

JUNE 19, 1980

A late freeze in March in Central Texas ruined the peach crop. I think I remember the cold spell that froze the blooms. Three days after we sheared, an Arctic front passing through the Shortgrass Country was so severe that deep freezes began to back draw and expel hot air.

I know I told you about the fresh peeled woolies shivering up under the cedar bushes. We caught an old ewe last week that still had chill bumps along her back strap. It was as bad as our weather gets as far as cold goes. The cattle and the sheep were shaking so bad that several herds of goats chilled down from fright.

Something besides a freeze must have hit the watermelon farmers. Last week in San Angelo, I found a melon marked \$5.99. The "5.99" was marked with a deep red crayon slash. I figure that produce men use that heavy marking stroke like we do. You know an old boy that feels sort of uncomfortable chalking out a dry cow or a toothless ewe will always mark real hard to hide the trembling in his hands. One of my bosses said a long time ago that any time a buyer came by the ranch with a big sack of chalk to work a couple of hundred sheep, you wanted to be his partner, not his customer.

The price of that watermelon made me start looking up. After I got home, I discovered that we had a vine growing in the backyard at the ranch. Not a scrawny vine either. One with long green runners and a total of eight yellow blooms. I must have dragged 90 feet of hose around the house to water my new garden. With a little luck that vine might bring in \$40 or \$50 dollars.

Growing wild watermelon vines, I knew, was going to beat raising sheep and cattle for a living. In fact, raising anything wild except people is a better deal than woolies and hollow horns. Why, I didn't have to invest a nickel to go in the watermelon business. I didn't know what kind of watermelon I was growing, but I wasn't thinking about entering a contest at the July fair. I was planning on being a part of the capitalistic system once again.

The bad thing about owning your own vegetable farm is the high value of the product. The cattle and sheep markets never stabilize long enough for anyone to worry whether the blossoms are going to freeze or the wretched root rot disease is going to stamp them out.

Tractor and combine artists have such a big chance of succeeding that bankers can't resist their paper. Once, however, a hailstone falls in North Texas, everybody begins to worry about the crops.

We don't get that kind of attention in our game. Out west of here in the oil fields, a huge crater has been sinking into the earth for weeks. Newspaper scribes have been scorching the ribbons on their typewriters writing of the oilmen moving pipe and tanks away from the area I've read every account in the morning edition of the Angelo paper. I've yet to find out whose ranch it was on or if one of my compadres might have fallen in that big hole.

The Knottsberry farm that makes good jelly and jam to sell all over the world started out as a family business in a back yard. I already belong to the Farm Bureau. I

may open a stand over on the highway before frost. When I finish this column I believe I'll just call the Lower Rio Grande hotline and find out what melons are worth.