

Routine telephone opening from one of my sons is:  
"Dad, anybody try to buy you out this week?"

The reply is always the same. "No, but this is only Thursday."

A big land boom roars all across the state. Inquiries come in the post every week seeking new listings. To sell adjoining lands, realtors only call herders in case a lock between former neighbors deters showing the ranch. For example, the sole contact after part of my maternal grandfather's estate sold was when a buyer called inquiring about the location of a plugged water well.

The buyer must have been intuitive. He said the people plugging the well probably didn't know enough to read electric logs or tell a dry hole from an artesian well. He was right. Ben Smith, his cable tool rig, and myself were the prospectors.

As technicians, we tied white rags on the sand line to guess our progress. At 150 feet, Ben bailed specks of wet clay on top of the red beds. I told him if Hughes Tool Company had loaned us a rotary rig with diamond bits, we might have drilled through the red beds to hit fresh water before hitting the salt dome.

The guy hung up without learning that the odds of Hughes Tool loaning Ben Smith and a sheep herder a rig and a set of tools fell somewhere in the range of the same parties becoming lucky enough to be transferred to a land of flowing springs and low-rent lakefront property.

Soon new signs appeared on the farm to market road. Noticed too, the wire gaps on the division fence sagged from chains and locks. Deer hunters sighted five wild hogs on us that might have been the reason for the locked gates. Newspaper ads offer wild pigs for \$250 a head. Be understandable, if the newcomers stocked high-priced game animals, that they wouldn't want a neighbor or his hunters wandering over property lines to harvest a high-priced pig.

Too, historically, stray hogs before the first cold weather in Irion County lived under perilous title. The few traces remaining of the founding families prefer avoiding the subject of river hogs, especially unbranded river hogs. I can state right now that were the commissioner's court worth the cost of the cushions in the worthies' chairs, the court would outlaw DNA in the county. Descendants of pioneers should be honored, not hounded by faults ingrained by our heritage. (Wish I could see that paragraph written on a blackboard the way we did in the fifth grade.)

Then comes the question of how many locks secure my outfit. On the highway, the rock house gate chain has a lock and a snap to allow for the ones of us who can't remember the combination. One inside door at the house has a bolt to keep little kids away from the mouse poison in the closets.

Up on the Divide, deer hunters lock trailers, cabins, shacks, blinds, tool boxes, beer coolers, spare tires, gas cans, and the jeeps and pickups at night. For my part to deter robbers, I prop a cane-bottom chair under the north doorknob in winter. Summertime, screen doors latches secure the house unless the grandchildren visit. Causes too much trouble to keep a stepstool handy to accommodate youngsters.

Besides, the point of visiting the ranch is freedom. Inducing a bronc teenager fresh off the asphalt and concrete and free of smog and grit to lock out warm earth, pure air and open sky with a screen door goes against the country theme of alleviating and healing the senses and being of guests.

When all my children were home, a senior screen door lasted six weeks. Only reason to have a latch was to keep the tomcats, hunting dogs and black crows from disturbing the menagerie of pet coons, fox squirrels, and barn owls

indoors. (No big change here. One son reported a possum spent three days last week inside his ranch house).

One place we keep locked at the ranch is the water well pumping from an underground stream. A heavy steel mesh door prevents novice explorers, like high school kids, from going down in the cave without permission.

A long time ago, Mother and my stepdad rescued a couple of lads by rigging a block and tackle over the cave. Be a good guess the lesson lasted the boys for a month or two. In those days, boys stayed out of danger and trouble for days, if not weeks, on end.

Best part is we have good neighbors – new and old. The newspapers keep hurting the chance of selling out, blabbing about the dry spell and the grass fires. Besides, were there such a thing as an offer, my son and I would have to rewrite our script.