

New age ranchers build lots of water gaps to close in the small plots. Along the highways in Central Texas, you see magnificent galvanized, chain link structures that shame the net and barb wire ones strung across oldtimers' places.

Enormous stone entrances and steel arches also mark the new places, named to the point that the Spanish language is nearly exhausted in *chiquitas* and *pocitos*. Outfits like mine with no more imagination than to say "The place down on the highway" fall way behind the times.

Now that Goat Whiskers the younger has passed, we no longer call his ranch "the Holiday Inn." Without him around to aggravate, it's no fun to tease of the long-ago days when Whiskers kept a crew of boys inseminating Maine Anjou cattle one summer on 23-hour shifts.

Big leak to the outside occurred from my son John Noelke being part of the crew that summer. John is an artist sort of hombre. By the time he applied his talents to describing doctoring the baby calves in the daytime and planting seeds in the Maines all night, he became very creative in describing the nurses' eyelids and the chute men putting bars in front of the cows instead of behind them in the darkness.

Young Whiskers was the first Noelke on Highway 67 to put up a sign. The Big Boss had one built before he died, but the first truck over the cattleguard dragged it off into the pasture. A one by six board with "Noelke" printed in branding paint tacked on a cedar post replaced the arch.

We do have good water gaps on the highway. You have to keep cattle off an asphalt track that's hot 24 hours a day with tread burning at 75 miles an hour. Diesel trucks go down the right-of-way huge enough to send one of those black muley cows or bulls sailing off into the lane. And be reminded that San Angelo's legal community doesn't need encouragement to turn such a collision into a catastrophe that'll send the rancher and his issue to the county poor farm until adequate punishment is discovered.

Away from the highway fences, the draws nowadays fill so heavy in brush that they trickle instead of flooding. A rancher said that during the July Fourth rains down south of Ozona on the Pecos River watershed, he fixed 18 outside gaps. He went on to say that he failed to meet the new neighbors on his fencing circuit, but it didn't matter as he didn't want to be county commissioner of that precinct. He'd just would like to know if they had a set of fence stretchers or a posthole digger in case his wore out. (The

last part is made up, or in the trade, called "creative addition.")

Last December, during a lull in the local oil activity, a Caterpillar operator agreed to repair the old spreader dam diverting the Seep Draw overflow from the Highway 67 fence. His price fit better than my idea. After he smoothed and filled back the big washes, it occurred that Seep hadn't run big enough in 25 years to reach the dam.

Now that herders can't work unpapered aliens, like every other business and all the other residents in the United States, we are lucky that brush infested our rangelands and choked the draws and creeks. In 1956 at the old ranch after a big flood, for example, we lost an estimated 46 miles of fence.

The Big Boss arranged for two crews from Mexico to rebuild the fences and dig the gates from the drift. Then we could still pick up men at Loma Alta or Juno above Del Rio. We were yet to win the title of the immigration law's number-one enemy.

Until the floors stopped cracking in our houses from the '56 flood, the wets living in tents had a better deal than we did. The family had to be moved to Mertzon the evening after a rattlesnake crawled out from under the

kitchen sink. I remember it sure was quiet with all the kids gone.

There must be lots more different water gaps than ever before. I know when that whopper of a big gap on the draw coming into my sister's country from the north down in Menard County burned a few years ago, the neighbor's suggestions for an economic solution was to run one 12-gauge smooth wire with iron stakes to mark the boundary line instead of fencing. The idea must have been a version of a "trip wire." She sidlined me before I could comment.

Several gaps my paternal grandfather built still swing on Dry Spring Creek and Dutch Woman Draw. One over on the place north of town goes way back, but is so covered in brush that neither the cattle nor ourselves can tell if it is stock-proof. Maybe we will find out this fall. It sure will take a big rain.