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Branches raking against the ranch house walls strike lighter in autumn than in wintertime. Nights in the calving corral make the sounds of nature seem far away. Owls hooting and gray fox barking under clouded moonlight chorus the scope of the ranch world. Wild turkeys rustling in the pecan trees loosen yellow-gold leaves to float to the wet ground.

Mud clots on the path to the barn make walking precarious under a flashlight beam. Pregnant cows breath heavy bedded on the soil-caked hay straw like a ward of weary, sick humans, the full beasts emitting rushes of air in long sighs and deep body groans.

Locating the head is not the task of the night nurse in a heifer calving clinic. Nights pass without ever seeing a cow's eartag. Range nurses and pasture doctors learn fast the distance a startled cow can kick. Instinct keeps us from being in reach of the heels day or night; however, to check our patients, we have to sight under the tail.

After making the 10 o'clock roll call, I darken my flashlight to sit on a steel feed trough. Told you before this is the ground of my boyhood. The twisted-trunk mesquite close to the trough has .22 caliber bullets lodged under the bark from 1934 target practice hunting Apache

warriors and capturing outlaws. Covered too deep to find are the footprints made on summer evenings to swim in the tank. Somewhere floating loose in the air are old dreams and fantasies of bareback rides in the Madison Square Garden rodeo and Fat Stock Show ribbons presented by blonde girls wearing blue dresses and red hair ribbons.

One night I left the lights on in the corrals 50 yards from my vantage point. Thought of the men who worked lambs and calves up the loading chute every fall. With just a glance at a crew of men working, you can spot the ones right away who know when and where to punch a cow brute or an old ewe.

Recalled hearing or reading about the FBI way back in the 60s or 70s tracing the sales of electric prod poles. Whatever the year, the man at the line camp and myself worked every day, spring and fall, with a crew of six cowboys from Mexico. The closest thing those stock-gathering hombres carried to a hotshot was a tan quirt plaited of rawhide hanging from the saddlehorn.

Was a time of bawling cow works deafening the scene and sheep corrals a foot deep in brown-gray dust suffocating the men. Only direct town contact was church or school programs. Ranch hands passing from other outfits always stopped to talk if they saw us riding close to the

highway or the county road. Railroad men dropped off to switch trains, and truckers the Boss hired contributed a small part of our exposure with the outside world.

Doesn't matter now how we learned that what we called "The G-Men" were investigating the sales of prod poles. The important thing is that the line camp hand and I rejoiced at the thought of the Angelo truckers being disarmed. In our minds - actually our world - a man who lit a smoke with a cigarette lighter or shocked a four-legged beast with a prod pole was a hopeless dude immersed in modernity.

Whole lot we knew about modernity, too. For example, Pete Rampy, living at the far south line camp of the Preston Ranch, told us the startling news of a ranch close to Sonora so well stocked in oil wells that an auger on a tractor dug their postholes. We knew Pete wasn't lying, as we'd seen green and yellow rubber-tired tractors go roaring by on flatbed railroad cars that might have had an invention so wonderful it replaced the crowbar.

But Pete wasn't the only one who knew about progress. We were well traveled. The Big Boss didn't hesitate to send us horseback to the Aldwell Ranch on Teepee Draw 20 miles away to drive horses home down the railroad right-of-way. One such journey was how we learned that an outfit at Sugg Switch sheared with an electric shearing machine. Remember

thinking I was going deaf when I rode by the shearing pen without hearing a gasoline engine popping like Angelo doctors on a dove hunt.

Sitting in the darkness looking at the shadows of the rails on the loading chute, I visualized how much pen room it'd take to hold all the livestock loaded from there. Wondered how many city folks ate ribeyes and hamburger or holiday legs of lamb that left our care for the feedlots over the slatted ramp.

Pete continued to be better traveled than the rest of us. Wasn't long before he had seen two electric shearing machines, so quiet that chickens didn't leave the roost when the work started in the morning.