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After the Big Boss died in the 60's, the ranch experienced big changes around the bank that had served the family for some 40 or 50-odd years. Among the changes was a deep chill on the subject of operating money. Also in line was a close vigil by the jugkeepers of the outcome of a little tiff going on between the estate and the IRS to settle differences involving inflated land values. Off to the side, a minor consequence of the market failure of livestock and wool flicked across their minds and paralyzed advances and renewals, the very heart of a herder's relation to his jug.

A cousin, ranching on the Pecos River, and I served as co-executors. The worst-tempered attorney in San Angelo represented the legal interests in a style warranted to incite hostility and delay settlement. Tax filing fell to a firm going back to my grandfather's times, who acted as grand arbitrators at restoring the havoc inflamed by our lawyer. The whole scene was a new one. The Big Boss had kept me in reserve to feed his cattle through the winters and polish my business skills underneath windmill towers and from the backs of countless green Thoroughbred horses. I would have been better qualified to round up a brushy five-section pasture on a hot summer afternoon than I was to sit in airconditioned offices across the desks of the tax fixers and arrangers of the wool capitol.

The bank kept us going. Each month, I submitted projections reviewed by my cousin; and each month, the jugkeepers advanced a trickle of expense money. Spring of the first year after the Big Boss's death came on hard and dry. Nevertheless, we marked a good lamb crop and the calves showed a fair amount of bloom. All went well until the ewes began to show up with their bags full of milk and their lambs missing. My cousin knew right away bobcats were the villains as there were no coyotes or panthers in those days. He prescribed the quickest solution: to find a pack of dogs and crisscross the sheep pastures, leaving as much dog scent over as much ground as the hound's feet would stand and the riders' constitutions would take.

"The dogs don't have to be worth a damn and the men on horseback don't have to know how to ride," he said, "but you are going to have to make those cats nervous and move em' somewhere else." Whatever route we took, he knew from long experience of ranching out west that we needed every lamb we had to keep access to the bank's note pads.

I wish I could remember how many hounds and how many different breeds the 'ole boy owned. He had a big mare mule, branded a wineglass on her left shoulder and bearing a mindset to be the champion beast of the world to destroy headstalls and leave trappers and cowboys to walk to the house. On moonlit nights, the jenny ran up and down the horse trap fence, nickering for a lost companion until the hounds started baying and changed the tune.

The dogs scattered all over the ranch. These saucers didn't run bobcats and they ignored the sheep. We rode too hard to carry guns. Had we packed a rifle, we'd have been too busy hunting runaway dogs to shoot a bobcat. Thinking of today, we qualified for the environmentally approved operation in the country. Other than disturbing their ranges, we offered no harm at all to the bobcats, unless our mule broke loose and ran over one on the way back to the house.

We stocked a feed house on cook stuff and tied a fresh change of horses at pasture gates. I learned hound dog talk to be sociable. On still mornings, I'd ask if that was "Old Feeler" or "Old Tess." He'd look real wise and say, "Neither one. That's Old Root, and he's shore to tree a cat if his feet ain't too tender."

I guess Root's feet stayed tender. We went out every morning for 45 days and the highest Old Root ever left the ground was the day he jumped over the bunkhouse fence and nearly strangled himself hanging by his collar.

After the third or fourth week, my cousin cut across the country from his Pecos River ranch and came up the country lane by the railroad tracks to check on us. He claimed after he left the asphalt that he began to see more jackrabbits in the road than he'd ever seen before in the spring.

I was tired of potlicking dogs baying at everything from rabbit slides to ground squirrel holes. So I asked without thinking where all those rabbits were coming from. I was caught in his net. "Monte," he replied, "you are going to have to face these hounds another direction, or you are going to drive all the rabbits in the country out on public domain."

The cats stopped killing and we shipped a good lamb crop. I took the house-broke mule in on a loan and the bank loosened up the next year.