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This April marks the first time in seven years we haven't continued feeding on into May.

The bins had enough range cubes left after the first rains to keep calling the cattle together to breed; the old ewes were lambing on a self-limiting block. Days after the rains, the woolies started chasing after the green pickings. The blocks were left for the birds and raccoons to eat, concluding the final contribution to those freeloaders for the season.

However, the prolonged feeding seasons increase cattle's addiction to cottonseed meal. From calthood, our cows bond to the spout of the auger off the bulk feeder. In the rush for a protein fix, the old sisters learn how to crease their tongues and open their throats to form a funnel up under the spout, kind like the guy who swallows swords at the circus stays in practice gargling whole olives after work. Sound of the starter motor and whir of the auger triggers an excessive flow of salvia in the galloping herd descending upon the truck. At the end of a run, the cowboy sitting in the driver's seat has looked down so many slobbering mouths, he's ready to tooth the cattle at the head gate of any size auction in the country.

The next shock after parking the feed wagon was opening the mail box on the first of May without a big feed bill waiting to be paid. All the feed on the Mertzon wool house

bill was six sacks of oats for the saddle horses. Oats aren't really feed on this outfit. *Bait* is a more accurate classification. Just enough feed is spread down the troughs to trick them into coming in every morning. Major exertion for modern-day ranch horses is hopping up in the back of a trailer. A few pound coffee cans of grain are sufficient to keep an old pony in condition to brace himself for bumpy roads, or adjust for sharp curves.

The Big Boss received a 40-to-one return on every bucket of oats he bought. During the work, he allowed us to fuel the night horse on a gallon of oats to bring in 40 head of grass fat horses before daylight. His riding stock trained on the mesquite leaves bitten off on the way to work and the small amounts of grass at the noon hobbling.

My first of the month mail run wasn't dull. An insurance company billed me for a workman's comp payment and the liability insurance for the pickups in a row of figures that'd make the Secretary of the Treasury think his computer was stuck wide open. One of the better San Angelo machine shops, sponsors of a slate of greaseball mechanics, sent another startling claim of over \$400 worth of front end work in which "Technician 4" received \$272 for his labor.

Try as I might, I was unable to identify "Technician 4" in the scowling force of greasy mechanics rolling jacks across the floors, or suddenly appearing from under broken-down pickups on a roller board. The most technical thing I

observed was the finetuning button on the volume control of the radios blaring on the work benches. Nevertheless, whoever number four was, he was technical enough to stick me for 272 bucks to fix the front end on a pickup doubtful of carrying a bid to \$136 in a claiming race on a hot market.

Quite a stir is on about how to pass computers into the millennium. I didn't think to ask technician four while I had him hired what the chances were, if any, of our vehicles lasting to the beginning of the new century. One way to evaluate a ranch pickup after they are no longer listed in the blue book is to go by a junkyard for spare parts and not be able to find your year model because weeds have grown over such out of date models. Technician fours aren't necessary to know where you stand if the junkyard owner laughs in your face.

Word is out on us without being fingered by a junk dealer. For years, the eternal wail of us herders was that nobody understood how tough our business was. Today, salesmen flinch at the sound of the word "rancher." Like wives and girlfriends, they are catching on too well what's amiss on the grasslands.

One of the Angelo horse traders told a man working for me outright that he didn't handle horses cheap enough for us to buy, meaning we weren't in the league of his calf roping and barrel racing customers. Even though he is right, it sure stings to be scorned by a horse trader. Makes me

understand better how bad old Ira Jones felt the time he was
barred from going to any more chicken fights up at Robert
Lee ...