

The last four times I passed through airport security at the San Angelo terminal, I noticed a slight bit of recognition in this tough, tight-run agency. Might be my packing style, as years ago a tip on packing roller board cases changed my method from the bunkhouse stuff-the-shorts-and-socks-in-the-boot-tops way to a refined placing of rich silks and soft cottons into an art form.

Check-in wasn't so pleasant three weeks ago. The ticket agent's greeting for the early flight was: "And how are you today, young man?" Minute he issued the boarding pass, a contemporary of my brother — say 1940 vintage — in the back of the line in a loud voice asked, "And where are we young folks off to today?"

Stunned — no, dumbfounded is a better choice of words — I retreated to the restroom. What was this "young man" and "we" stuff? Studied my image in the mirror. Thought, "Oh my, now I know how a turkey gobbler feels catching his reflection in a water trough for the first time."

I remembered further the warning a deputy sheriff gave me not to play the grandpa act because a lot of grannies and graybeards tried to sneak by customs officers smuggling

dope from Mexico, putting on a "little ol' lady" and "aw shucks" versions of the ol' granddad act.

Somewhat restored by splashing cold San Angelo city water on my face, I returned to the main terminal to join my friend and go through security. I needed her support, but didn't dare reveal my detractors. Had to hope our destination of Eureka Springs, Arkansas remained secret. As mysterious as the two previous encounters' behaviors were, if they knew I was going to a health resort, those two busybodies might report me to the old folk's home as a skip-out.

Knew for certain not to try acting younger than my age when going through security, so I decided after taking two glancing blows that I'd play the image to the hilt. At my turn, I took extra time removing my shoes and rolling my belt just right in the tray. Checked the time on my wristwatch and counted the pocket change twice before adding to the pile.

Before passing through the screening detector, I fluffed my bow tie and beamed at the agent holding the scanning wand. Fumbled around gathering my stuff off the conveyor belt; made a big deal of tying my shoes. I passed through, only delayed by my dawdling act.

The plane from Dallas/Fort Worth was much larger than expected, as northwestern Arkansas now has all the Wal-Mart and Tyson chicken business. (Missed a third huge corporation headquartered in NW Arkansas in my notes.) Made me uncomfortable riding on a plane bound to be filled with Wal-Mart executives or associated connections, and I consider Tyson chicken and all involved a personal threat to my livelihood and insult to my basic principles.

Knew my identity was safe, as I have only been in Wal-Mart stores three times in my whole life. Boycotting the largest merchant in the world makes fighting giants with slingshots seem like a fair fight.

I don't suppose Tyson noticed the loss of my business, either. My best lick against the chicken mammoth was the year I made 3600 contacts warning people about salmonella disease in chain store chicken. Only time I ever surpassed the record was the year I hit 3700, warning folks about the Australians adding dingo dog meat to their product.

Leaving on a bad start sure made me quiet around the car rental place. Held my thumb over the birthdate on my driver's license during the preliminaries. Withheld telling the young clerk that the first time I was in northwestern Arkansas, Hertz would have been so glad to have a customer, they'd have sent a guy along to be sure he didn't get lost.

We reached the inn in Eureka by five in the afternoon. All was arranged as agreed. The manager brought in a table for a desk and added reading lights, as we had discussed over the phone.

Her white Pekingese dog kept growling each trip I made by her office. She assured me the dog was harmless, and I resisted telling her and her dog that I wasn't harmless around four-legged animals. Worst chicken-killing dog to ever live in Mertzon was in the body class of her dog, however. If dogs are going to kill chickens today, the chickens are going to have to be brought indoors, as the days of free-roaming mutts have ended.

Being away restored the spirit. My trust returned when I realized the "we" and the "young man" patter were a communication deficiency seeped in clichés and TV jargon. The innkeeper sent us to a good restaurant, backgrounded in piped jazz music. Menu prices were lower than in Texas. We took a walk up to a pond after dinner. Burn off a few of the raw edges and this is still a good old world..