

APRIL 6, 1978

Shortgrass weather is stable. So stable that if it doesn't rain in April, all the howling the farmers and coal miners have been doing is going to sound like Little Sir Echo doing a rehearsal.

We marked a 50 percent lamb crop in the early lambing ewes. It was the worst score we've tallied in the 30 years that I've been on the ranch. Other calamities have happened during the period, but it's the closest we'd ever come to a complete crop failure. I think at one time I'd have settled for a passport to Cuba. An old ewe standing humped over a dead lamb is never an easy sight.

By time to mark, I knew the axe had fallen. Casual rides through the pastures told the sad tale. Herds of 30 or 40 head of dry ewes were a common sight. I wore a bandana handkerchief tied up under my chin to absorb the salt water.

One thing that preserved my morale was the runaway sheep market in San Angelo. Lambs jumped to 80 cents a pound so fast that the auctioneer had to learn a new chant. For those of us who had bad lamb crops, the market only has to last for a little over a year to save us. I already had it counted up that if feeder lambs were still the same price by May of 1979, we'd go to a lamb shipping that'd make the California gold rush look like a pet store trying to discontinue their stock of guppies.

When marking time did hit, I wasn't feeling so good. In case of emergency, I carried an army cot in the pickup. I saw an old boy fall over in a cow corral once. He'd held some yearlings long enough to need a method to make up a 12 cent market break that had occurred in about that many days.

The more he rolled and pitched on the corral floor, the more the dry residue that was sifting down his shirt collar and boot tops made him buck and pitch. Before his foreman could get him back on his feet, he'd ruptured the holes in a good leather belt and rubbed blisters from his short ribs clear across his back. Last I heard of him, he was hanging out at used car lots to be sure he wouldn't even hear of anything that was a year old.

Looks like the dry spell is going to demand an extra heavy toll. It sure has my attention. Management experts have been telling us for years that we ought to keep accurate records. What I wish now is that someone had told us to keep our money. Dry winds blow up every morning. I'm ready for some relief, how about you?