

DECEMBER 5, 1985

About everybody has shaped up for winter in the Shortgrass Country. Lambs and calves have been shipped; what's left have been weaned for replacements or to make holdover yearlings.

I keep up with the livestock movements by watching the highway that goes through the ranch, but the part I can't check on is where the money is going. Things have been so hard and dry for so long, you can't tell any difference between an hombre that's broke from one that's just had a lot of close calls. The reason I care, of course, is that I don't want to waste my time on a herder that's down on his luck. It's very important for the jugkeepers to see you keeping good company. I don't want them to think for a minute that I am not trying to better myself.

But I must not be the only one who is trying to keep up a good front. Just running down the chain of title on a coffee check is a tedious job. Herders and fossil fuel miners alike have been so shaken by the awful economy that they'll change their chairs four times over two cups of coffee. Once they do land, they slouch so far down in their chairs that the only way a waitress can identify them is by their haircuts, or maybe some quirk in the way their hats are creased.

The trickiest are the ones that have protected income, or were smart enough to stay away from dry grass and dry holes. The hottest CIA agent on the Potomac couldn't break these guys' cover. I've known some of them for 40 years, and until I broke one of their major methods of cover-up, I wasn't hitting one out of 10 guesses.

The break happened at an unlikely place. A friend of mine had invited me out to an afternoon tea dance at a big club. In the course of the dance, an old gal who heads up one of the established families, parked her aluminum walkers and started dancing with a gentleman I'd seen come in walking on a cane.

It took me a week of solitude at the ranch to figure that out. Together those two dancing partners had enough heirs and the money to fully occupy a loan committee working full time on emergency college expenses and down payments on honeymoon cottages. But besides staying up with the latest dance steps, they had developed a support routine that'd turn back the most eager of freebooters.

Since then I've been watching several suspects who drink coffee at a big hangout on the South side of town. I haven't caught any of them dancing, but I'm nearly certain I've counted as many as 20 steps without their support device touching the floor, and I've yet to hear anyone ask them for a loan or advancement.

I hate living in such a materialistic society, but I do admire that couple for being able to find a solution to their problem and have fun at the same time.