

JANUARY 7, 1982

Fireworks and open exhaust pickups were the only offenders of the serenity of Mertzon over the New Year's holidays. The oil boom continued at a furious pace, yet at times the main street looked like the old days when ranching dominated the scene.

On the First, I noted that the bank employees were working behind closed doors. As I think I've reported before, the local jug is powered by vaults full of coin. On any business day, herders are apt to drift in from far western outposts or the suburbs of San Angelo.

By habit, I always give the out-of-town customers the big welcome act. Nothing in my opinion is better for a rancher than to have a vigorous loan company close to his headquarters. Thus I try to add my part in making any and all depositors a welcome part of our banking community. In particular, the ones that have nice royalty income from oil wells and aren't dependent on livestock for a living.

I do have to watch myself around the Mertzon jug. The guy that acts as the executive officer has plenty of savvy on matters regarding hollow horns and woolies. He operates a couple of outfits of his own. I think I've warned you of this before, but about the toughest deals in any town are made by crossbreed rancher and banker combinations.

The point is that at the Mertzon jug, I can't be talking Krugerands and thinking cottonseed meal without the banker knowing that the closest I am going to come to a hoard of precious metal is a reel of 3/8-inch chain at the hardware store. Like all country banks, they know and I know that Okie calves and bitterweed sheep are fielding the odds, so all that babble a bout range bosses drinking from their hat brims at a water hole had better be saved to use on some jug in San Antone or Fort Worth.

We did have one misunderstanding in 1981, and I still contend that I was right. Along in late summer, the bank started a big building program to handle their new business. It seemed like every day when I went to the post office, the contractors were on a strike.

I was in a hurry to get the new drive-in windows in operation. The cattle market was so sour in the fall that going inside the bank was becoming an embarrassing situation for the banker and the bankee too. So I suggested to the headman that to speed things up maybe we ought to complete the job by using his customers that aspired to be cattle and sheep barons.

How it was going to work was to put these ambitious herders to laying brick and pouring asphalt until they had enough hours to pay for whatever size herd they wanted to buy? From the way I saw it, minimum wage would convert pretty fast on the dropping cow market. I was going to volunteer my services as gang foreman and timekeeper. Instead of the bank gambling on a bunch of wild eyed ranchers for the next 180 days, they'd have us right outside, on their own ground.

From the way he acted, you'd have thought I'd suggested that he hire Ted Kennedy to be his night messenger. I've had plenty of abrupt brush-offs in a lot bigger jugs than the Mertzon one, but that was as final as any in the history of notes and chattels, including the one that Christopher Columbus got when he asked a pawnbroker in Madrid to cover his return voyage using his compass as collateral.

I'm a lot more optimistic about 1982 than the people are that have money to lose. This old market is going to turn around; feed, as I see it, is going to be cheap with all the rain we are going to get. I've seen high and mighty bankers during other bad times. That's the last time I'll offer to be their field boss. I wonder what makes those guys so hard.