

MAY 28, 1987

For as long as my neighbor Goat Whiskers the Younger has been in charge of his outfit, he's taken in visitors from over a big part of the world. Summer or winter, Whiskers was apt to be entertaining guests from the Southern France, or maybe just a stray kid from Louisiana or Georgia.

In the days when we traded work on a regular basis, I got used to seeing these refugees from the cities tagging along, riding short gaited pet horses that were past retirement age but still useful for amateurs. It wasn't unusual to ride off in the mornings and look back and see a town guy or two down on the ground recapturing their hat, or falling farther behind, picking up dropped bridle reins and wandering off the road.

Meals were as much of a surprise as the outdoor work. Plates on the big round table in the dinning room barely had enough space between them to make room for the knives and forks. But other than an occasional foul from a upraised elbow, or a small scuffle over the biscuit allotment, whoever the cook happened to be seemed to be able to keep order and feed the regulars and compensate for the drop-in trade.

No guest book was kept on how long or how many visitors stayed at the ranch. Going back and forth like we were helping Whiskers work, I didn't make much effort to keep the New Zealanders and Australians separated from Englishmen and the South Africans. The accents from those principalities are so similar that it takes a sharp ear to tell the difference. Vaguely, I seem to recall that the New Zealand chaps were better hands working sheep and the English fellows could stand more cold weather; however he had a man and wife team out of Colorado one winter that were plenty handy around the sheep pens and on bad days seemed to be frost proof.

Travel sections in the newspapers list ranches that'll take in guests during their roundups . As tough as everything has been since we herders began to fall out of favor after Theodore Roosevelt's administration, we have desperately needed a primary source of income to supplement the secondary way that hollow horns and woolies have supported us.

Whiskers has been on the right track. All he needs to do is to set up a front desk in his living room and he'll be in business. I was over there the other night for dinner and wasn't surprised to find a stranger from San Francisco had moved in for a couple of weeks. I did note that they were marking up his late calves and doing some more odds and ends. Now that the wet Mexican days are about over, the guest idea may have even more appeal.