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In April, we hauled a 1970 model Ford tractor old enough to know the way to town over to a shop on the east boundary of San Angelo. The young mechanics stopped working on the huge air conditioned green and yellow John Deere to marvel at our rusty antique chained to a homemade flatbed trailer.

Key moment, however, was the expected question: "And where do you ranch, sir?"

Those Angelo folks may be blinded by air pollution, stir-crazed by overpopulation and poisoned on chlorinated water, but they can sure spot a herder. Like a guy at a radiator shop once said, "I can always tell a rancher as he wants to save the old hoses and sprung clamps leftover from the job."

Two weeks later, the inspection sticker expired on the 1983 Ford pickup my grandchildren use to do driver's ed homework and practice stunt driving. My sons use the truck during hunting season to knock off the dead limbs and big stumps by the roads leading to deer blinds.

Hard to find a new inspection site every year. All the area's inspectors close to the ranch over 45 years old know beforehand the pickup's defects. Also, choosing one is like a Barnhart rancher who used to summer steers in Kansas

advised the Big Boss about skipping paying local tax collectors in the bluegrass country: "Keep good records and be sure not to pasture cattle in the same county the next summer."

Before the test this spring, had the tire shop in Mertzon fix four flats and replace the spare with a used tire. Was the first expenditure except fuel in '05. No, that's not right. Ben Noelke bought a membership in the Game Warden's Association for a sticker to dress up the rear window and spread good will among peace officers.

Once the tires were patched, I put 25 pounds of air in each tire. Soft tires make the inspectors hurry. They don't want the business in the first place, and they sure don't want an old pickup with four flat tires blocking the door and leaking oil on the concrete driveway.

After inspection, (and I am not about to disclose the site, or there'd be a caravan of ranch pickups backed up to the Arizona line waiting to be inspected) the two front tires developed genuine slow leaks. Went back to the tire shop at the opening of the evening social hour plenty proud of the new sticker. Had barely stopped before one of the loafers asked, "Mr. Noelke, how did your truck pass inspection without a muffler and so much broomweed in the radiator grill that the hood won't latch?"

"My Boy," I replied, "makes 22 inspections this little one owner model one-fifty Ford has passed. Knows the questions beforehand. All I have to do is pull in the waiting stall. She knows the time to honk, to dim the headlights, and when to flash the turn signals."

Heady in the limelight, I went on to say that the only failing grade she's had in 23 years was a parking ticket issued in San Angelo in March of '05.

The whole trade area knows our game. Can hear the disgust in the parts houses and junkyards when they have to check prices and look a second time for a older model. Fossil fuel miners throw big wads of dough across the counters without counting the small bills. Hobby ranchers buy horse conditioners and big new cuttings of hay for feed as casually as they buy covered trailers and dually-wheeled crewcabs.

Only time our ponies ever see so much as straw is if a bale falls off a truck over on the highway. Conditioner to those old horses means plenty of exercise and scant savings of imported goods for fuel.

If I go on a spending spree, I suffer from the results. Last year, a handyman in his spare time rebuilt an old gate to close the yard fence down at the rock house on the highway. Installed two hollow core doors to keep

varmints and snakes outside, painted a pump house door with the leftover paint from the inside job, and made big headway tearing down the two decrepit carports made from material salvaged off the railroad right-of-way.

The work surprised the county appraiser so much, she increased the value of the housing, noting "Extensive improvements to the property." Thought of contesting the increase, but remembered we still had a quart of white paint and a sack of nails to return to the hardware store. Figured any size of cash transaction might jump my taxes higher.

The tractor continues to reside in the Angelo machine shop. Haven't put 10 miles on the pickup since inspection. Wish now I'd left those old carports for decoys. Best route seems to be to seek relief under the abandoned property act for my dwellings and my rolling stock.