

Shortgrass Country

By Monte Noelke

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Progressive invasion by mesquite and a number of other obnoxious brushes has turned our rangelands into a mass of thickets that make the famed jungles of Africa look like open air roping arenas. Saddlehorn visibility has been reduced to the extent that cowhands have become as nearsighted as the squinch-eyed octopus. Virgin soil had been redefined as land that has not been violated by the rays of the sun for 20 years.

Chemical and mechanical methods are being used to battle the brush menace. Thousands of acres of the unwanted vegetation have been either fogged from the air or felled by caterpillars, but alas, most of these expensive projects have turned into nothing more than delayed root stimulants for the hardy mesquite plants.

The trees, it seems, play dead as long as the rancher watches them. But once he becomes preoccupied, they spring up with a vigor that would make a skyward-bound Jack of the Bean Stalk think he had a fevered-root problem.

Five years of time has seen country change from a wide expanse of open ground to a thicket. In the mid-60s there were still a great many pastures from which a man could see patches of sky. Windmills and two-story houses could be spotted at distances up to a mile. Cowboys wore chaps and brush jackets, but it was unnecessary to wear them from the house to the barn.

Brush conditions today are 96 times worse than they were in 1965. Mesquite trees have fostered sprigs; sprigs have sponsored spriglets. Limbs classified by experts as being unhealthy have grown 18 inches a year, and healthy ones have made tremendous gains. Mesquite, like bank interest, has been working around the calendar.

I spent part of this past week talking with the representative of a company that has developed and applied a new herbicide. He was so silky of tongue that by the time I'd listened to his spiel I was believing his miracle medicine would do everything from cleaning the moss out of the water troughs to making our native pecan trees bear soft shell nuts.

Every time the salesman had to stop for water, his aerial spraying partner would pick up his lines. After hearing them for an hour, I was beginning to think that killing mesquite was about as difficult as knocking over fresh shorn goat with a cold rain.

However, slick as those two were, they couldn't have talked me into killing any brush in a hundred Julys. Like I told them, the day is coming when mesquite thickets and caves in the ground are going to be fast-moving residential rent property. Not a line in the daily newspaper denies that what's left of the same minority will soon be willing to pay good money for a hole in the ground or a thick stand of trees for shelter.

City folks may have been badly shell-shocked by the turmoil in the streets, but their brains haven't been so benumbed that they can't understand how hard it would be for one of those incendiary long hairs to get his whiskered self through a fully developed mesquite thicket.

Once the colleges get to rolling next fall, there's apt to be waiting lines of people ready to move to the brush.

The salesman and the aerial sprayman didn't stay much longer after hearing my theory. They seemed to be in a rush to get down the road. I don't guess I'll ever get to tell them my ideas on rebalancing nature.

City people, you know, can get in an awful big hurry if the subject doesn't stay to their liking.