

In the recovery after the Big Drouth of the 1950s, the boardwalks and lobbies of market centers resounded with booted herders racing to restock the ranchlands. Big coups of finding a thousand yearling ewes or a couple of loads of black heifer calves fueled the boom around hotel lobbies and on out to coffee houses in the ranchlands.

One hot tip hit formed into a scheme to stock Angora goats instead of following a family history of running woolies. It mattered not that the country to be stocked ran heavily to juniper cedar and six-minute gramma grasses, reinforced by limestone outcrops and withered, soil-sapping vines instead of the oak browse linked to successful goat ranching.

My advisor knew an old codger south of the ranch ready to sell his whole kid crop for the first time in his life. The opportunity raised imagery of morning sunlight reflecting off the silver hair of fat goats drifting across the eastern slope of hills, leading to heavy sacks of kid hair leaning close to the scales of the wool house, waiting for a Boston buyer to draft his company for a record buy.

The "old codger" penned the goats, set the time, and sprang the trap. Had an angel of mercy warned that buying four-legged beasts beneath a dark goat shed, bedded by

years of dust and muck ranked in the upper reaches to define foolhardy and insane, the power from the pocketed 30-day bank draft, supported by two ballpoints, still would have overridden the last fragment of judgment or restraint.

How "Old C" counted the kid goats under the shed dims in summarizing the tragedy. The recounting of the bout with amateur goat husbandry climaxes in the previously published tale of the miserable creatures drowning in a flood, leaving \$20,000 of mortgage afloat without security.

But here, let's skip the goat drowning to focus on working livestock in darkness. Charlie Goodnight counted his cowboys on one hand and tallied thousands of steers passing by on the other in the morning reaches of the prairie lands. Yet I don't suppose Old Charlie hired cowboys or received steers after midnight on the trail, before the sun illuminated the shade of bluff waterholes.

Go back, please, to frame the fateful scene of the prelude to the hair goat conquest. The 24 year-old (myself) entertains Goodnight visions of a thousand cream-colored, young humpy cows walking across 20 sections of pasture, dewlaps and ears flopping, baby calves racing to the side. Find the point where, my horse facing west, I turned in the saddle, looking across the herd to the south, my right boot

kicked loose from the offside stirrup, confident all's bound to peak before my thirty-first birthday.

Hear too, the embarrassing confession that, once the goats were loaded, no time was spared to ask the old gentleman's advice. Oh no, when you're destined to summer steers in the Kansas bluestem or top a feedlot gain in Amarillo, time runs too short to sit down and listen to a man who spent half a century kidding and raising Angora goats.

After the flood, the urge never returned to be a goat herder, nor did the conquest of the bluestem or Amarillo occur, or the cowherd reach close to a thousand head. The goat business shifted to Boers and big money. The spring eagle flyway on the 09 Divide prevented joining the bonanza.

The story returned four weeks ago on the way back to the house from the barn in light too dim to walk in rattlesnake country. The flash hit while opening the front gate. I'd just received two black bulls off a covered gooseneck trailer into a dawn-shadowed crowd pen. Paid for and accepted two phone-ordered black oxen from a trailer loaded the night before out of a big pen of bulls miles away.

He handles so many bulls, he must know the ones to pick by the snuffing or sighing in the darkness. His tuning system tells him which ox to send ol' Noelke, or which one suits my neighbor, ol' Brooks. Bet you have seen hombres who knew the exact time to press the right key at the precise moment to make a sale. He fits the bill.

But don't look for such intuition in buyers under goat sheds, or in pitch-dark cow pens. No, we are the ones to teach the pea underneath the shell game. Ring us up to sell a share in a wildcat oilwell or a piece of a gold mine in Arizona.

Seems that on the goat deal, I wrote the draft on a pickup hood in a big rush to beat the truck to the ranch. I know I paid for the bulls under flashlight. Comes to mind that Mother taught her feeble Collie to go under the bed for her shoes after "Chico" turned gray, yet failed to her last days to teach her son a modicum of business.