

29SHORTGRASS.DOC

Late in the nights in the ranch stillness, a Jimmy Rogers CD plays on my ditty box, yodeling ballads from the far-away Depression of the 1930s.

Somewhere apart from the music comes a line from a poem: "Yodel your way through the fields where the dew weeps, but not you, not you." The music and the words reframe the background of a ranch house older than the Great Depression.

The first visitor at daybreak brings the newspaper from Angelo. He comes early today. My dun Mexico horse goes for an annual appointment to a horse and mule dentist, set up for 10 a.m. in Sonora, some 70 miles from the ranch.

The idea of hiring a dentist for an old pony falls alien to other times, I explain. Even the Big Boss's polo ponies lacked dental service at the old ranch, I tell him. An old racehorse bum used to come by to knock blind teeth and such from advanced cases. "Old Mullethead" or "Streamline" felt a big enough shock from mouths prized open by stainless steel clamps without the pain delivered by a grizzled jockey-size man knocking an imbedded tooth loose with hammer and chisel.

The cowboy listens, though he's 30 years overdue on my stuff. One of his stories I really like: he says on his

first job, the old man running the place told new hands to spend the first week learning the ropes; then their pay started at a dollar a day.

His material strikes a chord. "To learn the ropes" – where does that come from? Oh yes, Ol' Jess Evans, the most irascible cowboy to ever hit every discordant key on the entire ranch keyboard, told us over at a saddle shop in San Angelo once that he was asked as a kid to defer expecting four bits a day until he learned "the rigmaroles around the place."

After the cowboy leaves, Catarina comes in to chart a feed run. He lives in Mertzon. He's retired from long tenure on a ranch east of town. He laughs at my stories. He knows the Mexican hands from the old days.

Once again, we revive ol' Filimenio Jimenez, storming from the dark tin shed kitchen, blinded by wood smoke over at Uncle Goat Whiskers' headquarters to join us, to go to work at 4 a.m. How Filimenio exploded to Catarina's question; "Donde esta los postres," or "Where's the dessert?"

Catarina knows to leave at the first break. Besides, he is a poor prospect to discuss economic indexes, or degrees of gringo recession. He came over here unpapered to work at age 11. In all the times we spend together,

including today, he never mentions the Dow Jones average or the unemployment rate.

My pal's timing works perfect. She knows the exact moment to call from her ranch. She hits so well today, our conversation discovers where the words come from in italics in the opening quote. She's the one who bought the book with the poem by Kay Boyle.

Part of our love story goes back to distractions on the wire to debate cow feeds and discuss seven-way vaccines. Our telephones today are private lines. Should they be tapped, it would be a shock to the "tapper" to hear the "tappee" read poetry, or struggle to find the page and paragraph in a novel mixed with packer cow market reports. ("Tapper" and "tappee" are my creations to add refinement to the new age infested with widespread snoops and sophisticated eavesdroppers.)

One chore saved for today after talking to her centers on throwing away more leftovers from the refrigerator. I am down to the third from the bottom shelf. Last stab, an unidentifiable petrified substance turned up, pitted in enough mold to interest a drug laboratory. Where the food lodged between the bars in the shelf, the metal corroded to an evil green to match the mold. Had the specimen gone

undiscovered, I feel sure the whole shelf would have collapsed.

Before I'd barely awakened today, inspiration to clean the refrigerator struck from an aftertaste from eating leftover mashed potato patties doused in cranberry sauce for a midnight snack. It was worse than the long-ago seared taste buds from drinking tequila Cuervo shots with lime and salt chasers. The replay was so real my lips numbed to the exact sensation experienced after singing "Rancho Grande" way into the border town nights. All of this was so real – so urgent – I snatched a half-ripe pomegranate from a basket and ate the whole fruit, dry pulp and black seeds.

The day turned away from the flashbacks. I plan on burying the fourth shelf of leftovers in the backyard for the armadillo to uncover in winter. I wonder what revived the tequila memory – the mashed potato or the cranberries?