

APRIL 23, 1981

Slow rains are dissolving the Shortgrass Country. Soil left exposed by the early weed crop is melting into a muddy slush. Drops have fallen so large that they overlapped the lips of the rain gauges. We've had four days of blessed, healing moisture. Communication and transportation are at a standstill. High winds before the rains dehydrated the telephone lines to the point that repairmen are going to have to develop a technique similar to a winger to revive the service. Roads are cut in deep, winding ruts. Fossil fuel miners and ranch bound herders have defaced the county roads to near shutdowns. Only hombres with four wheel drive vehicles are able to progress with any certainty.

For my outside calls, I use a pencil to tap out the Morse code on the telephone mouth piece. Static is fierce on the ranch line. The early spring newscast by the various gossip societies overloaded the sound waves in a wide area. The introduction of moisture, I think, fogged into the already damaged sound waves and jammed the service.

Some subscribers have been able to stay on the wire by grounding their phones in cat litter boxes. Cat owners hard hearted enough to kick old Tom out in the rain have a workable solution to the dead phones. It's quite a reverse to the times when we had to moisten the ground wires on crank telephones to improve reception. I am not going to contract for a house-broken cat just to have emergency telephone connection; however, I am tempted to see if I can't use the phones of the more fortunate pet owners in spite of their clawed up furniture and other hardships to delicate to mention.

Mertzon once had a countywide crank and battery operated telephone company. I thought of those days not too long ago. One of my sons had spent \$134 maintaining a romance on the wire with a girl on the coastal plains way south of here. When he asked me if I'd ever experienced such a big telephone bill, all I could think of was that I believed that's what it cost to run the whole telephone system back in my day. Maybe I was wrong. It could have been slightly more, considering that the company had an office to maintain in the operator's home.

In those days everything took extra exertion to operate. The cars, milk cows and the pump jacks worked off a lot of man's excess energy and latent frustrations. My Uncle Goat Whiskers the Elder used to develop muscle spasms in his right arm from cranking his ranch phone. Often his telephone voice carried farther than the wires reached.

This isn't saying that we have it too soft today with these new push button devices. As far as I am concerned, if the earth's crust was bedded in number one goose feathers, I'd still wear crepe soled boots. The cranks and the churn handles don't bring any tears to my eyes. I never pass by an abandoned chicken house, or old milk cow's stall without saluting progress. I talk a pretty good line of pioneering on the plains around the young kids, but I know you can see through that sort of myth so I don't dare let it slip into print.

We've had over three inches at this writing. It looks like for awhile the media are going to have to carry the rain reports. Once the phone service is restored, beauty shops and other news centers are going into a slump. The back log is going to be slow to work out from under. I never saw such beautiful weather.