

28SHORTGRASS.DOC

Next morning at the April Poetry Festival at Round Top, the dining room cook said her family ranch over close to La Grange received 10 inches of rain. In the big line full of writers and poets, she probably recognized that my sunburned nose and the white line around my neck came from a lifetime wearing bandana handkerchiefs on a sheep and cow outfit.

Good luck she connected, as she scooped extra scrambled eggs on my plate without saying a word. Quick contact gave time to report two inches out west, except three-tenths north of Mertzon. She agreed to fill a plate for me to take to my pal.

The rain report continued. One featured poet we knew from San Antonio said she took six hours to make the two and one half hour drive the previous night to pick up folks from the airport. You may remember her as Naomi Nye, who came to Mertzon last fall to read to the school kids.

Empty spaces indicated the weather reduced the crowd. My pal skipped breakfast to go to a workshop. The ranch lady cook brought over a Styrofoam container to be sure my pal had breakfast. She refused a two-dollar bill for a tip. Two-dollar bills make good travel denominations. She smiled when she handed the bill back.

After breakfast, the hostess helped decide how to put on my raincoat. The decision whether to turn the old soaked rag inside or wrong side out was difficult. Back in Austin, over to a bookstore, the rain fell at a perfect angle to soak the front going and leak through the rear seam coming back. The right pocket, or maybe the left one, holds water; the other has a hole in the bottom. The belt disappeared so long ago in an airport terminal that the loops are still good as new. If people wouldn't stare, it works better worn backwards.

We stayed in part of a house on the 200-acre grounds. The west windows opened to thick forest, grown in elms and cottonwoods under-covered with mounds and rolls of honeysuckle vines over fir shrubbery.

Already too wet to care, I walked down to a draw flooded with brown water swift enough to float logs and branches. Artistic work built from big rock slabs arched a bridge over the waters.

The masons must have have been European. It doesn't do any good to try to find out. The answer always given to my question where the workers came from who spent 12 years building the huge concert hall is always, "Round Top." A lot of folks must have disappeared over at Round Top since I've been coming down here, but Mertzon counted 35 kids in

the first grade one year way back when they built Highway 67.

My pal pointed out how poetry put to song on the stage minutes before tied in to the frogs croaking down on the creek on our walk last night. Mustang Draw runs through her ranch; however, like lots of the shortgrass country flood plain, the water gaps disappear in the brush. She's right. Frogs singing do enchant ranch people.

The rains cooled the temperature to make my disguise more comfortable. Years ago, I learned to wear turtleneck shirts and cargo pants for disguise and comfort. Cargo pant waistbands cinch enough belt holes to girt stomach folds without cutting off circulation; turtlenecks fit under the dewlap to conceal the most prominent rings.

Combined with a floppy rain hat, the costume causes variation in reaction from bewilderment to absolute shock. Stationed out front of an air terminal for a cab or bus, misconceptions run all the way from being mistaken for a jungle explorer to a waif on the bum for a smoke. Cabbies wonder whether I want a ride or a light; smokers ask if I need a light or a lift.

Every session we sat down front in the big concert hall. The same people sat nearby. We registered so early we

failed to have nametags. Names didn't make any difference. Smiles and nods serve for writers' festivals.

By the time we got around to having nametags, my first name duplicated the one on my passport: "Montgomery Noelke." The full version gives a choice of being called Montgomery as a first name, or mistaken for a last name. Montgomery is also easier to pronounce and spell than Noelke.

One lady Naomi Nye arranged to come from California was honored as the widow of the famous poet, William Stafford. Mrs. Stafford sparkled in dining room patter. Our private joke was that she didn't have to put "mister" on Montgomery or Noelke.

Last day, the draws ran down and a little sun came out after lunch. The cook added two oranges in the lunch she packed for a picnic. Her father reads the *Livestock Weekly*; maybe he will tell her we made it home all right.