

JULY 12, 1984

San Angelo is imposing watering restrictions on yards and gardens. Bathing, I think, is still free choice. The way folks go around over there in the city jogging and chasing after golf balls, such matters as washrags and soap could well be priority items, especially in the hot summer time.

Last week, scattered showers fell in the city limits. For the first time, the city hombres outdid the herders in measuring their rain. Poppy fever and chrysanthemum wilt had made them plenty aware of the drouth. Many more months of dry weather and the town-based newscasters may lose their enthusiasm for sunny weekends.

On one particular afternoon we watched the rain showers from the ranch. Giant, dark purple clouds bordered in fluffy boundaries built into huge cathedrals of storm proportions. Yet, except for an occasional sprinkle, the rain held off from the ranch country.

To work off my impatience, I put a field trim to my yard with a small power lawnmower. Lawn and garden care has to be casual when your only implement is an 18 inch mower powered by an engine, whose chances of starting are somewhere in the range of the odds held by a good table man in Las Vegas.

In 89 times at the crank, the machine backfires enough to bum small blisters on the operator's shins. But true to the breed of gasoline engines that man refuses to exterminate, the devilish monster saps my energy until often by the time it fires I am too exhausted to trail it around the yard. But I suppose on that hot humid afternoon conditions were right for running the mower, because at a whirl of the wheel I was off, absorbed in watching for rabbits' nests and avoiding the water hydrants that can rise suddenly underneath a mower.

I'd been mowing an hour, maybe longer, when there exploded a thunderclap of such proportions that I jumped 31.6 ft., with the lawn mower extended in front of me. I can't recall having any sensation of flight or of altitude. The shock of the thunder and lightning put such a strain on the earth, the air, and the sound waves that I'd clinched my teeth and closed my eyes to a degree that I had blacked out.

I must have rolled to a landing. The wheels on the mower acted like a Tri-pacer. It's possible that the motor did stall, but when I recovered it was still running.

After I realized the length of my jump, I stepped off the skip in the grass. I couldn't believe I'd made a flatfooted jump of over 10 steps, so I checked the measurement with a tape. 31.6 feet. That's what it was.

Like so many of the glorious moments of the rangelands, there was no one around to applaud or drape a gold medal around my neck. I drove a 20-penny nail at each end of the grass. I dared not move the mower or rewind my tape measure. I sat alone, wishing my one neighbor would come use the phone. Darkness forced me into the supper table.

I won't burden you with the end of the story. You probably know how quick man is to scorn an athletic feat performed under such singular circumstances. I can't explain why some of the surest loops and the best bronc rides have been done alone in the pasture.

I can't stomach people's skepticism. Think whatever you please, but I tell you one thing, you better not ever bet against old Monte when it comes to free style jumping with a lawn mower in a lightning storm.