

JUNE 9, 1988

Last year we missed more sheep during spring work in one pasture than we did over our whole operation this past season. For one thing, the weather broke in our favor this year by staying cool until well up into the day. For another, everybody tried extra hard to clean the pastures, making a big difference in the scores.

It wasn't an easy track. The brush had put on a thick green cover and the dead broomweeds were still high enough to hide the ewes and lambs. But things worked right. You probably know what I mean. Sometimes a small band of hombres have the right style that it takes to gather stock. Sometimes a little crew on horseback is caught up in a wave of pride, or stricken by a tinge of that old spirit that once sent them off down into rough, brush headers, risking a fall, to add one more pair to the count.

Not all of our days were that perfect. Where we did have to reride, the blue rays of heat steaming off the mesquite thickets and the buzz of the hornflies was as oppressing as ever. On one of those misfires I found myself comportsing one of my sons helping through the work, just like I encourages him when he was trailing along as a kid, riding a grey horse called Blucher.

The occasion at hand had been a chase after a few woolies and their lambs from a big grove of oak trees, through a mesquite and prickly pear cactus forest to the edge of a muddy waterhole in the bottom of a dark shaded draw. The pursued and the pursuers were willing to stop for an intermission.

"Take heart son John "I said in a low vice" We have them cornered, boy. If they head east, they 'll have to swim that water hole. If they break out anywhere else, we'll have 'em dead to rights in that northwest comer some two miles from here."

Sweat ran off the breasts of our horses and down the front under the saddles, making dark triangles on their flanks. Clouds shaded the sun; the leader of the group stamped her front foot and snorted.

"You might as well surrender, you John Brown of a sapsucker of damn runaway beast. We have plenty of help backing us up out there in the brush. You better give up, before we take down our ropes and drag you to the pens.

We bluffed them out of the draw and followed them to a fence. A few more limbs had to be snapped and short race or two run between the fence and draw, but they ended up going across the shearing boards with the rest of the herd.

Over and over, I've said it's not an occupation but an incurable disease. Folks of sound health don't fall for such outlandish folly. If it's two miles to the closest corner, it's twice that far to bring them back to your goal.