

In 1977, I started walking two miles a day over at Mertzon on the weekends and on odd town days. 1977 is an important marker. See, I quit walking after becoming a licensed driver in 1940. From 1940 to 1977, my track reached from the back door to the pickup. Long distance was from the house to the barn. So the first term was 14 years of school and prowling the countryside plus the past 25 years of exercising, giving a sum of 39 years of walking the streets of a two mile square town.

On the second round, I had little competition on my walks. One lady gathering aluminum cans crossed my route on occasions. The old fellow called "Cowboy Bob" might ride by on the days I went to the river. School kids didn't count as they were so embarrassed being on foot, a mere nod was a glorious salutation from a student.

Dogs seemed to be more offended by my presence than the citizens, but as this story unfolds that may be questioned. Mertzon's biggest dog years, however, have been over for a long time. In the 1970s, Mrs. Boyd Baze kept a kennel stocked with 75 white German Shepherds surrounding her house at the railroad crossing going to the river. Up on the schoolhouse hill, Granny Height sheltered a wild dog colony numbering 118 head in a chain link fence.

Granny's pack came to a fierce end. School and public health officials paired off against Granny and her dogs. In the settlement, she was allowed to keep seven dogs for company at home and for her trips around town. She was a charitable old soul. Quick to come to the aid of the needy and always present to comfort the mourning at every funeral. Treated the community and visitors to dramatic auto spectacles, making roaring straight-of-ways down main street, scolding her dogs not to hang out the windows, and veering across lanes at will in defiance of oncoming highway traffic.

Mrs. Baze's kennel just disappeared - dissolved without a trace. One day her front and back yard on Fleming Street behind the roadside park sent swirls of white dog hairs afloat and wafting odors strong as a wolf's den over the neighborhood. Next morning, nothing remained but the packed earth and refuse from so many canines. (Much later, one of the sons said his mother sold the dogs. I am sorry I don't have the details as the event is bound to be the largest dispersal of pets to ever occur in the shortgrass country.)

Many other things have disappeared besides Granny's and Mrs. Baze's kennels, such as the ranchers around town. As Goat Whiskers the younger mentioned during the February

shearing exercise, he said he didn't know 10 percent of the people in town. I didn't agree at the time, but I began to notice on my visits after shearing how few houses I knew the occupants of. Cars passed by with strange drivers. Faces were unfamiliar at the post office. Other than old employees at the bank, I might as well have been trading at the Wells Fargo in San Angelo.

But the real proof of Whiskers' case happened last week on my walk onto Highway 67 in the downtown school zone. Traffic was heavy in after-school activity. A big red and white pinot dog came bounding off his master's yard, headed for the meaty part of my hind leg. I held him at bay with a walking stick. Backed toward the highway, hoping to stall the 20 mile an hour traffic long enough to either escape or climb in the back seat of a vehicle. (Once a van driver in Tennessee came just in time to save me from two giant German beasts, the worst imaginable of dogs.)

Poised for attack, the dog eased closer. Ten vehicles must have passed before a lady named Minnie Bailey cut across the oncoming lane to rescue me. She was from across the river at Sherwood. Sherwood is a separate community, sylvan by nature of tall pecans and gurgling irrigation ditches. Isolated from the highway and railroad, citizens live a quiet life. Living as such made her too kind-hearted

to watch a gray-whiskered pedestrian's hind leg gnawed away by an 80-pound dog.

Mertzon is my home town. I grew up there during the Big Depression. Came back from college to live 12 miles from town and send all eight kids through the public school. But if cars won't stop creeping through a school zone at the sight of a dog attacking a fellow man, what's to happen to stop them once they hit the 40 mile an hour stripe?

The answer is I am going to do more civic work in the future. Keep better company and trim my gray whiskers neater. Create a better image by sitting up front at church and singing louder. Going to be slow to build support. In the meantime, I am bypassing the red dog's territory. Minnie might not be around the next time I need help.