

The whole shortgrass country stays in constant terror of fires that threaten every day during this dry spring of high winds. At this writing near the end of April, thunder clouds bring enough shade for measured relief. The rumble from far off thunder revives hope, but only scant showers moisten the parched, dead grasses.

In mid-April, we shipped the 10 and 11 year-old cows with 300-pound calves. The old sisters wintered hard on our hardest country down on the highway.

They traced back to the days when mother ewes nipped off the best grasses before they grew high enough for a cow to graze. In those times, an old cow had to rustle to make a living for herself and her calf on what the sheep left.

Once the coyotes and labor problems wiped out the sheep operation, tall grasses grew in the pastures that were not only strange to the cattle, but mysterious for herders. When my boys asked about different stands, I mumbled "little cane bluestem" or "red clover spangletop" for a stall.

Shortgrass ranges don't teach much about forages. You do become good at identifying thorny ripple bushes, or six-minute grammas, or wispy thistle weeds. Be hard to be an herbist out here where so little is edible. I worry about

all the jackrabbits and cottontails diminishing, but try to fool myself into thinking it'll recover someday.

The cattle sold for the highest weighing prices in my lifetime, an astounding 90 cents a pound for a crippled bull and 70 cents a pound for the cows. Adding the calves at over a dollar and four bits a pound made the weights less painful.

Nevertheless, until the last hoof stepped off the truck at the auction's pens, calves weaned so early caused a sadness. If there is a way of explaining, perhaps the simplest says a herder will use up the last means of making a profit to take one more chance to lose money.

From up on the catwalk at the pens, the cows looked like they were eating the first hay they'd ever tasted. You have to be thankful (or at least thoughtful), to ship a 10 year-old cow that's never in her life touched a leaf or sprig that didn't grow on her home grounds. Most likely the cows that recognized me on the catwalk became hungry. The only attachment those old beggars know is a feed wagon, or a free choice handout.

Round bales and such like may be one of the top enemies of today's ranching. It's always hard on a cow outfit to justify outside pasturage, or to buy grass tied in bales.

It's difficult to grow 35 pounds of grass for one cow to eat in one day on a small plot; nevertheless, big or small operators can all make the same size mistakes.

In the Big Drouth of the 50s, government feed programs cleaned out all the haystacks and barn floors in the Midwest to ship to Texas. At Noelke Switch on the Santa Fe, boxcar after boxcar loaded with hay docked on the siding for other ranches.

Big break for the ranch was the broken bales. All we cowboys had to do was throw the chips over the right of way fence to our horses, drawn to the odor from the open doors on the boxcars. Better luck was the chance to sweep up the boxcar floors of richer scatterings.

But back to now: the big question before and after the sale was how many more head would hit the market from dry weather or from the fires over the country. Huge acreages had been lost to prairie fires; plenty of ranches missed rains from way back to last summer. There were bound to be ranches on the verge of forced sales from those two holocausts.

Rain gauges down on the highway, for example, bottomed with fossilized insects a year old - a hard point to analyze as only the youngest bugs fall off into the glass

tubes, leaving out the old shells that were smarter, yet stiffened by age.

The reason bugs are attracted to rain gauge tubes in the shortgrass country is to escape the winds. Windbreaks are mighty popular out here. You don't hear much about things being waterproof.

A nice lady in the office at the auction company gave the sales results over the wire. Years ago, when the San Angel National Bank stayed mighty interested in my (our) receipts, I sweated the auction ring until my last hoof sold.

Today, however, I am out of practice owing money. Time may be here, however, to start a few goodwill visits by the jugs to renew acquaintances. Things sure point to our being headed that way.