

Geographic locations vary, yet human behavior patterns crop up the same all over our country. Last month in Florida on Sanibel Island in the Gulf, motorists piled from their vehicles to help a ranger herd an alligator off the road.

Go back in memory and you will remember that identical characters showed at car wrecks or stray cow roundups on an Interstate. That day in Florida, copies of the same hombres rushed by in soiled tee shirts and flipflop city shoes, dead bent on taking part in moving a thousand-pound reptile off one lane of a state highway without so much as a walking stick for a prod.

Any of the group could have been the same people who stood in the pickup lights and talked the night we butchered a steer calf killed on the highway through the ranch. It'd been no surprise to see the guy pass by who held up a belt he'd found at another wreck after an ambulance sped away from a much worse tragedy on the same highway.

Visible from our spot, a sign warned that feeding alligators meant a \$500 fine for the first offense. The bottom print was too small to see through a windshield

splattered with mosquitos and no-see-ums whether trying to sook a gator off the road with, say, a dead catfish for bait came under the same crime.

A second sign warned that parking on the right-of-way cost 50 bucks per offense. Beyond counting pairs on the feed ground or measuring windmill rods, shortgrass herders can pass a lifetime without much arithmetic. The ratio of 10 illegal parking offenses compared to feeding one alligator did seem out of proportion, even with a background reaching to the days when woolie operators flinched over four dollars worth of fine wool being enough fiber to make a hundred-dollar suit.

The alligator's clock ran on Stone Age time. In 30 minutes on Eastern Standard Time, my pal wanted to turn in an assignment over at the college sponsoring the three-day literary event for poets. Somewhere scribbled in on the same schedule, my timeframe showed I might toodle by courses offered for musical students in songwriting, or join the misguided innocents interested in journalism.

Alligator-blocked roadways make valid excuses on Sanibel Island for being late to class; or for that matter, perhaps for being a month behind on a quarterly payment. I was in no rush to make the classes filled with smooth cheeks so intent and ambitious.

Serious lads, they are. They take 15 to 18 course hours per semester. The weed they smoke to relax must not interfere with making classes, like tap beer once postponed my generation's attendance.

The main speaker last night was a journalist and a published novelist. His introduction said he'd worked for a Florida newspaper for 30 years. From what you hear, it's better for scribes not to bring up how many years they have written for a sheet. The drift nowadays says to beware of the label "legendary" once so dear a word attached to an author's profile, and substitute "momentary" for a title.

Girls in circulation at the *Livestock Weekly* sent an expiration notice in December to my post box at Mertzon. "By mistake," they said. Nevertheless, the ride back to the ranch with the notice on the dashboard made the tire treads hum a mighty dark version of "Ol' Rocking Chair's Got Me."

From the car, the hook on the ranger's poke stick looked like the crook on a rod to dunk cattle in a dipping vat – to push their heads under the water. She was bound to be trained beforehand on how and where to nudge an alligator.

Alligators are mighty hard to relate to by humans, with quirks like yawning without covering the mouth full of sharp teeth, to changing sides in a swamp puddle to bake

the mud stuck to the scales and belly. Students in Florida do have plenty of armadillos and tree lizards for starters to practice on.

Stuck there in the road, it came back to me how country we were in the 1930s. You could have told us alligators slept so soundly that Tarzan practiced his wrestling hold on sleeping alligators, and we'd have believed you.

We even believed "ol' Doggie," the ex-Diamond A cowboy, when he told us that out West, gila monsters dug holes in numbers as populous as prairie dog towns. Every last bunkhouse one of us would have hitchhiked if we thought we could land a job on the Diamond A.

Folks sure roared off once the ranger succeeded in moving the alligator to the ditch. My pal stayed late to make up for the time lost at the roadblock; I left songwriting early after the instructor said he wanted my row to come up for a tuning fork test for tone deafness.