worthwhile. After you have lived and ranched as long as I have without one cow hair to singe, the 16-dollar toll for a decade is hard to justify.

Nobody butts in during a drouth to loan money or give advice. Best time to study strategy or make plans is three a.m. on a ranch morning when a windmill brake and wheel keep screeching. Five hours sleep keeps a herder in top form. Let him get a tad overboard at the bank, and he'll sleep better.

A few people still ask about the Big Drouth in the 1950s. To summarize, I tell them the only person left out here by 1957 with money was Elmer Kelton, bankrolling the royalty from his book "The Time It Never Rained." But Elmer always knew how to write more books and how to keep his dough.