

Shortgrassers Become Inactive At Slightest Hint Of Rainfall

4-7-66

Page 2

MERTZON — At the time of this writing the new week is barely eight hours old and it's already obvious that countless man and woman hours are being wasted in this land the Lipan Indians called "The Big Washout."

The reason for the general slowdown is the spring showers which dribbled across the short grass country. Invariably this rare weather condition sets off a community-wide loafing period. It creates a feeling among the citizens that they are excused from any exertion more strenuous than lifting a coffee cup, shuffling dominoes, or chattering endlessly over the telephone.

Come to think of it, rain isn't required to interrupt the ordinary routine of the shortgrasser. It can come a dew within 30 miles of here and the whole pack will neglect tasks which normally a three-alarm prairie fire wouldn't make them overlook. Moreover, close observers to the scene have known for at least five years that a 25-percent increase in the humidity of the outer atmosphere is as schedule-wrecking to these dryland stock herders as a major break in a Mississippi River levee would be to a pepper farmer in Louisiana.

First knowledge of this change of pace was noted in a study of the females of the region. Scholars stumbled on the fact that any type of wet weather, from a flood to a fog, would suddenly quell the mother shortgrasser's desire to move furniture about the house. When it was ascertained that these ladies of the prairie were, at sight of a black cloud, inclined to leave in one place such heavy pieces of household equipment as pianos and deep-freezes, the investigators knew they had something.

After seeing this strange trait in women, the same study group became interested in the males. This phase of the study proved confusing for a time, as a few custom-bound oldtimers insisted on performing old fashioned wet weather tasks like halfheartedly shoeing old Snip behind, or celebrating autumn showers by dragging up fire wood for the May shearing.

However, before the observers completed the project (of course it takes years to reach any conclusions about effects of rain in a country where it barely settles the dust once a year), the senior citizens had fallen under the spell of the jet age and were learning to relax during a rain just as well as the young bucks.

Various reasons have been offered for the shortgrassers' tendency to shut down abruptly at the slightest feeling of moisture in the air. These range from blaming the government for failing to print pamphlets explaining how to open an umbrella to a complex theory which contends that since 99 percent of the natives in this country see their first daylight in a drouth, they cannot function under any other condition.

Some are transplanted troublemakers charge that the male shortgrass rancher isn't very active regardless of whether our mesquites are threatened with trunk rot, or if it blowing a dust storm sever enough to make Carrie Nation's predecessors turn to drink. But since this wild notion is suspected of originating in the the warped minds of a crank element, it gets practically no attention beyond some uncalled-for "Amens" from the females and a few scornful remarks at our all-morning coffee sessions or our daily afternoon domino game.

As a general rule the loss of time is thought to be offset by the benefits from the moisture. For example, on several occasions these spring rains have been sufficient to bring up a scattering of green weeds and tender shots of grass. And in spite of the known fact that our livestock have a very low tolerance for unbaled or unsacked nourishment, a few stockmen here believe this unusual forage may have some food value. This idea has led some to think the experiment stations should further examine the plants just to see if they are beneficial to range animals.