

JULY 21, 1983

Drouth victims are becoming easier to spot at the auction rings and the coffee houses. To work off the sick end of the bunch wouldn't take much of a cutting eye. I don't think you'd even have to chalk them in advance except for a few stragglers that are on the border lines of dry depression. They all look like they were rehearsing a wake that has worn into a long, shattering bankruptcy case.

At the last special calf sale in San Angelo the audience was made up predominantly of dries making run for the market. I know how they felt because I had a load of calves consigned for that very reason.

You know the kind of calves I am talking about if you've ever been to the Shortgrass Country during a dry spell. Balls of hair that have matured out into pointed ends that seem to never grow a pound or an inch. Later they pass through puberty, cutting their milk teeth and losing the curl in their tails without showing any symptom of yearlinghood except a long straight switch that nearly reaches the ground.

Before I shipped my calves I did try to knock off the dead hair with a livestock sprayer. The decision wasn't easy. Drouth-sick calves look so bad wet that I hate to dampen their hides even for a short time. Also, you have to be careful spraying that light an animal or you'll spray him through the fence. It's kind of like facing yourself in a mirror with a bad hangover. The more you spray, the more you realize how dehydrated they are.

Once I was at the sale, I sure kept to myself. As bad as I wanted to join the hombres sitting around in a daze, hurting from the drouth, I knew better than to be friendly. Drouth ranchers are just like the stray kids and unwanted dogs that used to roam the town site of Mertzon. Show the slightest sign of kindness or maybe a pat on the head, and you were apt to find them following you home for an undetermined amount of time.

After helping raise eight children, I am not about to start an orphanage or a boarding house for broke down ranchers. Of all the derelicts and sick folks that wander across this cold earth, I can't think of a less likely prospect to rehabilitate.

Say you did get an old boy cured from wintering yearlings or herding mother cows. The first time it came a shower on the fall wheat or a bank opened with a fresh set of note pads, there'd go your patient off on another tear.

Sure, I believe in charity and compassion for my fellow beings. But I think the best way to break up concrete is with an air hammer and not your own head. Any time you get a yen to reform the herders around you, just look and count up the ones that have quit before they were hauled over that last hill of life.

On the way home from the sale I noticed several pickups loading up on cantaloupes at a fruit stand. Melons are selling six for a dollar. I'll bet every one of those pickups belonged to calf men that were trying to convert their product at a fair rate. I sure know how they felt, except when my receipts came in, my stomach was too weak for any kind of a melon.