

28SHORTGRASS.DOC

The best stories originate from imaginative chroniclers free of witnesses. My maternal grandparents knew and lived lots of all kind of stories. Pioneer and Native American material flowed around a wood heater over at Papaw's ranch. On special venues, a domestic disagreement might end in a pistol shot, or a brand dispute might trail off into a mystery to make me wish Granddad carried a six-shooter.

The setting was perfect, as neither grandfather nor grandson committed to honor the truth. Grandmother owned a Good Book, but it wasn't handy on the long winter nights we spent in a half-circle around the stove to swear to tell all the truth all the time, or even half the truth half the time.

Right here is a good time for you to decide whether you like good stories or want to hear true stories. In the old days, sitting out in the yard in the summer under full moonlight, if the stories demanded the truth, there wouldn't have been a sound to hear except the hoot owls in the horse trap.

One story came to mind this morning that might have happened, or might have been part of one from Granddad's line. The way it goes: A wise man of the Humano tribe,

"Fading Arrow," named the shortgrass country "Big Checkerboard." Fading Arrow served as a spotter for the tribe. He rode hundreds of miles, locating herds close to handy cliffs to stampede the buffalos over to be trampled to death.

Alone, he began to notice how many more times a snake sheds his skin in desert country. How the lizards' tails break off from being brittle. He further studied harvest ants, risking cold weather to store a few more seeds against hard times. But most important, he became aware of how scattered rain fell out here. And from his observations came the name "Big Checkerboard." Fading Arrow left us an important discovery — a message we never heeded — the fickle rainfall pattern.

Forty-four times, perhaps 44 hundred times every spring, shortgrass herders exclaim, "Rains are shore spotted in my country. Been missing on the south side and haven't had a drop on the north," or "I heard they'd had good rains over part of the Robert Lee area and all over the Del Rio country."

The reports go on and on. Weather records might as well be written in invisible ink and buried with the lost scroll of the pyramids for lessons learned. The same practices are followed year after year.

For a hundred years, the Noelkes lambed in March and April, betting on a wet spring. The Boss always put his bulls out on the 20th of March, whether the weather cycle changed, the cow market changed, or the axis of Mother Earth changed her spiral. How or why we figured on hitting the right market or wet spell compares to trying to spot where a falling star is going to hit.

The most important part of Fading Arrow's finding was connected to shipping calves in July. First draft of the heaviest heifers went to a rancher on the eastern edge of the shortgrass country at a couple of dollars a hundred premium. Angus heifers, the kind to keep for cows, the kind with a black shine that'd made a sucker out of a herder quicker than a Las Vegas shill girl, and cost him a lot more dough.

Old grass from last year raised the calf crop. No rain fell from February to late June. The figures dropped from keeping a hundred heifers to 50 head for replacements. The bed pillow began to slip off from bucking and pitching in the night while recasting the restocking plans to 2017.

On one of those fitful nights the Big Checkerboard story came to light. For the first time, the significance, the true meaning, stuck. The shortgrass country plays a big game. We aren't an industry; we swap money among ourselves.

When it's dry west of us, down south of Sonora, an ol' boy will get a rain that starts a fever to buy heifers or ewe lambs, stout enough to set his checkbook on fire. He may drouth out before fall, but up north of Angelo, an hombre sows an oat patch before a shower. You know how little bait it takes to send him after a light calf or a twin lamb - a movement by the 7th Cavalry can't keep him away from the market.

So the truth is, we don't have any economy. We just trade back and forth between thunderstorms and dry spots. "Humano," or Jumano," by the way, means "the people." Fading Arrow could have belonged to any tribe to fit my imagination.