

10SHORT.DOC 2-10-00

Shortgrass roadside scenery causes big lumps to rise in the throats of us herders roaring down the road to town. The kind of lumps going back to such calamities as the Drouth of the 50s. After passing so much bare ground, a deep spinal shudder turns a severe enough to make the heart palpitate like a witch doctor shaking a gourd rattle.

The past 60 days have made a big difference in hollow horns nursing calves on daily handouts of cubes, enforced by dry stubble grazing. As the cattles' eyes receded into the sockets, the lusterless winter hair washboarded across the ribcages. Upon us was the desperate season the oldtime cowmen knew as the time to level your sight from the flanks and dewlap downward and avoid the rest of the cow.

After the sheep gave up trying to die from eating prickly pear cactus apples last fall, they stabilized. Looked like for awhile, we might become lucky enough for them to shed their fleeces, thus save us shearing off four-bit a pound wool at \$2.50 a head. But an old ewe can keep her stomachs filled with toxic weeds and thorny cactus pods, and still shear eight pounds of wool and wean a set of twins in the fall.

Before the last apples were consumed, a prominent feed salesman was overheard in a coffee house, saying he thought "they (the pear apples) tasted a lot like peaches." Such talk even by a big-shot feed and seed dealer is uncomfortable, especially if you recall how the drouth of

the fifties affected ranchers. Old boys burning prickly pear developed wild looks in their eyes and threw their heads up at the sight of another human. Nobody laughed. All of us were afraid we were going to end up bear wailing like bitterweed sheep, or hobbling along humped up the way an old cow turns creepy.

But the worst news was when the Schneeman brothers ranching southwest of Barnhart got hooked on the Cuban cane molasses they were feeding their father's sheep. People around Barnhart thought the dark rings encircling their mouths was chewing tobacco, until their lips started sticking together just like their old ewes'. No telling how high their father's feed bill would have gone if he hadn't spotted an ant trail leading to the bunkhouse in the dead of winter.

Be hard to evaluate the goat prospects today as the eye-catchers are folks motivated by over-ambitious fencing of town lots and other small plots of ground as a ranch. The surest indicator of overstocking goats is to check if the bird nests are gone up to the browse line. Once the nests are eaten, serious consideration should be given to seeking additional pasture, or to contract for more bird nests.

A friend and I rent movies in Angelo on the weekends to blot out the dry misery. I don't recognize any of the new stars, or the modern films. I just skip the aisles where the customers wear caps on backwards, or favor baggy britches

and sloppy sweatshirts. I sweep six films off the shelf at a time without reading the titles.

One trip, a little snip of a checker asked if I needed help carrying my movies to the car. I replied no, that if she'd open the front door, I could still carry nine ounces of reels in a one-ounce plastic bag. In foreign countries, gray beards and grannies are accorded a lot of respect. But after an American passes the 60th year, the pharmacy, the bank, and the registration desk at the nursing home are the only three businesses where he is going to receive equal attention, and that's going to be directly contingent on the lifespan of his bankroll.

At the ranch, the propane delivery man blowing the pop-off valve on the house tank every three weeks, or the saddle horses tripping the door to the corn bin, replaces the diversion of a VCR or a television set. In January, I caught the moon eclipse and found a hunter's pocketknife all in the same week. Something goes on nearly every day around here. A possum will dig under the house, or a hoot owl will swoop down and catch a cottontail. I never understood why Mother wanted to drive 23 miles to go to bridge parties and study club meetings when she had such an interesting scene out the kitchen window.

Going to be a close finish if we outlast this weather failure. All this month, we'll be shearing, marking calves, and hustling about to make the feed runs. The weather experts predict more dry weather ahead. Sometimes I wish

they'd go on and add "and that includes you optimistic fools
in the shortgrass country."