

05/14/92 **SHORTGRASS COUNTRY** by Monte Noelke

Three at least, and possibly more women hold elective offices up at the courthouse in Mertzon. The numbers are unimportant to this story. What counts is these officials take their jobs very seriously, including running full force, full throttle campaigns the year around for on and off election years.

The lady county attorney is also a neighbor of mine. Her most recent sideline was being a major figure in forestalling the salvaging of 365 miles of railroad track connecting San Angelo with the Mexican border at Presidio and on down to the Pacific Coast. Her efforts and those of quite a number more of the citizens and politicians in the area induced a small railroad company to buy out the Santa Fe.

Landowners along the line weren't offered a part in the negotiations. Such prominent right-of-way experts as Goat Whiskers the Younger already had been charged and recharged for using the railroad's lands for free pasturage and the basis of a nice, neat little animal collision claim business.

Young Whiskers extended his privileges to the point of once backing a 50 ft. straight-decked truck across the main line and the spur to load cattle from the old railroad

loading chute at last siding going west toward Barnhart, called Sugg's Switch.

Details of timing of the scheme are hazy, however, recollections are that Whiskers called the depot agent at the small station in Big Lake, Texas, and requested the schedule on the freights passing through Mertzon and Barnhart, admitting to a long family tradition of setting their mantle and grandfather clocks by the whistle of the train at Sugg's switch.

So Whiskers ordered the trucker to back over the four rails and the cattle loaded much better than they had been loading at a rickety old chute about a mile away. Had the railroad authorities only known, the shipping lightened up the load on their grass in the locale. In those days, cheap labor from Mexico was available. These steers had been herd broke to graze on the county lane and the railroad's property so long, if a train had come along and hit the truck, the survivors would have probably started grazing by the scene of the collision.

In the many years the trains were running from the oil boom and the sulfur mining out west, a lot of actions took place. One spring, for example, a boxcar load of coal turned over adjoining a pasture of ours. I promised the foreman of the section gang fat kid goats for his whole crew

if he'd not carry out his orders to set the mountain of coal on fire.

The tonnage of coal dumped at the wreck ran in the sixties to seventies of tons. The Shortgrass Country had never had a mine catch on fire, but had the foreman not had such an affinity for cabrito, we'd had coal smoke to breathe when the wind was from the north and grass fires to fight when the winds changed southward for the next 16 years.

The new company won't take long to become seasoned to the herders along the route. However, the old truck driver who jumped his duals over the tracks is gone and today Whiskers used quartz watches to keep time . . .