

MAY 20, 1993

Two of the five subscribers on the ranch party line speak one language, Spanish. The senoras talk in spells but provide little or no news unless the pains of young lovers and the suffering of rolling out tortillas with arthritic wrists are of interest to the eavesdropper.

The best news contact rests with the lady at the ranch of Goat Whiskers the Younger. She covers the beauty shop and study club beats on regular schedules. As Whiskers' backup on ranch work and fill-in on his oilfield activities, she taps a lot of information on the wire and over the ranch radio system after she's penned the goats up for night or driven 20 miles to check a pump jack.

Isolated as my place is, I depend on her each Monday to summarize the weekend news, plus give time and orientations of funeral services and the dockets of the district and justice court meetings. On critical appointments, also depend on her to clarify and correct questions or conflicts on dates and hours of local events under discussions with other radio subscribers.

As with the wire services, timing is critical. Featured local interests copy come in freshest after her Thursday afternoon beauty appointment. Saturday lunch wraps up the courthouse and downtown Mertzon scene; however, Wednesday study club day always supplies fruitful material. Only a nucleus of their former number remain on the club roster; nevertheless, the 48 Study Club remains a proud group and a conscientious one in fast reporting and accurate analysis of news around town.

Speed checks must be run. Last week I called for the sheriff on the radio. My news source came on the air and said he'd left for Houston the day before to return by noon the next day.

My next question (and I knew better than to doubt her report) was whether the deputies' work shifts had changed with their boss gone. After receiving a negative on the deputies, I popped the important one of how long it took her to find out the sheriff had left town.

She protected her source, but assured me she'd known the sheriff's travel plans one day prior to his trip and had more detailed information if I was interested in calling on her, but I had to know how rapid her reports arrived at the ranch.

For people living in the country on a unilingual party line, matching a free 24-hour news service stands next to impossible.

Good will must be the secret to her success. Mertzon and San Angelo citizens speak highly of her. She seems to sense the exact amount of seasoning to add to a story. I'd say she was a natural born reporter.

We depend on her a lot more than we count on the regular news channels. If Whiskers ever gave her a day off, there's no telling what she'd find out on her beat.