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The country west of San Angelo received over five inches of rainfall in February. Such grand amounts exceed the normal inch for the month. It had been a long-reaching drouth. The natural garden around the ranch house, for example, went 2.5 years, or a full six months longer than usual, without being touched by a mower. Rare has so much time passed without having to at least trim the hoarhound and broomweeds back from the gates and doorways.

At first, the ranch citizens seemed stunned by rains following up more rains. For a few days, the shock was so severe the coffee house measurement contests were called off. I mean the eternal rain gauge match. The "my gauge showed such and such" battle. The one opening, "Well, the weather bureau in San Angelo reported five-hundredths of an inch yesterday, but I poured out three tenths of an inch over on my west side."

Herders and weather service never agree on the amount of rainfall. The weather bureau uses a vessel, I'd call it, instead of a rain gauge. Rain funnels into an inner tube of one inch capacity, then overflows into a larger space holding four inches. Folks lucky enough to receive more than an inch of rain must pour the rain water back an inch at a time to measure the surplus. One advantage of the weather bureau's gauge is measurements of one hundredths of an inch are possible. (One hundredths of an inch is hard to transmit to the mind of a rancher used to using one half of a tomato

can as a standard for all measurements.) Plus, the remeasuring of the overflow, as all good trial lawyers know, gives the witness more time to consider the veracity of his report.

I discovered natural gardening years ago at an old plantation site outside Savannah, Georgia. The plan is perfect in a desert country. Grounds go back to nature. Roots from hedgerows push up the curbs and walks laid to restrain flower beds. Fish ponds rush away to become lovely basins in the rainy season. Rose bushes grow deep-rooted and branch out into hardy breastworks of thorns and strangling limbs. Grasses and forbes shelter cottontail rabbits, and falling nuts and undeveloped fruit feed the squirrels and raccoons. Song birds trill in the underbrush, fattened by white caterpillars and red worms nurtured in the rich organic soil. The gardener himself prospers in newfound leisure in a life void of hoes and rakes and other man-killing tools. One note: strange, but this type landscaping only appeals to males.

I have been intending as a peace offering to send the bureau a gauge like the one the Mertzon wool house gives away. The wool house ones are made for unlicensed and unbonded weather prophets, not papered scientists. On a year's run they catch more bugs and shelter more spider eggs than they collect moisture. Accuracy is untested, because the gaugers work alone and have great difficulty pegging the exact amount of rainwater closer than a quarter of an inch.

(I'd as soon take the stock market quotes from Cairo, Egypt and try to correlate them to our Dow Jones averages as try to pattern a West Texas rain from what you hear around the coffee houses.)

The best rain catching gauges to ever come about came from a livestock medicine house in San Angelo in the 1960s. Back in the days of plenty of help and good contract labor, ranchers drenched their sheep for stomach worms after every summer shower. Seemed like every time the skies clouded up, we caught anywhere from two to three tenths more at that station. We never thought about it until the tube broke, but those fancy wool capital medicine peddlers had added a false bottom to the tube, like the old item beer mugs over on Concho Street. No telling how many gallons of medicine the idea sold.

Markets responded immediately to the winter rains. Promise of a good spring set the herders into restocking and gave the packers and Mexican buyers the first competition in many months. Over in San Angelo, cow and calf pairs went over \$900 in instances, and now and then a light calf sold for over a buck a pound. Lambs, new and oldcrop, broke all records. The only woolie operators unhappy were the ones of us trying to find a dry day to shear before we started lambing.

It looks like the least the weather people and herders could do was to communicate. All I ever reach when I call the station is a recording, and I don't do much better

hanging out around Mertzon listening to those rain stories

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