

10SHORTGRASS.DOC

Once long ago in the cowboy era, like 1950, the last stretch of moonlit road before crossing the tracks at Noelke Switch on payday was ideal for singing a duet. Fresh from "the Tigers" over in Angelo, new haircut and shave, shined boots and new Levis, full of hamburgers and taps, "I Want to be a Cowboy's Sweetheart" caroled so tender a love song that hoot owls rustled on their roosts on telephone wires.

But rephrase - update! The joints - the Tigers - the cowboys and bar girls, barbers and shine boys and bartenders and bouncers are all gone from Angelo. Recruiting a second for a duet to sing a cowboy song down a county road after midnight might take driving to El Paso or maybe Farmington, New Mexico, to find him.

Even back then it was easier to sing the song than find a girl so foolish she wanted to live in a line camp shack or an old bunkhouse converted to a two or three-room house. Due south of the old ranch, for instance, a dim road led up a blind canyon to a camp without telephone or electricity.

In the winter, the cold water pipes began freezing in November and thawed a time or two before spring. Wood had to be carried in and ashes carried out. Company featured

such events as cowboys coming by horseback hunting a rogue bull, or a trapper stopping for a free meal.

The Big Boss said a big family lived in such rugged conditions to the north of us that he and Grandfather always managed to ride by after midday with only time to water their horses for fear of having to eat a meal. He said the lady cooked bread in goat tallow so rank the odor reached the barn.

Be hard to pull up all those different days together. Like on one trip to buy sheep down on the Pecos River in the 1950s, the rancher's wife and four kids accompanied by a momma dog with five pups were so lonesome, they all came out to open a wire gate more than a hundred yards from the ranch houses. She grabbed the Angelo newspaper from my pickup seat and clutched the rolled pages like a holy writ.

She'd been a dew-eyed nominee for the wool pageant contest at San Angelo High School 10 years previous. The day before this visit, she and the children swept the shearing boards for something to pass the time.

Greatest of Great Grandmother's arrival out here in the mid 19th century as a 17 year-old bride marked the first white woman to live in the shortgrass country out on Dove Creek. Great Granny, however, is a poor prospect for a sweetheart song. After raising a mob of kids on the

frontier, she took strong exception to Great Grandfather falling in love with an eighteen year-old girl he met on a cow work in San Antonio.

No, let's push ol' Gran aside. She became mighty ugly in the divorce trial. Uncle Charley Lackey served as court clerk. He wrote a steady hand for the minutes until she blurted out on the witness stand how mad she was at the old man.

To more current times, *The Cattleman's Magazine* shows pictures of herders and their wives frolicking at conventions and socials. Hard to tell much about these girls dressed in town finery in Austin hotels or Fort Worth banquet halls. Be an intrusion to outright point blank ask the wives what they told their daughters or granddaughters about marrying cowmen.

One of my granddaughters marries in April to a photographer in New York City. Only cowboy she ever met was one at the ranch, or maybe a day worker who happened to be on a roundup.

This groom is from Australia. Neither my granddaughter nor he could even hum "A Cowboy's Sweetheart," much less entertain such a thought as to sing a cowboy song under their breath on a New York subway.

Way back, the reason a lot of boys became cowboys was from private farewell parties at a Dean's office, or misplaced notions that opportunity knocked when it was actually a screen door popping in the wind. So maybe it meant really being a drop-out's sweetheart.

Big difference today is that the sweetheart material run their own ranches. The cow sale receipts often show feminine names. Unlike a few decades ago, that means that ol' gal is pedaling her own cart. Nowadays when a lady says she's busy shearing, she may mean she's rounding up, not cooking for the men.

One verse of the sweetheart song is all that's necessary to revive heart throbs strong enough to rack an old herder's being. One more moonlight drive would reset the scene.