

On the eve of spring storms, snakes crawl from the winter dens to take a tentative intermission from hibernating. May even seems a bit cool for the cold-blooded reptiles to become active.

A good guess is that the change in barometric pressure causes the snakes' coiling muscles to wind too tight. Unless the snake stretches, his mainspring becomes so taunt that it makes his eyes cross. Already optically limited from months of darkness, the further impairment of sight forces the snake to back from his den - a slow, tedious ascent handicapped by cramped winders and coil muscles.

If the weather is building, day or night, rattlers cross the county road leading to the ranch at the same places as the year before. Rock foundations under the railroad bridges are favored spots to den. In the days when the Santa Fe ran six trains a day down the line, snakes grew huge from the rumble of the tracks stimulating the development of healthy muscles.

The trail from the northwest corner of the horse trap at the old ranch crossed a big draw right in the shadow of the railroad bridge across the fence. Many a young horse wrangler came in ashen-faced from having disturbed the railroad company's snake den.

It was a dreaded water gap to rebuild, not only because of the snakes, but because of the steep banks. We left it to last, hoping the section crew beat us to the job. On the years of summer floods, when we knew snakes were going to be in the drift, pitchforks were the preferred tool to remove the trash from the wires. (The answer to the question of how a pitchfork is carried on a horse is "with care.")

Had to tie our horses on the high bank side of the creek to keep from spooking the old ponies if we stampeded from hearing a grasshopper whir in the tall grass. However, once we descended to the creek bottom, it was a serious matter to climb the steep, muddy trail wearing boots, spurs and batwing chaps.

We were just scared of snakes. The old men, *los viejos*, from Mexico were the ones superstitious of snakes. Mother said the time she killed a big snake in her flower bed, the old cowboy Luis from Musquiz stood guard all morning. Wouldn't leave until my stepdad came in for lunch. Polo Navarro, who worked for all the family at different times, used to stay around a dying snake waiting for the spirit to leave. Claimed if the vulture ate the snake before the spirit departed, the grounds remained haunted.

Ten years ago, the association journal for the Sheep and Goat Herders asked me to write a snake story. Forgot about the deal until the other day going to town, when two big snakes lay in the county road right where a roadrunner chased a rattler into some broomweeds last fall. My first impression was that perhaps the roadrunner had made a double score. I stopped and found one snake had been hit by a car; the other one was still very much alive and uninjured.

So what was the live snake doing mingling with the dead snake? Snakes are not cannibals. They eat rabbits and mice. Prefer black beetles over white-shelled beetles to darken the diamonds in the pigment of the skin, especially the decorative rings near the rattles of the male. Also, reptiles do not mourn, or carry out the "until death parts" stuff that weepy-eyed folks try to pawn off as the sanctity of nature. And man is too imaginative to study their sex life. (It's the wrong place to bring up snakes' mating habits. Just try not to take on the notions that high school boys and pool hall denizens hold on the subject. Vulgar cliches live long lives.)

The snake was slow to leave the scene. I sat longing for a witness. Didn't wish for a camera. Take more evidence

than a photograph to authenticate range experiences, especially one involving rattlesnakes.

After Mother and the school teacher stopped harping on the truth, I only have vague memories of needing to tell the truth. Oaths are a small part of a herder's life. Served on lots of juries way back, but we were sworn in as a panel, so the bindings on singular veracity were loose. The time I was summoned as a witness in a civil case, I swore to tell the truth. The questions were so broad, however, that only an outright professional would have lied.

But sitting in the road watching a freak of nature, I sure wished some reliable person had come by to confirm the snakes being together. Would have been big odds of it happening, as most hombres in the neighborhood develop reputations for huge cases of wild imagination. Just wish mother and the teachers had persevered. Hasn't been easy all these years, having to defend every single story I told.