

AUGUST 25, 1977

Time of this writing is eight days from press time. Sunday morning, the 14th day of August to be exact. I am sitting on a hill on the north end of the country by a parked fire truck. Six or seven of us are gathered, watching a grass fire that's temporarily under control.

The Sabbath is a traumatic day to be close to so much fire and heat. Ministers who have a difficult time making their points could be very graphic using this backstage.

Ash-blackened whirlwinds swirl across acres of dead country. Grass burned so fast that mesquites were left in partial leaf. Thousands of clumps of prickly pear and dead stumps smolder ready to rekindle the calamity.

These boys have been hurt bad. Fences are destroyed in mile-long stretches. No houses or livestock have been lost to my knowledge. However, my knowledge is limited to about a tenth of the seven or eight thousand acres that have been burned.

Any time the Shortgrass Country loses the space of an anthill, it's serious. I don't dare show how bad I feel about the fire. One of the damaged ranches belongs to part of my family. Just as sure as I let down my guard, they'd be dropping by the house for Sunday dinner, or wanting to borrow a wet Mexican to put back their fences. You know the jeopardy of a big family. There are so many Noelke's out here that the postal service has considered assigning us separate zip codes.

Two hours ago, my cousin and her husband came by, propping up their fences. I wasn't impolite, but I kept my distance. I tried to be friendly with them back when they got some big oil play on their country out west. The engineering reports on the wells proved incorrect. I'm not going to get involved again in a lot of family ties. Paper rich and oil rich bear too wide a spread.

In spite of my sensible attitude toward charity, I am moved by the way the people in the Shortgrass Country respond to other folk's troubles. I get mighty aggravated when they come by the ranch looking for their windmill tools, or fussing about pasturing a couple of bulls or a few old mares for the winter. But with all their faults, they sure stand high compared to the blackout looters up North and the scalawags elsewhere who feast off other people's grief staring full face in a television camera.

Old kids have been by here so tired that their eyes were sunk back to the level of their ear lobes. Fire trucks passed without a man aboard who'd ever seen a fireman's check. Airplanes are free of charge; I suppose 500 or more men and women are strung out across the fire line.

My cousin has gone back to the ranch to make sandwiches. She'd better smarted up or she'll have a long winter. It's been a bad August. The first fall rains need to be falling now.