

Over the holidays, a new plan developed for handling guests at the ranch. Discovered at Thanksgiving how to delegate power along with delegating work. I appointed my Austin daughter-in-law, Holly, to assign bedrooms but reserved the authority to handle complaints from the assignees.

The issue covers the ranch house and the Mertzon house bedrooms, also the couches and the floor space in the two living rooms for the student bunks. Second floor, or the loft accommodations at Mertzon, serve weaned and near-weaned kids still in playpens, cribs, baskets, or papoose frames. I learned years ago that the strain on a mother of capturing a child just before he plunges down the stairwell shortens the stay. Any trick to get the Pabulum set on the road, dirty or fair, beats Grandpa being crippled from stepping on a toy crocodile or steel top.

However, the unplugged TV set and computer downstairs comply with new findings by baby healers. The American Association of Pediatricians just released a warning that children should be two years of age before allowed to sit in front of computers, VCRs, and TV's more than two hours a day. They recommended freeing babies of sitting in Mom's lap while she plays games on the Net or spit-curls her hair

in front of the television screen. Made me reconsider giving my new grandchild her first laptop.

My daughter-in-law qualified for the reservation job in an indirect way. Her coffee recipe reduces the need for sleep. After a cup at breakfast, the morning paper's print waves like a six-point Richter reading on a California quake. One cup contains enough caffeine to give a 65-pound sloth insomnia. Once, on a half-cup cut with milk, I did a pirouette so high up on my toes that I bumped my head on a fixture flush with the kitchen ceiling.

My experience dealing with holiday complaints goes way back. The Big Boss spent a lot of his Christmas holidays at the old ranch as an intermission between his principal interests of polo tournaments and big game hunting trips mingled with prolonged winter stays in cabanas on the peninsula of Florida and summer vacations to the Colorado mountain slopes.

Always complained how he disliked the holidays because it wasn't possible to get any work done during Christmas. Came to breakfast grumbling about mechanics stopping work and the hardware store closing for two days. By lunch he had read enough in the day-old newspaper to be incensed over the Mertzson drugstore failing to open to deliver his latest edition. The season he ran short of seltzer water

and Travis Club cigars is hard to relate to in this age of all-night chain stores filled with chasers and stogies.

It took four cowboys, two wagons, four mules, and two 300-acre traps and a bunkhouse to hold the riders, the ridden and the harnessed stock required for the feed run at the old ranch. His orders were to feed the cattle double on the 24th. On Christmas morning, feed the horses and mules and do the chores. (Milk the cows, feed the hogs and chickens, and doctor the hospital pen.)

Over and over, he said how sad it was for an old pony to be without a bite on Christmas morning. The ones of us riding those old ponies were tenderhearted, too. The times we arose in the cold bunkhouse after a Christmas ball, unable to hold solid food on the raging stomach fires and brave thunderous throbs in our temples, we developed a compassion for man and beast as we pitched a saddle on a horse or collared a mule. The tenderness was so strong, the undertow would make Mother Teresa seem hard as a faro dealer.

The complaints I handle are current ones, however, not those of 1950s times. Suppose a grandson says, "Granddad, my face and chest were cold where I slept last night." A good answer would be, "My son, turn over from time to time and sleep on your stomach." Might be, "Granddad, I'm

starving." Sure to be, "Look on the bottom shelf of the cabinet for a stick of sugar-free gum. Excellent remedy to curb hunger, my boy." A likely event, "Granddad, 'Aurb' fell off Kate." Standard script, "Go catch the horse before she breaks the new reins J.R. made last week."

Hardest to please are grown sons. "Dad, the furnace was too high last night. Couldn't sleep." The solution, "Oh, I am sorry. Tonight, go down before bedtime and sweep the barn. Odor of fresh hay straw is an ancient cure for insomnia." Might be a whispered reminder that his guest is a vegetarian: "Dad, please, please carve the rib roast in the kitchen." And Dad (me): "Sure, son, if you will ask your guest to stop eating seaweed and raw okra in the living room between meals."

We are making big progress. Fielded fewer complaints over Christmas than ever before. I sure missed having my daughter-in-law on the ground, but followed her policies and was able to bed the crew..