

Summer ended the middle of November in the shortgrass country. The normal spring growing season runs from part of May to somewhere around mid-June. The old country flushes into autumn growth at the end of the August heat wave and enjoys a couple of weeks of decent September weather before cold weather hits in October. But summer lagged on until last week.

First frost knocks all the greenery back except the cactus, cedar bushes, locoweed, bitterweed, rabbit tobacco, snake weed, skunk thistle, mustard gourd, and milk weeds. Combinations of the above, depending on levels of toxicity and potency of acidity, affect winter stocking, renewal of notes and chattels, health and nourishing of lambs and calves, flourishing and control of wildlife, and disposition and marital contracts of the tenders of the land – the native and landed Shortgrassers.

Mysterious part is how year after year, the few of us stragglers left on the ranges book feed, pay taxes, or renew leases to face another winter so long and hard that the kindest month takes the sting from a Kansas dust storm.

Our cattle, however, summered in good shape in the prolonged season. We have young cows nursing six week-old calves in the same hair as a dry cow.

Score on the first 55 first-calf heifers reflects good luck, too. So far the book shows five calves pulled with a total loss on the eight head of hard deliveries of four

deaths. (For comparison, last Thanksgiving Day, we pulled three calves and lost one of them.)

The cattle are checked three times a day in the horse trap; after containment in the evening, a couple of times at night in the run-around. I take the night shift. First week of duty, wild turkeys flew every round into the darkness from the pecan trees in the front yard. After the old hens went through three nights of interruption, they started roosting east of the barn, preferring the risk of hoot owls and raccoons over a loss of sleep.

I was glad the turkeys moved. Wasn't helping my nerves to go out in the pitch darkness in weather still warm enough for rattlesnakes to be moving and have a turkey hen take flight overhead, crashing against tree branches, shattering leaves adrift, and doing that "bluble-bloo" racket an old hen makes from fear.

Doesn't mean I am an intern. A long time back we changed from an open range medical practice to a two-section pasture and then to a 200-acre hospital trap. Means the same ultimately, that no matter how long or how hard it's been going on, or where the cattle run, I still become excited and still hate to lose a calf, or have a cow unable to arise, or make a miscall causing the loss of either one.

Awhile back, an advisory said milking improved in dairy barns equipped with piped-in classical music. Seems those old black and white cows respond to Beethoven and Mozart. The catching part, however, was that the hands

worked better, too. Supposedly hit a better rhythm changing the machines and dumping the buckets.

I experimented by making night rounds wearing earphones with a Walkman playing CDs from a Bob Wills album. Didn't work. Didn't matter what kind of music I played, it made me want to quit and go to town.

There's sure not much to do in Mertzon after dark, and Barnhart is no better – the convenience store closes at 10. San Angelo offers plenty of night life, but were a graybeard of my vintage to walk in after 10 o'clock, the bouncer would be sure to call Baptist Geriatric to pull a bed check.

Think I might have told you before, I like being out under the stars with just me and the cattle, away from the bank, the market, the tax collectors, the lease contracts, the range experts, and all the other grief on this cold earth.

Heifers aren't watched in the night to make money. Heifers are calved in the night for the thrill of pointing one of those wobbly little wet creatures to drink his first gulp of warm milk. Gosh-a-mighty, the first year shortgrass chili joints introduced punch boards in 1935, the Barnhart drugstore dispensed more prize money than all we night nurses gather in a lifetime.

I've waited until the end to tell that we have had two sets of twins this calving season, the first in 10 years. Might be a bad omen, as the last multiple birth fell before

a long dry spell and a weak market period. Who knows what two sets of twins foretells?

So word spreads if you keep ranching. You can't keep it quiet. Most of the ones of us left don't have the willpower to quit. Just read, however, how delicious and expensive range beef is from Uruguay. Perhaps a new jolt of competition will start us doing something useful with our lives instead of raising food.