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Aunt Annie Bailey ballasts Goat Whiskers the Younger's Holiday Inn Ranch. Above the sound of corrals splintering and gates buckling under the forces of wild hollow horns or outlawed goats down at the barn, Auntie keeps the ol' Holiday on even keel by her mere presence at the ranch house, and has for years.

Her missions caring for distant children and grandchildren require a powerful automobile, equipped with a big black pipe bumper guard to deflect whitetail deer too slow to reach safety and to forewarn users of Highway 67 to allow for her slipstream off the dominant lane. (Her lane.) Traffic-hardened truckers deadheaded for the West Coast stay alert for "Aunt A." After all, if your idea of a trinket for your kids is a San Angelo house for a gift, you need to be fast to make your point.

At odd times, she leaves presents on the kitchen cabinet at the Mertzon house, items like a big canister of special Earl Grey tea to solve the problem of limited choices on the shelves in shortgrass stores.

A cookbook she brought me from San Francisco 15 years ago continues to be a fallback edition to underwrite the ranch law of never quite having all the ingredients for a recipe. Heavy use tatters and stains the green cloth cover.

Mother and Aunt Annie's influence muscles into the purpose of the book. More and more cooking for sick folks, or hombres dogied from losing a wife in a court fracas or by attrition, works into my scheme - my hobby.

Best overall panacea comes under the "Breads and Pastries" section, a quick-rising recipe for whole wheat bread. Honey substitutes for sugar; three packages of instant rising yeast lift the heavy whole wheat dough in half the time for the usual preparation. Unlike other bread recipes around, directions specify powdered milk instead of whole or condensed milk.

Nursing mother cows shade within 300 steps of the kitchen, but milking two cups from one of those kicking sisters, hobbled in a squeeze chute, takes more incentive than an appetite for home-cooked bread. Too, the last milk maid on the premises goes back so far in time, it would take a slide show to teach a new-age hand which end of a milk strainer to use, or where to place the bucket under the cow. (The American Museum of Natural History might be a useful reference here.)

Cooks rarely learn the truth about their efforts, but I sure did. The disappointment on the whole wheat bread occurred a few weeks ago on a visit to a sick friend and

her husband down east of San Angelo. Long sickness blights the wife.

Say last year or a tad longer ago, my pal delivered a loaf on her monthly book club meetings at their home, without knowing whether they even ate bread.

On the 09 Divide, a taste test is impossible. The guy who fills the propane tank every three weeks declines offers of food or even coffee. The county road runs within one-tenth of a mile of the house; oilfield pumpers drive too fast to stop in time to turn onto the ranch's road. Be impossible to gather enough cowboys nowadays in thin roll calls and empty saddle racks to know whether a half a sack of doughnut holes passes for popular food.

With a famine certain to hit the country, based on the wasp nest grocery store bread, it seemed safe to assume the thick heel from a rich, brown loaf of bread baked in clay ovenware and chocked with bee honey would take a breakaway prize without checking folks' appetat.

But I was mistaken. On a Memorial Day visit, the way the host tossed the loaf over on the bar aroused suspicion. I knew he was hungry from cooking his own meals and being a night nurse.

In the course of a shift change in the care people, I walked down to the riverbank close to the house to be out

of the way. The moment my reflection appeared on the surface, teeming fishes swirled and popped forth on top of the water, boiling in bubbles and inciting frantic fights. By the side of the trail lay a wad of weathered plastic bag from the ranch pantry. In minutes, black and white, cauliflower-faced ducks began a frantic quacking up the banks.

The sound of grade school graduation rehearsal down in the park, decades ago in Mertzon, echoed the same emptiness that long ago misspent moment revived. I kicked a big rock off the bank into the river. The thought flashed: "Cast loaves upon the water. Yes, indeed."

Oh well, step back, little cowboy, to allow Aunt Annie's goodness and Mother's memory be the Samaritan's chorus reign. Next hombre I cook for sits at this desk. Damn greedy fish and noisy river ducks feasting on my bread.