

Comes back in the haze this fall, the long-ago 1940s memory of Uncle Goat Whiskers and the Big Boss dividing Grandfather's estate some 30 years after his death. Never be a fall so wet again in the shortgrass country, nor a winter to hit so early and so cold.

Probably won't be many strings of horses, all branded, ever ridden as hard as that work. Sure won't be a gathering of waddies to parallel the crew. And, for sure, Goat Whiskers and the Big Boss leave a lost pattern of an era of time going back too far to witness off film or paper.

Here is part of what happened: Headquarters for the operation measured 10 miles from Mertzon by public road to the Monument Ranch, thence one half mile east of the Santa Fe rail line from a point or crossing called "Noelke Switch." The last half-mile of ranch road passed between the railroad pens and the ranch's working corrals to cross dry Spring Creek. The term "dry" doesn't fit in the timeframe of the division, as the draw ran clear water before spring of the next year.

Cedar brush roofed the kitchen that fed the crew from a chuckbox presided over by a black cook. One-by-twelve boards suspended between cedar posts offered a counter to eat upon. An ancient tool shed sheltered men lucky enough to find room to unroll their beds. Bosses commandeered an old rickety garage for office and bunk space.

A hydrant at the corner of a granary provided all the camp water for the cook. A strange, unknown, unpredicted

and unprecedented monsoon rain supplied the rest to soak cotton clothing, felt hats, boot tops and bottoms, and chaps and saddles. Green, wet mesquite wood smoked the camp ware, the food stuff, the arbor roof, and the cook's disposition. The most treasured personal possession was dry matches and smoking tobacco. The most cherished dream? Payday in town.

Rain stiffened manila ropes to steel bands. But I stop here for orientation. No one knew one thing about the remuda, except the colors of the 75 head of the estate's horses. Little more of 35 or 40 more horses brought to fill the need for mounts.

Picture then a foreman roping the morning's draw with a piece of manila harder to throw than a loop of barb wire. Feature the riders, brave without and apprehensive within, holding a headstall in the left hand, the reins in the right. All sentenced to waiting to bridle the brute, set the blanket, throw the saddle, cinch the girt, back the old spook to release the main spring, and leave the ground via a stirrup for one more verse in a western scene. (If you don't mind, I don't think I'll try that paragraph again.)

Cattle and sheep worked as mean as the weather. There were no counts on the pastures. Unbranded yearling bulls and unmarked rams passed through the pens along with toothless old hags years too old for running on grass. Railroad cars were the only source for freight or supplies. The county road was a quagmire, and stayed so past Christmas.

Bad temper and bad footing added to the emotion of dividing the stock. About as many fences were propped on forked limbs as miles, not feet, of water gaps lay covered in the drift of flooding water. Gates dragged on the ground, hinged and latched by baling wire. Took a contract fencing crew to secure the trap fences.

The Big Boss hired every man who came down the county road hunting work. Men quit, some in the night, ashamed to admit the work was too hard. The bosses paid the runaways by post. A small pile of discarded clothes and boots recorded the comings and goings of the crew. Inventory of the riding gear always balanced against roll call.

Long-term hands developed a taste for rainwater dripping off their hat brims. The early morning struggle pulling on wet boots over wet socks would have taken the head mediator at a Geneva Convention to keep peace. Might not take more than a bed rope touching another man's bed to start a cuss fight.

And there were sights and sightings. One morning while after the horses in a lifting fog, Jay Q. saw a pint of Hill and Hill whisky float off the haze. Tiny, or maybe Dave, dreamed the ranch built a brick bunkhouse heated by a furnace like that at the St. Angelus Hotel. The cook, after he hung a wagon wheel rim for a dinner bell, struck it one day at dinner so hard that sparks flew from the blows.

The challenges of dividing a ranch took a spell and a lot of good men and stout horses. Later on, much later on,

scientists confirmed pints of Hill and Hill floating in
outer space.