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Thursday is the deadline to buy groceries for weekend company at the ranch. I have to start cooking on Friday morning, or I won't be able to stay even. Mertzon lost its grocery store four years ago. We have two convenience stores, but they stock more canned macaroni and cheese and Vienna sausage in tomato paste than food to satisfy appetites whetted by country air.

San Angelo means a 120-mile round trip. Travel time one way is an hour from the house to the city limits without slowing down below 60 for cattle guards, or stopping in Mertzon for the mail. On Saturday evening, ignoring the railroad crossing and running the stop sign onto Highway 67 shaves off five minutes. The return trip after midnight takes longer; however, those old railroad rails shining in the moonlight bring back a lot of memories.

The first time a big eastern band from Brownwood called Rolly Poly's Ragtime Rhythm-makers played "Wherever She Lives is the Wrong Side of Town" at the Shadow Land Club in Angelo, a guy named "Shank" rode home with me. We sang such a pretty duet of the new hit tune, driving along in the wavering reflections of the tracks, that we took a short nap at the last gate to recover from our exertions. Shank's little sister was a raven-haired beauty. I must have burned 60 gallons of gasoline driving him around that summer, hoping he could prevail upon his mother to let his little sister date a cowboy.

Three huge grocery chains fight over the San Angelo trade area. One smaller outfit and a locally owned grocery get the jackal's share, after the lions and hyenas have pulled every pricing trick known to shelf or showcase.

My menu comes from recipe books. Writing the shopping list is solved by mathematics. Say there's going to be nine of us for six meals, or six of us for nine meals, the factor comes to 54. An eight by 11 legal tablet page has 27 lines. I divide the page in half and start the list. Once the two columns are filled, (and there's one extra line on a page) that's enough groceries to fill the order.

Some people drink skim milk and black coffee. Others want whole milk and decaffeinated coffee. To solve the milk dilemma, for every two gallons of skim milk, I buy two quarts of half milk and half cream. Given notice, I can take low fat and the half and half and formulate whole milk, two percent fat, and come close to hitting a 1.5 percent mixture using a jigger.

For the coffee drinkers, I brew one pot of dark roast in a French plunger model, going light on the water and heavy on the grounds. Allowed to stand five minutes, four cups of the French recipe diluted in any of the various milk concoctions above, or hot water, makes 16 cups of restaurant strength coffee, or eight cups of household blend.

Thanksgiving morning, I tossed down a demitasse of the French brew straight up. At first, the cracking noise sounded the way grease pops in the roaster. But on further

examination, we discovered the crackling came from my nerve ends tightening and breaking off on the tips.

Satisfying company's wide choice of done meat is tricky. My mother liked beef steak fried as hard as a coconut shell. Growing up, my immediate family ate roast beef so rare, the grading stamp was still visible on the rind as it lay on the carving platter. The only reason we didn't come down with a killer bacteria was because we ate so much rare beef and venison, the btu's from metabolizing the high protein pasteurized our bloodstreams.

However, the increased consumption of table wines in America helps more meat cooks than all the salt mines in Utah and pepper plants in Jamaica put together. Enough red or white wine splashed in the guests' glasses will turn a dismal duck dinner or an over-seared rib roast into a culinary festival. Liquid refreshments cause a gustatory blindfold. As the taste buds are numbed, the tongue wags free-flow.

By the time I shopped, the stores were out of 18-pound turkeys. I had to wait for a truck to unload. It didn't matter as the butcher needed the time to bone two legs of lamb. Twelve pounds of lamb cost \$67 and the 18-pound turkey added \$6.60 to the bill. So 30 pounds of meat cost \$73.60, or the net profit off three steer calves or 15 head of feeder lambs.

The turkey and dressing outlasted the guests' appetite by 24 hours. At the windup dinner, the crowd looked like

they were more interested in milk toast than turkey hash. On moon-filled nights, paralleling the railroad tracks, I think of old Rolly Poly with his velvet lapels and his big belly, rocking to the music, singing: "Whar evah she lives, thar's a honky tonk next door. The sheriff don't have to tell you it's the wrong side of town."