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Old Indian fighters far removed from the battlegrounds used to complain how bad their bones ached on anniversaries of the seasons when buffalo herds once drew the Comanches to their homesteads. Trail drivers wrote how painful their dreams became passing through the flood seasons on the Red River and the Colorado long after bridges and railroads crossed those treacherous waters. And many a herder can recall a deep body tremor from seeing a set of scales or a loading chute where he had shipped or received a bad deal decades ago.

At the last special calf sale in San Angelo, a tinge of uncertainty shaded the market for the first time since the cow boom began. Exhaustion from drouth and fear of grass fires further gripped the consignors. Shoulders drooped and elbows rested on knees; hands were clasped to make the fingers into steeples, like a banker watching the approach of an examiner.

Buyers became more reserved and ringside spectators more withdrawn. Only the beginners smiled and wheeled about in their chairs to greet acquaintances.

A lot of time passed handing out ribbons to the big showoffs who blow a lot of dough on high-priced bulls and good blooded stock just to make a dime or 15 cents a pound more on their calves. Were the judging fair, lightweight peewees like the ones raised out in our country wouldn't have to compete against the 400-600 pound classes.

The guys on my row were all consignors except an oldtime lamb buyer parading about fouling the air with stale cigar smoke. At closer quarters was a longtime friend of the family. He was taking the way things were going so hard that I told him about the grade school out at Mertzon, where the teacher wrote notes to parents about kids who were bad sports.

The rest of us put up a front like we had plenty of previous sales to back up this one moment of peril. I kept my mouth shut, but after the break became obvious a pain went down my left shoulder blade and my bum elbow began to ache for the first time in months. An hombre directly in front began to flex his hands and work his head from side to side; further down front an old fellow drew his right hind leg up and began to run his calf muscles.

One by one the group broke up without lunch invitations or common pleasantries. In the lobby, an auction hand said, "I'm going to call her steady to weak with last Thursday's sale." I was in too big a hurry to leave to take any more. His smile, however, seemed out of place...

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