

30SHORTGRASS.DOC

Fifteen years ago, at a Literary Olympic in Atlanta, my pal and I shared a picnic lunch on a sod lawn at the Jimmy Carter Center. A poet from Nebraska and a writer from Missouri joined us in a link from a dinner at a hotel the night before.

Been a long time ago. The important thing: we exchanged postal addresses on pieces of picnic sacks out away from the crowds in warm Georgia sunshine. For sure, we didn't have business cards.

I sensed then, and am certain now, that we all had and have a lot more to write each other than talk in person or over the wire. To this day, I don't have their phone numbers. And I'd estimate ... no, I can't guess how many postcard stamps we bought through the years.

I do know the Missourian's ancestors left a general store heritage. In three generations, his grandfather's roll-top desk still inventories enough oldtime colored photo postcards made in Germany to stock an island tourist resort. The cards are keepsakes.

The Nebraska poet writes on bonded white paper, stationery that once came from the college bookstore where he taught writing poetry. Important note, too: he's the state's poet laureate.

Before these guys came along, I developed the postcard habit traveling alone. On a three-week trip overseas, 30 or so cards accumulated in my pack to post at the first airport in the U.S., all written from depots and lobbies where I never saw the floor, looked out the window, or stared at the ceiling to check on loneliness.

Newsstands and machines sold stamps before departures. Postboxes became easy to find in terminals upon return stateside. Ballpoints are light to carry. And bookstores sold postcards 30 to the pack for 10 bucks.

A few but not many hotels supplied postcards large enough to write interspersed in the advertising: "I'm fine. How are you?" But rare enough was space to sign your name or add the dateline.

As the fever increased, I nicked cards at registration. Postcard theft goes unnoticed in an age when computers rule human contact and hallways become tumultuous dog runs that'd make the greyhound kennels around Miami race tracks look quarantined from a flea epidemic.

Like two weeks ago at the Inn of the Hills in Kerrville, two dozen cards worked into a swift hand sweep off at check-in from a side shelf while qualifying for the Senior Citizens' Triple A Repeat Customer Discount. (SCTA CD @ cheapskate.com).

A Hill Country German lady owned the Inn way back to the card's origin. Photo-side showed three Mexican dancers costumed in rose-colored exaggerated flounced skirts, performing on the red tiled patio side of the big swimming pool. Girls fired in the Latin energy to whirl and kick soft-soled shoes head high, entertaining a huge poolside audience.

In all the years that the Sheep and Goat herders convened at the Inn, the postcards laid in the rooms' desk drawers. The innkeeper must have printed a million copies. Considering how astute she was at managing her property, she probably bought the printing press and the paper mill to make her own postcards.

The convention occurred at her place too many times to keep the years straight. One highlight happened during a summer evening stay during the mad cow era over a rare steak order on the outdoor patio. This Teutonic ruler issued an edict in person that rare meat was forbidden until mad cattle disease was cured. She made her point so strongly that two full weeks passed before the ranch felt it safe to grill rare steaks.

In current time, I could sure use the old sister's authority to start a recall on 30 postcards mailed in '08. Last month, one of the hip graybeards I eat with on

Tuesdays in Angelo mentioned that the chef at the new River Valley café downtown once cooked for Cassius Clay, (The world champion boxer, not the Fort Worth livestock commission man.)

The week before, I'd posted the last card with Mr. Clay in black and white photo posed to wallop an opponent and retire to his corner reciting poetry. The 30 cards came from Half Price Books, marked down from nine dollars plus tax to one buck and no tax. Looked like Half Price Books in Corpus Christi and myself on the 09 Divide missed the opportunity to sell those cards down at the River Valley Café in San Angelo, Texas for who knows - fifty dollars, perhaps, signed by the chef.

My pal thinks she might have received three cards. I know I sent a poet in San Antonio a half-dozen. I am too proud to ask my pals in Nebraska and Missouri whether they received or even keep my correspondence. So just my tough luck on this dry spring to be that close to showing a windfall and mail off the chance stamped on a postcard.