

MARCH 1, 1984

About the year 2084, possible sooner, man is going to start setting a torch to the fast food joints. Somewhere a cook will boil a beef bone and split out the marrow to make a dumpling of cracker crumbs to float in a rich broth of meat and vegetables. Chunks of two year old steer will once again simmer over wood coals; spinach leaves and hard boiled eggs will be reunited with sliced radishes and white onions to make plates of salad. No indictments for arson will be given; life will flow at a rich ebb.

It all hit me the other night going to the ranch. Fast food is doomed. They can't keep leaving the peanut butter out of the cookies forever. The challenge is to great. Fancy signs and pretty pictures aren't going to satisfy people much longer. Air-spun bread and fake orange juice is going to fail. I don't know how long it's going to take, but one of these days a cornbread stick or a pan of yeast rolls is going to make the price on troy ounce metals seem like a counterfeiter has ruined the market.

Finding good food is a serious quest with me. Wherever I visit I watch for signs like aprons hanging on a doorknob or maybe a flour sifter or a pastry blender sticking out of a drawer. If the wastebasket so much as shows a frozen pizza box or a greasy carton from a fried chicken place, lots of unexpected things start filling up my appointment schedule. I have a telephone and a credit card; it's a home cooked meal that I want.

This morning I was forced to eat breakfast in a chain outfit in San Angelo. It was too early for the big crowd. Customers were scattered about the room, cut off in bunches of one.

While I waited the 23 seconds it took to flatten my egg and wrinkle my bacon in a microwave, it became apparent that these hombres were off their feed. Fried buns and melted cheese had jaded their outlook. Under the fluorescent lights I couldn't rate their indisposition, but by the way their ears drooped when they lowered their heads to sip coffee, I'd have cut nine of the first 10 to the sick pen and held back the one until I was sure he'd fit in the big lot.

The lady wrapping the food, and she has the most important post on the counter, said that lots of the customers appeared listless. Since I still had 4.1 minutes left of my allotted time to eat breakfast, I strolled among these ailing city folks to observe them closer. What was needed was an inducement to eat, like maybe a house derringer pistol the serving girls could carry in their pockets to flash at the diners who'd lost their will to eat. A short pistol barrel fitted snugly against an old boy's mastoid will unlock a lot of his mental blocks. As long as they didn't frighten little children with their guns. I don't see a drawn pistol as being any more threatening than a slow fate of anemia and boredom from flash-fried onion flakes and singed soybean crusts.

My breakfast took 7.6 minutes including the investigation. Compared to the time I spend in a slow-food place, I saved 37.4 minutes and by 10 o'clock only tasted a trace of aluminum foil when I exhaled.

Saving that extra time has put me on schedule all day. I haven't been late at a single stop. I'd hate to try to feed that city bunch out in a lean year. Maybe they get better once the sun warms their backs.