



Rancher Johnny Thomas after a long work day.

“It Sure Beats Picking Cotton!”

By J. Zane Walley

If one's hands recount the saga of their life, Johnny Thomas's speak volumes. His gnarled, calloused hands, quietly declare a life of hard work, and all he's done: farmer, cow-puncher, trapper, shepherd, rodeo cowboy, sheep rancher, lawman and cattleman. Those remarkable hands haven't rested in 88 years and still energetically labor from sunrise to sunset.

Driving across his craggy 10 section ranch in the foothills of Southern New Mexico mountains, muscling 250 pound feed blocks from the back of his truck, the plucky, former Texas farmboy fondly recalls a lifetime of gratifying work punctuated by adventure.

“I got tired of walking on my knees dragging a pick-sack and picking cotton; decided to become a cowboy, thought that was for me, so in '28, I left the family farm in Kress, Texas, and went to Swisher County (Texas) and hired on with the Shoe-Bar Ranch. We run about 10,000 head of cattle. It was rough; going 18 hours a day no matter what the weather. I was beginning to wonder if I'd made the right choice.

“A saddle-tramp showed up at the ranch and started talking about New Mexico's mountains; said we could make a bunch of money trapping. Well, we loaded up and lit out in '29. When we got here, hides were only bringing about 15 cents each; we were living on cotton-tails, sardines, beans, apples and frijoles. Luckily, I got a job in the mountains herding 2,000 head of Angora Goats. Made \$15 a month, vittles and a cot. Heck, I would have worked just for food and a place out of the weather.


“I started hearing about the jackpot goat ropings in Hondo and Ruidoso, so I started training. I'd practice on a goat 'til the hair plumb wore off his leg, then pick another one and do it all over again.

SHOOTIN' DOWN

RETIREMENT!



Johnny Thomas
as Billy the Kid
in the 1950s





Johnny Thomas, well known Lincoln area rancher, relaxes under the blistering sun one afternoon.

"When I'd hear of a roping, I'd ride my horse to it. Usually a cross country trip of 30 to 50 miles I was winning, often. Started making more money roping than herding. Gradually I got into calf roping and bull dogging. I remember riding my horse alongside the road to a rodeo and seeing other cowboys whizz past me pulling a horse trailer. I thought, if I could just get a car and trailer I'd be rich."

With horse and lariat, Johnny earned that car and trailer, started riding the rodeo circuit and working as a cowboy across the West. It was while roping, he met his future wife, Mickey Good.

"I was at a rodeo in Silver City. This fellow who managed a dude ranch for young ladies, came by and asked us cowboys, if we would sponsor some of their guests as our wives, so they could get grandstand seats. Well, I did! So here was this purty gal I'd never met, yelling and cheering fer me like we was hitched. We met after the rodeo, had a romance by mail and got married after the 1934 El Paso, Texas, Wild West Show."

After Johnny and Mickey married, they moved to Lincoln County. He worked as a ranch hand in the foothills of the Capitan Mountains for a dollar a day while roping and bull-dogging anytime there was a rodeo nearby. "Mickey and I found some land we wanted on the Rio Ruidoso. The owner wanted \$500 down. That weekend I won \$482 at the Ruidoso Rodeo! We got our land," Johnny recalls with considerable delight.

He and Mickey worked hard for years, establishing a apple orchard, and roadside fruit stand, while expanding their holdings and livestock.

"We got into sheep," Johnny grimaces, "the coyotes just about put us out of business. We were trapping and poisoning and the government trapper was working with us. One month we got 65 coyotes, but the killing never slowed down." Over the years, they parlayed their holdings into a ranch; the very same land,

on which Johnny had worked on for a dollar a day.

This land and the 100 head of Brangus mother cows are his pride, his joy, his ongoing act of complete faith in ranching's future.

Johnny predicts environmentalist pressure, and the cost of leasing public lands, will inevitably put

lease-holders out of business. "It's a shame," he says, "but the handwriting is on the wall. I believe that cattle prices will stay depressed for a while, but when ranchers are forced off public lands, folks who run livestock on private property will see an increase in prices."

