

21SHORTGRASS.DOC

An e-mail contributor a week or so ago included a story from New Orleans about a couple of writers after the 2004 floods, organizing hombres around the race tracks to take writers' workshops to record their histories and bolster morale city-wide. One strong point midway in the article was when a 66 year-old jockey was quoted saying, "You have to live it to write about it."

The advice came at the right time. Alone at the ranch in the office, about 10 feet away Elmer Kelton's books stood on a long shelf of Western literature. Elmer grew up a hundred miles further west than here. He lived in many old line camps that resembled this house in age and condition.

The stirrups and bridles he referred to, he knew by touch from those cold mornings when he wrangled horses for his dad before school. He further knew the Spanish and English spelling for every disruption and interruption in the languages linked to vaqueros and cowboys. (Deduct 10 points for the ruptions, if you like.)

But the part that was hurting here in the office was that one year had passed since I shut off my computer and started using this laptop in hospitals and hotels. My

saddle had been moved to one end of the room at the same time.

However, the clincher relates back to the New Orleans workshop advice, to wonder when are you going to be too far removed to write about your subject. How is it going to work from the seat of a 2007 model Chevrolet pickup, versus, say, a 16-inch Concho Saddle Shop tree?

To reach a bit ahead of the story, I'd already asked a cowboy whether he thought windshield works made as good material as being up in the air on four legs. The question startled him. He knew my reaction about the hand on Mother's ranch down on the highway who wasted a day and a half in a pickup looking for a bull in a 640-acre pasture.

After he thought a bit, he said, "Guess the time down on the River, (Rio Grande, like Chihuahua Desert) I worked for a feller named Ollie Cox who wintered 700 steers in a 20-section alkali flat pasture is a good example. (Over 13,000 acres) The day Ollie set out to work them steers, he rode in the pickup, two wets walked, and I was on horseback, which counts for an all-around test on steering wheel, foot back and horseback, in my way thinking."

"Part of the wets' effort has to be charged off for running a javelina hawg down on foot instead of helping us," he said. "To increase my role, at dinner the boss

announced the steers were going in a six-section trap, which added six square miles between our picnic grounds and the house to cross on a horse."

The cowboy went on to add, "Can't say how well the boss held up riding in the pickup, or how exciting it was, except he seemed to be always be tipping a bottle filled with cool water to his lips when he was in sight and playing sweet music on the radio real loud when he was in hearing distance."

He ended on: "We missed 115 head the first drag if you want to stretch 'we' in this case. You can't count the pickup in the next day. The Boss had to go for the mail and the wets had to butcher their hawg, so the 'we' part became a mighty stout bay and me gathering the rest of them steers, plus watering what we could in the trap."

Only near match I could come up with was the time I might have told you about the Big Boss leading two wets and me on a little east of the Pecos River expedition to work two 13-section pastures, or about 16,000 acres, of sotol cactus and catclaw bushes.

But we didn't have any pickup rounding up except to carry us down to Cedar Canyon camp at Rankin to saddle before daylight and ride back in to the Monument ranch at Mertzon that night.

The two wets were too scared of the horses they drew to run javelinas. The Big Boss had spent the winter in Del Ray Beach, Florida, with the polo crowd. He needed to ride in a pickup seat soft as he was, but chose to help us on horseback. Anyhow, we got the cattle.

Sure will be good to be more active again. Pretty hard to stay up with the times without a four-wheeler hand to help, or one of those other kind of motor scooter mounts like over at the Goat Whiskers' outfit. As the chips fall, however, a graybeard is always going to be behind the times.