

SEPTEMBER 1, 1983

Our final calf shipping ended on a quiet tone. All summer, we've been pulling green calves, favoring the driest pastures. However, once we did get to some decent weight calves, their mothers walked off from the weaning pens with hardly a glance back at their bawling babies.

In other years the same old sisters waded through net wire and tore down water gaps looking for their calves. True to the breed for black muley cattle, about as many would turn up at the shipping corrals as were willing to stay home.

I always have suspected that this big search was more drama than reality. In the days when we had to pair cattle up to separate the heifer calves and the steers beforehand, I was unimpressed with their mother instinct and often so wrong in my mating process that I failed to get any closer than an aunt and nephew relationship.

One of the reasons the cows should have objected to leaving their calves was the time of the shipment was ahead of normal weaning. I was in a rush to give the cattle a chance to heal up before frost. Somehow in the planning I overlooked the fact that last winter wasn't officially over. Instead of helping the cows, I made them more aware of how dry it was. Had I left their calves on them they'd have had less time to feel sorry for themselves. As it was they seemed to start looking for the feed wagon on the very next day after their calves were gone.

Dry weather is a great moderator of the mother instinct. Once when there was a water shortage over in San Angelo, school officials caught scores of mothers trying to put three-year olds in kindergarten. I've seen young ewes flat go off and leave their lambs during a bad drouth. And it doesn't matter how many times you've seen it happen, it still hurts to see a bad spring or a low water table cause that grief.

The boys helping ship the calves were more subdued too. For the first time, the cook began to have a lot of leftovers. The weather wasn't hurting them that much. On several mornings the temperature held off until 9 a.m. before it passed the 100 degree mark. After a conference, the cook and I decided that maybe these hands were going through a freak cutting of new teeth. She sure wasn't convinced that they'd lost their appetites, as that was too much to lose in such a short work. Whatever the cause, they were way ahead on their eating if they never took a bite for the rest of their lives.

I don't think the old cows' troubles and the cowboys' loss of appetites are connected. High powered dog trainers claim that Spaniels and Pointers get to copying their masters so close that you can't tell who teaches who to scratch their ears. But cattle and cowboys are different. They stay in conflict too much to cause a common influence.

Drouth lines are tightening. Mother cows had better be serious about staying in the pasture. The strength they've saved from climbing fences is going to add up before this is done. Right now I can't wait to see what the first cool snap will do to the cowboys. When they come back on their feed it'll be a sight to see.