Johnny and Mickey's moderately grazed property is adjacent to National Forest Land. He looks over the five strand fence at the three foot high grass. "All that grass, and all that land is just going to waste. It's dry as tinder. One spark, and it'll burn out of control; reckon it might burn me out too. If it was properly utilized, it would sure lower the fire danger."

Standing in a high point over looking the ranch Johnny points out interesting features.

"I been putting in a water system from that spring by the willow tree for the last few years. Now I have 11 miles of pipeline and 11 stock tanks," he says.

Pointing to a large meadow between the bases of two steep mountains he says, "Our land used to belong to Sheriff William Brady. He and his deputy, George Hindman are buried there; have been since Billy the Kid shot 'em." (The Kid and five regulators ambushed them in nearby Lincoln April 1, 1878.) Indicating a bullet-proof-looking, steel stock tank, Johnny laughs and says, "That's the wood fired boiler that produced hot water for Fort Stanton when General "Blackjack" Pershing was stationed there. To think, that old card player took a bath in the water from this boiler."

Don't tell Johnny he's 88 and should slow down. He has so many projects going, he ain't got time to think about it.

He's putting more miles of waterlines and storage tanks on the range; recently planted two orchards in the Rio Bonito Valley and is working on his garden. He and his sons, recently acquired and are restoring the house and property where lawyer Alexander McSween's widow, Sue, lived after the Lincoln County War.

The old cowboy regards the land, the cattle and the multitude of improvements with earnest pride; strong pride, born of making it with his hands, those remarkable hands. "Yep!" he says, "I'm still working, don't have too, but I love it; sure beats picking cotton!"

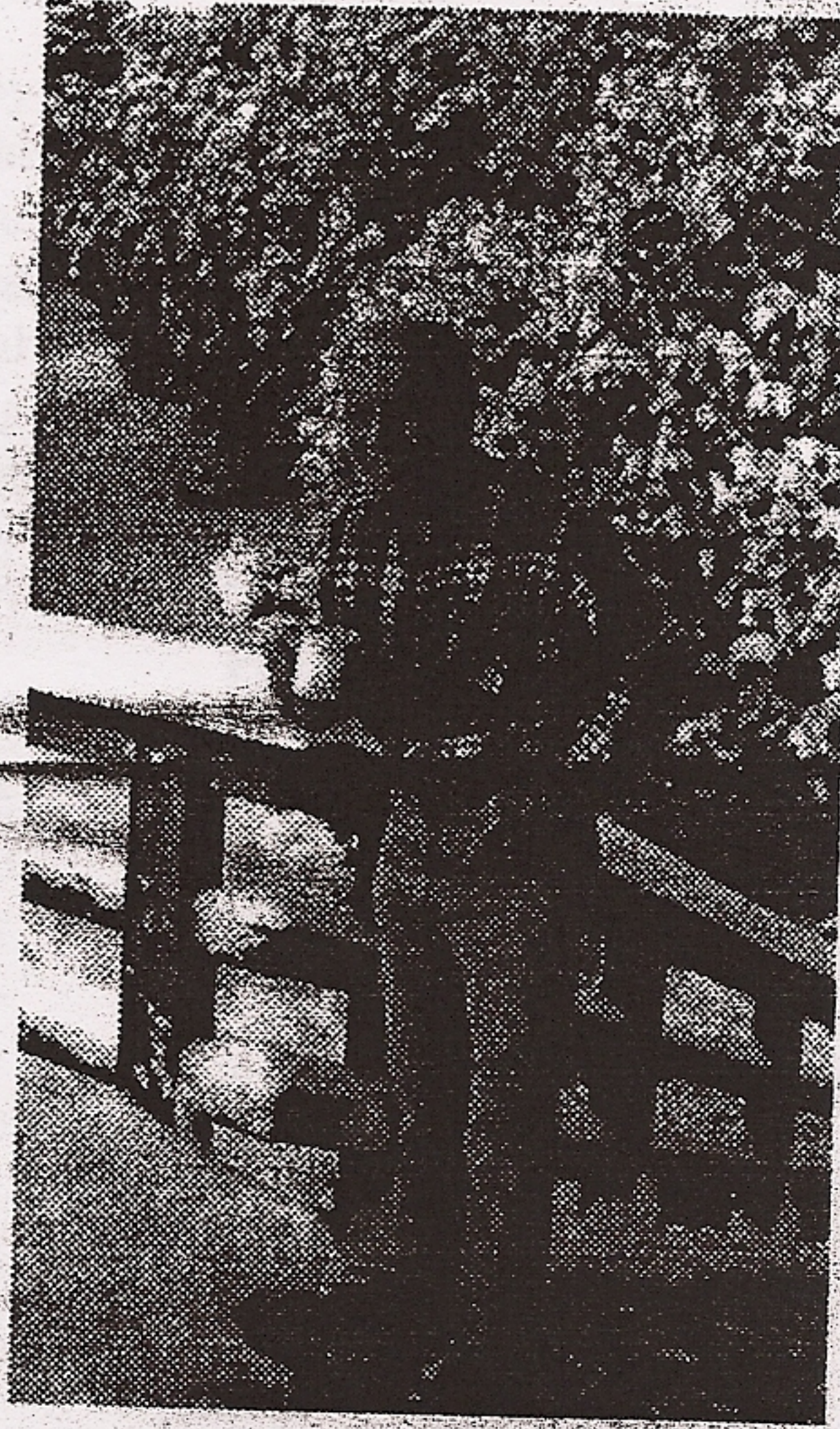
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"I got tired of walking on my knees dragging a pick-sack and picking cotton; decided to become a cowboy, thought that was for me, so in '28, I left the family farm in Kress, Texas and went to Swisher County (Texas). I hired on with the Shoe-Bar Ranch there. We run about 10,000 head of cattle. It was rough, going 18 hours a day no matter what the weather. I was beginning to wonder if I'd made the right choice.

