

APRIL 22, 1982

Lots of Northerners are moving south. Cities like Houston and Austin overflow with as many as a couple of hundred new families a week. One of my sons who works on the coast says the influx is so great that his bosses have forbidden on the site job applications. Day after day the Eastern press keeps cranking out glorious news of the promised land in Texas, and of course a lot of the folks that are unemployed follow this false scent of milk and honey.

Mertzon so far hasn't caught many of the immigrants. Perhaps the town has and I've overlooked it. Migration is a mighty sensitive word in my book. Last Monday at mail call, I got a renewed passport that was unsolicited. Inside an official brown envelope was a new passport and my cancelled old one. The picture was recent and my signature was genuine, yet I hadn't even thought of applying for foreign passage.

On the way to the ranch, I tried to unravel the mystery. The crowd around the Post Office acted innocent. Child Who Sits in the Sun had been busy with her spring house cleaning however, I didn't think she was going to do such a thorough job as that.

The next morning, as casually as I could, I asked the postmistress whether she handled passport renewals. I thought then, and I think now, that her negative reply was a little too quick to be on the up and up. She and my wife are big cronies. For several months I'd been noticing that the front pages of the newspapers were mighty wrinkled and torn. I'd had the feeling that their after-work meetings were more than plans to raid the discount houses in San Angelo.

Next, I found an excuse to visit my neighbors. I'm not sure, but I think the one that stays two issues ahead of the gardening magazines might be a suspect. His home was in Arkansas before he moved to Mertzon. Evidently, from the way he's always planting and pruning, he never had got over the idea that he wasn't going to make the Shortgrass Country look like his home state.

I think I know how he felt, because when I moved to town from the ranch I wanted our front yard to look as much like the country as possible. I was a long time getting enough empty barrels and goat hides scattered around to keep from feeling homesick. Space was limited, but I managed to maintain a natural landscaping theme that looked a lot like the herders' camps of my younger days.

Like all puzzles, the parts began to fall in place. I remembered that in the last city election one of the election judges had mentioned that the State Department was looking for poll watchers to go to San Salvador. Sometime ago I'd sat at the coffeehouse alone for a full course breakfast. Mother had been acting sad. On my walks in the afternoons only the school kids were waving from their cars.

Uncle Goat Whiskers the Elder used to take great pains in telling how, in the old days, unsavory hombres were deported to other parts. Whiskers claimed that informal committees of mounted men issued these notices. As my family grew, he expanded the story to include mean kids. Old man Whiskers had a flair for supporting his private causes. I think the part about the big families was a figment of his own creation.

I am going to tell you, but I am not even going to offer an excuse to those busy.

bodies over in town: This is a free country. Passport or no passport, I'm going to live out my days in the Shortgrass Country. I don't care if every bluecoat that ever worked on an assembly line homesteads the courthouse lawn, I'm going to hang onto my mail box and that dry ranch west of town.

My feelings are pretty tender today. Life offers lots of rewards greater than a manicured lawn. For all they know, I may get rich and hire a yard man. They'll be sorry when I do make my big comeback. A little coin, you know, makes a lot of change in a man's popularity.