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We had a windmill stay down for 30 days this spring – our all-time record. A freak waterspout dropped six-tenths of an inch of rain over the site. The floodwater washed dirt underneath the blocks holding the pipe into the casing of the well.

The damage was unexpected, in a way. We had a terrace on the slope above the well built to divert a half-inch rain, the limit necessary for protection from dirt washing into the well. But six-tenths in one rain was just too much, and it was a hard one, to boot.

The windmill man, a bottom check expert of wide renown, rushed by the scene three times to pull the rods and flush mud from the valves and checks. The challenge was to determine whether the well, with no log, had caved in from the top and bottom or only pumped mud from the topsoil washed into the well. There was also the quandary of how high to raise the pipe so it would be above the mud and still below the water line.

Now while this problem worsened, the heifers in the South Pasture across the fence and the cows and calves in the Devil River pasture found they preferred the water in the fast-declining five-by-20 tank over the two alternate waterings available in each pasture. The heifers would

swing by and leave, but the cows and calves hung over the dry trough, licking the last ooze from the float valve, until we drove them within smelling distance of the other watering at the north end of the pasture every afternoon.

The weather turned hot and still for April. Thunderclouds drifted east of us. Just one day off water drew the cows nursing calves. The windmill man fell further behind on his work.

He and his son also service electric pumps. House water was bound to be holding priority over livestock waterings. I was unable to ascertain how many wells he was behind as he was always in such a rush that the clouds of dust he stirred coming and going weren't conducive to opening my mouth to ask a question.

The morning after a storm the pump failed at the house. The hymns Grandmother sang while baking biscuits in July heat spells on a wood stove came back as clear as if Granny was in the room. Thought better of moistening my lips in buttermilk like she did to prevent cracking and drying from humming those sweet old songs. Thought better because the refrigerator stopped in the same lightning storm that hit the pump, causing the last glass of buttermilk to curdle into clabber.

Throwing the cows and calves to the other water on horses every afternoon became a routine. Once the cattle reached the ridge headed north from the dry tank, they struck a trot. One or two head always drifted in behind us to spend the night without water and bawl and complain of the hardship of a range cow.

The third time the windmill man pulled the well, he raised the pipe a few feet. Next morning early, the first winds, and later winds, didn't lift a drop at the Devil River mill.

Once the bad news came, symptoms of psychosomatic dry mouth hit full force. All those days of looking at dry stand pipes, dry troughs, dry tank bottoms and thirsty cattle, plus being out of water at the house for a couple of days, took a deep effect. My tongue became dry. So dry, the strawberry flavored oral rinse I gargled for relief separated in my parched mouth into a powder so potent, I coughed rose-colored dust rings until I fell to my knees, striking my head on the edge of the lavatory.

"Promise to come soon" was all the windmill man offered. Every morning, we struggled for an option. Pull the pipe, hoping to still be below the unknown water line? Strain memory – how high was the water mark on the pipe last time it laid on the ground?

The next morning the quest, the problems ended. We rode down to check for cows. Water was running in the tank! My grandfathers, my father, my step-father and myself pulled countless wells. Once I was so desperate for a solution that I recall looking into a three-inch nipple at a well head, hoping to see an answer down in the hole. But in all that history and all that work, we never had one go to pumping days later for no known reason.

The cows are full and the tank is half full at this writing. The calves are so trail broke after being driven so many afternoons, it won't take much to round up the Devil River pasture. People can brag all they want about big rains. I'd rather have a slow two-tenths than have a six-tenths deluge wash dirt in my water well.