

Gulf clouds have been bringing serious thunderstorms inland. Radio reports claim flooding in Central Texas. Dark clouds float over us without much more than a mist, but we have had strong rain odors off the front.

In 1955, on the Fourth of July, a storm adverse to rain boiled in from the Plains, so heavily laden with brown dirt that we hovered down underneath a bluff by a small hole of water on Spring Creek to finish our barbecue. After the meal, three of the families followed us to the old ranch. Took nine dustpans full to clean the dust off the kitchen floor to dance. The west wind blew so fierce, the screen doors tapped a two-step beat against the sills. A brown stream of dust spewed from the electric outlets. Took every decibel the Big Boss's record player raised to reach above the storm.

For three days before this Fourth, clouds tormented the shortgrass country. Teased us into a state of nerves as tense as the electricity in the atmosphere flashing into dark purple walls. Late on the evening of the second, the saddle horses came running and pitching to make a circle by the tank and out the double gates of the water lot to go back into the trap.

I puzzled over the behavior. Was it possible these simple-minded beasts, surer of foot than mind, suffered from a pre-storm hysteria? Lots of times before and after a rain, horses stampede into a fence or take a fall from slick ground. I may have told you how the long-legged, sorrel misfit of the Boss's named "Peacock" met a barbed wire death in a mud-slick race to collide into the Santa Fe Railroad's right-of-way fence. We never rode by the place afterwards; we didn't feel grateful for taut barbed wire. If the horses knew a rain was coming, their prescience was 12 hours in advance. On the morning of the third, six-tenths to an inch fell on the ranch. Conditions were so good good that more than one-tenth fell on the cursed grounds down on the highway. Hearing of heavier rains built up hopes that I might escape from my own planning.

Last fall, I started betting the drouth was going to be over this spring. Bet the old cows were going to be worth more money as pairs on a wet spring to come. Kept all the heifer calves, big ones and light ones alike. Turned bulls in early and left them out late, gambling on selling a bred cow on one end of the gestation period or the other. And took one more long shot on wintering ewes too old to keep on grass.

The spring didn't gel. In May, we started working off the tail end of each category of mistakes. As I confessed in a previous article, or should have, drawing to an inside straight on your longest losing streak in a lifetime beats trying to rebreed those mysterious dry cows that miss their first calf. But where I caught on to my mistake was the morning it rained. I thought we were going to have a flood.

My inner thoughts, however, revealed a dreadful miscalculation. On all these wild bets, I was anteing up the last of my grass and tossing 2100 bucks in the pot every time the feed truck augured in a load of cubes without other players calling my bet. Came to mind that the lady at the Barnhart convenience store offered to sell me a chance on a lottery prize worth \$71 million for a buck. Here I was rolling molasses tubs on the dry ground at \$43 apiece, thinking making \$50 a head more on 28 old cows was going to be hitting the jackpot.

"Jackpot" ended here in 1940, the year the neighbors moved to town and the small goat roping arena at the Devils River Mill fell to ruin. I tried to remember if I even thought in terms of a jackpot. The dream I know was this: "Comes a wet spring, Angus cattle are going to be higher than mink stoles in Dallas before the opening of the opera season."

Sitting on a feed trough in late autumn waiting for a heifer to calve, visions floated by of Angus heifers going through the ring at San Saba to the golden tune of a wooden hammer tapping the final bid. "Sebenteen hunert and fifty dollars a head for Mr. Monte Noelke's cattle out at Mertzon. Let's give him a big hand."

Six-tenths of an inch isn't going to cover my action. The old ewes are eating prickly pear too bad to ship. Angus cattle may have slipped in price, it's been so long since rain inspired buyers. The big lottery prize was cashed weeks ago. But I am not going to gamble my money away, especially on a game that doesn't take a rain to be a winner.