

JUNE 3, 1976

Cool weather preserved the Shortgrass wild flower crop later into the spring this year. Songbirds are staying longer than usual. Morning drives to the ranch from Mertzson are lined by brilliant yellow flowers mixed in among tall, white, spiraled buds. Cactus stage the show in purples and reds that make the opening of every day a supreme relief that man and his asphalt have yet to cover the earth.

Out in the pastures, deer are throwing off the misery of the winter drouth. Three weeks ago, their hair was a patched dun color. Grass and fresh browse have brightened them to a brown sheen. Many fawns died earlier, but the late crop prospers on the change.

On horseback, I forget the importance of work. Younger men bustle onto the drives, hurrying the round-up. Cloud banks form; my mind wanders to the dismal cities, to the space-crazy people that never see the rangelands.

Love of land, as I have told you before, is an all encompassing disease. Run your finger tips across a product of the earth, if you disbelieve her might, then trace your finger over a result stamped from a mighty machine.

Indians believed that the Supreme Being was in the ground. Man, by their creed, was merely a tenant. We reversed that belief. I am unprepared to say why or how the first white-eyed artist caught a brave looking to the heavens toward his Great Spirit. I am prepared to say that as the Indian slept and sat on the ground, he sensed the power of the earth.

We taught those people lots of useful things. Wampum, for instance, became money at our insistence. After the whiteman showed the tribes that they must have a form of currency, some Indians used woodpecker scalps for coin. I suppose that, if the custom continued, fur traders would have started woodpecker farms to introduce inflation. All the woodpecker hunting that I ever did showed a slow return. Part of the Daisy air rifle company's success was once based on the amount of B.B.'s that Mertzson's young riflemen shot into telephone poles as woodpeckers flitted from range.

In those depression times, mothers contracted kids to kill flies at so much a dozen and trap mice by the head. I've often wondered why such noted child specialist as Dr. Spock didn't adopt that practice. Rare indeed do you find something as bothersome as an idle boy and buzzing housefly offsetting each other.

To this day, the common nap fly that only comes out of hibernation when a man relaxes on his couch would make a good field trip for, say, the rough string of the third grade, or the outlawed portion of the west end of town.

When my sons were all at home, I used the doctrine technically known as the rawhide and weed patch approach. The main difficulty in that branch of child psychology was that the quirt was often hidden and the weeds didn't grow fast enough to accommodate the number of young gentlemen that had to serve out sentences for lost report cards and schoolyard rock fights. I learned too late that my standards were too strict. My advice to young parents is to find an eye doctor that can fit them in a pair of opaque eyeglasses with an earpiece that causes premature deafness.

If I had back all the days I spent keeping the docket current at the house, I'd be only about 25 years old. Age teaches you to overlook a lot of mischief. At the same time, age will also keep you out of a lot of mischief. So I suppose what I am really recommending is that everyone ought to grow old.

Spring lingers in the Shortgrass Country. Each morning the landscape proves that we are blessed to be of the land. I don't know how we got so lucky, but I know that I'm unwilling to trade.