

Memories of the Big Boss living in the St. Angelus Hotel in Angelo for 17 years connects to many housekeepers named "Maria." The Boss stayed on good terms with the maids and bellboys.

He banked and bonded the help with various misbehaviors and indiscretions. He testified in Justice Court so impressively in one case ("Nevah knew her not to be a perfect little lady") that His Honor accepted a bird hunt at the ranch the day dove season opened a month later.

On the trip up north, a slight flick of the gene returned. The maid at the first hotel disclosed that she came from Colombia. She became expansive and super-efficient after the two-dollar bills hit the bathroom counter.

The Mertzon bank keeps two-dollar bills to make tips easier to figure on small stuff like, say, drinks in a joint where some old gal supports a husband and two mean kids, "dealing 'em off the arm."

You may have heard that in 1936, the multiplication tables only reached to two in Mertzon and Barnhart. My highest mark in arithmetic for three years in Miss Greengross' class was Conditional. Bless her young heart; she tried pebbles to teach us to count.

The maid earlier at Cape Cod spoke Portuguese in a deep growl. If my partner worked at the desk, she pursed her lips to spew silence. She scowled at the mention of extra pillows or more towels. Twos or one-dollar bills failed to warm the relationship. The trick turned out to be my complaint about the saucer dogs baying in the adjoining room.

I've been to Portugal. Maybe to two Portuguese islands plus Brazil, but I can't holler "Help" in the language. Nevertheless, the way she used the terms for dog excreta, she established contact with a clear definition in blunt barnyard terms.

From then, she spent more time on our room than on five down the hall. Maids out back waved from the trash dumpster. The room clerk saved the morning paper. And the lady and her two dogs spent a lot of time outdoors around a boat trailer that her mutts preferred for an outdoor bathroom.

After or before Cape Cod, the next hotel in Philadelphia only offered rooms on the club floor. The difference in club rooms and regular rooms means two things: a big room on the floor serves breakfast for business people in a rush and the rent costs 25 bucks more a night for folks slower to go to breakfast.

It differed from the other hotels. A huge atrium overlooked multiple floors in a massive confusion of elevators and branch hallways. By mistake, the maid opened our door. She began to apologize in chin bobs, the way Mexicans once acknowledged a shrine.

After she calmed a bit, she folded the nightclothes in the bed and fluffed the pillows in practices lost way before disarrangements on the road made disorder in D.C. look like an engineering school.

Again, by custom, or probably more accurately from distraction at the televised market report, I handed her a two-dollar bill. She laid down her duster, bobbed her head twice or three times and addressed us: "Sirs, I am from Ethiopia. Where is your home? Hope your home is not far away, like mine."

You learn to spot right away the difference between the hustlers and genuinely helpful folks. Memory returned of an Ethiopian van driver in the Dallas/Fort Worth airport stalled in a blocked lane, yet determined to cross traffic on foot to snatch my suitcase. Like him, her gracious persona whelmed if not overwhelmed us.

As the story comes together, a few weeks ago I remembered to ask a room clerk in a Kerrville hotel whether the head housekeeper retired. Once at a Sheep and Goat

Herder meeting, I forgot a seersucker jacket hung in the closet. On the next trip, the visit to the housekeeper's department felt the same as my next turn in Miss Greengross' grade for a vacant corner.

She corrected the request to "the room attendant found your coat" from "which 'maid' do I need to thank?" The reprimand came not from the Maria naturalized from Sabinas, Coahuila. Her discipline came from the owner of the inn - a Teutonic mistress of core equal to the Mad Hun of Prussia. An old gal so strict she refused to serve rare beef during the mad cow scare in spite of the threat of anemia among her ranch customers.

A long time ago, the hardship of packing bags to throw and drag from cab trunks through lobbies when checking in and out of distant rooms changed the concept of tipping to bribing.

Also, when your mother goes off and forgets you seven years in a row at the rodeos in Angelo, the experience makes you nimble at the cutting gates and whirling turnstiles on the cold old earth from the memories of empty grandstand shadows in a setting sun. And two-dollar bills aren't much ticket for today's tab.