

MAY 30, 1974

Mertzon is being tormented by an unsolved mystery. In February, the superintendent of the school resigned, offering as an explanation that he wanted to change his profession to sheep and cow ranching. After 18 or 19 years of wrangling kids and loose herding teachers, he made a switch in his economic position that would cause a Las Vegas gambler to throw both hands over his hip pockets.

I saw it happen or I wouldn't have ever believed it. As I think I've told you, I serve on the local school board. Fathers of big families are practically assured that position. Anyone who has four or five boys in school is going to attend so many private P.T.A. meetings that they might as well go on and be a full time board member.

The board was stunned to silence. All of us were connected with the ranching game. Also, all of us had known the headmaster for 40 years. He was raised in Mertzon. His mother or dad, to my best knowledge, had never cuffed him on the head enough to cause brain fever. If he'd ever been hit too hard by a rock or bucked off a horse on a concussion course, we hadn't heard of the accident. Nothing in his army record showed a period of disability. His emotional stability prior to this radical change was unquestionable; he had told me himself that many a time he has faced enraged mothers without bolting to safety.

As we were to later learn from the Board of Education, the case was unique in the whole realm of public schooling. Teachers, we were told, had resigned and enlisted in mercenary armies to escape mean kids and impossible parents. Principals had left school systems in such desperate frames of mind that they attempted to enlist in the paratroopers with the understanding that basic training be omitted.

The history on superintendents was a long one. Headmasters had gone to such extremes as donating their bodies to clinics on 10 day prior notice contracts or begging for permission to join secret suicide missions to foreign countries. But nowhere at any time had any educator ever become so disappointed with his career that he would turn to sheep and cow herding as a living.

Who was to blame? Was it the kids? Was it the faculty, or was it the school board and the parents?

Of all people who might be able to answer this, I should be the one. For five years the headmaster was our neighbor. His kids were in and out of our house so much that the Internal Revenue allowed me to count one of them as a sponsored dependent. My kids stayed around his place so much that his wife got confused one afternoon and took two of them in for immunization shots.

Yet, over that period, there were no symptoms that at age 43 he was going to just give up a useful career for a business that is at best classified as a hardship sideline.

It just doesn't make any sense. Play ranching is popular among city folks. Hombres who couldn't locate the hock of a cow projected on a movie screen so as to pinpoint the hindleg go around dreaming of owning a ranch. Doctors lose their stethoscopes thinking of the many weeks of practice that it takes them to make enough money to buy their first ranch. Barristers lose cases in court while distracted by the thought of waiting six or seven months to buy a few thousand acres.

But that doesn't solve this case. You never know what a man is apt to do. One day he's apparently normal, then the next he falls to pieces.

The town has been worrying for months over the matter. You can imagine what our chances are of hiring a replacement. people sure can act strange. It'll be a long time before we understand what happened.