

10/01/92

SHORT GRASS COUNTY

By Monte Noelke

Lightning damage has become so severe at the ranch, a new expense column is going to have to be added under a separate heading. We've had two small fires, nine split telephone poles and a couple of nights of extra work on neighboring places holding the grass fires off all of us.

People laugh because I go under the bed during the bad storms. The habit started down at the Old Ranch. When we moved in from college, a part Fox Terrier named Keg joined us from the line camp. We were always uncertain whether he influenced me, or I changed his behavior.

He was the smartest dog in the whole country. Six of my eight children were little in those days. So many diapers were hung on the clothes line, ol' Keg started carrying a wooden clothespin in his mouth. Before the last baby was trained, he was so burned out picking up dropped pins that he'd hide under the house at the sound of the washing machine running. Keg was as happy as we were over the first clothes dryer.

Everywhere I went horseback, he trailed along. The telephone service was a single wire, crank, and Central Operator system. The right-of-way was too brushy to ride in a pickup. Line trouble was common enough, Keg learned to spot broken wires and cracked insulators before I ever reached the breakdown.

Uncle Goat Whiskers called seven times a week after lunch with a resounding on-the-line ring, loaded in authority and boiling in urgency. The minute Whiskers cranked out three rings, Keg was on his feet, hunting for me so he could finish his nap.

But both of us were scared of thunderstorms. Caught out in the pasture, we'd hover in the corner of feed houses and comfort each other as best we could, hiding our heads under old sacks. At the house, we'd stay under the bed until the skies cleared.

How people found out about our phobia went unsolved. Keg sure was a loyal friend. Certainly wasn't a tattle-tale. He saw me get thrown off often enough and miss enough loops to entertain a bunkhouse full of cowboys with reports of my private rodeos out in the pastures.

After Keg died, ranch dogs became larger and less responsive. Jose the passaporte and I buried Keg in an unmarked grave. Lots of laughing had been done about bumped heads on bed slats, but I've reached the winter years without being hit by a single bolt of lightning.