

20SHORT.DOC 4-20-00

During all those semesters in the fifth grade, a Mr. Conger used to come every spring to Mertzon to take class pictures, using a big view box camera. By his third visit to our room, we started calling each other by our first names, "Dick" in his case, of course "Monte" in mine. As I was the largest boy in the room, Miss Greengoss sent me along to other rooms to help Dick move his heavy camera and tripod.

Once he allowed me to go up under the black cloth to see how the fourth grade, I believe it was, looked through the lens. All I remember is the boys were so rusty and freckle-faced, they took on light shaded by a tincture of iodine tinge. Dick said the same was true in all country schools, but that he'd been making the circuit so long, he was hardened to the sight.

Last week, a prominent Kerrville, Texas horse and mule trainer sent a photographer by Mertzon doing a pictorial essay of ranchers' faces. This mug shot artist originated in western New York state, but had retired to Central Texas a few years back. After learning over the wire the nature of his assignment, I figured the horse tuner was probably thinking of opening a riding academy and wanted to use this guy to photograph his classes the way Mr. Conger did for schools. Fingering me was probably just a spur of the moment decision, as the only contact herders have with models are the cowboys hired in the spring and fall that'd be better at posing for Marlboro ads than gathering livestock.

He called the office early of a morning, explaining he had an appointment in San Angelo to shoot a picture of a famous western author accustomed to having his picture on his many book jackets, wearing a three and half-inch brim, XXX beaver creased to perfection. He asked if I had any suggestions how to shoot the writer to bring out his dominant features. I suggested the best rule to follow shooting all booted and hatted gents was to have them pull their hat brims down as far as possible to hide their faces; though tempted, to not go so far as to cause them to bend their eyeglasses to ruin their hats.

We met at the quaint new Italian restaurant coming into Mertzon from San Angelo. Called "Damos," the chef is of long Italian bloodlines going back to the great operatic tenor, Enrico Caruso. She and her very energetic husband preside over the small trailer house kitchen and lean-to-dining room as grand impresarios should, being related to an immortal maestro. In fact, her strong musical heritage will surely mean "Damos" will someday feature violin music in the evening hours if the lean-to's ceiling space will allow room to slant the violinist's bow.

A meeting at the wool house delayed our lunch appointment. I found the photographer taking a nap in his van out front of the café. However, he bounced right on into the café as enthusiastic as if we were entering a famous Italian restaurant in his home state. During lunch he showed me a large album of the men and women he had shot, from a 98

year-old lady riding instructor to guys on horses, who looked like they'd be safer on the ground than in the air.

When he came to the horse trainer's photograph mounted on a paint horse, I studied the look captured on film in the man's and the horse's eyes. Studied the look for a long time trying to figure what the dealer was up to sending an innocent ex-northeastern chap to prepare a photo exhibit for his stables. It was a long shot to catch the look in ol' Paint's eyes, nevertheless, sometimes when the rider and the ridden stay together a long time, they develop similar habits and similar reactions.

The story was told when Will Prather over at San Angelo stabled a paint stud at Wilkie Downs, the grooms claimed in a short time old man Will was as bad at cribbing stall boards as his stud horse. Even after he sold the stallion, he chewed the wooden matches with the ferocity of a termite. However, the longer I looked at the photograph, the more I knew the man and the horse were probably guilty of the commonplace horseman's transgression of borrowing tack, in the man's case, and breaking the borrowed bridle's reins and headstalls in the horse's case.

We had a big time at lunch. He was a lot better storyteller than expected of northern bloods. I apologized for not having a cowboy hat or a Buffalo Bill costume for a pose. I was hurt he spent so much time photographing the front side of Damos' Restaurant. But I guess expatriates

from New York miss the flavor of the Little Italy. I do know  
he was impressed meeting a descendent of Enrico Caruso.