

25SHORT.DOC

Once at a cattle auction close to Houston, a buyer climbed up on the rails of the ring to wave his hat for the attention of the auctioneer to give \$1000 for a load of \$600 brindle cows. Headlines should have read, and may have: LIKE A RAGING FIRE ACROSS A DRY SAVANNAH, COW FEVER HITS TEXAS!

Nine months later, or the approximate gestation period for a brindle cow, the governor of the state of Texas declared all 254 counties a disaster area.

Drop the "once" from above, tear 30 years off the calendar and move 300 miles inland from Houston to San Saba at a Saturday special cow sale last month. Three days before sale day, buyers walked across the hot pens looking for cows before the auction company had time to sort them. Inquiries and orders from New Mexico, Oklahoma and Arkansas poured in across the wire.

Then came the fateful Saturday. Bootheels make a different sound during booms. Click-de-click, the heels hit against the floor in a staccato. Auctioneers pat the stand, drumming aboard.

"You betta buy them cows before it's too late."

Too much noise and confusion in the stands to hear the buyers' stomachs gurgling, or to feel their sweaty palms. Too big a crowd to check the heartbeats of the stoic, poker-faced players. Too much rush to analyze how the wives of these madmen feel holding a program and pencil, marking the sale.

But match these dollars to cattle: 38 bred Angus heifers, \$1120; 80 more bred Angus heifers; \$980 for the top pen and \$950 for the short end. And try these for a lesson in fast money in the auction barn: bred tigerstripe heifers (long bred, I dare say), \$1370 per cow, or about 10 bucks for every brown and black wave on their sleek cream-colored hides. Hold the shorts back on the tigerstripes for \$1220 a head. Wait for the ring to clear and watch first-calf Brangus heifers bring \$1140, second-calf cows of the same set for \$1075 and the short bred end at \$1075.

On and on the sale lingo goes: "Short bred, middle aged, three's to five's. Hold onto your seats little cowboy, next ones in the ring are as honest a set of range cows as I've ever sold."

Plenty of good stories go into every sale. Newspaper writers are no match for the professional cow salesman. Like, "The reason these cows have so many brands, they come out of Montana. Up there, everybody in a family will brand a few head of their own." Or, "Most of them are bred to good Angus bulls." The truth is they are bred to the Joe Strangler straight-hock bloodline with a yearling weaning weight of 400 pounds on good years.

San Saba is three hours away from the ranch. On the way, I stopped in Brady to buy a watermelon for a cowboy working on a ranch close to the road going down there. But no one was around the place, so I left the watermelon on his front porch. After watching the sale and realizing how long

it was going to be before cows were cheap enough to run on my country, I stopped back by my partner's outfit. He still wasn't home.

After so much disappointment, I just brought the watermelon on back to Mertzon to soften the blow of the hard times ahead ...