

About a month or so ago, a right slick columnist from up north said that the reason beef was so high in the markets was because of a conspiracy of ranchers to create a shortage. Always before, I'd ignore that particular writer. On his best leads, I rated him somewhere close to those big brown water snakes that live down in the creek close to Mertzon.

However, after I began to think back over the past 30 years of the ranchers that I'd known, I began to realize that maybe there'd been a conspiracy and I'd been left out of the deal.

For once that writer might be right. At the auction barns and other cow centers, you do see hombres whispering and showing each other secrets written inside the palm of their hands like scale weights and lot numbers.

In the crash of '73, plenty of the cowboys acted suspiciously and distant in my company. I figured they were just ailing from overdoses of market failure, or a spell of an overcharge of optimism hacking up on the inside so hard that the heels on their boots were turning the wrong way. I sure might have been plotting this next cow boom and felt guilty for not including me in the plans.

Cowmen have changed since the traildriving days of Mr. Chisum and Mr. Goodnight. Herders hear and see all sorts of shenanigans on TV. Nearly every evening, newscasters expose some price fixing deal or some cartel that's hung a case of the hocus pocus on some innocent folks.

It wouldn't be so unlikely that a few traders here and a rancher or two over there might work out a scheme that'd manipulate the birth rates of calves and the slaughter of the old cows all over the nation. As smart as those guys have been sounding at the Angelo auction café since cattle perked up in August, some individuals might pull that off singlehand.

Let's suppose, if you will, that the last three weeks' runs in San Angelo weren't prompted by the drought like everyone thinks. That the yards overflowing in cattle and sheep weren't from a shortage of trucks in town and a shortage of grass in the country.

In all that excitement, it'd be plenty hard to pick the ringleaders. Until a detective got used to the way an old boy will stare off in space from a catwalk when he's forced to sell, it'd take a school bus to haul off the suspects to jail.

But, I agree, I think something is going on. Like last week, Goat Whiskers the Younger claimed he was up in Colorado shipping his yearlings. How do I know that he wasn't up in Kansas City talking to a bunch of bigshot yearling men, mapping out a way to get us to dump our cattle so their two's will be worth more money.

I told you about being at a registered cow sale not too long ago. What I didn't tell you was that in the middle of the sale, they up and sold a trick circus mule for \$4000. What I didn't think about at the time was to ask who had trained that mule to do those tricks. Mules learn lots of tricks running loose in the pasture, but not the kind of tricks that circus fans pay to see. I should have noticed right then and spotted that mule teacher in charge of the cattle conspiracy.

Trucks and trailers are tearing along the road every sales day. The drouth is running the smart boys to town while the rest of us late show characters stay at the ranch.

Conspiracy or no conspiracy, the grass shortage is obvious. I'll let you know when I find the leader.