

3SHORTGRASS.DOC

Better clarify from the start that the datelines go back into June; the places are Iowa City at the University of Iowa and later, Denver. Gauge, too, that the emotional response ranges from toodling along to classes across sun-shadowed campuses to the English Philosophy Building blissful as an Irish elf skimming across the bogs in mythical verse, to trudging down dim hotel corridors broken-spirited as a rag merchant over cancelled transportation. (Excuse this; euphemisms become stronger when stranded by high water.)

Insert somewhere the one day – the one day – when the whole town of Iowa City lost wireless service to honor credit cards as water rose, a calamity only matched if cell phone service failed, the standby of all the flood-bound people and all spectators on the scene.

Study close from here for tips to evacuate: like Friday, when an all-points weather bulletin announces that the Iowa River will crest 17 feet above flood stage on Tuesday. Next, add 30 Coast Guardsmens' gear stacked in a pile at one end of the hotel lobby.

Got it? In minutes, tall, dark blue-uniformed hombres in smart white caps start tossing the bags over their shoulders for briefing downstairs. Stature and stride

emanate that the Guardsmen aren't here to shuck Iowa roasting ears for a cookout.

Be aware that the University closes – the last meeting of your class moves from afternoon to a morning meeting at a fast food joint close to the hotel. Note also that the University Health Service asks students and faculty over the weekend to update tetanus injections and avoid wading backwaters to reach sandbag levees.

Do monitor the flow of college students in the outdoor mall traffic to catch the social reactions to the flood. Find that tap beer drops a buck a mug from five to seven p.m.; pitchers hold steady as students take breaks from filling sandbags and moving from rooms subject to flooding.

Now, where has this led? Find my pal and I up in our room dialing cab companies, car rentals and shuttle services to flee – to no avail. Heavily to mind come words of the Big Boss, an escapist equal to Houdini: "I don't want the cheese; I just want out of the trap." Too late flashes the awful truth that we ignored the above warnings to the point when the Coast Guard arrived.

We might have been slow picking up the other clues, but Iowa does not have coastlines. Coast Guardsmen patrol the beaches, not the windrows. However, I suppose the way

the rivers spread over the levees and out of riverbanks, a broad definition gives the state a sea.

Granted, we underrated little tidbits like TV reports saying, "All major highways and interstates leading to the Cedar Rapids airport are closed." The report that the old railroad bridge over the Iowa River washed away last night did give impetus to pack and search for dry ground. Put us into action, in fact, by wire and lobby contact in forces of human determination unmatched since the grand migrations in Medieval Europe to flee the Black Plague.

Late one evening, Saturday perhaps, tired of keeping the line open in hopes a cab or rental car company called, I contacted a friend who lives in Iowa City. In minutes, he assured me that he'd take us to the Cedar Rapids Airport the next morning by an obscure gravel road joined to a high point close to the airport. So pause right here, forgive the disgrace of ignoring any and all signs of that obvious disaster and add, "You shore can't corner a couple of shortgrass cowboys by a little ol' row cropper's flood."

On the last lap on the gravel road, the State Police consoled us by saying that the road stays open unless the bridge washes out over Emerald Creek. We passed over Emerald so fast my ears popped from the speed. Over the first rise, the airport came into view.

Along with no space to fly to San Angelo, low water pressure closed rest rooms and stopped the serving of coffee at the terminal. St. Louis and Chicago flashed weather alerts from thunderstorms. Delays outshone on-time arrivals. After a one-minute debate, we chose to fly to the mile-high, dry city of Denver.

With a margin of six hours to boarding time, we tore to Security, to be delayed for the first time by the Service's training program. I told the instructor and his pupil going through my stuff that I was deaf. (The louder folks have to talk, the shorter the search.) But this teacher was a plenty savvy hombre. He replied, "How strange; I see you carry sponge rubber earplugs in your kit."

It had been my fate in the old days to take some mighty sad trips home from college. Deans and similar fussbudgets interrupted my education several times. The boarding pass felt good in my shirt pocket. I bet the security guy gets a promotion for being such an observant snoop.