

26SHORTGRASS.DOC

The broken-down hotel elevator caused a 10 – no, make that 20 – minute delay in getting to the first class on Monday. Seems pushing the button on my fourth floor landing prompted every maid, bell-man, clerk and guest to want a ride downstairs.

I allowed for delay, but failed to factor in a lady in a gray jersey jogging costume two sizes too large, winning the whole car for one descent to bring along a big, slobbering mutt eager to sniff strangers' shoes and pants cuffs. She faced the door, the opened elevator door on my floor, and ignored me.

However, as I tried to tell the room clerk, unless the hotel allows for dry cleaning and shoeshine expense from the 50 bucks a day extra charged for setters and terriers sharing rooms with humans, I wasn't going to take an elevator with a mastiff salivating in a volume symptomatic of rabies.

The clerk, (and I am reviewing this to prove how unfairly I was treated in class), piped in the banner language of hotel schools: "Sorry for the inconvenience, sir." Had I fallen into the elevator shaft to be lacerated by looped, grimy, shredded cables and land on top of a rusted steel cage, shattering my brittle old bones, bet on

the same words as the stretcher bearers walked toward the ambulance.

Once on the campus, racing to the classroom at a doubletime pace put such a strain that the backdraft sounded like an old pony wheezing from a bad case of distemper. Strange, but once at the classroom door, the smell of chalk dust, reminiscent of my old grade school days, calmed the spasm.

Thus composed, I marched into the room, took a seat by an alert lady attorney whose handwriting became legible from one desk width of space. Seated, I apologized for being late. I condensed the facts from above, centering on the crowded elevator and dramatizing the dog scene way out of proportion to reality.

In my closing, sensing victory, the golden retriever on the elevator became a muzzled pit bull and the leash containing the monster increased 24 inches and became plaited rawhide. I was at high pitch when the words in the catalogue profiling the professor flashed before me: "... and she lives at home in Iowa City with her two pets, Skip and Skipper."

Maybe the teacher sighed; perhaps she scowled. The lady fixer began to draw big black pencil loops on a yellow

page. The rocket scientist read the opening to his book. I listened.

Soon other members passed around copies of their work on the assignment to write about an ancestor. Mine was the only one in longhand. Everyone else typed beautiful print on fancy laptops. I thought better than to explain that the first year I wrote for the newspaper, I submitted 500 words a week in longhand.

But for this one time, I'll share the work about my great-grandfather, Ferdinand Noelke, the day I was scolded for being late. Just don't do any red penciling, or let some heavy-handed on-duty schoolteacher rip it to pieces. I've had all the school I want for now.

The original copy, titled "Greatest of Great Grandfather," is double spaced in longhand. I am going to read real slow. Don't fret about words like "grape" shortened from "grape shot" like the nitpickers did in class. Understand, Northerners are unblessed by kindness and forgiveness the way folks are on the downside of the Mason Dixie when we celebrate Lincoln Day by polishing great-grandfather's bayonet and saber. But please listen quietly:

"An oval ebony frame holds the foreboding photograph of greatest of great-grandfather Ferdinand Noelke, the

fierce cavalryman who lost 13 horses in 17 skirmishes,
dodging 17,000 volleys of 'Yankee grape.'

"Private F. Noelke, the mounted warrior, walking back,
one spur left on his boot heel, cutting a line in defeated
dust. The other spur hung in the flank of a dead horse,
rotting on the battlefield. The last one dropped in the
final, feeble charge.

"Ahead in Texas, milk stock weaning baby calves,
finewool sheep slipping fleeces, gardens shattering to
fodder, cattle escaping to the thickets, babies crying -
women bracing.

"An eclipse darkening the land, shading the sunrays.
Yet on he comes. Private F. Noelke dragging a spur rowel,
cutting a path for the wrath of the victors to follow."

Can't say I recovered or recouped my losses. The
elevator started working. Dogs, I suppose, checked in and
checked out. One desk clerk became a friend. She was the
one who didn't laugh when I asked her to make copies of my
assignments.