

18SHORTGRASS.DOC

At this moment, I write at a scarred desk on the top floor of the 1926-model Colony Hotel in Delray Beach, Florida. Intolerance for windshield wiper slosh in the Everglades made a move farther north to dryer ground above Miami a better choice.

Delray holds a unique family tie where the Big Boss fell in love one year at a winter polo tournament, which resulted in a nine-month layover for the affair to run its course. Part of the story is that he lived at this hotel.

The exact dates are lost other than the 1950 drouth for a tie-in. The spring, for sure, was the year the ranch ran cattle on the Pecos River in an alkali dust, dead hair, bovine tragedy unequaled in all shortgrass drouth chronicles combined.

Perhaps the Boss called the ranch from the telephone on this old desk. Distemper plagued the stables bad that winter. Five of his horses took sick. Good thing he had the distraction of his lady friend to soften the blows.

Colony Hotel maids and elevator operators, then and now, come from Bahama Islands descent way back to 1880s. Hearing aids fail to translate the exchange in the hallways.

But a French restaurant down the street mediating an error in my bill with a cream strawberry tart in a florist box broke the language barrier. Already 3000 calories overdrawn on my training regimen, I gave the tort to the elevator operator. The next ride to the top floor, she said, "If you are going to need a ride back down, Sir, I'll wait." (I can't write in her dialect.)

Later, on an ascent with a couple, she ran me on up to my landing without stopping. Bellman took notice to no avail. Several times, the desk clerk stared as she held back passengers to allow me to dismount first.

All the downtown restaurants feature outdoor tables. One, perhaps two, serve customers on bar stools right on the sidewalk. Understand that Delray sports a very vigorous community. At breakfast, a professor from a Florida university explained, partiers come here from out of state to purchase chemical stimulants and enjoy beverage alcohol under liberal control.

My exposure to the masses takes 10 blocks and one railroad crossing on foot to reach the poetry festival at the Old School Square. Southbound trains roar through town twice a day over the route to add peril and excitement from the grate and screech of wheels and whine from brake drags.

From after lunch to way after midnight, the sidewalk joints fill with arm-benders juggling Margaritas and puffing on a popular Mexican weed. Male bystanders appear affected by the vapors and fumes off the action; however, the mooneyes and the chin bobbing could be from sighting long female legs crossed on stools below tight skirts.

Last night after a poetry reading, on the way back through a park, a gray haze floated above the streetlights over the main drag toward the hotel. First thing that came to mind was fog drifting in from the Atlantic Ocean four miles away.

Then a lull, or a shift in the wind, sent blasts of rock music strong enough to make the leaves tremble in the park and link the smoke to cork tips and marijuana. Paralysis from the odor, sights, and sounds caused a knee lock too severe for a hockey coach to treat.

Once in motion through the crowds on the sidewalk by the Hard Rock Bar, I made Sherman's March to the Sea look like the troops wore hobbles. Military double-time fits best. And you sure can't say this old cowboy paused long enough to see any red mesh stocking legs hooked on bar stools by gold sequined shoes, or red rose tattoos under low-cut blouses showing jeweled belly buttons in full sight.

Once at the hotel lobby, a wicker chair became a merciful refuge. Peace flowed from the gentle rhythm the rockers made on the thick rug. A hymn came back to hum – the words and title long forgotten – from my childhood.

The lobby's clock striking switched to recall. I did meet her. The lady from Delray was at the ranch. The Big Boss brought her by the "Three-Pasture Corrals" at noon during a spring lamb marking expedition.

She caused the crew to brush the hair from our foreheads and to eat with less noise scraping the tin plates. Dick Nasworthy, or maybe Colonel Dick Waring, once raced a Thoroughbred filly that showed that much class and speed. The only other thing I remembered was that she wore green high heels to walk over to our dinner ground.

Second time the clock chimed, I relaxed enough to go upstairs to bed.