

Last week the bank held a reception for a candidate running for state representative for our new district. He packs a lot of wallop in Austin as Speaker of the House of Representatives. I claim no party affiliation, yet I have enough clean shirts and good sense to know that when the speaker of the house is in Mertzson, I am going to be glad of hand and first in the reception line.

Irion County is the southernmost county under the new redistricting plan. Our current representative, Rob Junell, is retiring the end of the year. When I was feeling so optimistic last fall after a wet spell, I predicted Mr. Junell's retirement as chairman of the Appropriations Committee signaled the end of representative government for the shortgrass country at the state level.

After a hard winter and a worse spring, I don't think we are going to come out that good. Once the district lines were carved, we had to face the awful truth that Harris County's seat, Houston, earns more representatives than all the counties west of I-35. Instead of grieving over the loss of Mr. Junell, we better hope our new representatives aren't assigned the broom closet for offices. No more strokes than rural constituents are going to have, the

closest we are going rank for a committee chair is the one in charge of tidying and sweeping the chambers at night.

However, our desperation failed to move the Mertzson community. About 15 of us joined the two worthies at fruit punch and cookies. Two members of the commissioner's court plus the county judge and the justice of the peace represented the county government. A couple of jugkeepers, the local hardware man, and a herder or two made up the crowd. Word must not have reached Mertzson that Mr. Junell is one of President Bush's nominees for a place on the federal bench. Didn't sink in at the coffee house that when Mr. Junell becomes Judge Junell, if it so suits his honor, he can make every citizen stand at attention from Angelo to Big Lake until he's ready to order "parade rest."

I debated whether to call him "Your Honor." I needed to do a bit of patching on our past. Once, instead of giving him a campaign contribution, I sent him a pair of polo spurs the Big Boss shipped around with his polo horses to Long Island and on down once to Mexico City. The spurs weren't silver plated, but I figured if Mr. Junell had enough dough to play polo, he'd consider the sentimental value of the gift instead of the monetary value. But standing in the lobby of the Mertzson jug last week, I was struck how inappropriate a pair of spurs were going to be

for a federal judge. (Justice Sandra O'Connor was a cowboy, but she quit before her judgement was ruined to go to law school.) Short-shank English spurs wouldn't show underneath his robe even if he bothered to snap the leathers on his black boots to coordinate his costume.

My fascination for politicians goes way back. In the 1950s one session, I hung out at night on the floor of the House visiting the pages after the meetings adjourned. I worked for the Land Office, but liked to be over watching the action going on and about the Capitol building.

Plenty lively bunch hit town in those days. Beverage alcohol inspired the imagination and behavior of our then public servants, especially the Panhandle delegation spending the winter in Austin away from the howling winds of the Plains, where the closest legal drink was across the New Mexico line. (I refuse to defame the past by telling the full story of the night a worthy plunged from the north capitol door and directed a cab driver to take him home. The cabby asked, "Where's home?" "Why, the 'Capitol Tavern,' boy. Ain't you got any sense?" Be up to a less responsible writer to dishonor the men who served before tattletales lurked in front of microphones and poised behind word processors ready to blab every deficiency known to man in ink and word.)

One night after adjournment, a page shot an empty brass spittoon down the middle aisle with a croquet mallet. The spittoon banked off the base of the speaker's podium, cleaned to a stop for a perfect side pocket under the Sergeant of Arms' desk. The racket set off pandemonium among the janitorial forces cleaning up behind the tobacco fiends who puffed on thick cigars and gnawed on big plugs of black chewing tobacco.

But it always was my trouble to be associating with a bunch of near primates, while guys headed to the top studied and carried around library cards in their hip pocket instead of playing spittoon croquet and packing an update of the week's handicap on the football games. Until the election and the nominations are set, I am going to be on hand for all occasions. I just hope His Honor to be places as much value on those polo spurs as the Big Boss did slipping 'em on his high-topped riding boots.