

## Ranch Hands Can't Seem To Appreciate Their Good Fortune

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MERTZON — Summer is taking over the shortgrass Scene. The mornings are still cool enough to work stock, but after lunch it gets hotter than the sunny side of a July 4 popcorn stand.

My fellow drovers have sure been complaining about the hot weather. They can't seem to get out of bed before 5 a.m. By the time they drag through breakfast and saddle up, we have to work six or seven hours in the afternoon to get in a day.

A government lawyer couldn't convince them that they have one of the softest jobs in the world, even though their normal roundup schedule breaks down like this: 8.6 percent of the work is done at the kitchen table; slightly over 7.5 percent is spent sitting on the foam cushion of a pickup seat; 3.4 percent is wasted lounging around the water can or leaning against corral fences. A whopping 80.5 percent is used up comfortably astride an old pony.

To go further, I analyzed their activity on three windmill repair jobs. Though I didn't break this category down into percentages, the study showed that over half the work period spent underneath the tower was done in a relaxing, stooped-over crouch. Otherwise, the men were either bracing themselves against the tower while climbing the ladder, or balancing themselves while lifting rods or pipe.

At this point the case was made. Here were these cowhands, stationed out in the rangelands, being paid to enjoy the romance of an industry that has inspired writers and painters since the Indians were forced to leave. Unlike city folk, they could ride horseback as far as they pleased without spending a dime, roaming the great outdoors free of charge.

It's hard to say what a citizen of Dallas or Chicago would pay to participate in moving a bunch of ewes against the wind as the mid-day sun creates delicate heat waves and an array of brilliant colors in the rising dust. A northern factory worker would wreck the equity in his travel cards for the opportunity to ride off in the pre-dawn light and remain close to nature until twilight.

Yet my colleagues, like workers everywhere, feel compelled to bad-mouth their jobs. Old cows tear down gates, young horses throw thrilling fits, and still these hombres go blindly along without stopping to appreciate their being a part of the splendor of the rangelands.

It's the same old story throughout the years. In winter they fuss about the cold; springtime finds them cursing whirlwinds and dust storms; through the summer and into the fall they denounce the heat.

Sometimes I kind of wish it had been my fate to manage a bunch of artists or high-strung opera singers instead of ending up out here wrangling a few waddies who think life should be like the scenes on travel posters.