

Shortgrass Country

By Monte Noelke

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At 6:30 a.m., a should-be cowboy left the barn to get the horses. Thus far, he has logged three hours and 30 minutes trap time, or a breakdown time of 21 minutes per horse. For comparison, I'd estimate that a New York cab driver, fresh from the city, could beat his time by half. Any of the girls in the local sewing club could run him a close tie, and some of the fellows who have ridden from here could give him a three hour handicap and still win.

Tension has gradually been building up here at the house. I've had to conceal my anger from the boys sitting around waiting to go to work. A faint sign of unrest would only make them start eating butter and jelly sandwiches. They've already had enough coffee to change the December futures market on that commodity. Smoke is so thick in the living room that the flies can't see to land.

In their recollections, early ranchers speak of many great hardships. Indian raids and water hole wars in conjunction with cholera epidemics and endless drouths have made the frontier picture sound mighty grim. Yet, the scene today has reached degrees of frustration that would make the graybeards rip the tassels off their buckskin jackets.

Imagine what old man Goodnight would have said or done if he'd had to wait while a horse wrangler spent the morning in a trap the size of a small shopping center. Picture,, if you will, what the great granddaddy of all cowdom, Mr. Chisum, would have said if he'd ridden up on a camp of waddies sitting on their haunches, eating high-priced jelly, waiting for an hombre masquerading as a drover to bring in the remuda. I don't think either of those two giants would have caught their breath for an hour. None of their language would have got a General Public rating.

I did wrong when I sent that wandering cow-scatterer out cold. He should have been jogged around the horse corral until he had the sleep knocked from his eyes. Without a warm up, I ought to have known that he couldn't find his way in a 365 acre trap. He'd only been in there about a dozen times. I should have known he was too green to solo.

My guess is that he's probably traveling a wide, purposeless circle. The horse are probably serving as the center of this useless course. How long it'll take for the dumbhead to run into them depends on whether the basic laws of geometry are correct. The best luck we can hope for is that the circle reaches the sink holes in the northeast corner of the trap. He'd be easier to find with a bunged up hind leg than mounted on a horse.

Episodes like this one make you think back to your mother begging you to do something useful with your life. Long-gone schoolmasters pleading for your attention seem awfully vivid as you look forward to a fate of seeing more and more waddies who can't wrangle 10 head of horses in a half day.

If I could re-enroll in school today, I'd sit on the edge of the front seat. The teacher wouldn't be able to clear her throat without my making a notation in my notebook.

The first time a student even mentioned the glories of the west, I'd hit him with a leaded spitball. The theme of my days would be an academic crusade that'd make Hannibal's crossing of the Alps sound like a Boy Scout hike.

One thing for sure that wouldn't be included in the program would be a course on how to wetnurse cowboys in a horse trap.