

16SHORTGRASS.DOC

From my current vantage point at the Dallas/Fort Worth terminal, streams of passengers roll suitcases by to mount escalators in a hurry to make connections to other airports, where they will embark at a faster pace ending at a baggage carousel that's lolling along, indifferent to man's time.

We are on the way to Philadelphia to go on to a poetry festival in northern New Jersey. The San Angelo flight allows enough time for a customary layover across from the Starbucks coffee joint in the big airport.

Starbucks grinds so much coffee that the caffeine fumes drift across to the newspaper rack. Along with a six-bit purchase of *USA Today* comes half to three-quarters of the jolt from a \$4 coffee latte without blowing so much as a whole dollar.

The people passing show no symptoms of the economic disaster cast by every news headline and television monitor in the terminal in ominous type and booming declamations. Facial expressions mirror the same frozen mold of all humanity pressed in a tumultuous mass of bodies bent on catching a plane or finding the gate to catch a plane.

The overview appears: credit cards across the way at Starbucks still slide smoothly across the counters for

charging and signing. I hesitate to stand in the line. The worn imprint on the MasterCard safe in my front pants pocket snags the pocket lining and slows every transaction. The Visa card buttoned in the shirt pocket, however, fast-draws in situations requiring speed to reduce time stalling a long line of young people.

One grandson palms his credit card part in his shirt cuff for fast action, but his credit card nimbleness goes back to grade school and maybe kindergarten. He gave up trying to teach me how to talk on a cell phone and manipulate a card's receipt at checkout.

Visa and MasterCard rank the same in specials. "Julie" with Visa left a recorded message on the office answering device in the summer. She reserved "a special cash advance of \$10,000 for a summer vacation for the Noelke family." MasterCard's "Peggy" countered with a loan to finance a cruise special to romantic Caribbean islands for "the Noelkes and loved ones."

Advertisements by American Express featured double frequent flier miles credit on all hotels with the green insignia. Discover Card, not to be outdone, offered two cents back on every dollar charged for flights to Hawaii.

Such glowing offers become irresistible on a lonesome, dry ranch, faced with 100-plus degree days and still hot

nights. On every mail run, brochures came from tour companies in a contest, it seemed, to offer the most exotic vacations at the most enticing rates.

I kept warning my pal that we'd better move. I reminded her that herders of our ilk best keep our dough in airline tickets and hotel rent with a backup on rental cars and restaurant tabs before the wildest of all long shots struck – betting the come on hollow horns and woolies against odds as treacherous as handicapping the summer tidal waves off the Texas Coast.

My friends at the Tuesday lunch meeting increased the pressure. Somehow ... an unexplainable somehow ... I sensed those wise old dickens moved toward bullion ... gold – to hard stuff, not paper certificates. None of that Federal Reserve junk for those guys.

The more I was in town, the higher the fever rose to act before fuel prices increased airfare and reservations tightened for lodging. Yet over and over, security weighed against pleasure.

Late at night at the ranch, the board spelled: "Put your chips on gold, little cowboy." Then the next frame read: "You got plenty of old grass – enough to winter your heifer calves. Go have fun before a drouth comes or the cow market breaks."

The stock market news was harder to connect to than gold or traveling. I was more in touch with stretched coon hides than sophisticated finances. But four pages from a legal tablet on the kitchen table soon converted the values of hollow horns to jet expenses in a myth beyond the wildest fables in The Tales of Mother Goose.

Four pages or 40 pages of figures were not going to be enough to persuade my pal that we needed to travel before hard times. After she sold her cattle in the last drouth, she became an astute judge of values. She stopped placing her dough on wintering hollow horns on dry grass and cottonseed meal, aiming for a rate of gain but actually being a "cost of survival."

So how did we end up across from the Starbucks in DFW? The clue is and was the poetry festival. Before a scheme formed on a legal pad, she made reservations by air and land. Bolstered by the caffeine in the atmosphere, we made the Philadelphia connection way ahead of time.