

Mornings after mail call at the Mertzson office hit a high pace. Only old duffers or dufferettes slowed by age spend much time lingering in the lobby.

One age group is retirees home after a career in the cities or overseas. Last week or maybe last month, a gent some 65 years old walked to his pickup, the exact replica of his ol' dad, a ranch neighbor long gone by at least 10 years.

He held his shoulders reared in the same stance as his father. The flashback returned of a spring flood when his father helped rebuild our adjoining water gaps for two months into the summer. Written record of that monsoon season may remain in this newspaper's archives.

Ozona and Sonora suffered big floods. Spring Creek wasn't any frog pond. We hung more fence on forked sticks than was steepled to posts.

The glimpse that morning started a routine of pausing awhile in the pickup in front of the post office to watch for familiar faces or familiar people. One morning two brothers talked on the porch, bringing back memories of their dad.

The older was a herder from over on the old ranch's east side, the younger a local with a jug full of dough

from selling hardware and lumber downtown, retired to a plush life across Spring Creek.

Neither of the two acknowledged my presence one parking slot away from them. As mentioned previously, folks become uncomfortable after it becomes evident your new theme song may be "Amazing Grace," shadowed by the ornamental cedars at the cemetery.

By the time my postal key rose from the pickup box, the crowd grew to three of the same generation. Again, a crowd I'd worked with, or with their fathers.

Too late for a save, I plunged into a litany focused on dry cows and dry grass 40 years behind the times. "Why, by golly, it's time again to buy high-priced feed and ride out the good market," I blabbed with the same oblivion with which a dry disaster always propels a herder to plunge deeper and take a stronger hold on his cow madness.

"We shipped the late calvers and dries last week for nine hundred and fifty-seven dollars a head," I bragged. "Less trucking and nine months' pasturage, interest on the old sisters, and a little dab of feed, say, two hundred bucks worth, that comes to a lotta' dough."

Even outside in the wind in front of the post office, the two wisened-up ones' humming became audible, impatient to go home to open fat pension checks. The herder had plenty

of time to listen. His pickup was easy to spot, filled with loose feed sacks.

Next morning, the threesome dispersed before I parked. However, inside the office, one of their cousins, a rancher out close to the neighborhood, stalked into the office. He opened his post box pretty similar to the way he'd tilt a calf cradle or throw a cutting gate shut.

Didn't take guesswork to know how his spring lambing was going on a bobcat range.

Best description comes in fragments of the encounter. "How's it going?" Next, "My son up working in New York City says the city folks are shooting coyotes with paint balls. Hope they go back to shooting each other with lead." Last: "Gotta' go milk out a big-bagged cow with a starving calf - I'll be seeing you."

Strange that after that visit, homesickness for the ranch hurt a little less. Anybody in the game knows you don't yearn to snub an old range cow to milk her. Nevertheless, all the airborne thin residue and dirt clods, thrown and empty loops, and dropped turkey quills and nipple bottles (don't bother to look up quill or nipple if you don't connect) flavor the ol' life.

Mertzson isn't much of a city, but it would take awhile on most days at the post office to find an audience

interested in a big-bagged cow. For one thing, you'd need a script thick as an encyclopedia to explain to a greenhorn how an old cow can give too much milk on such a dry spring.

Post office visits increased from a ranch trip every Saturday afternoon in the 1950s to the present every morning at 10 a.m. calls. Humans don't exist today that demand their mail be tied in a neat roll like Uncle Goat Whiskers demanded of the postmistresses, to open and do at his convenience in the 1940s. (Not open the window, drive six blocks and open the office.)

After that last morning, I wait until later to go for the mail. I find golf balls on my walks. Maybe that will offer a new topic to a different crowd.