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San Angelo holds their rodeo and fat stock show on the second week in March every year, the timing being set to come after the big show in Houston.

Shortgrassers need distraction in March, as the weather is usually dustier and colder than in February or April. Up until the coliseum was built, watching an outdoor Angelo rodeo was as cold as catching the early trials of the sled dog races in the Yukon.

Way back, the fairground association tried to hold the event in June, but attendance dropped off so bad, they learned the hard way how invigorated West Texans are by blowing dust and frigid north winds. Much to the association's astonishment, they discovered the trade from the outposts liked to eat cotton candy and hotdogs outdoors in raging wind and billowing dust. It was the same as the way the old sailors on the clipper ships were restored by storms popping the sails and bending the mast, except the rodeo fans were exhilarated by the wind-driven grit hitting the hotdog buns and spinning the cotton candy in the gales.

I have lived through two distinct periods of the rodeo week. As a child of the Great Depression, I survived playing under the old grandstands and climbing the corral fences full of bucking stock. It was an era of early weaning times, and boys had to beat their mothers to the parking lot after the rodeo, or they'd find themselves sleeping in the loft above the show barn until they caught a ride home.

The next period occurred 25 years later, herding my own family of eight children to the Friday matinee, or school day at the rodeo. The broad age span made this a challenging event. The youngest had not learned to mind, the middle group was beginning to resent authority, and the older ones were embarrassed being around parents in public.

Short of using leg manacles, I tried to find a way of holding the herd together in the only time of year we were in a crowd. In such a mob of children, gathering a stray was a big problem. A buddy system worked as long as the lead and the tail end stayed in sight. However, the moment we passed by an open tent flap or a snow cone vender, the cadence was sure to break and they'd spread out of control.

Being ranch-raised, they weren't interested in the same shows as city kids. The ones over six years old had already had to help mark calves and lambs, so sideshows and Ferris wheels were the big drawing cards. (Their horsemanship was too advanced for merry-go-rounds.) Choices weren't up for discussion as I didn't have the wherewithal to buy tickets for the rides and shows for such a big operation. If they set up too big a howl to see "the Giant from Borneo," or take the thrill of a lifetime ride on the roller coaster, I'd tell them to shut up, or I was going to take them to the petting zoo and afterwards have all the boys' pictures taken riding sidesaddle on the paint pony tied outside the main gate.

Most of the time, I didn't have to tell them to calm down or shut up. The older ones held swift court to control the younger brothers. I noticed last Christmas how the three youngests' noses turn up slightly and the points of their chins droop from their older brothers holding their hands over their mouths to keep them quiet. The Flat Head Indians in the Pacific Northwest shaped papooses' heads by strapping a board to the forehead. The same thing must have happened to shape the boys' upper lips and chins from the firm grip of their older brothers.

I started out to the fairgrounds last Friday, but lost my nerve. Age weakens the will to confront the young. There's a pretty rowdy gang of new age kids coming on. Around the better hamburger joints now, you see a heavier-duty highchair and thicker web seatbelts to contain the toddlers. Spoons are hurled farther and harder than I remember silverware being thrown.

By my guess, the increased adhesion of the disposable diaper to highchair bottoms, compared to the smoother texture of the oldtime cotton diapers, improves the infant's swing the way spiked shoes stabilize batters standing at the plate. Stands to reason a guy can't make a good throw skidding around on a slick surface. (Baseball games are called off because of rain, but babies have to play on through being babies regardless of how wet things become.)

All my old pals have retired from judging the shows and helping run the rodeo. The rides back to the ranch at night

were measured by fitful elbow jabs and knee jams in a station wagon full of tired kids. Every time I see a big family unloading at a show, I smile and recall what grand times those were for the Noelke family to come to the San Angelo rodeo.