

13SHORTGRASS.doc

*Don't ever steal a bicycle in Hong Kong.* Sonny Noelke to his 14 year-old son after giving him a straight shot of whisky at the Cactus Hotel in San Angelo ...

If I haven't, I should have told you I've been to Hong Kong twice without stealing a bicycle. Proves some advice lasts a long time. After all these decades, it's hard to keep numbers straight, but believe this: my record is clean in Hong Kong.

The story is based on the truth. The Big Boss and his buddy, Austin Millspaugh, docked in Hong Kong during a 1930 stint in the U.S. Merchant Marines. One or the other pedaled off on a citizen's bicycle from a watering spot.

You learn further that they were tried the next morning in British Colonial Court, to be released to the ship's captain, officially ending shore leave for his crew.

After you live a long time, most advice you receive thins down. Over the holidays at a 12-step meeting, an old member told a group of 20 year-olds the lessons and teachers he matriculated to go through to ever stop drinking beverage alcohol, like wardens and prisons.

The kids sat stone-faced. Across the wide table, they looked like maybe graduate students who were having a hard day. The modern stimulants make withdrawals from the hooch

my generation drank strike like a light brush with granny's whisk broom across your brow.

One point offered by the oldtimer was how if you kept on like he did, you would end up coming out of prison with a bunch of tattoos. The thought shot up that these kids cherish tattoos – they don't need to go behind bars to get one, or two dozen.

But before this goes too far, recall how as a young cowboy, you wanted "Peggy" tattooed on your arm, yet never quite had the nerve or courage to face what Mother might do when she saw the tattoo.

Yes, that was sure good advice by Mother. Now the tissue in the same spot on the arm has aged so much after 60-odd years that the loops in blue ink in the letters in her name would blur. The "gs" would look more like spatulas or frying pans, all blotched under hide that old.

On top of that, before "Ol' Peggy" disappeared, it turned out her name was Margaret. Wouldn't that have been a fine kettle for say, 60 years, to have a loved one's name tattooed on your arm that was a pseudonym or a nickname?

My son Ben, who examines banks for a living, called from New York City before Christmas; he'd found a case to support giving advice by stating a mathematical fact. Ben read this story down at the museum in J.P. Morgan's old

office. I know he wasn't inspecting Ol' Man Morgan's jug, or can't imagine such a travesty from shortgrass images of the North.

Ben found it in a museum log where stories as funny as Mark Twain's were listed. The story was that a grandfather told his grandson in grade school he better find a college.

The boy replied: "Granddad, I don't know. I am taking this math course, and I am not doing so hot. In fact, Granddad, it doesn't look like I've got a 60-60 chance of passing."

Ben knows the depth of humor. He'd seen plenty of 60-60 stuff before he branched out from Texas on such matters as the come on calf crops or baled cotton. Those cowboys up there in New York might know to handle J.P. Morgan's dough, but those hombres' chimneys run to soot if they think they are going find humor to match Mark Twain's.

What sparked ol' Ben, too, is that his bloodlines go back to herders who would rise off their sick bed to find 10 more head of old cows with odds that good of raising one more calf. Ben has been inspecting jugs for a long time in lots of places where Ol' Man Morgan would probably have loved the action. The best thing may be that Mark Twain would have loved the material.

You know, on the subject of high finance, Mr. Twain said once that the first time he saw St. Louis, he could have bought the whole shooting match for a million dollars, and all he lacked was nine hundred, ninety-nine thousand and ninety-nine bucks.

It seems I have always had more kids than advice to spare. Been long enough since I was in Hong Kong that the British are gone and China owns the island again. So the Big Boss's advice is even better today. I've seen Chinese guys badly upset over matters smaller than a bicycle, but that's another story ...