

01.30.1975

After every market failure, stories are circulated about the smart operators who were able to turn their sentimental attachment to an old cow into money before the break. Small portions of any industry seem to have a few who can foresee disaster. They are blessed by a Midas touch that saves them from the wheel just as the spokes are all breaking.

The rest of us can outdo surfboarders when it comes to riding the crest to the bottom. In boom times, we hold and hold as our footing becomes less sound. The old saying that you can't be an in-and-outer sure sounds philosophical in a coffee house, but across the table from a banker, it loses its glow.

Inauguration day had passed at the courthouse before I realized that the sheriff, the judge, and one commissioner had made a timely switch from donating beef to the public to contracting for a monthly check from the public till.

By then there was no chance of announcing for office, nor any possibility of a resignation or a scandal to create a vacancy.

Hot, uncontrolled envy combined with outright, unlimited jealousy was the lowest index of emotion that I reached. Old man Goodnight's lifetime accumulation of cattle wouldn't net today what a man could make from a public job.

Here those super smart-heads had moved from the loss of cow herding to four years of assured income without much opposition to their deal. I didn't think that I could have defeated any of the three, but at least I could have defeated any of the three, but at least I could have shown the judgment to have been their campaign manager. All it would have taken was some public head nodding and private laughing at their stories to have been part of the velvet. But not, I was too busy shipping two-bit calves and working sheep to participate in a money winning election.

The sheriff made no effort to cover his intentions. After his election, he loaned me his fed troughs and finished shipping his cattle. Anyone should have realized what was up. In the history of all cowdom, there never were over two borrowed troughs returned; and cattle don't leave ranches with a roundtrip ticket tucked to their sides.

Change in the new commissioner was noticeable by Christmas. During the holidays, he was calving out a bunch of first calf heifers as casually as a veteran school teacher audits an Easter egg hunt.

Down at the gas station, his conversation switched from red ink cow statistics to the horrible crime of owing delinquent taxes.

The ties of a brotherhood had been severed. In a final appeal to join his good fortune, he offered me a job as county hide inspector at no salary. In a final moment of great dignity, I told him I'd think it over and let him know.

One consolation remains. Their four years of office will pass a lot faster than they will for the rest of us, out on the ranchlands. Making a living off borrowed time and money will prolong our span. The warm winters and cool summers at the courthouse will pass swiftly. You remember how short the days were during the boom? They'll be running for office again before they know it.