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## **Shortgrass Country**

**by Monte Noelke**

Last week the Texas Dept. of Agriculture held a school in Mertzon to license herders to apply pesticides and herbicides. Instructions and examinations took over six hours. Out of 100 questions on the exam, 70 correct was a passing score.

To legally make mesquite trees and cactus drowsy from spraying projects, or to induce dizzy spells with insecticides for gray ticks and hornflies, the law reads that we had to have this training.

Mother took the news that I was going back to school harder than I did. The Ag annex at the courthouse is two blocks from the room where I started the first grade. Mother refused to believe that pesticide teachers don't hold back slow learners. She claimed that the year before I was stalled so long in the fifth grade, the elementary principal had shot her the same line.

My classmates were from several counties. Seating was open, so I chose to sit next to a retired army officer. A gentleman, I hoped, who hadn't been ranching so long that his sole specialties were tripping the lever on a cake feeder and repairing short linked gate latches with baling wire.

The test was closed book. The fellow I was counting on for support covered his answer sheet like he was concealing military secrets. On the left, a bright young rancher made deep, confident marks on his page. Up front, the instructor starred into space and ate a raw carrot for his lunch. Up on the wall, clock ticked away in a stroke that I swear I'd once heard in a classroom assigned to first year algebra.

The new privacy laws keep exam scores a secret. However, from the looks on some of the faces of those handing in their paper, we may all be headed back to using fly traps and grubbing hoes.