

JANUARY 7, 1988

When I began to cull my holiday mail, I became aware of how many outfits that were still sending me Christmas cards and calendars. that I hadn't traded with in years. From the way the jugs and loans companies were shutting down on all of us, I'd figured as far as calendars were concerned, we were headed back to using marks and slashes like the cavemen used to keep time.

But after I'd studied these items closer, I began to understand why such operators as feed stores and trucking firms and commission houses were still giving me their token. Along about Christmas, those shoelace milling, rate-fixing and pencil shrinking artists were hoping a desk calendar would suffice for all the hocus pocus they'd pulled off in 1987 and subsequent years.

Lots of things get clearer when you are out at the ranch by yourself, I think. The more elaborate the calendar, the more suspicious I became. Those bigshot town dealers get to be such great actors. Last month when I was ordering my winter feed, the miller I'd done business with for 15 or 16 years kept getting me confused with my cousin Goat Whisker's the Younger and my brother. We were trading on the telephone. Nevertheless, I sound about as much like my kinsfolks as a skit off the British Broadcasting wave resembles the Ole Opry House.

I'd already contracted the feed before I realized that he was deliberately confusing my name to avoid such subjects as the meaning of "trace minerals" and "inert ingredients." Instead of concentrating on his newest sacked recipe, I was constantly distracted by his failure to get my name right.

When the wool houses started baling our fleeces I was hoping that we were going to join the rest of the scalawags on this earth that can do more tricks with a filler than a juggler can with a rubber ball. But that fell through after they reversed the process and didn't do any baling until after the wool was sold.

Calendars and key rings aren't going to throw me off guard. I've got about four suspects' names on a pad by the telephone to remind me to be careful. It's going to take a mighty slick hombre to pull that name scam on me again.