

JANUARY 29, 1987

Business is so dull in the downtown part of San Angelo that the parking meter ladies fight over who is going to jiggle down the flags that are stuck. The times I've had appointments in that part of town, I've wanted to ask how big a crime it is against man to over park in a district that's in such a slump. But the streets and sidewalks are so deserted that I never see anyone to ask about the parking laws except the meter maids, and I figure it'd be a conflict of interest for them to answer my question.

Twenty-five years ago you sure couldn't take a chance on violation the parking regulations. Townsmen and farmers and herders were so thick downtown that a nickel was a good investment to hold space for an hour.

Things were plenty lively then, especially on a Saturday afternoon. The old hotel where the Boss lived so long was going full blast. Cowboys and restless city guys waited at the coffee shop doors before dawn; for the rest of the day, buyers and traders and merchants swarmed through the doors to sell everything from tailor-made suits to 13-year-old bald-faced cows.

Business wasn't the only thing that made the hotel important. I think the combination of room clerks, bellboys and waitresses, mixed with the wildcat oil operators, ranchers and support groups of wool buyers and feed millers created an atmosphere of richness and fun.

More characters were available to perform and tell stories than there were audiences to watch and listen to them. Those old black topped tables just brought out a lot of tales featuring fast starting horses and crooked dry holes and gigantic rattlesnakes and fierce-minded wives.

The obligation to entertain wasn't limited to the daylight hours in the coffee shop. It wasn't unusual when some of the hotel guests were out and about the city at night for them to bring home a dance band to counteract the dullness that hits a hotel lobby around two or three in the morning. Without their sound equipment, a five-piece band won't disturb more than about half the guests in a seven-story building unless, of course, the concert room is located close to the transmission advantages of the elevator shaft.

A bass fiddle beat, as I remember it, has a comforting effect that time of day if you can get your breathing in tune with the movement. Occasionally, I'm sure, there were complaints at the desk by soreheads and light sleepers irritated by the windows vibrating and the doors shaking; however a lot of that noise wasn't from the concert, but was caused by the bellboys racing up and down the service stairs bringing ice and other things necessary to keep the part refreshed.

Late the other evening, I walked around down town. Two schoolgirls jaywalked across the street with the tails of their white shirts out over their blue jeans. Way down the sidewalk, other dim figures moved. A big bank occupies the hotel site, overlooking the "for sale" and "for lease" signs. Boot heels don't strike the walkways and if a five-piece band were to appear, it'd be under the auspices of the Salvation Army.