

Shortgrass Country

By Monte Noelke

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The lady pushed by to the veterinarian's reception desk in the finest supermarket style. She poked the lap dog nearly over the counter and said; "This is Ginger; she has a sore eye."

Right after the lady introduced her sore-eyed dog, an old boy came in the door carrying a box full of puppies. I went out in the back, I didn't want to stand around waiting to hear the puppies' names.

While the vet was working on the dogs, I sat by the trailer with a saddlehorse that was foundered. Dog doctoring is time consuming, so I had plenty of time to study ten new situations around veterinary clinics. I never noticed before that you were supposed to introduce your patient to the doctor or his nurse. What sick cows and horses I've hauled to the vet's have remained anonymous. Most of them were so sick that all the good a name would have done was to provide a systematic way of marking their grave. Like most ranchers, I don't ever take anything to the doctor until it's so serious that a miracle wouldn't cure the side symptoms.

The horses at the ranch do have names. However, the riders don't use them. I imagine horses think their real names are monikers like — "You better watch your step, you John Brown sapsucker, you," or "All right you two-bit son of a show boat, you better stand up there before I..."

In front of company, the boys call them such names of endearment as "Pecos" or "Ramonita." But when there's nobody around, those old ponies are called things that would make a mule skinner think he'd lost the use of the language.

When the vet finally got to my foundered horse, I told him the animal was named Jack of Diamonds, and that he had a bellyache from breaking into the feed house and eating too much green hay.

Also I told him we'd start making up names for the cows we brought in. I realized it was going to be hard for a sheep and cow herder to stay up with the lapdog set, but I figured that ranchers were big enough outcasts without bearing the burden of being shunned at dog and cat gatherings.

The doctor must have been smelling too many sick dogs to be in a talkative mood. He didn't respond to the introduction. Jack of Diamonds was treated just like he was a nameless horse in a mass of 4 footed animals. I'd heard the healer sort of cooing to the poodle dogs inside, but his trailer side manner with old Jack was on the borderline of indifference.

Veterinarians, you know, are as temperamental as songwriters. One time a long ways back, my Uncle Goat Whiskers asked a horse and cow specialist why he didn't move his clinic closer to the rendering plant. Whiskers had a good eye when it came to saving on freight. It was 15 years before the doctor was very friendly toward anyone in the family. I don't think Uncle Goat Whiskers ever tried to help a professional man after that incident.

Pet owners and herders are going to be hard to integrate around the animal hospitals. The only trait they have in common is that dogs and cats don't make any more money than sheep and cows do. I guess those common grounds may draw us all together.

Jack of Diamonds got over his illness and returned to the ranch in time to get cut up in some wire. This time, however, he's going to have to be cured by father nature, because I don't think either one of us is too popular in town.