

SEPTEMBER 3, 1981

A light rain has shut down our fall work. Everybody was so tired that it didn't take much weather to send us to the house. About four drops were enough to put us under the barn. We had stirred up so much dust in the corrals that for the first hour of the shower, the rain was splashing over the fences.

We've been scattering and loading livestock for three weeks now. The biggest problem hasn't been the amount of work, it's been the lack of our regular cook. The lady that helps us has been invaded by her kinfolks. She's been overrun by revolving housefuls of sisters and grandkids and herds of nieces and nephews.

So by default, and not by popular demand, I've been running the kitchen at noon. Whenever there was a break in the pasture or the pens, I've been dashing to the house to smother whatever was on fire and re-water whatever that had boiled dry.

This isn't my first bout with the skillet. After the Boss died in the late '60s, I logged a lot of hours around a cook stove. I had a hard time keeping any help in those tough times. We traded work with the Goat Whiskers outfit and even such big volume table hands as Goat Whiskers the Younger learned to pay attention to what they were scooping on their plates.

However, the long rest seems to have improved my cooking ability. For example I cooked a beef heart last Monday that was still plenty tasty by Wednesday. I found that by adding bouillon to fried spinach, it'd make it smell like chicken and taste like eggplant. Back on that other job, I was trying to find something they'd eat. This time I've cooked things that'd fight back and last for a few days.

I already knew to lock up the guns and the blunt objects. Cowboys become mighty fretful if the food isn't up to par. I put the poker dice up high in the kitchen shelf. I sure didn't want them to have the slightest excuse to start a fight.

Twice a week, we've eaten dinner in the pasture. Always before, they'd gripe something awful over eating cold lunchmeat underneath the shade of a windmill tower. But for some reason they haven't complained at all about the bologna sandwiches and the salty potato chips. In fact, one old kid liked the lunchmeat so well that I saw him eating a couple of slices down at the saddle shed one day after he'd finished a big meal at the house.

Without our cook, we sure haven't attracted so much extra company. My brother and his son did come out to spend a week, but along about the third morning they had to leave unexpectedly to go help a cousin shear, down on the Pecos River.

I offered to pack them a lunch in case they arrived too late to eat with the shearing crew. I had enough leftovers in the refrigerator to feed about four shearing crews. Water down on the Pecos is so bad that things like raw turnip slaw taste pretty good. I don't know why they got so emotional about their refusal. Maybe the change in climate from San Angelo to Mertzson had ruined their appetites.

Less than three days are left before we'll be shaped up for winter. I don't believe I ever saw a work go so slow. The men aren't whistling in the pastures, and if an old pony stumps his toe he's sure to get his ears burned off with curse words and his hind end warped with a rope.

Aprons never have fitted me as well as chaps have I've still got two more meals to go. A dadgum crow keeps coming close to the trash barrels in the evenings. Funny thing, he never seems to stay too long. Soda and flour make good water bread, but don't count on a spoonful of nutmeg turning a can of peaches into a cobbler.