

12/03/92 (pg.12)

## **Shortgrass Country**

**by Monte Noelke**

Scores on the 1992 heifer calving results are secret. Now and then a blurb comes over the closed radio circuit, giving directions to reach a patient requiring a range delivery. Calls for help are terse and followed by a debate whether to use the time necessary to saddle a horse or to bring an extra horse.

The failed growing season weakened our heifers and, we think, increased the odds of prolapsed wombs and other disasters, like no milk for the calves and prolonged staggering from strained pelvic nerves.

Mesquites kept their leaves up to the last week in November, making the hunts twice as hard. Topsoil had dried out so that on foggy mornings the haze was a grey dusty brown color, much thicker than our normal overcast weather, which in the Shortgrass Country usually runs from a light opaque mist to a peculiar transparent dew. Herders calving out brindle or tigerstripe cattle probably had to use small traps to overcome the handicap of no color contrast.

Restricted visibility of black cattle hardly helps. Shade of a juniper cedar in the winter looks like an Angus cow down on her side. On summer sheep roundups the same trees resemble the silhouette of a bushed-up woolie.

Grey limestone rocks and fallen tree trunks seen at a mile or so over a saddle horn, also resemble whatever species is under search. About half the mileage on horseback comes from checking on false alarms or "ghost sightings" as the oldtimers called them.

Lots of time the quarry finds us. The longer and harder the winter, the more ranch people's clothes absorb the flavors of cottonseed meal and cane molasses and redtop maize. Cattle come running if they catch a whiff of those feedstuffs. Furthermore, feed mills don't have trash dumps; for all that's known, the old cows may be chasing after the smell of broken shoe laces and empty snuff cans and anything else that can possibly be cubed up in sacked goods.

The last "heifer" bulls our ranch bought originated from a herd owned by a veterinarian. The calves birth at low weights, but I keep thinking that buying bulls to calve heifers from a vet is as foolish as asking your doctor to recommend a good medical book, or a useful first aid kit.

Large animal clinics earn their fees during the heifer season. Stable-side manners and chute gate etiquette thins down to pitched emotions after a few calls out to perform pasture C-sections on rocky ridges.

Like all the side services of the ranch business, veterinarians have their supporters and detractors. At a cow sale last month, a couple of distinguished hollow horn

operators were locked in a hot debate over their respective vets' advice on how to deal with retained placenta, one contending surgery, the other supporting a drug.

"The Boss," I offered, "always had us feed the mistletoe to cows down from infections." They wheeled on their boot heels and declared simultaneously, "Monte, mistletoe is poisonous to cattle!"

Once again, science triumphed over experience. Sunday's newspaper claimed the ancients believed mistletoe drove away bad spirits. If that be true, the Boss's remedies bordered on witchcraft. Lucky we didn't know the extra risk we were taking.