

4SHORTGRASS.DOC

Nineteen-fifty or a tad into '51 makes a rough year to mark the opening of the Big Drouth. I know I moved back to the old ranch from college in July in the 50s. One critical date to remember is that a short time after unpacking, the boom ended in time to borrow money to buy black cows before the market dropped.

Memories come back, like the postmistress in Mertzon who knew we came to town for the mail Saturday afternoon, so she took my *Harper's Magazine* home Thursday after work to read and put back in the box Saturday morning, along with newspapers and magazines yet unclaimed by patrons she knew were out of town.

The relationship continued in different ways after the drouth ended. On return trips home from newspaper jobs and livestock adventures, I posted cards in a Central Texas office at Pontotoc out of loyalty to small towns. The town sat back off the highway, so sparsely populated that the postmistress kept the money in a coffee can.

I'd ask her where to drop the cards. (There might be as many as 20 cards after a long trip.) She'd always be sitting in a rocking chair in the front room. She'd point to her lap, creased by a flour sack apron to make a perfect

landing spot for the postcards, and a convenient place to read them without arising.

She never disclosed why blue steel live animal traps in rows stood stacked on the office's front porch. We were beginning to hear a new word - "environmentalism." But it was not new to postmistresses or patrons in those days to mind our own business.

The postcard habit expanded after my boundaries widened overseas. By then, I corresponded with hombres met at literary functions, or any interests where scribes gathered here and abroad.

Before you become curious, no romances developed from the cards or the trips. Womens' instincts prevent them taking up with ol' boys in slept-in raincoats with no belts or buttons, and shaggy hair lines drooped down to cover unironed shirt collars. Lots of lonely ol' gals on the road make tragic choices, but few become so desperate they will take up with a guy so unsophisticated he writes postcards home to someone who could be his mother.

Half Price book stores made the best source for 30-postcard books. Thrift overrode taste, as many of the choices hit on old prize fighters and older photographs. For a long time, the Postal Department sold discounted postcard stamps to post any size card. However, big cards

began to be delivered stamped "two cents postage overdue" in red letters.

After recipients complained, the first class rate had to be adopted to shut up pals on such close budgets that a couple of "coppers" meant that much. The postal snoops or the complainers never realized that every time 30 cards hit the mail, at cost 60 cents more for the packet to go first class, not to mention that barely 72 hours could pass without the Postal Service asking for a two-cent rate increase in first class postage.

Mertzson always gave us special attention even after times became better. The loss of such eccentric customers as Uncle Goat Whiskers, who demanded his mail be rolled and tied in brown string a certain way, improved morale, if nothing else. As late as last year, a large envelope addressed to my box burst open. For a couple of runs (days), the clerks sorted related pages from the accident into my box without an address or a cancellation note as a clue.

Other extra service covers the self-illustrated postcards my granddaughter writes from Brooklyn, New York covered in cartoon images. The postal ladies read her cards before they reach the box. Even though they have never seen her, they can tell the lady who picks up the mail important

developments beforehand. For example, they knew ahead when she moved or changed jobs.

The agents remember, too, being young better than the rest of us. It's not unusual for them to warn us to keep some of the news secret from her parents. For sure they are able to keep roommates and boyfriends straighter than I can.

On the road nowadays, I write the postal people cards telling them what to be on the lookout for, like Toney Aid up in Missouri, who prints his message on his grandfather's stash of cards from Germany dating back to the early 1900s. Yesterday, I asked that they check and see if Doctor Gamble up in Colorado felt better after the weather cooled. In the postscript, I asked if Bill Kloefkorn had written from Nebraska how he was doing after being released from the hospital.

Last time I was by ol' granny's post, she and the live traps had moved on elsewhere. I didn't go inside, or use the new blue box out front.