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Thunder showers appear to be covering wide areas of the shortgrass country this spring. Short of having enough reporters to be on hand at every post office in every small outpost and every stockyard and auction barn, the pattern is impossible to trace.

"Human over-call" also has to be considered. Takes a practiced mind to catch such nuances as the common ploy, "I poured an inch from my gauge," assuring that if the inch fails to come close to passing, his gauge is to blame. Another trick is to open by admitting you may not have dumped all the bugs out after the last rains, or an even smarter move to say, "I only measured a half-inch, but it sure looked like more on the south side of the pasture."

Also, on the 22-mile drive from the ranch to Mertzon, four or five different bands of showers may pass across the roadway on the same afternoon, leaving water standing in the ruts in one part and the dust unsettled in the next stretch. A Mexican cowboy and I are the only permanent residents in the neighborhood. We are in charge of reporting high water and grass fires for the whole Divide.

We share rain gauge measurements among other neighbors, but not with the same enthusiasm reserved for our private exchange of coyote signs and eagle sightings. Alfredo and I don't trust outsiders. We are mighty suspicious of folks who live close to doctor offices and grocery stores. We don't

understand hombres renting movies every night and eating all the popcorn they want whenever the whim hits them.

But I can swear, on the 4th and 5th of May over three inches fell up here on top. Saturday morning the thunder and lightning boomed and crashed so severe, part of the ceiling in my living room fell into the drip pan catching the leak in the roof. The impact of the ceiling tiles splashed water up onto the coffee table, causing drops of newsprint ink to drip off the edge and give the beige rug a charcoal tinge.

The house damage didn't bother me. Restored by the merciful deluge of a heavy rain, I felt so good I waited on the telephone to go back to working so I could call Zurich to have a Swiss bank account ready for next fall's lamb and calf receipts. Compared to the 11 years of dry weather, three ceiling blocks lying lopsided in and on a drip pan had the same impact as a plait working loose in a show horse's tail would at the end of a big parade.

Once the phone worked, Alfredo reported two inches. He also thought the gaps were up on Devil's River draw as the small draws weren't running off his outfit. Sounded fishy to find a Mexican cowboy at the ranch on Cinco de Mayo. The oldtime shearing and roundup crews used to take off to the Border in such force that the major wool house in San Angelo started having a party for ranchers to distract us from the delay. Helped make the herders more sympathetic with the hands on the morning after if we celebrated the "Cinco," too.

As a lark one time over at the Goat Whiskers' ranch spring shearing, we told Filomenio Jiminez to be sure to strain the milk before he put it in the refrigerator as we were going to be gone to the horse races at Del Rio the 5th of May. The most gifted artist to ever do a painting of the agonies of the Heavenly Father's son could not have reproduced the sadness on Filomenio's face.

Filomenio was 65 years old. He'd worked on this side of the Big River for 30 years. He'd never thought of a gringo being so irresponsible as to leave his ranch during shearing. He was so upset, he walked over to the highway after work and caught the bus to Angelo. Ten days elapsed before Filomenio had to strain any cow's milk. Old man Whiskers stormed around threatening to fire him without a hearing, but by the time he got back to the ranch, Whiskers' hind legs hurt so bad from squatting down to milk that he never said a word.

Been so long since we had any help from the other side of the River, I don't know whether Mexican cowboys still celebrate the Cinco and 16th of September like they once did. Alfredo and I are plenty close, but all we discuss is business. If the rains keep coming on and stock lose their devotion to sacked goods and pickup tailgates, we are going to need a bunch of Filomenio's kind to work our country. Be my guess, too, that'd we'd be a lot easier to work for than we were in the old days ...