

Grids projected to latitudes and longitudes won't help in locating where my pal and I stayed in Colorado last month. Better to stab the topographical map west of Denver close to the south slope of a big snow-peaked mountain with brush cleared around the base than take a reading.

Forty years ago, my editors insisted readers cared for such details. Four decades of covering personal weather failures and individual market sorrows slanted in an appeal for charity without receiving one card or one nudge of support, assigned readers to a general rule. To wit: the Black ranch herd of llamas over at Ozona care more about the plight of scribes than the general public.

All said, the closest outpost fits in a narrow valley with space for maybe 60 citizens. A big blue post box serves as the post office. The general store's floor space might be 20 by 40, including the space covered by the bases of shelves and potato sacks slumped over in the aisles.

The general store keeps more reliable hours than the one café. Never was sure whether we were going to shop for fig bars and potato chips on a Wednesday at the store, or eat out every day except Monday at the café.

The lunch and dinner menu offered the same nine choices every meal. No, eight choices were listed; scratch the meatloaf and brown gravy. Going way back, my credo forbids eating meatloaf with or without brown gravy in months having the letter "r".

Last time I broke the rule was helping ship lambs on Dove Creek in 1946. After a lunch featuring grease-jelled meatloaf, the boss cut me a horse called "Trotting John." Two hundred yards from the barn, the boss struck a lope. Two hundred yards and 10 steps from the barn, old John hit a gait so rough, the meatloaf fumes from the tomato paste and dried sage surged up my gullet with mighty force. Such force that my taste buds became so numb for years thereafter that couldn't tell the taste of a chili pepper seed from a grapefruit seed.

Bands of sheep passed down the valley by our place two weeks previous to the visit. The smell of the woolies lingered on the trails and set off a yearning for those sharp fall days shipping whiteface lambs at the ranch. Woolie operators are among the world's most sentimental people. Just humming "Mary Had A Little Lamb" might bring tears - especially to an old herder who had just taken a whipping on his lambs over at the Angelo market - that'd

make a ship flying the Jolly Roger look like a rescue vessel.

Fellow in an art studio close by said his boys had to be kept indoors on the days the flocks passed down the road. The herders use big fierce guard dogs to protect the sheep from bears and coyotes. The artist said the dogs must think his sons are a threat to the sheep, but he didn't know why.

To know why guard dogs behave so, I needed to know how the boys behave, like maybe lobbing a few jagged igneous rocks at the sheep over the yard fence or from the pickup bed. Also, Pyrenees dogs are high enough off the ground to see over a car door or a yard fence. Be plenty shocking to an old dog used to seeing his master wearing a hat with the brim pointed in front to see a kid wearing a baseball cap backwards for the first time. I'm not saying he would want to bite the kid, as at early stages of maturity, the normal response of canines to the odor of pubescent boys is to fall over and roll in the dirt.

He said after the boys reached school age, whether to bus the students to a big school or hire two teachers for a small school became a hot issue in the district. Part of the cry by oldtimers was a lament that 10 years ago, the community got along – worked out differences.

Lacking the temperament or the inclination to enter a political battle, he said he audited previous elections going back past the 70s. Found the vote to be split evenly 16 for and 16 against every issue and every candidate. That ended any contention that the community was ever in agreement and confirmed that the Colorado outback is no different than small outposts in Texas. (I didn't check this. It just suited my purpose as a way to end his story.)

Every morning, the aspens gilded the fingers up the fissures or chasms to the mountain tops and at times draped a cloak of gold on the slopes. Light frost began to loosen the white petals of the wildflowers. And sometimes as often as every three days, news came of the misery of heat waves and hurricane in Texas.

Oh yes, don't be peevish about me omitting my location. Chances are I'll let it slip when I get home.