

MARCH 6, 1986

Part of the ranch where I live is on a big, open plateau. The rest of the outfit is rolling mesquite country, practically untouched by man or modernization. Winters are what you'd expect of bare, Texas ranchland; summers are blessed by cool nights and, as you'd guess, the days never reach the temperatures reflected off asphalt, concrete and steel.

Three months ago I asked the state Park and Wildlife people to restock some of the ranch in antelope. The reason I say "restock" is because my maternal grandfather told me that in the old days when he passed across here with freight wagons the land was covered in herds of antelope.

I didn't want the antelope to eat, or to sell to hunters. Antelope meat, in my opinion, was intended for coming off a long fast, or dulling the edge of a particularly sharp tooth. I am certainly not against charging redcaps for anything from taking pictures of jackrabbits to bore sighting their magnum rifles in the bunkhouse kitchen. But supposing that I may some day have a modicum of financial freedom, I would like to limit my hunting income to animals slightly wilder than pet sheep and the lead goats that truck drivers use in the sheep country.

I do remember once knowing a lady ranch cook who claimed that on one of her slowest days in the kitchen, she was overqualified in the art of cooking antelope meat, but by the time I got by to test her claim she must have experienced a loss of memory, or a loss of taste and sight, because her platter of antelope steaks didn't work out any better than my previous matches with the meat.

Last week an agent for the game department came by to pass on whether my pastures were large enough and if the range was suitable for running antelope. One thing he really liked about my layout was that my inside fences are dissolving so fast that soon it's all going to be in one pasture unless the outside fences fall down before that happens and it becomes open range again.

Like I explained to the agent, these flashy four-bit heifer calf markets, the fast money on 30-cent cows and the thrilling wool markets are about to turn the Shortgrass Country back into it's original state, if not it's original space. We have missed two feeding seasons of getting any hay baled in wire. Binder twine was all right for temporary fence repair, but without that good steel bailing wire off the New Mexico hay fields, we can't keep our fences up in the good order that we always have in the past.

I'd sure like to see this old country like it was in my grandfather's time. Big herds of brown and white pronghorns ranging across open expanses of tall grama grasses with horizons unblemished by falling-down fences and pieces of rusty wire. It makes my heart warm to reconstruct those grand old days. Man really messed up when he got so picky about boundaries, numbers, and fence lines.