

SEPTEMBER 22, 1983

Shortgrass operators started shaping up for winter in June and July. On some outfits the work was in honor of the '82 winter season and on others it was in preparation for the oncoming season. When the tropical storm fizzled in late August, cutting gates began to really swing in earnest. Right up to this writing the run to town continues.

I wish now that I had completely sold out in the summer, and you can pick the summer. I'm not even sure I'm glad that we restocked after the drouth of the '50s. A fellow that writes to me from out in Arizona claims he made more money selling horned toads in his wife's filling station than he did from her cattle. Like he said, bankers and feed stores won't underwrite the back drag off a horned toad business, and on hollow horns they have to swallow half the dust from the Gobi Desert before they get enough of those old scamps.

Also, out in Arizona distances are such that papas and mommas cooped up in the car with their kids will buy everything from post cards with pictures of Gila monsters on them to snakeskin belts to distract the terror of their station wagons. I like his idea, especially the way you have control over your customers.

The thing I've been having to watch against this drouth was a phony love affair with the cowherd. I nearly forgot yesterday when we were shipping three loads of older cows.

As I hung over the corral fence watching the number brands pass, I realized that when those numerals were burned, grey was an off color in my beard and sideburns. In the fall of 1971, I think it was, the work was a glorious experience of green carpets of grass and fragrant wild mint perfuming the air. The lady up at the kitchen cooked fresh hot biscuits every day; our oldest son was home specializing in calves' heads baked in the ground.

On lots of days we stood under a cedar arbor and ate better with our pocket knives than folks do in the splendor of Hyatt Regencies and Holiday Inns. It was hard to recall while watching bred cows walk through the deep dust of the pens. I got a bit misty eyed thinking I might have been gone from the ranch on one of those days. However, my tear ducts have been light triggered all month, so it might have not been the cause at all.

Loving old cows and wooly headed sheep to the point of keeping them after the grass is gone is a certain path to debtor's lane. Cowboys that can keep their taste to common cattle and cold blooded ewes have a better chance of selling out before they've fed up everything solvent, from their patented land to borrowings off their in-laws.

I keep reminding myself that black cows were imported to Texas from Scotland. Black hides aren't going to disappear if I let go of ours. Once the dry spell has ended, there'll be an influx of the precious blood and once again we'll have plenty of cows to feed and support on our pastureland.

"Reminders" haven't been all that I've got from the drouth. Yesterday the word hit that Mexico had withdrawn from the sheep market. Ewes, so they said, had dropped from 13 cents a pound to a weak seven cents. On the way home from San Angelo (and that's where I heard the news), my dashboard projections showed that in six weeks my collateral had dropped 89 percent in value, and on an optimistic appraisal I had about 18 hours left to make a comeback and three of those hours had already been wasted.

Once I got so I could hold the pickup in the right lane, I vowed I was going to sell cattle and sheep until every shade tree on my outfit was empty. If a saddle horse got in the way going to the barn, he was going to the big parade to Proctor's and Gamble's. Grass eating beasts, I swore, were going off my list until it clouded up again. Anybody needing to know the bloodlines of my grandpa's sheep and cows could just drop by the library and see whether they were recorded there.

All right, the battle cry out here is going to be to take a tight hold and grit your teeth so you won't bite your tongue. I was way overdrawn on the good things of life. I wonder who scared those Mexican sheep buyers back across the River?