

APRIL 21, 1983

Even for April Fool's Day in the Shortgrass Country, the wind was too much. Too much for the flora and too much for the people. Too hard on baby lambs and too frightening for baby calves. Gales reached 70 miles an hour. It was way over a week before I was able to write about it.

The day broke orange and bright, radiant in spring and new life. On the way to get my newspaper, oak trees in the park spread lime colored leaves. into a side ground of delicate, purple blossoming catclaw. Algerita brush cast golden waves in the healing air. Best for all of us were the barrow ditches covered in tender grass.

Less than an hour later, west winds roared in upon the land, blasting the greenery and ripping the buds from the limbs. A tearing force that lifted rocks into pelleting gravel barrages. A scorching wind laden with reddish brown top soil destined to land on kitchen floors and leaking window sills.

In the backyard, chairs began to lose their balance. Limbs beat wildly against the redwood fence, and a nearby windmill screamed against its brake bands, holding its own for reasons known only to the engineers of wind machines.

The first report from the ranches began to come over private radio channels. Barn roofs and electric lines were the first to go down. At our outfit, big rocks and old railroad ties were keeping a tenuous hold on the tin sheds. By midmorning it was apparent that the wind was going to do plenty of damage.

I'd better explain that, because we have different kinds of wind storms out here. One variety is a high velocity gale that is more of a bluff than an actual storm. The other kind is a high speed wind too, but this one still has the power to carry off the objects that it tears from the ground or the air.

When I was smoking a pipe I became aware of dead spots in the winds. Sometimes I'd be riding along in the pasture and find that even though I might have a 20 mile crosswind, the smoke wouldn't rise from the pipe bowl. I'd exhale and the smoke would just stay around my head like a beekeeper's hat. I'm sure you've seen pickups that had plenty of scat, but wouldn't pull a thumbtack out of a piece of molding board.

Winds come the same way. Before television and telephones covered the country, northers blew across here into Mexico and were back in three days full of twist and vigor. Nowadays we never know when the wind will get up from the south, or if it'll turn a windmill wheel once it does come back.

Last winter we had a tractor operator clean a right of way for an old telephone line. The air was so worn out underneath the wires that he had to start chewing tobacco to keep from suffocating from his own cigarette smoke. In other times, ranch ladies planned so many bridge parties and exchanged so many recipes over the line that the atmosphere was dead.

Of all the weather that undermines the nervous system of man and his beasts, the dust storm is worst. Into the night, the high pitched fury raged on to exact it's toll. March must have moved into April. Any day now, a half-inch rain would bring a big price in our parts.