I heard about New Mexico's mountains from a wrangler, moved here in '29 and tried to make a living trapping, but hides were only bringing about 15 cents; I was living on cottontails, sardines, apples, and frijoles. Luckily, I got a job herding 4,000 head of Angora goats in the mountains. Made \$15 a month, vittles and a cot. I started hearing about jackpot goat roping in Hondo and Ruidoso, so started training. I'd practice on a goat



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With horse and lariat, Johnny earned his rig, started riding the rodeo circuit and working as a cowboy across the West. It was while roping he met his future wife, Mickey Good. "I was at a rodeo in Silver City, New Mexico. This fellow who managed a

dude ranch for young ladies, came by and asked us cowboys, if we would sponsor some of their guests, as our wives, so they could get grandstand seats. Well, I did! Here was this gal I'd never met, yelling and cheering fer me like we was hitched. We met after the rodeo, had a romance by mail and got married after the 1934 El Paso, Texas Wild West Show."

After the wedding, Johnny and Mickey moved to Lincoln County. He worked, as a ranch hand in the foothills of the Capitan Mountains for a dollar a day while roping and bulldogging anytime there was a nearby rodeo. "Mickey and I found some land we wanted on the Rio Ruidoso. The owner wanted \$500 down. That weekend I won \$482 at the Ruidoso Rodeo! We got our land," he recalls with considerable delight.

He and Mickey worked hard for years, establishing an apple orchard, and roadside fruit stand, while expanding their holdings and livestock. "We got into sheep." Johnny grimaces, "The coyotes just about put us out of business. We were trapping and poisoning, and the government trapper was working with us. One month we got 65 coyotes, but the killing never slowed down." In 1958, they parlayed their holdings into a ranch; the very same land on which Johnny had worked for a dollar a day. This land, and the hundred head of Brangus mother cows, are his joy and ongoing act of complete faith in the future of ranching. Johnny predicts environmentalist lobbyists, and cost of leasing public lands will inevitably put leaseholders out of business.

Johnny and Mickey's moderately grazed property is adjacent to National Forest Land. He looks over the five-strand government fence at the three-foot high grass. "All that grass, and all that land is just going to waste. It is dry as tinder. One spark and it'll burn out of control; reckon it

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SIMPLY JOHNNY.

