

OCTOBER 29, 1987

These good grass seasons are making our calves harder to wean than in the usual short feed situation that characterizes our land. Most autumns in the Shortgrass Country are so bleak of promise that man and his beasts are constantly aware of the coming of winter. Normally, when the calves are cut off at the pens, the mothers make a few perfunctory rumbles of a bawl on the way back to the pasture and that concludes their attachment.

But today, with their stomachs full of grass and their udders loaded in milk, old sisters that have never owed any allegiance to anything except the four huge cavities of their stomachs are carrying on about the loss of their calves like low score football fans, or the supporters of bad luck baseball clubs.

As phony as their bawling is, they can be pretty convincing while rooting under watergaps and jumping over fences to come back to the pens. However, to really break a genuine Shortgrass mother cow's heart, all it takes is to drive through her pasture with a load of cottonseed meal mixture without pouring any of the same out on the ground. In about 99.77 percent of the blade bovine gluttons that I have to support, what motherly love they have can be corrupted by three ounces of meal.

Where I fail is the amount of money I spend weaning my heifer calves. It takes a big slash out of what the steer calves bring to buy meal and hulls, or molasses and hay for my keepers. I sure wasn't brought up to be such a spendthrift. In the old days, the Boss and his father before him thought that paying an extra hand to drive a string of green calves to the gate of a big pasture was an extravagance.

I don't know how I got off on a tangent of pampering a heifer calf like she was an exotic fish, or Lady Astor's prized lap dog. I sure can't blame the research people, or the experiment stations, because I get in enough trouble taking my own advice without listening to them.

Often I wish I had never tried to improve the weaning weight of my cattle. I just wish I'd stopped spending money when I found out how good that burned lube oil on a tow sack was for controlling lice, and how effective sprinkling wood ashes on salt was for a mineral deficiency. Like a lot of herders, it took me 30 years of 180-day term payments to find out that spending four-bits a pound to raise a calf that sold for 32 cents a pound was a losing proposition.

Late in the evenings a few cows continue to bawl mournfully for their near yearling offspring. I can still remember the first fall the Boss had us feed his heifer calves. The very biggest ones were allowed a dipper of cake.