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A long time ago at a banquet for herders and wives, my place at the table spilled over enough grandchildren tales to fill several eras of modern history. Sure no complaint on my part.

In those thin-soled days of run-over boot heels for cowboy wages, 50 bucks was enough to commission a winter speech to Nome, Alaska, if the trails broke open on a weekend.

The next important part was the eternal, forever lesson learned – to omit grandchildren stories to audiences outside of prisons. The talkers at the table only waited to high-spot how brilliant the grandkids acted at church, school, the ranch and the bank before going into detailed climaxes at the breakfast table, the sunroom, her sister's house, and the car seat.

After feeding a mob of seven boys and a girl from the ranch pastures to the townsite of Mertzon and to the school grounds, grandparents' tales from mothers and stepdads covered that topic. Record somewhere that if you ever need to hire a grandkid-proof storyteller, look for parents of a big brood. They are foolproof. They are not going to tell you about first teeth, or cute sayings to the young

preacher, or first cuss word about his first tooth to the young preacher.

And don't go off saying this scribe will be sorry someday that he didn't write about his grandchildren. The newspaper has run this article for 40 or 50 years. No record exists, but there may have been times of being ashamed but not sorry a deadline was reached without a grandchild audition.

Pictures of grandkids or grandbabies stun audiences, too. After they have been flashed, the people's eyes glaze over like sailors on the Dead Sea. Once the children leave home, sell the movie and slide camera to buy maps and a travelogue, or maybe a compass and a Winnebago.

If that doesn't work, see if you are lonesome over the holidays after half the eastern part of Texas comes for dinner. (Six point fine, here.) Take a pulse count of the response to the news that "We are staying home during" or "By the way, Dad, bet you'd like to spend Christmas out in Arizona like you ...". Run those by, then consider whether you want a subscription to *Good Housekeeping* or *National Geographic*.

Grandkids and grandparents like each other, even love each other, don't misunderstand. The grandson and his girlfriend, who just came home during the hurricane season

from a charter boat off in the Indies, make good listeners beached without wind whistling through port holes. Along with a French girlfriend beautiful enough to make Mother's grandfather clock chime on her way upstairs, he brought exotic chocolates, blanched cheeses, and rich wines.

Close as this comes to a grandson story is the time when, at five years old in my lap, he wanted to know if I liked to look at pictures of pretty women. Without hesitation, we agreed. From then on, we upheld that standard of truth between us.

One time, he spent a whole summer at the ranch without being warned to stay away from the Mexican border on weekends, or out of San Angelo, Texas after dark.

He flanked big, stout calves; he smoked unfiltered Camel cigarettes out in the yard. The work encompassed 25 or 30 square miles of land space and 10 times that much skyline. His wage was deposited in an Austin bank in pure cash – part of which applies to his land payment today.

Such urban nonsense as income taxes and Social Security did not apply to granddads and grandsons. Shipwrecked as ranches stay, the goal is to avoid deductions, not hunt excuses for tax deductions.

The words "tax-free" do make a herder jerk like a stinging scorpion's tail. The way to settle us is a low

interest rate crooned over a radio set or printed on the page of a newspaper.

Those old jug-keepers who stuck with us during the Drouth of the 50s ranched about as hard as we did before that little seven-year recess ended. Grasslands east and west of Angelo grew some potent characters then.

Shoot! One time the FBI investigated a rancher down on the McCullough County line in World War II for taking cookies to the German war prisoners at Brady, Texas. She fed the agents lunch and gave them two pounds of country butter to take home apiece. No one has ever seen a written report yet, unless the prisoners wrote home from Brady about a nice German-American lady who baked brownies.

Lots of other folks' grandkids pass by here on a school day. But if you let your lawn grow long in Mertzon, no one will stop.