

MARCH 18, 1974

San Angelo's stock show and rodeo passed unnoticed at the ranch. Twelve sheep shearers led by an eager contractor put us after the woolies instead of the midways.

The scene was far removed from the arenas and show barns. Old ewes stricken by the last staged of bitterweed poisoning made desperate attempts to run for the brush. Baby lambs weaned by the drouth crumpled in the rush to be hauled to the dogie pens. Sunshine lost its comfort as my assistants struggled to drive the sheep to the corrals.

To improve morale, I suggested we observe a Western Day just like the people in town. Fellow at the bunkhouse admitted that he still owned a string tie left over from his days as a square dancer. I thought it'd brighten the work to change to cowboy costumes. Two of the extra hands already had big hats. We didn't need much to set off a big show.

Not one man showed interest. Saddling in the mornings, they looked like a crew at the roundhouse oiling up a train. Caps and coveralls contribute as much western flavor as Aunt Tillie's sachet did to air pollution. Hombres wrapped up in a cup towel lend as much to the romance of the rangelands as Little Orphan Annie helped the cause of abandoned kids. And wearing overboots on horseback is as out of place as offering a dancehall girl a breath mint to cure her sore feet.

I told them that I might have company during the work that'd want to see dressed up cowboys. City folks like a flair- a dash of color. Cowboys aren't supposed to look like stevedores that load cotton boats. Cowboys are supposed to wear flashy clothes, not arctic looking outfits that resemble a deer hunter's costume.

Mean temperature off the ground on a horse's back has a chill factor of some 25 degrees lower than the wing temperature of airplanes aloft on the same day. I know that. But the human body is so constructed that the shaking and shivering actions ward off serious frostbite under short term conditions.

City people are willing to copy western style dress. Other morning at the coffee house in Mertzon, a peanut salesman had on a hat banded by genuine pheasant feathers, shaped so well that his reflection in the jukebox came back in the living color.

I bet if I'd asked him to join in on a ranch Western Day, he'd have left his peanut vat by the side of the road. We could have slipped a pair of shotgun leggings over his form fitting pants and changed him from a peanut handler to a prospect for a cigarette ad.

Thirty minutes later, I watched a cowhand from northern Mexico tie a tow sack behind his saddle to use for an aporon in the lamb marking pen. His chaps were tied at the bottoms with two pieces of cheap sissal rope. The noseband for his hackamore was made from a discarded bull halter. Sweat had faded his saddleblanket; bald spots were worn on the saddleskirts against the cinches. Horses had fallen on his saddlehorn until it was a disgrace. He was some contrast to the fellow at the cafe.

Talent scouts would have thought that Mexican cowboy had hired out to pick velvet beans. TV stars don't tie tow sacks behind their saddles. Movieland never saw a worn out saddle blanket or a piece of discolored leather.

You know, I like those western shows. My favorite is one where the hero comes riding up on a small ranch. Real pretty girl is out by a waterwell, filling a bucket. He says, "Ma'am, my horse has throwed a shoe." She knows and he knows that the horse hasn't done enough to throw a cartridge from a gunbelt, much less a shoe, yet fast moving

drama has to be full of real life. So she says, "You're mighty welcome to stop here, stranger."

Along about dark, he gets out his guitar. A little later, she comes a walking sideways toward the bunkhouse and the guitar playing. Too soon for anything but some singing, old daddy comes outside to smoke his pipe. I'd go on and tell you the rest. Chances are, however, you've seen the show before.

We got too busy to think about Western Days. Healthy sheep escaped to be gathered by the rope; sick ones died on the shearing boards to be hauled off on a rope.

I saw the rodeo parade on the night news. I'm glad the spectators couldn't see the crew at the ranch. Some chance we'd have of saving the Old West when we can't keep a bunch of sheep alive!