

Back in the early '30s, I started traveling the highway that runs through the ranch. At the same time, I crossed the Santa Fe Railroad tracks twice a day to go to school. After all those years, I am still afraid of railroads and highways.

It doesn't matter how often we pass a few old cows or a herd of sheep over the road beds, an onrushing Volkswagon or a far-way train whistle causes a chill that'd demoralize a submarine commander.

Used to be that we could get down off our horses to listen to the rails to tell whether a train was coming. "Used to" here is just like every other "used to." Nowadays, track inspectors drive pickups on the tracks. Furthermore, my hind legs are so stiff that by the time I get off a horse, Amtrak could reroute a bicentennial train through here and be back at the roundhouse refilling the diesel tanks before I got back on. Amtrak, I'm told, is one of our slowest trains. We'd never beat a streamliner.

Out in the pasture the risk is as great as on the roadways. Oilmen invaded the entire outfit last year. Seven miles of caliche road runs from a county road to our south side. On still days, visibility is limited to about four racetrack lengths for a mile on either side of oilmen's speedway.

C. B. radios are impractical for mounted men. I always thought that the end would come on a downgrade trip from an ill-fated feeding venture up on the plains, or a peaceful collapse over a Monday morning market report. I am unsure now as the traffic in the pastures is heavier than the National Safety Council projects for the next World's Fair.

During deer season, I thought of hiring the San Angelo Riding Club's flag bearers to lead us through the pastures. Drilling crews eat so many cold sandwiches under rig towers that they shoot at fresh meat on the same impulse that males a rattlesnake strike at a warm scent. Roughnecks don't look past the crosshair in a scope. Fellow working down on a ranch on the Pecos River told me that he lost enough Jersey calves one year because of road hunting that he overreacted so bad that he wouldn't dehorn a calf in a chute unless his wife was standing guard with a pair of field glasses.

Doctors say that phobias are cured by familiarizing the patient with whatever frightens him. Folks scared of airplanes are consoled by sessions at air terminals, observing planes landing and taking off. Relapses are handled by exposing the person to the insolent ground crews employed by the airlines. One-to-one encounters with ticket agents and baggage clerks will make anyone glad to be airborne.

I admit that I'm a coward. Courage means holding your stance at any odds. Bravery isn't running or hiding under a bed. For 27 years, I've known that Child Who Sits in the Sun was going to remain in a wild state as long as I ran every time she attacked.

I swear after every battle that I'm never going to back down again. Just the other day, she was serving cokes at the concession stands for the school basketball game. I reached across the counter for a coffee cup while she had her back turned. She whirled around so fast, swinging a six pronged ice pick, that a school teacher filling the popcorn machine poured melted butter on a tray of how dogs.

People grew so quiet in the foyer of the gym that the superintendent had the janitor unplug the electric clock to reduce the tension. Two old time referees retreated to the dressing room. I went by the flagpole out front so fast that 44 feet of cotton rope threaded through the top pulley before the air currents.

I can't change. As much as I try, chrome bumpers and black iron cow catchers are too dangerous. Oilmen driving through the dust without radar means death. However, I'll show that red woman some day. She's always meaner out in public.