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Things are falling into place in '97. Big offers started coming in right after the holidays. Opportunities like a bid to keep a notorious insomniac eight month-old boy at the ranch while the mother and father rested up on the top floor at a big Fling Ding dance at Sonora, Texas.

That was followed by a chance to serve on the Irion County Historical Board at only a bit more risk than breaking up gang fights on football fields, or arbitrating disputes over domino games at family reunions. Neither contact appreciated that I only give advice and opinions on rearing children and running community affairs. "Long distance analyst twice removed" is the title of the position.

The ranch is no longer set up for babies and is too isolated for the vigorous life of committee work. By satellite, the ranch telephone makes a 450 mile round trip to transmit messages. One-on-one encounters mean a 44 mile round trip. Thirty miles is over a dirt track suitable for Range Rovers and heavy duty jeeps. Pickups and oil transports travel the road daily, however, the vibration is so severe that side vents come unhinged and door handles and ashtrays shake off in the floorboards. Thus, opening a weekend nursery or public office off out here defeats the definition of the electronic and jet age.

Much has been lost by my children and friends ignoring my lengthy cribside experiences as a father of eight.

Clinics as far away as Rochester, New York and Panama City, Florida once clamored for my advice on wind colic and lateral teething problems. My cereal recipe laced with paregoric with a 5 cc dropper full of the latter reserved straight for mom or dad, met wide acclaim across the country. Orthopedic doctors called long distance to discuss my method of healing rocking chair elbow by knotting diapers into a sling to relieve the strain on the joints of rocking a howling kid to sleep. My paper on drying diapers entitled, "Bleaching the Stains From Parenthood" was quoted in medical journals in far corners of the continent.

Of all my accomplishment in the field, however, I am proudest of the discovery of a foolproof method to burp babies in the lap instead of over the shoulder. At one time, I could have burped any size patient from a premature spider monkey to a 44-pound baby orangutan without so much as a wet gurgle.

The thought of serving on boards revived a different feeling than thinking back on raising kids. Tremors still develop along my temples recalling the hours on school boards and city councils and such august panels as the Cub Scout and PTA forums. I wanted history preserved. I just didn't want to be one of the preservatives.

A few weeks ago during the January blizzard, I looked through the book the history society published in the 1970s of all the families in Irion County. The book meant more than it did 30 years ago. In those three decades so much had

been lost to the grim rate of attrition of man and his sense of place.

Within the same time frame in which I read the history book, an old friend in Austin sent a photograph from the Library of Congress taken at the Stock Show in San Angelo in 1940. Fellow by the name of Russell Lee made the shot. He worked for the Farm Security Administration in the 1930s helping the famous photographers Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange record the Big Depression. Mr. Lee had been a fishing buddy of my friend in Austin. My compadre wanted to know the buyers' names sitting on the front row of the stands.

Not one lead worked in identifying these once important civic leaders. Older oldtimers thought maybe one was the mayor and another a powerful banker and big landowner. The idea struck, and struck hard: "If in 47 years, nobody around can identify the mayor of a city the size of San Angelo and a big jugkeeper backed by 100 sections of deeded lands, those high-kicking dancers I run into every Saturday night over in Angelo at the V.F.W. Club and Elk's Fraternal Order are going to be remembered about as long as a kid writing his name on the sidewalk in white chalk out in front of the school house." Same fate awaits for the spendthrifts I keep meeting on airplanes and tour boats. All that's going to happen after they are gone is a big meltdown of plastic credit cards and an estate composed of frequent flier miles.

Too bad Mr. Lee didn't give us a hint by writing initials on the back of his photograph. From the looks of

his subjects, they didn't appear to be prospects to borrow  
five bucks to leave town...