

It's That Time Of Year Again: Cattle, Deer Look Just Alike

By Monte Noelke

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MERTZON — People are staying close to their home now. Early mornings and late evenings are marked by sporadic gunfire. As this is being written, the deer season is less than a week old and the natives have already retreated for cover.

Road hunting is receiving a big play. Once again the most popular diversion among certain elements is shooting head-lighted sets of eyes from the country lanes. To enhance the adventure, domestic animals have been added to the game list. Outfits bordering on public thoroughfares are contributing calves and yearlings right along. No exact estimates are available regarding the size of the donations, but by the end of this tax quarter the write-off should add up to respectable proportions. This depends, of course, on the number of dark nights and abundance of quarry that the sportsmen have to choose from.

Questions are arising on how to classify losses for tax purposes. Accountants specializing in ranch bookkeeping are studying the new benefit. Until a ruling is issued by the Internal Revenue Service, no one will know definitely whether the livestock lost to road hunters will be classified as a contribution to the nations recreation program or will be shown as a capital loss.

Also, each tax payer will have to be treated separately. Gentlemen ranchers may find that they cannot buy ranchland joining roadways if their intention is to use slaughtered or shell shocked stock for a tax advantage. However, your guess along those lines is as good as anybody's. Betting over 15 cents that the government wouldn't be taxing the knobs on flagpoles by next week would be about as foolish as entering a Siamese tomcat as a backup in a song bird contest. Nobody with any sense at all even knows what the term "gentleman rancher" means. In my time, I've known scores of ranchers, but I can't remember one who could stay in the business and stay genteel at the same time.

Where the traffic in nocturnal prowlers has been the heaviest, the tax angle is being ignored. Ranchers close to San Angelo are beginning to change from the normal role of the browbeaten minority into hateful name callers. In their book, road hunters are being placed in the same category as rustlers and thieves. One group of hombres has become so upset over cows coming in without their calves that they've threatened to hire a special ranger to make roadside butcher shops a bit more inconvenient to operate.

When crimes wasn't so fashionable, hiring an agent would have been a good idea. Today, however, a segment of society as small as ranchers couldn't start to buck a national trend as large as the one fostering and supporting the lawbreakers.

Livestock associations wouldn't stand a chance of out-lobbying the bank robbers and white slave dealers. Small town smuggler gangs and minute banks of pickpockets would make us the laughing stock of the cloak rooms. We'd look mighty ridiculous trying to put the old finger on a cow thief backed by a list of special privileges that'd make the Bill of Rights look like it was written by a South American dictator.

The answer is to educate these offenders as to how serious the punishment might be. Once they are told that a man convicted of a felony could have to spend 12 hours in jail, they'll take a second look. Letting them know that unless a civil liberty organization is interested in their case they might be detained in the pokey overnight would also help. Furthermore, they should be informed that the jails are no longer meeting places for hardened criminals. The chances of them finding any of their own kind behind bars would be awfully slim. I couldn't say where the lawless gather to talk shop, but it's a dead cinch they aren't kept in the cell blocks long enough to discuss their business. At the rate criminals are sprung today, jailkeepers need a computer to keep up with the check out list.

Oldtimers think we should go back to the swinging rope system of justice. New grounders argue in favor of 24 hour rehabilitation sessions in the electric chair. But actually what we need to do is pray for our own safety and hope that the next step of progress doesn't get us all.