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Late fall rains and healing misty days soaked a big portion of the shortgrass country in October and into November. Up until the very end of the wet spell, the scope and location of the country still dry is unknown. The drouth had been on too long to feel comfortable asking another herder if he has had rain. Also, years had passed since follow-up moisture had covered much of the area.

After so much dry weather, we didn't know who was still in a drouth. Pasture to pasture to fenceline made a big difference in conditions. Seemed like farm to market roads or even railroad tracks were strong enough barriers to hold back the clouds. Chicken Little in the fairy tale thought the sky was falling when an acorn hit her in the head, or I think it was an acorn. From where we were standing watching the clouds split on the far horizon, I began to believe the sky was breaking in half.

Until reports began to come in on the rains, I avoided bringing up the subject, which in West Texas is as hard as keeping a Wall Street trader away from the Dow Jones averages. At the post office, I found the safest way to approach a friend was to glance at his mail and say: "Well, well, I see you and Maudie still have box 231," or, "Man, the old trash can here in the lobby sure is full." (During the Big Drouth of the 50s, I forgot to pick up my mail for a while. I don't know how long the interruption lasted. However, life cycled back then on 180-day demand note

renewals. It had to be less than six months, or the bank would have put out an all-state bulletin on my behalf.)

However, just seeing an old boy going down the road is enough of a clue to tell if he has had a rain the night before. If he slumps down so far his head barely clears the steering wheel of his pickup, or is driving eight miles an hour on the shoulder with only the crown of his hat showing, no need for a weather report from his outfit. One thing about meeting a driver pulling a trailer load of feed and looking at the floorboard, it sure settles the dispute over who has the right-of-way.

With or without drouth fever, we herders drive so slow from piddling around in the pastures on the verge of stalling the engine, we tend to open the lanes of traffic on the asphalt. Nevertheless, now that John Glenn blasted back into space at age 77, kids are going to have a harder time making a case for pulling old gramp's or granny's driver's licenses. The first time one of us knocks over the post box 10 feet from the driveway, or parallel parks two wheels over in the gladiola bed, we can ask how many of their age group has been into space twice in a lifetime?

I keep my membership card in the American Association of Retired Persons by my driver's license to alert traffic officers of my influence. The AARP wields lots of political clout, plus many of us better members had matriculated several driver's ed. courses before these new age policemen graduated from the police academy.

You may not have noticed, but the citizens directing traffic at school crossings are nothing more than old coots who have probably been grounded for speeding in school zones. You can tell the way they brandish the red stop signs and step out in the middle lane and scowl that they are mad at motorists. I don't let them worry me as long as they have good sturdy signs to steady themselves on the pavement and are surrounded by enough kids to keep from being run over.

I hear of a few bunches of young cows going back to the country. Well, one bunch of young cows going back to the country. The rains are too late to heal the bare spots, yet enough weeds are coming to winter the old ewes and help the cattle along. I sure was sweating John Glenn making it back okay. He's going to be the key to renewing a lot of senior citizen insurance ...