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A day or two ago, these words came back: "If any wets come by, we sure do need a man to work at the line camp until the regular comes back from Mexico."

Spelled by the rerun, ol' Calletano Montaya's image shoeing a dun horse's front foot came in focus under a cedar arbor at the line camp. Clear vision: "Rusty" tied in the sparse shade - with the old cowboy underneath the belly, astraddle a front wheel (foot) to tack on a shoe.

In his long cowboy life, Calletano never rode a horse shod behind, or on "all four," like *Americanos*. Add right here that he he also never understood why we carried catch ropes 60 feet shorter than the 90-foot coil needed for a *vaquero*.

But federal law prohibiting employing illegal aliens sure cured us herders. On a weekend trip to Austin in March, every time an unpapered alien cleaned the hotel room, stood at a stoplight, or removed the dishes from a restaurant table, the mystery arose why the restriction only affected ranchers.

Once in the mouth of an alley bordered by multi-floored buildings, five men stood around a trash can fire appointed for a pickup by an employer. Tortillas tied in bread sacks and sun-faded blue denims topped by reverse-

billed caps pointed toward tougher times, or perhaps bigger payments to coyotes to sneak from the Border.

They avoided eye contact or acknowledging my salutation: "*Buenos Dias.*" Slowly the realization hit that these hombres in the alley bore no connection to the men on the ranches to the 1960s. It was good that these town dudes stood unapproachable, knotted around a trash barrel, smoking their choice of weed, and fingering cell phones.

One maid willing to talk said she received her citizenship under President Reagan. She birthed five kids after naturalization to the U.S. "All five," she said, "have high school and college education from over here."

Once the bus boys scurrying about a restaurant brought back the dark *medio indios* from Musquiz, Coahuila. For sure, the fury in the taco joint prevented time to recount the wild bronc riding "Musquiz Kid," who rode "Iron Man," or the "Ol' Tomas" hombre that slipped back into Mexico to even a family score in Musquiz with a knife slash ear to ear for resolution.

The not-enough-time factor I see now is the reason the new relation felt so strange. Shaded by the tank at the line camp, the old cowboy Calletano and myself staged our stories to fit pauses for chewing and swallowing our food.

The scene was far removed from the restaurant clamor of stacked plates and rushing through swinging doors.

He ate and slept outdoors in the summer. Air circulated far too freely, winter or summer, to need an exhaust fan in his kitchens. He kept his camp too clean to attract flies; screens and sprays were unnecessary.

Many times he told how as a young hand, he helped gather wild cattle from a huge mountain basin only watered from the sky. How those outlawed beasts in dry seasons lived on green cactus pads without a water source.

Cowboys, the story sounded like, lived little better in the basin than the cattle from seep springs dug from hillsides to water the camp and the horses. Yet he communicated the same spirit, the same intoxication, expressed and felt by cowboys over the world, to relive one more morning to ride off in soft fog or sun-blurred dew on a new fall or early spring day.

One radical departure on the Austin trip happened the afternoon the eye specialist dilated my eyes for the annual checkup. (Many my generation suffer weak eyesight from playing penny punchboards at Doc's pool hall in the other Depression.) My son Ben chauffeured us to the doctor's office. Twice before, my partner and I braved Austin traffic under afternoon sun blurred by dilation.

Volkswagens, and such missiles as Roy's cabs yielding to the lumbering metro buses, cured us permanently of being independent and blind drivers.

But what I need to tell, Ben and my partner missed, (and you don't have to blab it around.) After my eyes became fuzzy and rimmed, I felt more comfortable than I'd been the whole trip.

The traffic seemed lighter and quieter. Passage through the busy intersection at Lamar and 45th moved as smooth as life once floated in tall draft pitchers and white frosted mugs at the Ol' University beer gardens in my youth.

The good doctor must have sensed my displacement and overdosed my old weary eyes. It helped immensely, too, that I forgot to replace my hearing aids after the examination. Air brake releases made mere wishes instead of paralyzing the eardrums.

Back on sound ground at the ranch, it doesn't matter whether the towns are filled with unpapered aliens. Whoever lives or comes over here won't bring back the days with ol' Calletano leaned against a cool concrete tank, eating flour tortillas and mashed beans with baked cabrito.