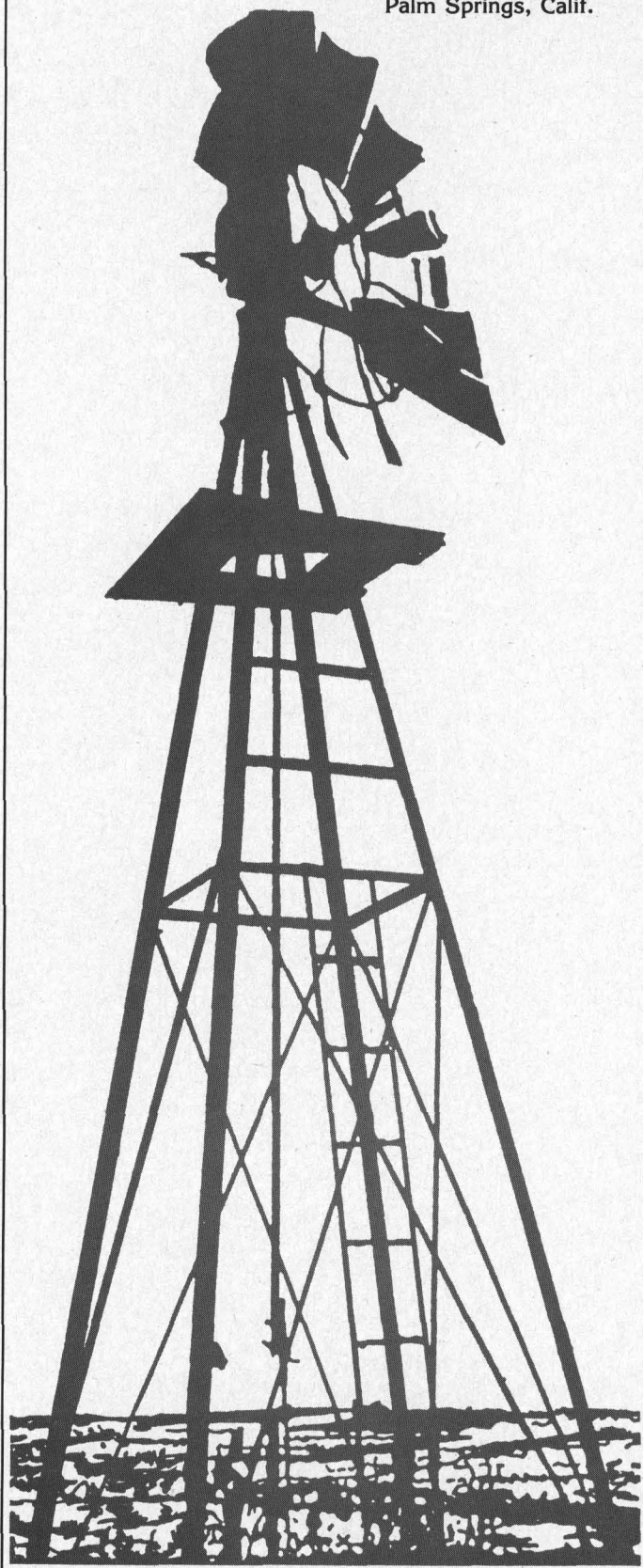


WHEN WINDMILLS WERE IN FLOWER

By Troxey Kemper
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Those wonderfully efficient farm windmills are still around, but available electricity has thinned them out. Once, windmills sprang up like wildflowers across the face of the nation, bringing water to a thirsty land.

Usually there was plenty of wind to be tapped for power, and it was free. Before the introduction of the mills in the 19th century, water wells had to be dug by hand and the life-giving liquid was brought to the surface in "the old oaken bucket," or some similar vessel.

In the Texas Panhandle, my cousin and her husband had a small ranch, where they produced Angus cattle. They also raised a family of skunks, almost unintentionally.

My cousin's husband found the baby skunks in the cedar breaks, clustered around their dead mother. He took the young ones to the ranchhouse, adopted them, and also had a veterinarian to de-skunk them.

Visitors got a surprise on seeing one or more skunks almost underfoot, and a scramble for safety was the usual reaction.

"Oh, they've been fixed," my cousin would explain. "They won't get you with skunk stink." But visitors still were uneasy.

When the striped kittens grew up, they all left—probably went back to the cedar breaks. But sometimes little tracks would appear in moist spots around the ranch windmill, and it looked like the skunks had come back during the night. They never showed up in the daytime.

On large ranches, installation of a windmill made it possible to tap water under the range and bring it to the surface for livestock which, until then, traveled great distances between waterholes.

With a windmill's bounty, the housewife in the arid west, trying to build a home against great odds could have a little garden and even some flowers.

Most farms and ranches in the Midwest and the West had at least one mill powered by wind currents. A range rider, in addition to his cowboy gear, might carry a few tools and repairs for windmills. On his journeys to check fences and keep tabs on the foraging herds, he also could keep the mills pumping and storing water.

My cousin and her husband had only one mill which furnished water for the livestock and for the household. They had a large metal tank to store water for the stock in case the wind failed for days at a time, which was sure to happen.

One day when I was there for a visit, they were showing me with pride their Angus cows and heifers and steers as they came in from the grassland to get a drink. Being a small herd, most of them were gentle and at ease around people. One lanky cow was rather frisky, though.

As she was busy drinking at the stock tank, I walked up behind her and, on a sudden impulse, reached out with both hands and somewhat like a pouncing wildcat, made a growling noise and slapped her on the rear end. I don't know what made me do it; it was a crazy thing to do. I would have been in big trouble if the poor cow had been injured, or worse still, drowned. Because that's what she did—she leaped into the tank.

I think my cousin and her husband and I all stood with our mouths open, at least for a minute. The cow swam to the other side and climbed out and took off for the open prairie. She did not appear to be hurt or even slowed down by her swim.

It was a relief to me when my cousin and her husband burst out with a laugh and a whoop. They were not mad at me at all. But I wouldn't want to try that stunt again.

They named that cow Leapin' Lena.

Whenever we were together, we always mentioned Leapin' Lena at the windmill. The mills, wherever they were situated, usually were social gathering places for cattle and horses and sheep.