

The longest Easter egg hunt at the Mertzson house ended the year a colored egg with a petrified yolk was discovered in the toe of a stocking in the Christmas decorations. Whether the bunny laid the egg in the box and hid it in the sock, or one of the boys stashed the egg in the box for summer scout camp, went unsolved.

It was such a big relief to discover that the odor in the back bedroom wasn't a gas leak, the incident passed as an added benefit for Christmas. But unsolved crimes were common in those days. By the time eight kids came to and left supper, were bathed or ordered to bathe, were read to or forced to recite, they had turned the ol' fireside into case of bedlam and chaos that'd make the Boxer Revolt in China seem like the Epworth League's Silver Anniversary on the little fork of the Brazos River.

The Easter egg mystery might have been reported, yet failed to reach docket from Easter to Christmas. The fact that a hard-boiled egg in a stocking could also have been a weapon along the lines of a crude mace is a clue to the temperament of the times.

Easter egg hunts moved indoors this year. On Thursday, shirtsleeve weather outfitted an 80-degree afternoon. Friday morning, Good Friday, the old cows came bellowing to

feed over frosty stubble and frozen ground. Saturday, driving to Mertzon, I saw highway crews defrosting bridges pelted with sleet and obscured by floating clouds of snow.

The thermometer on the pickup mirror showed 26 degrees. Resting my arm on the hollow seat divider, the thump of my pulse beat a chant over and over: "This little cowboy sent his cattle to market; this little cowboy kept his home. This little cowboy had angel food cake; this little cowboy had cold corn-pone."

Under such a deep spell, one of two things happened; ice on the windshield reduced the field of vision, or the trauma of spring reversing back to winter brought on a blinding spasm of tears. Too, after all those thin Hereford cows of the ranch's smothered in a Kansas snowstorm in the drouth of 1950, just artificial snowflakes falling off fake Christmas trees in department store windows blur my eyes so bad that the sidewalks in Angelo buckle and pitch like kite tails.

Diagnosing herders' afflictions takes all the instruments and knowledge of modern medicine, plus every trick a seer can pull up on a crystal ball. Healers need a lot of experience to treat patients where the yellow tinge to tissue may just be from wallowing in cottonseed meal instead of a symptom of jaundice.

I don't know the full particulars, but the spring the foreman at Cedar Canyon thought the cowboy Rowdy lost his eyesight from drinking lemon extract the first time, the old doc at Rankin restored Rowdy's vision to 20/20. Doc's secret was prescribing wearing a new stiff-brimmed hat instead of a floppy, dusty one that folded over when Rowdy took a nap on the bar.

But the next town feat Rowdy pulled, he lost his new hat and his eyesight. So Doc's advice was never proven right for sure. No one disputes the fact that lemons are healthy; yet when imbibing it in extract form for light stimulation while avoiding entertainment taxes, folks see all sorts of snakes and spiders on the ceiling until the projector shuts off for good.

Easter weekend, the icy roads caused a 10-car pileup in San Angelo. To renew the rights of the Texas Highway Department to cross the place on Highway 67, a truck skidded off on the top of Cowboy Hill, tearing a big hole in the net wire on the south side of the road. The fence went unchecked until late Sunday, as I had to use a couple of my grandson's ski poles to fetch the morning newspaper.

After the thaw Monday, the damage showed stalled growth of grass and burned leaved and buds on the fruit and pecan trees. Big shock was the shriveled, frost-bitten

mesquite leaves. Mesquites thrive on adverse weather. Weather failures, such as drouths, floods, hailstorms, tornadoes, or close sequences of all those calamities seem to stimulate growth of strong branches, abundant leaves, and sharp thorns.

The prickly pear and locoweed languished in false wilt for a whole day. Jimpson weed and bitterweed, deadly plants to all species, shuddered a few times and shook off the chill. The old cows took on mournful stances, but those old sisters are the grand dames of looking sorrowful.

I'm sure plenty of herders stayed around the phone hoping to report a worse blizzard on Easter in 1945, or a big death loss in sheep and goats in '76. I kept hoping for an opening to mention the spring we marked lambs in a freezing rain.