

Shortgrassers May Not Come Down With Dreaded Bitterweed Johnders

By Monte Noelke

2-9-67

Page 6

MERTZON — From now until spring will be the most critical time of year for this land the Indians called “Dry Scalp.” The next 90 days will tell whether lambs and calves mash down the scales at shipping time, or barely leave an imprint on the weight sheet as they hobble through the weighing pens.

The same period will be one of stress for the people, too. Until it rains, these dry-docked hombres are going to be as fragile as the sixth-generation members of a family of hot house roses. No one knows precisely how wide the moisture gap can become before serious physical and mental imparities are suffered, but it’s well agreed that the February-May period is the time to expect stampedes to both human and veterinary hospitals.

In our neighborhood the biggest immediate problem is our most prolific evergreen plant a champion sheep killer known as bitterweed.

Since November, nearly every range sheep in this section has been trying to set a new world record for consumption of the toxic weed. Sheep that haven’t been trying to break the record (it’s three pounds per day, in case you haven’t heard) have been shut up in hospital traps or confined to corrals that have been turned into intensive care wards. Here they are lapping up enough high priced hay and grain to shatter the cash surplus of the Bank of America.

One blessing has accompanied this tragedy. It appears this will be the first bad bitterweed season in which the majority of the herdsmen didn’t come down with the bitterweed johnders. Always, before, the ranchers with poisoned flocks wound up sicker then the weak end of their sheep. During severe epidemics the whole fraternity would be tortured by the blind staggers, weakened by hot and cold flashes, and stricken by a wobbly knee disorder that would have grounded Tarzan and all his tree apes.

In such awful days you could tell the “weedy” hombres as far as you could see them. They stood out in a crowd because of their vacant stare and inevitable proneness to mumble to themselves. In fact this staring and talking often got so bad that the patient would grow hoarse as young crow afflicted with poultry bronchitis.

Doctors used to have a terrible time saving victims of the bitterweed johnders. One bunch of hombres would rally just as another group collapsed. Actually, about all that could be done for the patients was to issue optimistic promises of higher prices for dead wool and empty feed sacks, or falsify the long range weather forecasts to indicate that a veritable monsoon season was just over the horizon.

Well, it’s heartening to see that the illness hasn’t struck this year. The Good Lord knows we have enough grief for an area ten times this big, without having the bitterweed johnders to further discourage us. As it is, our natives may be pouring out more feed than is good for anybody’s health, but least they are still able to do it standing upright, staring the situation right in the eye.