

13SHORTGRASS.DOC

The bedroom in the rented place in Provincetown stored a collection of oldtime audio equipment, from a 1909 record machine to a dry cell battery radio, to a 1946 model TV with a six-inch square screen. All wall, floor and shelf space deferred to files, Victrolas, earphones, speakers and any other paraphernalia related to the same.

In one corner, the same model cabinet style Victrola the Big Boss called his "ditty box" stood to revive memories of the furniture moved on the porch for his sporting cronies to dance way into the summer nights at the old ranch.

Heavy-footed jazz age dancing, brown and white slippers and straw boater aura, strong on arm gyrations and amorous motions. Music stirred by liquor - the redeye stuff, hot and powerful straight whiskey to make the hair curl and switch the pitch to coyote howls and Mexican *gritos*.

The guest list excluded the ones hired to cowboy. With all the windows open in the bunkhouse, we heard every tune from the main house. Partly forgotten about being a ranch hand in those days is that we celebrated on payday. After buying a few clothes and a haircut, a cowboy had to "match

the tiger." (Activate your imagination from here; look for a confession elsewhere.)

After I asked, the landlord brought up the crank handle to the upright. He changed the needle. Fifty, at least, single-side records rested in neat slots above the speakers and below the turntable. The minute he left, I played "In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree," the same version Grandfather used to play on a mandolin and sing in my childhood.

Sentiment arose so fevered and high that the skin's prickles began to lift my glasses' earpieces above the lobes. The Victrola's spring was strong enough to play the "Apple Tree" twice without rewind. I wasn't strong enough to keep from doing a solitary shuffle to "Dill Pickle Rag."

Thus excited by the old tunes, I stayed on my feet to look into the funneled speaker on the "1909 Victrola Talking Machine." Down inside, the flaked green and dim yellow paint verified the owner calling the tin speaker, "a Morning Glory." He said that the machine played disks made from clay.

Confronted by such an extravagant device, influenced by the lingering music, old notes and old rhythms floated around off the shelves. The effect of being around poets

began to be an influence, combined with nostalgia potent enough to show on a cardiac test screen.

There in a room with a dry cell battery radio going back to the 1930s, times when the ranch people waited to buy new batteries until Montgomery Ward's sale, to touch a knob without moving the knob is no surprise. Stilled in reverie, an old radio show opens in an explosive introduction: "THE LONE RANGER AND TONTO!"

The owner worked downstairs in his quarters. His watchdog slept most mornings. My pal made workshops over at the center. The street in front was too narrow for much traffic. Rain showers pelleted hard enough on the skylight to accompany the music from the Victrola.

Ready or not, a blues number brought back the night old man Evans searched the whole Mertzon town site and riverfront after a dance, looking for his daughters with a gun in the front seat. Thought also that they should have called Mrs. Brown, ol' lady nitpicker Brown for being so upset over Maxine saving the last dance to do barefoot on the upper Spring Creek Bridge after midnight that summer.

The ol' ill-tempered heifer, it's a wonder she hadn't stalled and stymied the struggling passage into adulthood, or nether-hood, or wherever life headed then. Only connection to the outside world from the ranch was a 10-

drop party line. Been about as likely to reach Maxine Brown in Mertzon by private wire as if I'd tapped out the Morse Code on the railroad rails over at the switch to contact her.

The old memories rose and fell with music like "Left Her Standing in the Rain." All alone, so far away from home, a tie to the classwork last week hooked right onto that old music, those wild sports dancing at the ranch to a ditty box, to a poem I wrote to close here.

Up-Date

Don't you fret I've got plenty of money

Despite the way my 1920 seersucker suit

Matches my 1901 mind

Set off by a bow tie fashionable in 1917.

Want to know more?

Bulge in the right coat pocket is coarse banknotes.

Thick, big-numbered silver certificates - crisp and

clean.

And what else?

Sure can't recommend you wear seersucker clothes,

But if you wear a bow tie

No one will ever ask if you are saved.