

MARCH 30, 1978

Cowmen who dislike wasty cattle would sure be happy in the Shortgrass Country this season. Cattle are drawn down to their structures. I see old cows reaching for mistletoe and bird nests high in the trees. Spoiled old nellies that couldn't reach salt blocks in the odd side of troughs are making fair livings in the advanced altitudes.

Heel flies have run our stuff into the thickets. Feeding them is on a one-to-one basis. February snow brought up enough green tinge to add to the fly insanity. Whether they run all day or not doesn't really matter. I hear herders complaining about the loss of strength. But I keep hoping that the flies will get so fierce that they'll run them over a fence onto the neighbors or out in the highway.

I wish before my time is up I'd get to see a heel fly. For over 40 years I've been watching cattle roll their tails over their backs and run. Old boys that I rode along with kept telling me that they were those little old flies down there close to their hind legs.

I've often wondered if heel flies even existed. In dry springs, I know that herders imagine lots of sounds and sights. We have roaring in our ears and all sorts of fuzzy looking things swimming on the horizon. Old cows may have the same trouble.

I do know one combination that'll make heel flies look like an expense paid trip to the better end of the Florida peninsula. It's having an oil boom and a dry spring and an epidemic of heel flies to hit at the same time. We've got some cattle so run down from chasing and dodging fossil fuel miners that the heel flies can't raise them.

Two pastures of our cattle have been lapping seven miles of new road for three months. What feed we've been able to get in them has been spent galloping up the caliche roads. I scattered some protein blocks at the waterings in hopes of diminishing the sack and pickup fever. But the old girls were so busy bawling and running after the traffic that it was so late when they went to water that the coons had already eaten the blocks.

My oldest son suggested that we ask the oilmen to feed the cattle every time they passed by. Politicians have been mighty nasty about windfall petroleum profits. Mr. Exxon could hide a lot of his cash if he'd adopt a few herds of cattle to feed through the winter.

Days don't count anymore. Feed bills on the clipboard tally the score. Hang on until your knuckles turn white, then grab for a stronger hold. The greybeards did it and so can we.