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At least 30 years ago, maybe longer, a neighbor's cowboy on the Divide accused us of stealing one of his Spanish goats that crawled through the fence into the Devil's River pasture. Goats at the time were worth two dollars a head under special demand, like for a rodeo barbeque or a wedding celebration. Auctioneers hardly bothered to look up when a bunch came through the ring.

Old Frank, however, was mighty upset over seeing his blue mutton goat running with our sheep. An offer of six more goats to compensate for the damages was refused. Old Frank knew when he'd cornered a rustler. The whole story wouldn't have been believable if you hadn't lived around the ranches where "the Franks" raised dogie kid goats and soon were running a pretty good herd in the horse trap on the Boss' grass.

Frank had come close to catching us before the goat robbery on a cattleguard theft. Here's the evidence: a fence builder pushed an abandoned cattleguard to our side on a division fence. The cattleguard was at least 30 years old, left from a closed road that once went where Frank worked. Constructed of scrap windmill pipe, rust had pretty well destroyed all but the shape of the guard. Grasses and

mesquites covered it by the time Frank found his cattleguard was on our side of the fence.

Here's the solution: the cattleguard was too hard to extract from the thicket and put over the fence. An oil company had given us two-inch pipe, so we sent six joints down to Frank to compensate for the cattleguard we stole from him. Welding rods were not compensated because the guard was made from bolts and baling wire.

Goats and cattleguards connect in a different way today. Frank is gone, but he'd have plenty of goat herding to do if he were around today with these outlaw goats all over the countryside and oil company cattleguards between every pasture and all the road rights-of-way. The goats and the cattleguards are worth a lot more money than back when they were only worth stealing or shooting a neighbor in Frank's and my era.

Deer hunters raise a big fuss about goats' competition with the deer. From the red caps' side, for example, the seven head of outlaw goats in our Devil's River of some 1900 acres is going to stomp out all the grass and destroy all the brush. Seven rounds of 30-caliber ammunition would solve the problem.

I mentioned the goats were back in the Devil's River to the cowboy that usually looks after such matters. He

helped gather this same band of outlaws a short time before fencers took down a division fence and turned them back on us. But he's been driving a tractor all winter.

He said his horses were too soft for a goat chase. True, his old ponies have been down on the Highway place since last September. The most they have exerted themselves was to raise their heads to look through the right of way fence at the traffic passing by.

The big mystery about wild goats is that bobcats and coyotes and eagles eat the goats you want to raise. Wild ones must not taste good because any little band of mavericks becomes seedstock to multiply and expand.

Over on the ranch north of Mertzson I stocked some hair goats once that took 220 nannies to raise 23 kids big enough for a cold rain to freeze down after an August shearing. Herders in those days cursed synthetics. However, had the textile industry depended on my clip, we'd have had to join a nudist colony after our clothes wore out, unless bobcat furs and coyote hides and eagle feathers could be fashioned into wraps.

Once last year, that place had 16 head of stray goats. They ran in one pasture long enough for my son to build a trap at the watering. Construction wasn't a problem; containment was the catch. Until he found out how hard

those wild goats were to keep from tearing down a pen they would go in, I thought the time we tried to trap the Boss' wild hawks at the Clay Water Hole was a disappointment. On that failed expedition, if one of the boys hadn't been a good shot, the ranch would have fed store-bought salt pork that winter instead of sausage.

I sure did my best to exaggerate the story about Frank's goat and his cattleguard. The epitome would be to say he was a good ol' cowboy, like they say about all of us behind our backs. Sure do wish he was around to make us act on those wild goats.