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Recent newspaper articles claim San Angelo is in better shape nowadays for water than during the dry 50s.

The city mains are hooked up to three new lakes, holding a whopping 15-month supply of water. Lakes – one, at least – have gained from August rains, increasing the margin. The ideal scenario would be to draw down on the current supply, then have a big flood fill the basins with fresh water.

I haven't tested a glass since the run-off, but the last time I was served water in a café, the lemon juice the waiter squeezed in the glass turned the contents a milky color, indicating an aging in body and flavor.

Forty or 50 thousand more people live within the city limits, or about double the population of the 50s drouth. As I reported before, after a city passes 90,000, the rate of expiration increases the humidity in the atmosphere, making a city need less water. The best evidence is that the outdoor March rodeo and stock show in San Angelo, once known for raging, blinding dust storms, now performs in front of fans packed indoors, breathing over snowcones and soda water. Fogs float up in the dome of the building. Caretakers know to expect early morning dews on the wet sand in the arena.

Small towns lack this advantage. Until Mertzon had eight inches of rain last month, oak trees 300 years old wilted in the heat. Boot and saddle leather cracked from dryness. Seven or eight hundred souls aren't enough to fog up the windshield of a Volkswagen, much less change the atmosphere of three square miles of townsite.

Nevertheless, one morning as I was walking by the Mertzon coffeehouse, the glass door looked overcast. On closer inspection, the haze turned out to be from fumes off the tobacco the local windmill man, "Possum" Martin, rolls into cigarettes. Oldtime windmill men, going back to the days of climbing towers and working on greasy tables, developed a bellows-powered lung action to keep a cigarette lit in high winds. "Possum" has a pulling unit nowadays, but he still draws on a cigarette the way sailors took a drag on their pipes riding the masts of a sailing ship on the high seas. So I just happened to pass by as he expelled a huge cloud of smoke, moistened by the saliva seal of the cigarette paper. (The only smoke-free area the cafe has is the parking lot.)

For sure, Mertzon wasn't hurt as bad by the drouth this time as before. The payroll at the Conoco gas plant and the various jobs serving oil wells changed the picture. By 1955, about all the traffic through town were salesmen

checking by in hopes of an order. The main activity at the lumberyard was sweeping out every morning and locking up in the evening. Down at the wool house, the manager and the warehouseman loaded feed the year around, advancing credit to customers on wool clips that had dropped from thousands of fleeces to the hundreds or less.

I didn't borrow money from the Mertzson bank in those days. The main pin at the bank sat at a desk up front, defending the jug's capital with a threatening scowl tempered by his Scotch ancestry. Took all my emotional and most of my physical strength to face the jugkeepers over at the San Angelo National Bank. Old man J.J. Mathew, the vice president in charge of my notes, kept his desk so enshrouded in cigar smoke that for years thereafter, I'd tremble at the downdraft off a stogie. By the time the rain came in 1957, however, due to the tenacity of us better tenders of hooves and horns, we had pulled the entire banking community from Fort Worth to El Paso on into New Mexico down into equities that'd make a lottery player think he was holding an upper hand.

Now that it's raining around, I feel more comfortable stopping by to drink free coffee at the Mertzson bank. Instead of a scowling Scotchman buffering the trade, smiling officers wave from polished desks and chipper

tellers and alert receptionists greet customers. If I recognize a pickup out front belonging to one of my contemporaries, I go on to the ranch. I like a fresh audience. No use going in to remind the youngsters that the bank ought to be loaning money on livestock instead of cars and bass boats if every gray-whiskered hombre in town is going to preach the same sermon.

Newscasters and scribes enjoy free rein comparing the drouth of the 50s to the one starting in 1992, as witnesses are about gone from the first one. The weather has been dry so long, we don't want to be tricked by a few thunderstorms. Doesn't matter which drouth is worse, unless you are going to organize a debating team. I just wish this one would officially end before there's no question of it being the worst dry spell in history.