

FEBRUARY 14, 1974

Shortgrassers were faulting the truckers' strike before the duals cooled in the driveways. Around the coffee house in Mertzson, ranchers were setting up an awful howl. Without examining the situation, they were already predicting another big cow wreck.

I felt bad too until this month's feed bill arrived. After staring at that toll, I wish the commissioners' court would block the road leading to the ranch. As high as feed is, it'd be a blessing to stop the feed trucks. Freight-in is running a lot higher than freight-out.

My wife said she heard that some grocery items were growing short over in San Angelo due to the strike. No one is going to convince me that the wool capitol is going to starve out. I've been studying those hombres for a long time. Any incident that requires them to need a guardian will throw the rest of the country into a calamity that'd make us hump up worse than a frostbit Southern calf.

San Angeloans know how to look after themselves. Six months ago when things began to get rough, I started watching the restaurant operators over there. Like any other town with a big stockyard complex, lots of blackbirds live on the townsite. As chicken grew more expensive more expensive, the brown sauce started getting thicker and darker. Chicken a la king changed from a white gravy to an opaque brown that'd hide polar bear meat. Poultry dishes became the specialty of nearly every outfit.

Blackbirds got so wild that they were flying in a single formation. Behind the stockpens they grew so jumpy that they stopped roosting over the water troughs.

I'd be out there taking pictures of cattle. Instead of having a nearly solid black horizon, I'd start a regular bird stampede every time the shutter clicked.

What really aroused my suspicion happened at a cafe that was under management of two men known stockyard connections. I was in there one day at lunch. Featured on the menu was a dish they'd named a bluebird special. It doesn't take much imagination to figure out how hard it'd be to tell a dressed blackbird from a dressed bluebird.

The waitress whisked by and said the bluebird was mighty good. I told her I could catch all the bluebirds at the ranch that I wanted to eat.

She misunderstood me. Her reply didn't make any sense. She said that country boys ought to stay home and trap bluebirds. I knew that much before the bluebird conversation ever started. City folks sure can act strange.

Mertzson was already in a trucking shortage before the strike started. The old boy who did public hauling go appointed sheriff last month. He'd no more than pinned on his badge until a robber stole a bathtub from a widow lady's rent house. So he's been all tied up working on the bathtub robbery while his trucking business lapsed into nothing.

The bad thing about it, of course, is that we need a trucker worse than we do a law officer. We could have thrown together and bought the lady a bathtub too heavy for thieves to carry off, but I don't know where we are going to find another trucker.

Now don't go spreading it around that the wool capitol chili joints and such like have violated the food standards. Bird watchers are too tough to handle as it is. I couldn't swear that blackbirds are being hidden in the brown sauce. It could be sparrows for all I know.