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Small towns from Austin and San Antonio heading westward past San Angelo stretch about 30 to 40 miles apart. Some of the smaller outposts survive in between the larger ones, but are reduced to post offices too determined to be closed and are presided over by storekeepers too old to quit.

Reunions bring the families and long ago classmates back together on anniversary dates and homecomings. However, rarely do folks return until time to be interred in their hometown cemetery. Church people over in Mertzon comfort and feed the out of town mourners. In January, the sister of one of my old compadres called to report she was bringing him home from Colorado for the last rites.

He and I partnered in a shoe shine parlor in our grade school years. Mertzon's two barbershops became mighty lively Saturday afternoon and Saturday night in the '30s. On the first of the month, cowboys hit town in a big way, ready for a shave and a hair cut and a shine to match their new clothes.

Money piled up faster than means to spend it. At a dime a shine, we split a Jot of two and three-dollar pots at closing time. Sweeping the floor and cleaning the public bathtub satisfied the rent. I suppose the shoe shine business was the lowest overhead game in town.

Secrets had short lives among shine boys. My compadre would come tearing in the back door of the shop from a detour by Doc Sorrel's pool hall, or a shortcut by the drugstore, full of exciting news. "Gosh-a-mighty, Monte," he'd say, " Doc told me himself that ole Jack won 16 straight games of 9-ball last night." Or, "Great guns, they said down at the drugstore there' s a carnival hitting town next week with a wrestler. who'll give a hundred dollars to anyone who can pin him to the mat."

On about 20 of those busy Saturdays he'd retell the story about his Uncle Casey, or Uncle Newt's first wife talking him into shooting a neighbor's chicken that was pecking around her doorsteps. It doesn't matter whether it was Uncle Casey or Uncle Newt's wife. He had uncles and aunts to spare, plus a wide collection of stories on each of their lives. But I still remember how well he described dressing the fryer out in the brush, the body unmarked except for the rock from his sling shot. His mother had to act like she didn't know the chicken was contraband. They were so eager to taste something besides beans and goat meat, they fried the chicken way before dinner time, so he said.

World War II drafted all the cowboys and ruined the shine business. However, by then our careers had advanced to the day-working on the ranches. We stopped pooling our money. He had his checks made to his mother to keep her going and mine was put aside for the hard times coming ahead.

After his sister called in January, I thawed an old hen to bake. She was bound to have been a victim of attrition. Nine hours passed before her drum sticks loosened from her flanks.

Over at the family home, I waited on the front step before I rang the bell. I'd already made it up just in case his ghost, or his mother's spirit were listening. I'd deliver this final recitation of old-timey talk in a loud voice: "I BROUGHT AN OLD HEN IN

FROM THE RANCH. SHE'D QUIT LAYING AND CAME WADDLING AROUND THE HOUSE ASKING TO BE SHOT."

"She is one of those checker breasted hens like old lady so-and-so used to raise across from where Casey, or Newt lived close to the school house. Better keep her off the back porch. If the tomcats were to gnaw on her, it'll break their teeth. It was a bigger job to cook her than it was to bring her in from the ranch."

Only scatterings of familiar faces showed up for the service. The ranks thin every year. On the way back to the pickup I kicked a rock exactly the right size for a sling shot. Powered by the correct length of rubber straps, it would've knocked a fryer flat on his side.