

Shortgrass Country

Sears dropped their mail order business last year. A few decades ago, closing down what was then called Sears Roebuck & Co. would have caused Christmas to be drearier than the eve of Ground Hog's Day.

The principal shipment of packages to the Mertzon post office and the railroad depot in the old days bore the Sears name. In the spring, baby chickens peeping in the back of the offices stoked the postmistresses' tempers to high fevers and made the depot agent even grouchier than normal for his trade.

The multi-species range policy on the Mertzon town site grazed a lot of chickens and turkeys and milk cows and saddle horses in those days. Town dogs developed fine bone structure from drinking whole milk and robbing hen's nests. Until prosperity and high feed bills ended the era, few field trials sported Spaniels or pointers with glossier coats of hair than the dogs around Mertzon self-conditioning on yard eggs and calcium-rich egg shells.

The depot and agent disappeared years ago, and mail service is more formal today than in the baby chick period. Last month, for example, a new clerk recognized me by saying, "Oh, you are box 636 and 739, aren't you?" Caught in the spirit, I replied, "Then you must be 76941." We smiled and that's the last contact we've had.

The old boy looking after the lobby and raising and lowering the flag and watering the grass and trees is much more available. For such a busy chap, he's quite light-hearted.

On one of my mail checks I saw six red and gold hens and a black crested rooster grazing on the Post Office lawn as they darted in and out of the reach of the rubber hose he kept swinging in their direction. But he still returned my wave with a smile.

A day later under calmer conditions, I asked him if he thought those chickens might be descendants of a long ago shipment from a mail order house. Experiments on pigeons, for example, show they'll fly hundreds of miles to return to a familiar loft.

The homing instincts of Rhode Island Red hens, to my knowledge, haven't been researched. But it certainly is reasonable to think a three-week-old chick pecking a hole in a cardboard box that landed on a post office floor might become like sailors who see so many shores through port holes that they think any place framed in a circle is their home.

Without knowing one sailor or owning one pigeon, I know for sure that fence-jumping and water-gap-crawling humpy bulls grow worse after looking through the side boards during trailer hauls. Somewhere between and underneath their horns in their minute brain cavity they have an ingrained round trip scheme that's bad enough without giving them travel experience on wheels.

The Postal Service flock disappeared after last week's snowstorm. The mother hen might have moved her brood farther south to a warmer territory.

It'll be interesting to see whether they come back to our post office in the spring. However, as energetic as the yard man swings his hose, science may be forced in the background.