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A small irrigated valley and Spring Creek divide the two townsites of Mertzon and Sherwood. Mertzon leans heavily toward juniper cedars and massive liveoaks; Sherwood is shaded by huge pecans and oaks mixed with hackberry trees spotted among vines and shrubs growing from roots going back into the gardens of the late 19th century.

Of the two sites, Sherwood holds a big edge for shady roads and such monuments as an old cut stone courthouse and a scattering of houses built before 1900. Connecting the courthouse and the homesteads to the original settlers of the town paints more of an image of a Southern town instead of a Southwestern one. So Sherwood is history and an oasis in a region too close to the desert.

One abandoned house took on the aura of one of William Faulkner's Mississippi stories. Not a grand place, but the white fish scales under the eaves, the scroll design of the yard fence, the oval glass front door, in a setting of wild grape vines hanging from pecan limbs set the mind's eye to see one of Mr. Faulkner's characters opening the green screen door.

In the 1960s the lady who lived there had a quilting frame in her parlor. She patched blue jeans and might have taken in ironing. She wore her hair in a thin tight plait rolled in a gray-blue bun. The kitchen always smelled of baking powder biscuits and fried salt pork. Her husband saw spooks high up in the pecan trees. On moonlight nights, he'd

blast the shadows with .22 long rifle bullets. Made things hot for the creatures he saw in his troubled mind. When I'd come by to pick up my boys' patched pants, he'd screw up his red face, close one eye and say, "Noelke, last night I shot at a tree-full of Mexicans right up (pointing) there."

After the boys stopped wearing out the knees in their jeans, I lost contact with the couple. Kept meaning to take photographs of her quilting frame and cane back rocking chair; however, by the time I returned, a grandson was guarding the place armed with a .22 pistol and the house was empty.

In the spring an artist came out for a tour of Mertzon and Sherwood to look for old houses before the leafing of the trees covered the scene. We found four or five prospects in each town. Shadows were changing by the lowering sun by the time we reached the old night hunter's house. The backyard looked the same as a wood lot from a northeastern scene. Thick vines covered the front. There was a long yellow snakeskin on the porch. Gray webs and chalk white spider eggs clung to the half-closed screen door.

On the artist's second trip to see the effect of leafing, the Texas Department of Transportation had been on a tree butchering spree along the road in front of the house that'd make General Sherman's march to the sea look like a minor pruning of the countryside. Where shadows cast soft images before, bare stumps stood among wide slash marks and drooping limbs.

First reaction was to wish the spook-hunting grandfather and his pistol-packing grandson were around to see how far the Highway Department had trespassed over the property lines. The next reaction was to wonder how long man and his chainsaws were going to be turning the only shady spot to the west of San Angelo into an open plain.

After seeing the extent of the damage, I changed courses and drove down to the Arden crossing on the river. The West Texas Utilities company had beat the Highway Department to those trees. The power company had cut deep V-shaped notches in pecan trees 150 years old. Shaken, I began to peer at the rings exposed on a 24-inch diameter pecan tree, now three feet of stump.

Tracing my fingers across the circle, not knowing any more than the stump how to tell time by the rings, I muttered, "Here in the center a squirrel must have planted a nut in the rich river loam. And this ring must be where you became big enough to shade the farmer and his horse plowing his field. And this crooked line must be the one where the legislature granted the power companies dominion over the air space and gave the Highway Department the right to kill trees."

Nightfall caught me on the way back across the river. Next morning, a lawyer assured me the Highway Department and the utilities Company have the right to down the trees in their rights-of-way. I noticed yesterday on a walk in Mertzon that the town banker has a 10-foot windmill wheel

mounted close to one of the power lines. He better stay on guard, or the utility company or the Highway Department will be trimming the windmill's sails.