

The Stampede Season Is At Hand; Cowboys, Not Cows, Out Of Control

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MERTZON — Lately, something strange has come over my fellow drovers. The whole crew has grown edgy as cattle before a storm, or an old married man prior to the final round of a domestic dispute. It's flat impossible to get a day's work done in normal fashion.

Any little noise will halt our operations. The creaking of a gate hinge or the slam of a car door being shut is all it takes to put them on guard. Out in the pasture, they're even worse. An old cow snuffing in the distance, or an engine back-firing in the nearby oilfield will send them scurrying into a thicket. Our roundups resemble spook hunts more than stock gatherings.

Noises aren't all that upset the hands. Yesterday we were driving a little bunch of cattle across the county road when one of the boys spotted a box or two of spent rifle shells. From the way he and his partner began to take on, you'd have thought the Viet Cong had landed in the Shortgrass Country. Actually, there wasn't a double handful of the shells strewn around. There wasn't a sign of any bloodshed. In fact the empty beer cans at the scene outnumbered all the other clues by at least two-to-one.

Also, there was nothing about the scene to indicate malicious intent. A rookie game warden could have seen in a minute that the signs were obviously left by a midnight party of kids shooting insulators off our telephone poles, or perhaps practicing quick shots with the aid of their headlights.

Without dismounting from my horse, I could see that it would have taken the rarest sort of luck for any of the bullets to hit the ranch house. An amateur rural detective schooled only by a subscription to Range Romances could have closed the case in a few minutes.

But despite the innocuous nature of the evidence, it ruined our morning. The men were nervous and uneasy from then on. They spent more time looking over their shoulders than watching for cattle. Had the cows not been very gentle we'd have lost half of them before reaching the first gate. It was like riding with a bunch of outlaws. Old Geronimo himself never fielded a bunch of scouts as "coyote" as the herders.

Now mind you, the Boss and I are tolerant men. We've worked plenty of cowboys temperamental enough to put a symphony conductor to chewing the big end of his baton. And it's granted that ranchers are no longer hard-line economic ventures. But if this bunch of softies think we're going to put up with such foolishness, they're crazy.

Opening of the legal deer season was less than five days away at the time. If these hands of our can't stand what amounts to child's play, they'll really fold up once the redcaps start shelling in earnest. Anyone in the deer country knows that the havoc wrought by kids is insignificant in comparison to what happens when their elders unsheathe their magnums and special-bore elephant guns.

A man who's gun shy before the season opens won't last through the preliminaries of the real action.

To be partially honest, I could foresee this was going to happen. Ever since the screwworm was brought under control, the drovers have been growing softer and softer. Last year, these same men showed symptoms of getting silly about gunfire. They got excited whenever headlighters started shooting near the headquarters. One of them pouted for a week just because the jeep and a pickup traffic made his old milk cow too wild to come in at night.

What I mean is their behavior has led me to suspect they let concern for their own personal safety come before their work.

Actually, we're victims of the era we're living in. Workers everywhere are becoming more of a problem as time goes by.

There's no telling what will strike ranchdom next, but it had better be automation.