

The big hollow-horn association, The Texas and Southwestern Cattleman's, published a survey in their journal last month showing the average age of the members to be 58.5 years. About a third of us herders were 65 or older, and less than 5 percent were below 35 years of age.

Just those figures brought all kinds of complications to mind. Looked as if the young men were going to have plenty of country to lease in the next decade. Unclear, however, was how many graybeards were going to leave widows, or how old the widows were going to be at the expiration of the spouse. It's pretty easy to figure without running another poll that any woman who had been married to a rancher in the past two decades of a serious labor shortage wasn't going to keep ranching, or keep marrying ranchers.

The poll further showed only six percent of the members were females. I don't know whether the wives were left out because they normally may have two other careers, like teaching school and keeping house, or because they preferred to be anonymous in case they had to duck out from an over-eager loan company.

Remember in the old shipwreck movies how the women boarded the lifeboats, and it was "Ol' Cap," the glory-struck old fool, who went down with the ship? This isn't saying women haven't been courageous. They have faced down all sorts of adversities all over the ranch country.

However, my family history proves my Greatest of Great Grandmothers was afraid of Comanche war parties. One winter in the 1860s, when the Indians were on the warpath, she moved her family from the ranch over to officers' quarters at Fort Concho. Normally she wasn't that flighty, but I suppose she had to face shooting her sawed-off shotgun and packing a new baby on her hip at the same time.

Next quandary was how many young people are going into agriculture in New Zealand and Australia, our country's alternate food source and primary nemesis for domestic agriculture? Might be a way of taking a bank shot at our country in our own behalf by dropping a hint that we have only caught the "Aussies" once adding dingo dog to ground meat. For consumers to keep in mind, a touch of wild flavor improves the taste of hamburger. Further, that Oriental palates put great store in canine recipes.

A French sheep farmer recently caused a stir nationwide by objecting to McDonalds serving Brazilian beef in his country. True, the hide off a South American cow brute is about as tender as her loin, but they might let us know if they were going to add aardvark or anteater meat to their product. Argentine labels on canned corned beef make vague references to the contents. Those cowboys eat their old horses, but that's not like slipping wild dog meat into the grinders.

Takes the human system a lot of time to become adjusted to eating horsemeat or drinking mare's milk. Much more than

the slight behavior changes from eating dingo-related products, like growling on moonlight nights and sudden urges to scratch. Twenty years ago, I drank fresh mare's milk in Lower Mongolia. My right ear still flicks forward in a horse corral. And it's all I can do sometimes on crowded dance floors to keep from kicking when another dancer bumps me from behind.

The poll didn't address the prospect of any of us retiring. Jose, the cowboy who worked for us for more than 40 years, made the mistake of deciding he and I were the same age. Jose began watching me pulling up in the saddle like I was climbing a loose rope ladder, until he figured he was in the same shape and quit over 10 years ago. Too bad he took me for an example, and didn't notice his boot heel still cleared the dance floor 12 inches every time they called a polka at the Cuarto Caminos. But once again I was a bad influence on the man I wanted to help so much.

I think every year about going back to conventions and reunions to check on the fraternity of hollow horns and woolies. The other day at the grocery store, I ran across a man who lived at my grandfather's Bentley line camp in 1923. He was waiting for the paperwork on a trip to England. If he was worried about the attrition of herders he was sure keeping up a good front. I wish I had asked him if he filled in the Cattleman's questionnaire. Be a big help in lowering the average age to weed out the retired ones ...