

21SHORTGRASS.DOC

February's name needs to be changed to "ground gales." The feeble walls of the ranch house on the 09 Divide billow and deflate in 20 to 35 mile gusts, tearing across the dry prairie lands, uprooting heavy broomweeds to windrow against frail fencelines.

The cowboy feeding makes mad dashes every morning, hoping to be through before the winds deafen his charges. Many days, he scores big by making starting on the last lap of the Indianapolis speedway seem like your grandmother starting off in the wrong gear. Shortgrass native cattle are such cottonseed fiends they lick the meal off calves' hair, ignoring ticks and dust.

On free times, I go along to check the cows for poor-doers, or perhaps a sick calf. Shortgrassers own sixth senses and sharp eyes. We go through so many widespread epidemics, weather failures, raging floods, grass fires, lengthy calms, plus suffocating dust storms in a lifetime that our insight makes the three wise men's prophesies sound like a punch board was their basic tool.

Before we finished one morning, we crossed the old field last planted to dryland farm 40 years ago. Two-foot-tall, dead broom weeds rolled, shattered and flew across the road. Once, maybe twice, the west winds lifted a

broomweed stalk up the front grill and over to fall off the fender of the truck to be crushed in the snap of a branch by the tires.

Simultaneously, we uttered an expletive inserted into "what if those _____ broomweeds catch on fire?" Winds rocked the truck; we drifted deep within ourselves, off the board – out of contact.

The weather continued for two days to be high winds from mid-morning to die-down late of an evening. On the third day, a calm spelled the dreadnaught over, until at five p.m., the hour my pal called from her ranch pasture on the cell, audible enough to report a fire east of her.

Before I went outside to locate the smoke, my helper burst through the back door, nearly shouting, "There's smoke off grass burning to the south-southeast of the Devil's River pasture! I was down the way home, but turned back!"

The Ozona telephone book instructed to call 911 to report fires. Right above was the number of the fire department administration. Rattled, I chose to call the department. The lady answered, "Yes, the fire has been reported – a prescribed burn on so-and-so's ranch."

All right, by the time the message reaches my friend, she cuts across pasture to locate the fire from a high

place to direct the fire trucks to the site and unlock the gate. Cell phones are weak in her area, but her adrenalin pumping clears the circuit.

I leave the wire to stop the cowboy loading our livestock sprayer. In the fifth grade, my nickname should have been "chicken-licken" or "three-alarm" the way I liked fire drills. The memory returns of calming her and stopping the cowboy from loading the sprayer, but the glow is gone for fire drills.

By nightfall, the odor of smoldering weeds enveloped the ranch house. Alone, I analyzed our response goes back before the word "prescribed" became common usage in any sense. Sure didn't link to medicine or prairie fires. The word "prescriptions" isn't necessary if the major remedies are laundry bluing and kerosene for all ailments from blood poisoning to lockjaw. Same was true for such titles as "911" and "fire department" in the days when tow sacks and a water barrel equipped fire fighters.

In 1944, Air Force practice bombs and flares floating on huge parachutes ignited 45 sections of grassland east of the ranch. Herders and soldiers from 50 miles distant helped fight the blaze for three days and nights with wet burlap sacks before winds changed and backfired it.

As I wrote previously, Washington stalled too long paying the claim for dead sheep to save the ranch from bankruptcy. Four or five times a week, the bombardiers' school ignited more fires. (High school boys smelled like soot – an improvement, by the way, over pool table dust. We missed so much school going to fires that teachers stopped calling the rolls.)

The final punch on the present matter is that it came after the Governor declared 150 counties under a burn ban. Communication must be the reason, as welders east of us ignited a 2000-acre fire the same week. During the same period, a wildfire outside Midland stretched 25 miles to the north of Andrews from a faulty powerline to further validate our fears.

Sure good my pal keeps watch over our south boundaries and the guy working here goes back to times when we went to all fires. I kick the broomweeds off the south side of the house every day. I wish old Guv had the Texas Rangers behind his proclamations.