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Mail accumulates on the runs away from home. The lady at the office in Mertzon holds off the critical material. My hard and fast rule reads to dodge things that have the penalty for late payment in small print.

Two or three of those gangbusters are serious, whether printed in block or miniature. Flotsam toward the ol' trash basket can throw open a hullabaloo in a computerized world.

However, heavyweights like the IRS probably speed-read herders' tax returns. The Service caught on years ago; the break-even point for examining our stuff made chimney sweep look like a good trade.

By the time the trip was over in January, the 2009 return was ready. Big difference from the old days is that there were only eight kids to deduct back then. But today, other than myself, there may be as many as three or four hundred cows to support, plus a little dab of ad valorem taxes to deduct a whopper of a feed bill that keeps my four-legged dependents.

One big deduction the bookkeepers disallow is the 30 or 40 postcards a month that should qualify for business expense. Were you around way back the time an IRS agent inquired how many days a cowboy helped mark calves on the Divide years ago, you would agree with me.

To expedite contact, I wrote back on a postcard, "He drew eight days' pay and probably did four to four and a half days' work. I think one of those days, a calf was about as likely to trip and fall as to be flanked by that hombre."

You may recall further, I offered to meet halfway between Mertzon and Abilene. The highways iced over thick that winter. Also, I was curious to learn in person how the Service determined how many days some hands worked.

Among the first oil exploration crews ever in the county, for example, the oldtimers thought those lads they called "Doodlebuggers" might be reported dead because they came to work so late. In those graybeards' whole lives they had never seen anyone go to work after daylight and come in before dark. I was curious how an agent in an office could solve that mystery still left on the range.

Next day, the agent called back to say it wasn't necessary to pursue the matter. She added that neither she nor anyone in the office had ever had a case answered by a postcard, much less an offer to meet partway to resolve it.

I might have replied; if not, I will here: "Folks can keep an ol' Mickey Mouse watch they had in grade school for 50 years, and then some can't keep from telling a secret

the distance of the shortest block in Mertzon, Texas. Postcards work as well as registered mail or codes."

Later the details of the tax case returned clearer than during the investigation. (Becomes bit cozy here, don't you think?) The hand in question was the one we looked back from the squeeze chute to the crowd pen to see sitting on the fence instead pushing cows our way. He wore a three and one-half inch brimmed black hat. Every time he waved his hat, those old Angus poured through the chute. I remember being thankful he wasn't sitting above the mouth of the chute, slowing the cattle down.

One report in the mail brought results of a doctor's physical examination taken the day after the trip. Without puckering my lips or having a horn to play, the most mournful taps resounded in a three-quarter-ton pickup cab out front of the Mertzon post office ever heard on this side of Cemetery Hill when I opened the results.

Uh, uh, Aunt Mary! What does all this mean? It means when the ol' doc slips on the masks and takes one last whets on the irons, the precious space between your breast bones tying some kind of bones will be split open to repair yore heart. It means you had too much more Rio Bravo than River Jordan in those young days, so far in the past it makes the cave carvings read like current events.

Whew-ee, they may stick their heads in the cavity, for all you are going to know up on a slab in a coma deeper than a Margarita overdose, which ranks with the worst blackout known from the Border up to way into the Shortgrass Country. (Sounds like I am already a bit gassed. Do confess that at the last dance I will probably ever, ever go to on Saturday night, deep homesickness struck when the band played "Rancho Grande.")

Young people don't park behind the graybeards and grannies after we go for our mail. It took and takes a while to engage after a bad report.

Plenty lucky to be off out on the Divide this morning in a light rain, about through packing. The world sure would be a mess if herders could take all their stuff along to town. One thing more, I sure hope I have overreacted, and I *really* hope the doctors have.