

Included in the impact of a new age hitting the shortgrass country, the electricians connecting the first rural lines in the dreadful drouth of the early 1950s noticed mysterious readings on volt meters connecting the herders' houses. So the lineman said, (Note: not *I* said) that when he was on assignments to check a short on a meter pole or inspect a house for a loose wire, an hombre walking from the barn by the job or passing through the room shot the meter from zero to off the scale.

The dry spell had been on four, maybe five years by then. Specialists in climbing splintery creosote poles and stretching heavy wires in high winds are, of course, unaware of drouth nerves. Out here we all know herders and bankers' nervous systems run conflicting currents and corresponding dead spots during weather failures that'd make Thomas A. Edison take up elementary kite flying to understand electricity.

But an important point is a story that spread of a lineman who watched a cowboy working cattle ground a sprayer engine by placing his thumb on the spark plug. The lineman watched the waddie kill the engine twice before he believed such grounding possible, or so the story goes. Further, the witness waited until the cattle walked out of

the pen to be sure the beasts were not akin to the wild, humpy cow jungle cattle, fueled by such violent energy that stopwatches run backwards at calf roping events.

He claimed his meter dropped over in the minus zone of dead cells, frayed cables, grounded wires, burned fuses, tripped breaker switches, and bad circuitry to fly upwards to overload, power surge, high voltage, and lightning bolts. (Credit me for expanding the last part.)

Move next, please, to the third week of February '08, to 40 to 50 mile-per-hour winds raging across the northern reaches of the shortgrass country. Fires 25 or 30 miles long burned so fast that firetrucks raced and failed to stop the blazes. Townsfolk fled, judges ordered evacuation, and volunteer firefighters spent the night on the blaze-line. Downwind, the brown grass smoke dimmed the setting sun.

At the ranch, we filled a livestock sprayer to be ready for our turn to share in the holocaust. Listening to the water dribbling into the hundred-gallon tank from a garden hose seemed like using a tallow candle and a six-inch ruler to chart the Mammoth Caverns of Kentucky, or better, taking a package of fly paper to head off an African fire ant epidemic.

All the time the sprayer filled, the decision rocked back and forth whether to load the sprayer in the '83 model Ford like now, or wait the next day for a newer truck easier to start and more reliable to prevent being trapped in a firestorm. Thus distracted, in a loss of presence, I leaned against a front fender.

Lo and behold and gosh-a-mighty, for the first time in the life of the hopeless old cold-motored wreck, the engine kicked off and fired without the starter grinding five minutes or flooding the carburetor to assure a 30-minute delay.

The mini-second I jumped free, the engine died. The water pouring in the sprayer tank sounded loud as a waterfall. The exhaust might have backfired upon dying; I can't say. My nerves shook so badly, the pen in my top pocket quivered and inked my shirt in spasmodic squirts tuned to the valve stroke of the V8 engine dying in a hacking beat. I remember trying to wipe my face with a bandana, only to learn I was wiping my reflection in the window glass.

By dusk, the wind died and the air cleared of smoke, giving an eerie feel. Old firefighters become so vigilant their whole being changes. Like Indian fighters of old, the pupils of the eyes become enlarged after darkness from

staying alert. Normal movement of the head changes to wide sweeps of the vision's periphery from watching the horizons. Wandering around outdoors on moonlit nights becomes a habit in the subject; especially unusual is kicking mice nests from bunches of grass and being extra sensitive to horned owls hooting and foxes barking.

Comes now to live through the month of March. Brown, dry broomweeds stand belly deep to a grown man on open plains. The windmills bump and rattle in the gales, sending the message - spreading the word to shortgrassers to pull the cinch straps tighter, to take a deep hold.

Eight and one-half days from this writing, I saw a town guy in Mertzon build a backyard fire on the ground. Seventy-two hours ago, I listened to a severe fire danger report on the radio. And so once again, our world of hollow horns and woolies, needle grasses and cactuses lies in the midst of an alien place.