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Drouths never release their grip until the last droplet of reserve is squeezed from their victim. The present one is the most treacherous to fall in this century.

"Treacherous," because last year a large portion of the Shortgrass Country began to receive good rains. Restocking began in high-priced cattle, and expensive heifer calves stayed home. Woolie operators and goat herders bought back into the game. If feed was booked at all, only modest amounts were reserved for winter.

Then, the drouth backlashed in a mighty blow that'd made a stingray look like a piece of seaweed floating in the waves. Before we realized what had happened, the dry winter skipped over spring and turned into an even drier summer. One hundred-degree temperatures boiled the life from newcrop lambs and the toasted prairie lands turned the hairball calves into matching mates for their winter-coated mothers.

There was no place to hide or escape. The entire state dried up into a serious series of crop failures and water shortages. The best time to travel in any direction was after darkness concealed the stubble in the pastures and empty windrows. Even then, the awful smell of dead grass contaminated the air-conditioning system. On the way from the ranch to Mertzon, the only oasis was on the railroad right-of-way, where the moisture condensed underneath the bridges and beneath the rails on cool nights.

Spring Creek dropped so low over at Mertzon, the shady pecan bottoms no longer offered a retreat to forget about the drouth. After Memorial Day, the city lost the one employee in charge of removing litter. The scene worsened as all forms of disgraceful trash covered the banks. For a short time, I tried sacking the mess, but gave up the evening I found a piece of shag carpet halfway thrown in the water and too soaked to move. Crossing the low-water bridge became so painful, I'd cover one side of my face with my hat.

But losing the walk along the river was minor compared to the other consequences. Markets broke, and every hoof going to town gave the buyers' circle at the auction an advantage in price and weighing condition. Any age cow above a three year-old went to the packers; the buyers from Mexico skimmed off the ones they wanted to send home to their killing floors. (The Mexican demand saved the old ewe market and pumped a little life into the loosely defined packer cattle trade.)

Losses on the fat markets, sheep and cattle alike, made the collapse of the stock market in the 1920s read like "A Child's Garden of Verses." Handholds on the arms of the seats in the stands at the auction barn had nail prints a half-inch deep. Wasn't anything to see an old boy hit the front door wearing his hat backwards to join the race of pickups and empty goosenecks headed for one last stop at the feed store.

We shipped every week all summer. On every count, we came up short. On every work, we tried to beat the heat and the dust and lost on every case. Sales receipts got cursory glances. Trucking bills and feed bills were paid without being checked. (I paid one of my pals twice for a load of cows.) The hardest time, however, for me happened at daylight in mid-July. Before I'd pulled on my boots one morning, a cowboy burst in and said, "Your gray mare broke her hind leg last night, Monte."

"Oh dear, little cowboy. Oh dear, oh dear, go find a place to hide your head and a new spot to bite on your tongue. The Big Boss thought he was going to be afoot if he bred fewer than 30 head of mares and weaned fewer than that many colts in the summer. In all those years I worked for him, I only had to shoot two horses with broken legs."

Seemed unreal such a small outfit as mine could generate so much hard luck and so much sorrow. The dust in the horse corrals kept my sinuses draining and my eyes watering. One of the men had to help catch the new mount. My headstall was too long and the curb strap too loose. Took an extra wrap to tighten the cinch. The saddle blanket didn't set right. In the back of my mind, I wondered if the drouth was going to eventually take away my saddle.

I wasn't much help gathering. If a young stout horse could break a leg in a water lot, I figured a graybeard my caliber might pop his bridle reins on his chaps a little to

hard and throw his hind leg out of place, or knock a knee out of joint.

Lots of outfits got rain in August, but there's still enough dry country to remind us the scourge hasn't ended. Ranching in a desert has always been a tough game, but it doesn't have to be so bad as to take away a man's pet horse.