

MAY 15, 1980

Shortgrass ranches had from widespread sprinkles to 2 inches of rain over the past weekend. Outfits that were seriously eyeing their loading chutes for mass dispersals found new hope. Spring was declared open for the growing of grass and weeds; rejoicing was contained by the knowledge that one rain or one shower wouldn't cure such a severe drouth.

We were marking lambs on the west side of the ranch on the morning the moisture fell. I was helping holding a herd of sheep while a crew of foot soldiers were building a portable corral.

The first drops were low velocity ones that barely marked the dirt. I didn't bother to dismount to keep my shirt dry. I remembered to shift my pipe tobacco and matches to an inner pocket. One squirrel aged kid was my only human company. I felt that I had to remain calm in the face of such a dramatic weather change, or the boy might panic and fall off his horse.

We were on a hill above the sheep and out of sight of the pen builders. To the west and slightly south, the purple bank began to turn to wide grey columns with black runners. The winds shifted and rose to about the same force as the shower. Against my horse's will, I turned him facing the direction of the weather. The kid had sought shelter under a big cedar tree, as unperturbed as the tree itself. His main concern, I knew, that the rain would save him from hard day's work in the marking pen and liberate him to the comforts of the house and table.

The rain began as it always does in times of great need. Sweeping showers that bring the painful doubt that the dust will be settled. Then the still of waiting and watching swirling clouds in the higher atmosphere that threaten to lift the banks of grey and allow sunlight to force through at odd angles. Next, the awful notches of clear sky that signify a blank spot in the pattern. And foremost, the gnawing fear that rain will fail to come to a land of so much space in such desperate shape for moisture.

First the hat brim begins to drip. Have you ever noticed how fast a saddle horn becomes slippery? Chaps wilt and a rope stiffens. The seams of a brush jacket turn rainwater right down the small of a man's back. A buttoned shirt collar, I've heard but never believed, will choke you in a rain. I do know that the most gifted maestro to ever direct a cello section in the finest of orchestras can not match the sound of shod horses heading to the house in the mud.

Once I read of the end of a in remote early settlement in California. The villagers, so the story went, fell spread-eagle into the mud and rolled in a wild, primitive exhibition of near savagery. I can't say that emotion exists in the intermission or the closing of a dry spell in our land, but feeling runs high and sweet and a peace descends that is rarely experienced in this life.

Clouds lingered for five days after the rains. Sheep are scattered in a mad chase for the green shoots of grass. Old cows are reworking the hills, earning a small part of their keep. We are through making lambs. The old kid is back in school and his saddle pardner is mighty grateful for an inch and a half of rain.