

2SHORTGRASS.DOC

The two brothers who retired last fall from cowboying to become pumpers spend days off from the oil patch working their dad's outfit. They spend other time trying to convince the rest of the county that they can't help Sunday, next week, or next month.

Before I called a week ago, certain to be turned down to work the cows and calves on the Divide, a new scheme developed. If cowboys wanted to be pumpers, it would be more sensible to offer pumping jobs than ranch work.

I related back, too, to how proud Mother became when I pumped for Atlantic Oil Co. in the 1950s. For the first time, her son wasn't shaded up under a shearing machine's tarp doctoring woolies, or bent over a chute trying to snare an old cow's head to snub her and make her claim a dogie calf.

First step was to contact the pumpers over on the north side to see if they'd like to be cowboys for five days. (Part of our leased country has production.) Once that jelled, I'd ring the brothers and say, "You guys want a deal checking wells for four or five days over close to the Woodward pens?"

Before even a test took place, timing turned against us. The regular man saw one brother and a shearing crew

going into his dad's place at daylight. We then had to wait to see whether the other brother drove their oilfield jitney or pulled a horse trailer in behind his brother's rig.

The delay allowed time to reassess offering the pumpers on the north side a job. Last year, a cow died on a battery site over there. Instant death – she never kicked, just fell over by a settling tank spigot. It was hard to imagine the pumpers would want to reopen a discussion having anything to do with “cow” after that little contest.

The claim and counterclaim ran true to form on the death, except the oilman contended the cow died elsewhere and was dumped by the spigot. His charge hurt my feelings.

But the short of the matter was that after a veterinarian's examination showed petroleum products in the cow's paunch, the oil company paid half the loss, which went a good ways toward healing my feelings. (Half is always okay. Hits about what my stuff's worth.)

After the idea cooled on tricking the cowboys and the pumpers, late one nightmare-tormented night, puzzled by the oilman's charge, the time flashed back to when a waddie called “Little Dave” and myself, alone at the old ranch, drowned a sorrel horse in the dirt tank by tying him too low to a mesquite limb over the water. The outlawed brute's

hind foot had to be doctored for screwworms, and our only choice was drown the worms, or end up as crippled as the sorrel horse from being kicked and pawed.

We worked all day pulling the victim from the muddy dirt tank with a four-way rigged block and tackle hooked to a team of mules on the end of a steel cable. The Big Boss' death freed the story up as an engineering feat, interring "Ol' Sorrel Top" in a shallow grave in a spot so lonesome that vultures lost the way back a second time.

Decades and miles away from the dirt tank episode, in bed at war with sheets knotted around my hindlegs, traumatized in throes of strangulation unknown off a hangman's scaffold, the origin came to the charge of dumping the cow on the battery pad. "Sure," I reasoned, "the oil guy heard or read about the ingenuous removal of a waterlogged 1200-pound corpse way back on the Noelke ranch from a boggy tank with obsolete equipment only practical for the Amish."

It came to mind also that fifth graders know mysteries better than to think a fossil fuel miner able to drill 7500 feet through the earth to hit a thin layer of oil sand couldn't solve the death of a cow 12 inches from the valve to his settling tank.

By daylight, in a spell of regret potent enough to wreck a Tibetan monk's serenity, I vowed to give fellow man just and fair hearing, to never tie wild horses in dirt tanks, or ever find, notice, or report dead cows around oil tanks.

Things began to work. A neighbor's son agreed to help for five days. He and his dad had been welding on corrals in 95-degree heat. It was my good fortune to catch him eager to switch the welding mask for a three-inch felt brim.

Now the problem lingers as to how the cow fell on the tank battery by the spigot without leaving truck tracks, or why her hitherto unmentioned baby calf remained at her side.

Bunkhouse chroniclers go way back in my family history, further even than removing dead horses from dirt tanks. But it is going to be hard to find an audience this time to practice on with my cowboy pals busy pumping oil wells.