

8SHORT 6-8-00

Promise of a new career caused me to take a layover in Austin last month on the way to Maryland. Without extra help, I guarded a three-bedroom, two-bath home in the south part of town for three days, not allowing one intruder to break into the place. For 72 hours, I singlehandedly resisted all comers, including a census taker on the grounds that housesitters aren't bonafide residents of a domicile.

May sound easy being a housesitter in the state capitol, the center of our justice system and the base of the creation of law and order. But consider these facts: Austin is growing at the rate of 150 citizens per day, meaning even if the crime rate dropped eight percent in May as the newspapers claim, and the base figure comes to eight percent, a dozen new burglars move to town every day needing to work.

Pinpointing crime in Austin is difficult, especially when the state legislature is in session. Wild charges of misconduct fly from each side of the aisle, only to make a quiet landing after the press corps leaves the chambers to meet the day's deadlines. The best guideline to rate most of these gentlemen and ladies of glib tongues and eternal smiles is to consider them guilty until a break in the case or a loophole in the law proves them innocent. However, as long as the worthies are on the Capitol grounds, the chief

of police can't be blamed for what it takes to put on such a good show.

The huge Texas University student body further complicates defining the city's crime rate. The problem lies where library fines and parking tickets combined with spirited misbehavior on and off campus stop, and rigging pay phones and utility meters, breaches of promise, hazing and general civil disobedience become a criminal act. The wisest approach here, I think, is denial. Just act as if the tens of thousands of U.T. students do not exist.

Also, keep in mind, *Forbes* magazine picked Austin as the best place to do business in the United States. This is sure to have gained wide interest among the lawless. Upon reading the news, smalltown crooks probably took a deep look at the future in robbing the gum ball machine in front of the VFW hall, or nicking the take at the newspaper rack in front of the bus station as the coin box fills with nickels.

Visions of the spoils of a high-tech Austin economy are bound to have flashed before their eyes. Thirty-six hundred dollar laptops, portable as a pair of roller skates and as merchantable as Krugerands, arose in their dreams as sharp as the sugar plums of legend and verse. Eight hundred dollars' worth of hubcaps flicked off four wheels of a Jaguar and clanging on the curb made a tantalizing sound of easy money. The more creative envisioned kidnapping the groomed lapdogs the Austin rich hold in such high esteem. Others less ambitious thought of all the custom garden tools

and thick rubber hoses just waiting to be snatched from inside open garage doors.

But the hard part of my job was being on duty day and night, having to take calls. AT&T rang on the hour wanting to sell long distance services. Sprint and MCI hit three times a day at meals. A.L. "Laudy" Jefferson's lawn service slipped a card under the door. "Try-Back Pizza" hung a coupon for a free 12-inch pie on the front door knob. And "Billy Marie's Beauty Shop" posted a rose colored circular offering three dollars off on a "perm."

In the daylight hours, I scanned the back yard through a big picture window, sitting in a web-backed rocking chair. Except for a rolling pen, I was unarmed. The only six-shooter I own is a Colt I keep in the bank box in Mertzon. After all of my boys sneaked the old gun out for surreptitious target practice, as ranch kids have done since the invention of gunpowder, I stored it in the bank box to keep it from disappearing the way four or five pairs of good spurs have been lost. The pistol wouldn't have helped anyway, unless the attack was on the right flank in line with where the cylinder spits pieces of lead hot and fast as shrapnel.

I took regular naps and read three novels. Hardest physical work was rolling the trash can down to the curb for regular pickup. I am not going to charge a fee until I become more experienced. Having the Austin job on my resume is going to going to look good in out-of-the-away places

like San Angelo. I know the folks I worked for will give me
a good recommendation.