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BUILDING a new corral

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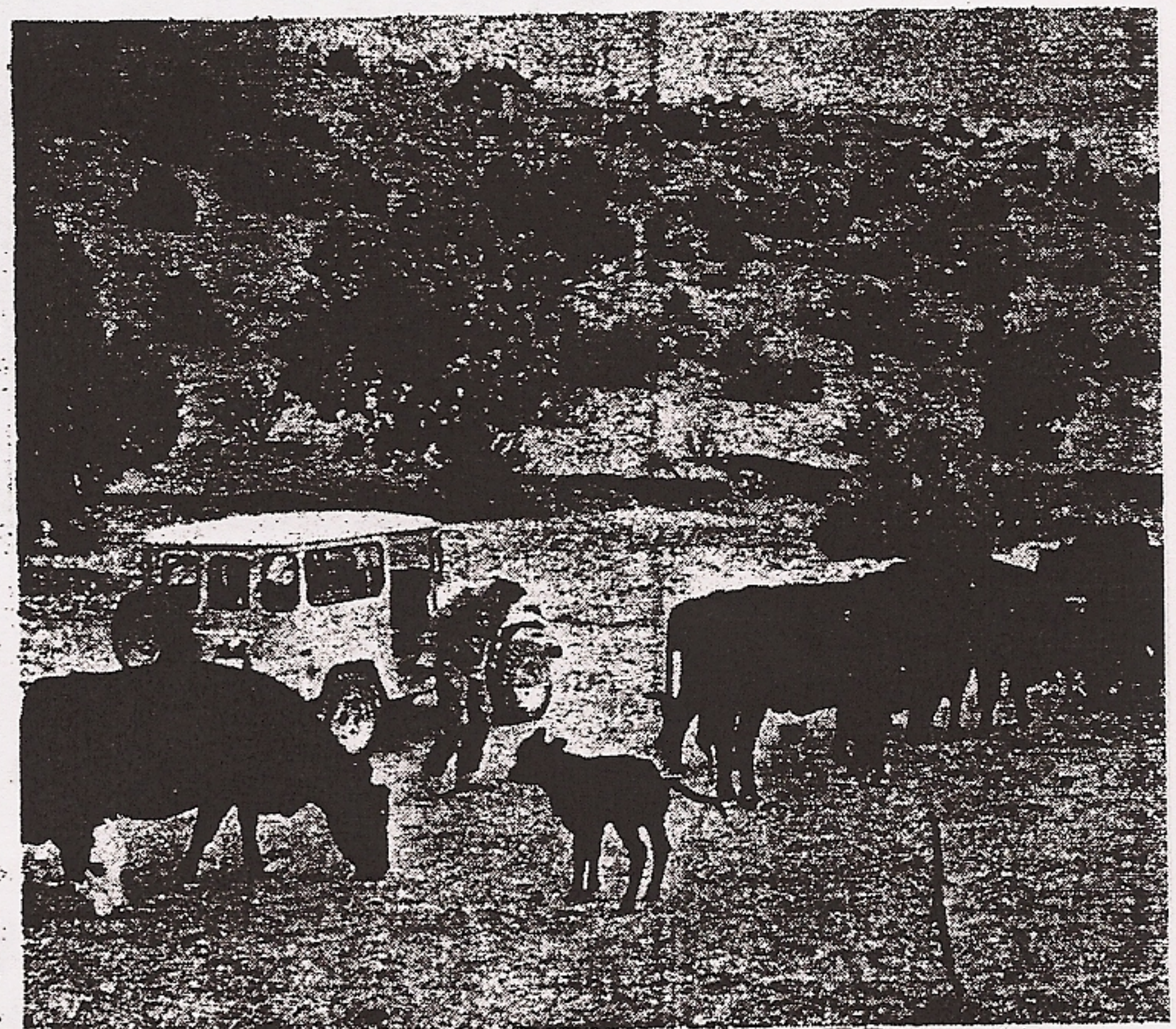
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CHECKING the calf crop.