

Citizens in Mertzon are dated by the directions given visitors. Graybeards say: "Go down there and turn left at Wagner's Garage and take a right at the old South Texas Lumber Yard. He lives in the house next to the old Major Cox home."

Smooth cheeks, in turn, give short, snappy directions using the street signs, house numbers, zip codes, federal ID numbers, or punch all of those figures into a thingamajig called a North Star. Now, a North Star isn't a celestial thing at all, or of any use to my generation to find the house down the street. Cab drivers can be taught to use them, but old herders need a North Star about as much as they need one more fall from a horse.

Unless the newcomer accesses a history book of the county or hires a guide from the 48 Study Club or the Masonic Lodge, he might as well be tracing the Spanish explorers' trails across Texas as asking the oldtimers. Worse luck, however, is to stop a pedestrian for directions, as walking in a ranch town is lonelier than crossing the Dead Sea in a kayak.

Sure sign of desperation is a motorist finally giving up circling the blocks, and stopping some old guy taking a walk to ask where so-and-so lives, or where Juanita Street

intersects Second Avenue. Other than learning the walker has lived in Mertzon all his life, he would do be better to take soundings of the town dogs barking to guess what house is vacant and what one is occupied.

Sunday mornings bring the church crowd to town – some local and some visitors. Baptists and Catholics seem to be the best oriented. If I dare to chance the scorn of the righteous by walking on the Sabbath, more Methodists ask for directions than other faiths. As reported previously, the chimes at the Methodist church echo up Spring Creek valley in decibels exceeding the warning siren at the courthouse. The morning after the Christmas and New Year's dance, the holiday lights strung around the courthouse blink from the chimes bonging so hard in the churchhouse steeple.

In between the chimes clanging, such Methodist stalwarts as Mrs. Robin Hood and her husband Hubert come roaring up in a pickup tuned loud enough so they can hear the motor running to start slamming song books in all the pews. Should I be walking at a church time, I overreact when giving directions to the Methodist service. Have to assume an hombre who can't locate a cacophony of bells echoing across the townsite and can't find the chimes sure won't be able to hear a normal tone of voice. But it

frightens folks to holler; I have to be careful, or the inquirer will just shout, "Never mind, grandpa."

Looks as if I am going to have to find a new place to walk. Preliminary studies by the new USDA nutrition and fitness guide recommend walking 90 minutes a day instead of the 30 minutes in the present guidelines. Should this be accepted, I am going to have to find a town larger than Mertzon to walk in.

Mertzon's townsite is only 12 or 13 hundred acres. Sure, by lapping the school's athletic track, one can walk for 90 minutes, but going in a circle is the curse of a herder's life. Bad enough to be in a profession that repeats the same program year after year without having your one diversion turned into all the excitement of a treadmill.

Don't know how the USDA qualified as being health experts. The agents seen in our parts drive luxurious pickups and eat in the same high-calorie coffee houses and chili joints the rest of us less fortunate members of the community frequent. My sole in-person contact is once a year when a Natural Resources man comes by to design a stocking program requiring high technical skills as there is never much grass to graze. The closest the topic comes

to health is prescribing a recipe for spraying mesquite or prickly pear.

Perhaps I am too close to the pad in Mertzon to find a 90-minute walk. Strangers, crowd-weary city folks, probably see the townsite differently than citizens of a town thinly populated enough to have a clothesline or a dog run in the backyard.

Another thing about judging small towns is that the ranch telephone links to Barnhart. Always is puzzling when a telemarketer pest comes on the wire without knowing my location and says, "I'll be passing through your area." Other than hombres who stop over at the Yellow Rose for a break, a house-to-house tour including a private reception at each stop wouldn't last a couple of hours in Barnhart.

Going to have to study my schedule to walk an hour more every day. Taking shorter baths and eating faster may be the answer. Be interesting to check on the USDA workers' health program. They might give ground if the truth came to light.