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The long range forecast for the New Year from the San Angelo Weather Bureau was promising. The dew point calculators and chill factor prophets say: "Weather in the Edwards Plateau (the shortgrass country) will be much the same as last year." Bound to have been good news that the weather wasn't going to be worse than last year to herders rattling across the frost-bit pastures, radios turned high enough to hear above the bawling hollow horns trailing along behind the feed wagons for handouts reaching far back into the past year.

I tried to broach the forecast before Christmas at lunch at the table of gentlemen I meet every Tuesday in Angelo. I deserved to be exempted from the 10-minute limit floor rule, as I had brought each of the seven members a pound of bacon from the Mertzon Locker Plant. Those painful years in grade school taught deep compassion for forgotten souls, sitting in a hard seat on the back row of the classroom, watching the Christmas tree program end without so much as hearing my name. Driving in from the ranch, the thought hit that a pound of bacon was not much, but might be the only gift those old rascals would receive on Christmas.

I wasn't the only person having the same idea. The Senator's wife sent a piece of white divinity in the shape of a Christmas bell for each of us. She's a lovely lady, big of heart, willing to forgive and forget – a trait she learned no doubt on the long campaign trails of the Senator's 14 years of service. We were right about the paucity of presents, too. Once meetings resumed after the New Year, no shiny belt buckles or bright patterned neckties graced the tables. Effusive greetings were sent via the Senator to his wife far beyond the size of her gift, leaving the impression Christmas had humbled the group by the hard truth that going around grumbling about taxes and haggling over interest rates can't be wiped away the last 10 days of the year.

But to go back to the beginning, the forecast was unfavorable for the city and the ranchers. In 2001, the Middle Concho and the South Concho rivers flooded one time each enough to reach the municipal reservoirs. Right through the big picture window of our lunch spot overlooking the golf course, sprinklers sprayed huge volumes of water. Down the street, the big Country Club Estate homes used thousands of gallons of water irrigating the St. Augustine turf and floating water lilies in the fish ponds. Closest thing I'd heard to water conservation

in all of Angelo was a College Hills lady at the checkout counter of the grocery store buying bottled water for her dog to protect her pooch's breath from smelling like chlorine at his birthday party.

Now keep this straight: those Angelo citizens are plenty sharp. After Christmas, I started setting up doctor and dental appointments for January. I'd ring up the clinic. The receptionist would answer, "Dr. Carsner's Office." She'd sound exactly like Mrs. Boatwright who has worked for the doctor so long. Minutes later, I'd dial Dr. Makin's office, and hear his assistant, Mrs. Smith's voice came on the wire same as usual. Come to find out, both offices were closed. The answering services were such skilled actresses that the operators were impersonating the voice of the regular help. Gave patients the impression Dr. Carner and Dr. Makin were hard at work. Hard at work relieving the misery of man, instead of languishing in a high-priced resort eating Swiss chocolates and sunbathing by a big pool in the custom most of the town's healers and tooth grinders follow for the holidays.

Good thing there's no tote board flashing the odds of rain to the herders and farmers betting on a wet spring. The Extension Service in San Angelo was quoted in the article predicting this year's weather as being tired of

hearing about the two years of drouth. Out west of Mertzon, heading on across the Pecos River, quite a number of us are weary, too, of the past 14 years of weather failures. But all the help we can spare our city brethren is to buck up and face the prospects of a dry camp. For if the meteorologists are right, two floods this spring will not be enough to make the water reach to all the lawns and gardens of the bustling city, not to mention the golf courses, cemeteries and swimming pools.