

Been a flurry of tragic news from the West of a herder fighting the government to stay on land he's ranched for a long time. The latest round, published in this newspaper, mentioned that the prosecution claimed the defendant's wearing of spurs in an alleged mounted attack on a Forest Service agent enhanced the charge of assault with a deadly weapon.

It was the first time since cowboys, cowgirls and cowmen have been wearing boot iron that spurs were deemed dangerous for anybody except the wearer. In the incidents I've observed, the horse was the one guilty of trying to hurt the rider. Bystanders were safe as long as they didn't try some foolhardy stunt, like trying to ride in close and pull up an old bandit's head, whether they were wearing spurs or chewing Brown Mule tobacco.

Understand two points from the start: I am not trying to qualify as a professional witness on spurring horses from the air, spurring horses pointed toward a federal officer, or spurring horses on the ground at the bunkhouse. Second, 97 percent of my opinions, written or spoken, dreamed or imagined, favor herders and rural folks. Three percent rank as undecided, unless I'm under strong influence from financial institutions (jugs - state and

national charter, land banks, production credit associations, Commodity Credit banks, Fannie May, Freddie Mac, etc.) asking for support on all one hundred percent of my influence.

But whether I tell him or not, the district attorney in that case needs educating on spurs. Until a pilot of horses and mules goes through the "rowel-reduction" period of life, the only safe pair of spurs he will ever own are the cast-metal, rubber-roweled ones he got for his fifth birthday in a toy six-shooter set. But that means his safety, not some guy blocking a trail, or however it was the Forest Ranger chose to head a mounted man.

Oh, I do know of one case of spurs rescuing a cowboy, if you want to take ol' Barney's word about the morning he hit the Bentley line camp at the old ranch 14 hours overdue from a visit to a roping. Barney swore spurs saved his life. He claimed that if he hadn't tripped on the long shank of a gooseneck spur in reverse gear, throwing him off target, his wife would have dropped him with a head shot from a .44 Colt. Furthermore, he said, once in flight, on every step his backswing was so great that he was spurring himself to greater speed. (Gooseneck spurs, in case you haven't seen one, have a long silver plated shank that sort of looks like a goose's neck in flight with rowels at the

beak. There's one in a museum in Havana, Cuba, that's supposed to have belonged to one of Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders.)

We never heard her side of the story. Cowboy named Roach and I watered cattle right across the fence from the line camp later the same morning, but it's imprudent to interrupt a lady throwing her husband's stuff out in the yard and at the same time stowing hers in an old car, especially a redhead knowledgeable in aiming and firing sidearms.

At the grocery store in Angelo the other day, a young guy was wearing a pair of roping spurs on boots covered with mud and thin residue. Looked awful young to be a ranch cowboy. Most of us ranchhands are better prospects for a screen test to play Moses than to go dragging a pair of spur rowels across the floors of an Angelo supermarket. But he failed to fit the mold of a rodeo performer, and he sure didn't look like a dude.

In the checkout line, I warned the young man that in the eyes of the federal bench, wearing spurs might be a worse rap than carrying a derringer in his boot top. Gave him an overview of the court case out West. Advised him not to run a stopsign on the way home.

Granted, short-shanked roping spurs are hard to see all muddy and caked in sign. It was hard to talk in the checkout lane; the clerk kept repeating, "Have a good day, Mr. Noelke."

Last I heard of Barney, he had a new wife but still wore the same pair of gooseneck spurs. Can't say how much he exaggerated the story of the redheaded gun lady, but as long as he stayed at the ranch he never took off his spurs, even to work on a windmill or rebuild a water gap. Swore they were his good luck piece. Sure would have made a good poem if Barney had died with his spurs on.