

First killing frost hit the shortgrass country the morning of the sixteenth of November, or about three weeks later than usual. I overslept from being up with a heifer. I glimpsed the sun melting a hoary sheen from wilting grass and drooping mesquite leaves, through eyes focused on the birthing of calves.

But I knew without seeing a thermometer or hearing a weather report that the temperature fell below freezing. Knew because the battery refused to crank the feed wagon; further, my pal's car failed to start until a mechanic cleaned the battery post.

Keep in mind as the tale unfolds that the subject is a ranch, not a museum. The 1985 model feed wagon is the critical unit in the ranch's fleet of demolition derby prospects. The one-ton gears off a manual transmission. On a cold morning, a push out of the barn is fast enough for the ignition to fire.

Survival tools and old methods sound primitive and backward in the jet and technological age. But stranded on a cold morning 22 miles from a post office, urgency to feed a herd of hungry cows supersedes world opinion, state house opinion, popular opinion, Texas A&M directives, the results of all the polls, and whatever holy law denounces the poor of spirit. (May want to strike the last phrase. Hard to stop at the right point on a big run of words and wind.)

But to go further on the truck, one of the best ranch mechanics to ever hook a chain over a tree limb substituted

a gallon milk jug for the factory-installed surge tank, starting a series of similar grafts to the point of terminating Chevrolet's patent protection. And once the odometer passed 200,000 miles on all these alien and adopted parts, the rough edges wore smooth. The purr under the hood matched the peaceful sound of a butterfly's heartbeat.

The transition returns me in a way to the big change Jose and I saw in the Iguana horse of the Big Boss's day when we removed his shoes without using a twitch and threatening to add six inches to his upper lip. For the first time in his long career of bringing misery to cowboys' lives, he stood still as a show horse for all four feet.

(A "twitch" is a dinky little piece of farrier equipment, properly applied to obstinate and recalcitrant equines' upper lips by tightening a chain loop with a piece of shovel handle to induce cooperation in placing or removing horseshoes. A few turns of the handle will make a Percheron stud horse exhale like a bagpipe deflating.)

We may have been wrong, but we thought the reason his disposition changed stemmed from a racetrack guy floating his teeth. Teeth affect animal behavior. After Old Man Clark over at Mertzon hit his Jersey cow between the eyes for kicking over a full bucket of milk, the blow loosened her teeth so much, she never raised her hind foot to kick a fly, fearing the jolt might shake a tooth loose.

Better evidence, (and perhaps more closely connected to the feed wagon running smoother), a friend of mine once struck a GMC pickup's front fender with a lug wrench for

falling off a bumper jack with a mighty blow that caved in the steel and sent sparks flashing off the wrench. Later on, I watched him change a flat with the same jack, elevating that old dude four feet in the air and holding it steady as the trunk of a big oak tree.

The hard part of gathering evidence is that the Chevrolet feed wagon is so far out of date in so many ways. In the 1980s, General Motors' assembly lines roared with production, rolling off trucks made with U.S. steel by U.S. workers. Last week, General Motors' stocks and bonds sounded like the low note of a flute's descent into a soft, sad, failing melody.

Understand too, please, that once a feed wagon is rigged, you can't slide a piece of plastic pickup underneath an 80-gallon fuel tank and a 1500-pound capacity feed hopper backed a by an auxiliary gravity feeder styled to be free for unloading salt and mineral from the bed. (Wish I could draw you a picture of the bed. Need to go down to the barn and look at the truck to refresh my memory.)

This close to Thanksgiving, I have enough sense to know I am lucky to be out away from town on a bitterweed and mesquite brush piece of earth, clinging to a belief in the resurrection of junk, and not sitting on an all-weather sun porch in a climate of forgotten souls in a nursing home.

Wish I knew the exact spot Mr. Clark hit his milk cow. Would sure help us trying to convince a young cow to take an extra calf on this cold November day.