

Shortgrass Country

By Monte Noelke

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Daylight saving time plus bad consciences has put a bunch of hombres in a talkative humor. The telephone has been rousing me from bed more than the Indians disturbed the pioneers. Two more weeks of this ringing outbreak is going to put my right hand in the same shape of an ex-boxer's.

To accentuate the problem, the telephone companies have been blabbering it around how much cheaper their rates are after 5 o'clock in the evening. So it appears that the fate of this summer is going to be one of listening to insomniac cheapskates.

Several nights ago, one of the ladies with the agriculture statistical reporting service called to ask why I hadn't answered a questionnaire she'd sent out during the spring shearing and marking season.

At 11 o'clock at night, it's hard to think of an excuse why you hadn't let the agriculture statisticians know how many sugar beets you didn't raise, or how much fertilizer you didn't buy in the month of April. After hobbling across a floor full of kids' toys, offhand answers to offbeat questions are difficult to ad-lib. Johnny Carson wouldn't have so many quick comebacks if he had to spend his days wandering around dusty sheep corrals.

I could remember why I hadn't reported the number of eggs that were gathered on March the 19th. That was easy. The ranch's poultry herd consists of one quackless duck who is also a non-bearing, eggless duck. In fact, other than the feathers that he sheds on the floor of the saddle house, he doesn't affect the egg and poultry futures market anymore than the old wood lizard who lives in the same barn.

In detail I told the lady counter about the duck. Instead of being interested, she got all huffy and accused me of being a non-cooperator. She acted as if it was my fault that the Shortgrass Country wasn't suitable for two legged feather farming.

I'm sure she didn't realize that having chickens roosting over saddles and sidewalks is closer related to mining bat guano than to egg production, or she wouldn't have got so angry. The last chickens we had here made nearly as much mess as the Woodstock music festival. The greatest contribution to cleanliness of this century was when chicken wranglers became obsolete and the confounded old hens were shut up in cages.

Naturally, I didn't dare tell this nocturnal statistician the true facts about the open range chicken business. After 20 years of filling out government forms, you learn not to bring up anything else that can be added to a tally sheet. I don't know how the census takers could go about handling such an indelicate subject as the residue from chicken roosts. But I'll bet one thing, once they ever got to rolling they'd want to know to the gram how much was produced on each farm.

Being called a non-cooperator isn't so bad, anyway. From the rancher's view, every other segment in the United States can be called either outright aggressors or downright non-cooperators. The miniature golf association has more friends in Washington than we ever did at the peak of our popularity. (*) We did have a cowman in the White House once, but all he ever did to help the cattle people was what ground meat his cook used to make chili con carne.

So my advice is to go on and let the telephone company brag what a terrific bargain their night service is. If you don't mind being warded for the rest of your days, then go on and sit back and let those bell ringing destroyers of peace set up a clamor over a device that wouldn't be a good buy at nickel a month.

But bear this in mind: If you think nighttime telephone service is a good way to save money, the next time you buy a seat at a band concert, price the space on the floor underneath the cymbal player's chair.

(*) Ranchers' grandest moment was on Dec. 14, 1921, when a soft hearted page in the U.S. Senate agreed to lead one of our lobbyists to the Senate restroom.