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One characteristic that all program chairmen seem to have that I come across is a desire to hire a speaker who has a message. Messages have been difficult for me to develop. Most of the time a herder's life is made up of dry episodes followed by grim market reports. Citizens who learn a message, I suspect, utilize it and get out of the ranching game.

I have tried reading poetry and studying philosophy, hoping that some night behind the podium I'd wax off into an eloquent passage that'd bring tremors of emotion through the crowd. Women would mop the tears from their eyes and men would nervously clear the tightness from their throats. Nostalgia and joy and reverie would overlay the room, and then after the speech the program chairman would send a bouquet of red sweet peas inscribed "to a sensitive man."

On my time off during the holidays, I began to work on messages. Free of extra work, I came up with this piece of excellent advice: "If you plan on telling the truth, you'd better practice up beforehand, because, in my opinion, the truth isn't a natural reaction in man."

My first chance to test it on a live audience was at lunch in San Angelo with my sister and a couple of her cronies. I waited until they'd finished a detailed list of the hardships of shopping out at the Mall and reviewed a minute inventory of the voids in the gift selections in five of the six major department stores there before I sprang my message.

Down at the old ranch, the Boss once got a strain of bucking blood in his Thoroughbred horses, and you sure couldn't have fed it out of those ponies with stuffed avocados like those girls were eating. I'd heard of off-stage episodes in opera dressing rooms that reached emotional highs, but I never had seen such a charged situation as that one turned into.

I didn't have any idea that women were so sensitive to the subject of telling the truth. Out at the auction houses and the coffee joints, hombres will slip in tidbits of factual information to spice up a story, or maybe to mislead the audience a bit, but they don't make a big deal of it one way or the other.

My sister was the most offended of the lot. She is a stock broker and runs a ranch on the side. Perhaps the combination of the two trades may be enough strain to force out the truth. When people are tired they make more mistakes. Using all those complicated fractions and fancy points like brokers do to divert their customers from dollars and cents is bound to be stressful. I didn't say that I held it against people for telling truth; what I said was that they needed to practice up beforehand.

Now I positively advise against using the truth when you are in trouble. In my experience that's like using gasoline to rinse off and electric short. I don't know what high stepping trial lawyers tell their clients before court, but I am going to bet they advise moderation in regards to the truth.

I never did regain the floor long enough to do anything but pay their check. Possibly that's another topic that can't be discussed in mixed company. But I don't think I want to put out more feelers to see.