

Every Cloud Has A Silver Lining; Even Those Raised By Feed Trucks

By Monte Noelke

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MERTZON, Texas — At the opening of each week's business one finds more and more truckloads of feed roaring out to the dry ranchlands of the Shortgrass Country. In the early mornings small caravans of pickups are freighting the same feedstuff. No estimates as to the dollar volume being moved down the roadway are available, but judging from the stooped backs and grim expressions of the hombres hanging out at the coffee houses, chances are that the expense has already ascended to a level that would have given John D. Rockefeller Sr. a counter-clockwise dizzy spell.

This feed isn't cheap. During the last summer the price of the basic ingredient, cottonseed meal, began to sail upward as if the prospective customers were making final arrangements to take over the controlling interest in the Chase Manhattan National Bank. While the bountiful autumn rains were falling, the traffickers in livestock feed were evidently in all-night session, making plans for the unfurling of the astounding price schedules. By frost, they had done a remarkable job.

The hard core ranchers, however, don't even flinch when feed goes up. As a rule, after a man has survived a few financial shipwrecks severe enough to make a tour of duty with Captain Kidd seem like a pleasure cruise, he has learned that high priced feed is generally followed by some encouraging development.

For instance, during those terribly dry year of the '50s when hay, grain and cubes were so high that chinchilla farmers were looking for substitute rations, many blessings accompanied every jump in feed costs.

Often before anyone had time to shed a tear over the feed situation, lambs would climb from 10 cents a pound to 10¼ cents; then some cowman would sell a few first-calf heifers without having to deliver them overseas. The joy caused by these good tidings would be so far reaching that veteran bankers could be heard whistling all three verses to "Home on the Range" for the first time in years.

Those who constantly criticize high feed prices ignore this indisputable evidence. They go on their dreary way, claiming that as long as livestock bankers consider putting up the money for anything from a red bandanna handkerchief to a pair of new boot innersoles, which is an extravagance akin to the spending habits of the wildest days of the Roman Empire, man had better hope and pray he doesn't have to go down to the bank asking for more money to buy less feed.

Included in the critics' foolish notions is a bunch of nonsense about there being a limit to the amount of feed 40-cent wool and 22-cent heifer calves will buy. But nobody pays any attention to that kind of bad-mouthing, unless you want to count a few weak-hearted bank directors who are always about half scared of their shadows to start with.

In sum, the current Shortgrass scene is one of anticipation of what the future will hold. The precious \$80 per ton cubes are hitting the ground every morning. The cows are humped up, the old ewes are beginning to look like a honey bear caught on the wrong side of a Siberian cold front. And the people — well, they are bracing themselves, waiting to see what spring will bring.