

9SHORTGRASS.DOC

Composition of the following article began the day after a ranch Thanksgiving moved over to the Mertzson town house. Action centers around 15 immediate family members slated to join a commercial caterer hired to cook dinner off the back of her restored 1900 model covered wagon in the back yard.

She and her sister set up the wagon sometime past daylight. After she lowered the chuck box lid, she swung a gallon blue black pot over a wood fire to boil coffee. Without breaking stride or showing the least strain at heaving Dutch ovens large enough to feed the crowd, she stepped around and over one saucer and biscuit dog and several rowdy kids old enough to stay out of way.

Her jolly disposition fit the universal notion all herders hold that hombres in profitable business immune to drouths, pestilences and market failures, traipse across the Mother Earth light-footed and bliss-filled as bands of meadow fairies on a spring morning.

At this moment, add proof of a common reaction about spending our dough. Musicians come in the back gate carrying guitar and fiddle cases, two gents and one lady paid to play for atmosphere and dancing on the patio.

The key words are "paid to play." The double dead cinch in the matter is that at least one guest member, if not two, feels obligated to go into details on the music scene in his or her home base, Austin, Texas, with these roving musicians.

Reel back to my chair by the fire, where audible enough for the cook to hear, I announce, "Tell that string band that unpacking an instrument case does not require an intermission afterwards, plus, don't pull any of that 15-minute delay tuning up stuff. This is not a recital spot run by Little Bo Peep. The iron triangle dinner bell hanging by the wagon is all a bow dragger or guitar picker needs for a tuning fork."

After using enough time to move and set up the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, a daughter-in-law begins to sing with the trio, now a foursome including one of my sons on his guitar. My daughter gives her yearling granddaughter dancing lessons on the patio. The cook slips a violin from a case to touch bow to strings and bring strains of the Westphalia Waltz to the back yard that'd stun an audience in Vienna. More couples begin to dance.

Over by the fire alone, stilled by the fading waltz, old dreams arise back to on-stage klieg lights with a

spotlight sweeping across the floor on a then-young cowboy embracing Ginger Rogers in a white evening dress.

Life passes you by, for sure. Like it seems only yesterday, Mrs. Ivey played the piano with L.D and Les White on the strings in the district courtroom for a dance at Sherwood on a holiday night. Here he sits 60 years later, a crippled old man with a backyard filled with his blood and kin, and ends up being nothing but a paymaster for a San Angelo troupe of fiddlers and camp cooks.

More like 75 years ago, he ate off the lid of his Grandfather Noelke's chuckwagon at the Monument pens. Cecil Parks, who later lived 30 years at the line camp on the Whiskers outfit, looked after him. Cecil doctored his red ant stings with tobacco juice. He worked for the Noelkes so long that the Mexican cowboys called him "San Pedro," or "Saint Peter."

Two strangers, a lady and man, come through the side gate from the alley. He goes directly to the musicians; she comes over to the fire. In minutes, he covers his entrance by going back outside to bring in a guitar case, except the case contains a Dobro - a lap top resonator type of guitar that sounds like a dulcimer.

His wife explains they are late because they played a gig over at a joint called the Chicken Farm in Angelo

before coming to Mertzon. She qualified "we" by saying she was a classical pianist, not a performer at chuckbox or Chicken Farm affairs like her husband.

She asks where the garage sale is.

I admit I don't know anyone in Mertzon, garage sale or house sale, adding that once nearly everyone in town was named Tankersley, but they wouldn't have had a Shetland pony sale if it meant allowing the public in the front yard.

She replies, "Well, there's a big yellow sign saying 'Garage Sale' in your front yard."

Then my daughter pipes up, having just joined us: "I put up the garage sale sign so people would stop thinking my dad was so stuffy he wouldn't have a garage sale, or even go to a garage sale."

She was right. I wasn't running a second-hand store for idle bargain hunters to pry in my house. The cook and violinist ended a long pause by ringing the dinner bell.