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Perfect winter rains fell over the shortgrass country beginning in December. Perfect rains to seep down and nurture the hairy roots of the grasses, to feed life back into the soils, and to trickle into the water sands to start springs seeping in a green mossy stream from under limestone ledges.

The kind of healing moisture starting the earthworms and rusty toads to roll over deep in moist black earth. The old toads shifting around to position their heads so the rain drops fall under their eyelids to wash away being imprisoned in a deep grave because of a drouth.

The drouth hit down on the highway in 1992. Rains slacked off in the spring. I know it was that spring as I bought a new pair of work boots after the wool clip sold. The boots rubbed my heel. (They still do if I don't wear heavy socks.) But I wasn't worried as I figured on giving them to Jose to take back to Mexico after Christmas.

Prosperity raged on into the fall. Calves and lambs weighed so heavy, I traded for a new two-tone crewcab pickup. The front seat on the driver's side came too close to the steering wheel to be comfortable wearing a belt buckle or even a thick belt. However, I planned on losing weight the next summer and buying a pickup to fit my new physique. At the 10,000-mile checkup, the salesman claimed the seats in the 93's set back further, giving more room for

stout drivers to be able to cut the wheels without holding in our stomachs.

Signs began to point that new pickup and new boot weather expired as the winter feed bill extended into the mid-summer of 1993. In 1995 or maybe 1996, the feed wagon on the Divide kept giving so much trouble, the crewcab substituted while the old crate was hospitalized for a crankshaft operation. Using the truck in the pasture, opening gates and making circles scattering feed, made the driver's side more form-fitting and the driver more trim. So much stopping and starting also wore off the right heel on my work boots.

I worried whether to take the chance and start wearing my town boots to work, hoping the rains came in time to buy a new pair before the Angelo rodeo. After hobbling around on the faulty heel a day or two, I opted for Tony the shoe cobbler's shop. Tony added to the gloom by saying he was seeing lots more ranchers nowadays than usual for his trade. He wanted to put on new soles, but I told him I liked them slick so they'd slip from the stirrup in case of a fall.

About then I started saving \$1350 a month from outside income to buy a new pickup. Kept the money on interest, the first I'd ever saved, until one day an audit showed my 1992 trade-in was dropping in value at the same rate a replacement rose in price. Besides the gap in salvage and replacement, taxes on a \$33,000 rig ran more than the interest on the savings account.

Hopes of a new truck dashed, I jerked on my boots that fateful morning in a hurry to go to the barn, and broke the ear too deep on one boot top to be sewed back in place. Right then regret flashed before me, how Mother begged me to do something useful with my life instead of following the family curse of herding sheep and cows. How she offered to buy the little white stucco, two-pump Gulf station down by the Mertzson grocery store and promised to move part of her business there even though she burned Texaco gasoline.

But oh no, I was going to have a big summer range in Montana only exceeded by my enormous outfit in Old Mexico covered in stirrup-high grammas to fatten steers watered by flowing springs located close to an expansive adobe hacienda, overlooking my stables and race track. Going down to the barn, walking on run-over boots with a denim pant leg hooked on the broken ear, I thought, "Yes, yes, little cowboy, go look at your reflection in the water trough. See if you can find one characteristic of the 'Boss of the Plains' image you hoped to project to conquer the West so many foolish years ago."

Before the monsoon season ends, I am going to spend what's left over after the winter feed bills are paid on a new pair of Red Wing boots, a Laredo straw hat, and a set of blue plaid seat covers from Walmart. If that kind of high living takes my roll, I'll at least be able to work around the day men without being ashamed of my costume or my rolling stock.