

Austin claims to have a 50-year supply of water. Omitted in the boast of abundant water is the supply of fresh air, running around 24 to 36 hours' worth, in my opinion.

Tuesday week ago, I climbed a slight incline over in the southeast part of town on an early morning walk. Humidity pegged 80 percent-plus; Fahrenheit temperature registered over 90 degrees. Raw gasoline odor fouled the air thick enough to coat the roof of my mouth and make it taste like the back drag on a siphoning hose. Gasping and trembling for air made my walking stick tap as hard as a steel bit hitting the sidewalk.

At the turn-around, blinded by the pollution, it took two tries to find the course to return to my room. Every step, I whistled the powerful *Battle Hymn of the Republic* to expel the carbon fumes from my lungs. By striking a sharp military cadence, I reached the back yard of my friend's house and the relative safety of natural shade under a fig tree and earth freshened by a lawn sprinkler drawing earthworms from the turf.

Surprisingly, the air circulation dropped with the state legislature in session. Those windbags pump enough air into the state halls to make the collapse of a big

dirigible seem like a birthday balloon deflating. However, 55 of the worthies fled last month across the Texas border into Oklahoma, bringing the House to a standstill to avoid a quorum and block a vote on a redistricting bill. Had the border jumpers stayed and chose to filibuster, hot air rising in the rotunda of the Capitol building would have caused a draft downtown, diverting the carbon monoxide fumes and breaking down the toxicants.

Only contact I had with the site of our state government was a picnic one of my sons' family held on the southeast grounds on a grassy knoll. The Capitol was chosen because this set of grandchildren is too young to play among the fire ant beds in the city parks. Fire ant control is much more serious on state property than the organic nature-balancing method used by the city.

Two stern state troopers and a high steel spiked fence further secured the area. Other than sharing the space with the two dogs to one jogger ratio common to Austin, the toddler and her five year-old brother roamed at will, observing the sweaty figures following their leashed pooches. Using an old jacket for a pillow. I rested under a shade tree.

Staring up in the branches, drugged by rich cheeses and spiced sausages, I reviewed my disappointment with a 20

year-old grandson for finishing his last semester in a New Mexico college without answering my letters or returning telephone calls. Combined the two issues into a seething setting of resentment and a well staged case of self-pity. Last I'd heard from him was when he wanted to know how to cook deer chili for a Super Bowl party. It was so long ago I'd forgotten my answer.

I suddenly became alert and realized I was lying close to the path I once took as a 20 year-old employee of the Land Office to go back and forth to the Comptroller's Office 50 years ago. Raised on one elbow, across the street to the right of the state troopers' post, the vision of the hearty iniquity of the old Capitol Tavern returned to memory. As I gazed northerly, a big pillar to the right of the main entrance came in focus; that was where the pages shot dice while waiting to perform their valet duties transporting lawmakers to and from the session.

Thus oriented, I laid back and stared into the branches. Listened to the leaves rustle in the cottonwood song. Stroked the stubble of my gray beard. Pictured my grandson in New Mexico, lingering on the campus to the final day of school, his thoughts immersed in college girls and his program directed toward malt beverages from Colorado.

"He's not such a bad kid," I thought. "Hell's afire, we were five gallons of gas and a five dollar bill away from perdition for days on end so close to the border of Mexico. Better drop the charges and hope the lad's DNA links to his mother's side of the family."

The Chinese say, "Before you mash a yellow speckle firefly, you better be sure it's not a yellow speckle wasp." My old mother used to tell me not to judge other folks, followed by, "You are just like your father."

Security was lax when we went out the gate carrying picnic baskets and sleepy grandkids. I nodded toward the site of the Capitol Tavern. Made a silent salute to the big gateway leading into the pillared doorway. And thought how much I hoped my grandson would make it back to Texas without running his pickup off in a ditch.