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After a drouth decimates a herd, listening to the market news is like a baseball fan sitting on a cold car fender out in a parking lot, listening to the crowds cheering a world series playoff. Noontime reports on six-weight steers in Oklahoma City and oldcrop muttons in Angelo mean little to a man who can gather and load his whole outfit by nightfall.

Membership fees in the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Herder's Assn. fell due the first of March, or mine did. Included in the renewal application is a sketch of a steer to fill in the member's brands and earmarks for the inspector's files to facilitate identifying stolen cattle. I messed up my copy trying to make the steer look like one of my old cows. I had to trace in the protruding ribs and prominent hip bones, countersink the eye sockets and draw a big knot of prickly pear thorns between the jawbones. Putting in the shaggy winter coating of hair was what foiled me. Those bare spots cattle rub off from lice are hard to reproduce on slick paper.

For one thing, they had this steer posing so upright, I wasn't sure where the branding iron would hit on a cow brute standing so still. Most of the ones we squeeze in the chute slip down, making hitting behind their left shoulder blade about like finding your place in the small print of a pocket size bible.

The country is mending a bit. My maternal grandfather's place measured a total of two and one-half inches in two rains last week. Up here where I live, we caught one tenth of an inch the first night and leveled out the next night with a bountiful three tenths, bringing the 1995 total to between five and six tenths, depending on the gauges.

Sheep and cattle have been on feed since last September. Feeding so long and so much has affected the cattle. We didn't realize the extent until we burned out the motor running the automated feeder. The unit originated from a country welding shop and was hard to repair. Feed runs were too critical to skip, so the man doing the feeding shoveled the cake into a hopper to scatter on the ground.

Elevated on the pickup bed, he began to notice the cows looking his way held their heads funny. Those old sisters had been crowding around the auger spout on the feeder so long, watching the cubes whirl out in spirals, their eyes were corkscrewed worse than a roulette croupier's in Las Vegas. All they had been thinking of for nine months was charging the feed wagon to gulp down range cubes and standing on a hillside bawling forlornly at the sound of distant motor vehicles. To ever realign their vision, we are going to have to go back to feeding from sacks and string the feed in a straight line.

In the other times at the old ranch, we had lots of cancer-eyed and pinkeye blinded cows, but we choused our

patients so hard, puffing pink powders, squirting blue ointments and swabbing screwworm medicines in their eyes, a lot of them died without ever looking any further than down a board chute, or across a small holding trap.

I already have a recovery plan in case the last rains are the end of the drouth. A friend knows about a big rancher in Mexico who culls his cow herd to raise fighting bulls. He sorts back any cow who shows the slightest tendency to be gentle natured. The only thing that'll kill these cattle, besides matadors, is old age and direct hits by lighting bolts.

As long as family history reaches, we've been broke trying to raise sons and daughters of Prince Pompadour bred to Blackguard of Dead Weight at the expense of the cattle living higher than the owners. Under the new era, I am going to budget, say, \$200 per Mexican cow to raise a calf; except this time, I am going withhold half of the money to see how much her calf returns ...