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At the peak of my spring rejuvenation, a neighbor said if I'd shave off my beard, I'd look younger. Asked how much younger, she replied, "Ten or 15 years younger."

The part she didn't know is that the whiskers are prescribed by the dean of San Angelo healers — a dermatologist of such wide experience in burning sun blotches off shortgrassers' hides, he makes the town's other skin specialists look like they'd been caught patronizing a tanning salon. Next thing she didn't know was that after my winter hair sheds in the spring, I have to frown to look my age.

Her opinion brought second thoughts. Be a big change to look young enough to be mistaken for the baby boomer crowd instead of being the symbol of the disappearing generation. Sure sounded nice to think of buying the ranch groceries without the checker either hollering so loud she makes the credit card machine blink, or talking too soft for a lip reader to tell whether she is crooning a lullaby or reciting a portion from Child's Garden of Verses under her breath.

Had a lot of appeal, also, to imagine being treated like a normal patient at the doctor's office, instead of being treated with strained patience or grand forbearance

by a snippy receptionist overpriced in a bulk offering from business school at four bits for a dozen with an option to cut back two head.

Another point about looking, or not looking my age is my background. A prolonged stay in grade school caused special problems. For example, I had to go to the movies with classmates to buy a dime ticket, plus produce my report card as proof of being a fifth-grader.

Age was a constant handicap. To buy a sack of tobacco or a plug of chewing tobacco, boys had to conform to whatever arbitrary age storekeepers in those days set to sell smokes or a chew. Mr. Harvey's store down on one end of town held a hard line at six years old on tobacco products; "Red" Frambo, across the railroad tracks from Mr. Harvey, refused to sell home brew to kids but gave a discount to adults teaching minors to drink in moderation.

Remember Red? He was called an entrepreneur and home distiller, the way the genteel Mertzonite avoided the crude label "bootlegger." Fine fellow - tipped us shine boys a nickel for delivering a pint of corn whisky from his place to the barbershop or the pool hall.

Doc scared me into growing a beard by relating how many of the family had suffered sun damage. Wasn't his

fault the whiskers turned a vintage gray, tinted to a sheen that'd make Moses look young in comparison.

First time the beard reached a quarter-inch and curled into a swirl of gray-streaked stubble, the dock man at the wool house stopped allowing me to help load feed in the back of the pickup, and I realized my neighbor was right. Soon the young mothers and schoolteachers entering the post office began to wait and hold the door open. One morning, a young guy caught my elbow as I stepped up on the porch. Heard a lot more "sirs" and a surprising amount of the archaic expression, "Pardon me, sir."

Biggest shock happened at the San Angelo airport one morning while waiting for security check. One of the town's arrangers and fixers, from the back of the line, emitted a loud hail: "Monte! How ya' doing, old folks?"

Oh boy, if you want to give a graybeard or granny an adrenaline surge plumb out of bounds, just hit "old folks" one count and "young-un" the next one. Such boors can risk insults in lineups sure to be free of concealed weapons, like today's airport security. However, I do not recommend ambitious nieces and nephews being that cute with rich aunts and uncles, unless they are sure ol' Uncle and Auntie have already passed their dough down another line.

Good test of being aware of age is to say the time arrives when there are more stories to tell than audiences to listen to stories. In short, you become aware of thin smiles the first time you answer a simple question with a parallel 25-minute story dated 1927.

Suddenly San Angelo has become a town of strangers. That means walking into a grocery store and the setting might as well be Austin, and peering at the crowd desperate to see a familiar face, or a herder, stranger or friend, to say "Hello, you caught a shower?"

Wish now I'd saved a sample of the red beard I grew the infamous hot summer of 1960, when the Boss had us work sheep from the middle of April to the first of October. Could have matched the color to a red dye to tone down the gray whiskers. Do be warned about being too successful in altering your age. Be a bad deal to lose the senior citizen discounts.