

DECEMBER 10, 1987

In a lull not too long ago at a bull sale, a herder from the southern part of the Shortgrass Country said wet Mexicans were passing through his outfit in the heaviest waves of migration he'd ever seen. On the same morning, the newspapers were running a feature story about how effective the new immigration law had been in stopping the influx of illegal aliens.

After we had to let our men go back to Mexico last summer, we've been too shorthanded to run a census on unpapered aliens. Just to score enough on a sheep gathering to justify feeding our saddle horses was keeping us plenty busy. On those hot July mornings, trailing along behind a herd of woolies, the question wasn't how many hombres are crossing the border; the question was whether the natural limitations of intense heat and high humidity were going to send the whole outfit staggering over to the shade of a water tank for their very last breath of air.

Last week, however, an immigration officer called the ranch from over at their new headquarters in San Angelo to ask if I understood the law. He explained that any worker hired after Nov. 6, 1986 had to fill out one of their forms proving his legal status in the country.

Well, the "his" turned out to be imprecise, because included in the miagra's interpretation of the law, he included a suggestion that I might consider hiring women to solve the labor shortage. I was so startled, I failed to ask where these cowgirls were. I decided later that he probably didn't have the answer, but was perhaps just some young lovesick guy who wanted to get even with an old gal for breaking his heart.

The odds are that in the days when this patrolman was out chasing wets he might have seen how handy ranch wives can be at juggling pots and pans, feeding dogie lambs and doing relief work out on the range, and had decided that all ladies were interested in hard work.

But I think women are too smart to choose a trade that in the summer lacks about four degrees of causing sunstroke and in the winter isn't much further from causing frost bite. It's my best guess that any time you find a class of people who have indoor clothes dryers and fancy gadgets to dry their hair in a climate where the sun shines 96 percent of the time, you aren't going to find them being victims of the elements.

All total, I've seen 10 wets since the law was enforced. I do keep a form handy in case a job applicant comes by. The old time border patrolmen knew how to ride a horse. Maybe some of these new model enforcers could learn to do the same on their day's off.