

11SHORTGRASS.DOC

One of the government agencies – the name escapes me for the moment – claims that 11 million citizens in my generation remember the Depression of the 1930s. For sure, 11 million is the quoted figure. The agency might have been federal or state.

The reason the 11 million figure stands out is that the Department of Commerce, or the Department of Labor, one, announced two or three years ago that 11 million illegal Mexican aliens worked on this side of the Rio Bravo.

Some outfit – sounds like the Census Bureau or the Immigration Service – must have kept population scores on the tanned folks in line on Saturdays at the supermarkets. And you better believe it's hard to count a line, the way 90 percent of the people talk on cell phones in grocery stores. One gal looks down, phone buried in her ear; the other in front of her gazes into space, elbow at half-mast. It makes it impossible to determine where the line is headed.

Biggest mystery is that both counts came out exactly 11 million. At the time that Commerce or maybe Labor estimated the amount of illegals in the country, traffic headed south for Christmas moved so many wets on the way

home between San Antonio and the Border that the tabulator hoses across the highways back-lashed.

During the Depression investigation, the guys I lunch with over in the Wool Capital contributed lots of testimony centered on the years when San Angelo won the district or played for State in football without a comment on the economic index or unemployment rate in the 1930s.

All seven grew up during the Depression. All seven agree the Ford dealership changed owners in 1938. The impact of the new dealer's daughter first day in high school registers strong and clear, down to a blow by blow description of the bloody fight two studs named "Spiky" and Will matched over her in front of Mafeney's drugstore.

How many Ford cars sold in Angelo that year escaped our memory, or why the dealership changed hands. We all agreed that if "Spiky" and Will knew how the Ford dealer's daughter looked last time she hit town in 1998, they'd have found other subjects to disagree upon. The interview boiled down to whether 11 million or 1100 of our generation remembered the details of the Big Depression, but that was sure some fight in front of Mafeney's Drug.

The telephone or utility companies might be who fingered the number of graybeards and grannies left to recall the Big Depression. We attract attention once we

begin to confuse fire alarms and ambulance sirens with the refrigerator and deep freeze coming on too often, or complain about dialing the wrong numbers on dials rigged with numbers and flashers better sized for racetrack tote boards or overhead traffic lights.

One of my sons brought up at Thanksgiving that all international telephone calls are monitored by the government for a clue. A great-grandkid hiding under the tablecloth, beating on a tin pan, marred the explanation. Right there might have been a chance to insert the fact that long distance calls from Mertzon to Angelo cost six precious bits for three minutes in 1938, or thereabout. It would have been an important way to compare long distance calling cost in 1938 to the work it took a cowboy in 12 or 14 hours to earn one dollar.

Now way back, I might have expanded on how the international operators snooped on calls. Eavesdropping became a science on country party lines. The wire strung from the ranch to Mertzon of some eight drops made the observation of the right to privacy act rank with adherence to a weekend dress code at a nudist colony.

Also, hearing aids tuned to override a rocking chair's creak or denture's pop give poor transmission over toy drums and baby rattles. Best chance is to try ol' Grandpap

out on a test like: "Gramps, want another little nip?" Then shoot the clincher: "Time to go home, Grandpa. The band quit an hour ago."

Once the drummer fell asleep under the table, the subject switched to the day's football games. Before I gained the floor to retell the time an indisposed goat roper mounted on a dun horse on the sidelines at Menard in 1935 heeled a player from Mason in a broken-field touchdown attempt. My daughter asked where the coffee filters were kept.

Good she did, as I'd forgotten if the roper's name was "Booger," or if that was the football player's name. Too bad there wasn't some government guy around to analyze the deficiency.

I am going to write the agency that knows 11 million of us remember the Big Depression as soon as I remember the name. Be valuable to know how they discovered how much we remember for a base study on absentminded witnesses in courtrooms, or field studies of little tiffs in marital unions. Might be they gave too much credence to the amount of recall of Ford dealers' daughters and fistfights in front of drugstores.