

JANUARY 6, 1977

Cattle are wintering in poor spirit. Old cows stand around the salt troughs, trying to outdo each other in putting on pitiful faces. Judging by the number of feed trucks on the highways, sack goods must be being spread on the ground. Pickups at the post office bear further evidence of feeds and feeding. Thus, long season has begun in the Shortgrass Country.

Along the roadsides, herds of holdover calves make the scene more mournful. Shaggy steers coated in winter hair offer little romance to the rangelands. Baby fat has dissolved; the curl of their tails has changed to yearling stiffness.

Calves at the ranch were weaned twice. In October, we separated them from their mothers. By Christmas, I terminated their dependence upon range cubes. From now until spring, their appetites can be settled by a fresh air and dry grass ration. Cost of gain is going to be limited to depreciation on the fences and the price of white salt in Mertzton.

For awhile, I did allow every five head enough meal to color their lips. Further pressure on the market ended that handout. The calves now bellow at the feed wagons louder than they did the night they were weaned from their mothers. People say there's nothing that'll replace a mother's love. The saying works just fine until a black calf tastes a gram of cotton seed mill.

Smartest move I made was telling the bank that we were wintering dry stuff. Instead of turning the bulls out this year in February, I'm going to hold up until the last week of 77.

In all the throes of short collateral and long term financing, nothing pleases a livestock banker better than to hear that the feed bill is going to be light. I watched a jugkeeper in Mertzton before Christmas reading a grain report. His lips were drawn so tight that you'd have thought the directors were passing out green persimmons for bonuses.

The idea is an old one. I remember one time back in the dry '50s, we wouldn't have had a 40 percent calf crop if the death loss in the cows hadn't been so high. In the plight of those dreadful times, I watched a mother jackrabbit jump in front of a freight train to avoid watching her babies starve to death. The dead cows and the barren cows ended up making more than the wet ones. Biggest steer calf shipped that year wouldn't have made a pot of chili for a small family.

You know, I really don't understand why we weren't cured of owning cattle by the Big Drouth of the '50s. I can't even explain why the market crash of 1973 didn't put every herder from Montana to the Isthmus to selling used cars or pumping gasoline.

Perhaps trafficking in hollow horns is an incurable disease. I would bet a bundle that if a cure were found, a squad of New York policemen couldn't control the ranch wives that'd swarm the drugstores.

I think that eating so much meat must activate the cow fever germ. vegetarians don't buy cattle, or if they do I never did meet one around an auction ring.

Odors and tastes have a strong effect on human mechanisms. Beef fat lingers a long time after the T-bone is eaten. Fellow told me that one time he knew a wolf trapper up in the Northwest who had to stop going to bars and night spots. It was way back there. Winters came on hard; watering places provided hostesses as matter of course. Saloons and such like were overloaded by runaways that'd never been halter broke. Until the

trapper learned not to warm his boots on the stove rails, his nature was unable to stand the popularity.

Same might be true of red meat. Herders put big store in steaks and strips. Might be that we could go the lettuce and asparagus route and throw the entire habit of the cattle blight.

I am not going to spend the winter supporting a herd of non-profit beasts. Warnings that a weak cow won't breed can go to other ears. Come the thaw, the inventory may be down, but the feed store and the bank won't have to fight over what's left.