

18SHORT.DOC 12-18-03

Two trips to the wool house in Mertzon Christmas shopping for socks have been wasted. Demand is so high for mohair socks there must be a plethora of hombres staying below the sensible \$10 limit on gifts.

After the second trip, I scanned the mail order catalogues for presents for my brother and sister. Prices are dreadful. The company offering fill-in-the-blanks thank-you notes has shot the price to \$9 from \$6.50 for 48 cards packed in a pretty box. Repeat customers should be favored. Until high school seniors and newlyweds stopped sending announcements, I gave fill-in-the-blanks cards to all parties. Never received a card back from a recipient, but if you preach gratitude, you should use symbols of gratitude. One of these days, used fill-in-the-blanks thank-you notes are going to be collector items, I think.

Next gift idea came in a strange way. One of the ranch families down south of the ranch requested their father be memorialized by donations to a college scholarship fund for the West Texas Boys' Ranch. Mellowed by the church dinner afterward, it sounded good to help the Boys' Ranch kids go to college.

Back home, I found the scholarship office in the directory listed at an impressive address in the Wells

Fargo Bank building in San Angelo. Renting an office in the bank building answered the question of whether the scholarship funds were separate from running the Boys' Ranch. I learned right away that five of the boys were in college. I did not learn why the scholarship fund needed an office in the bank building, but didn't need to ask as I read the *Wall Street Journal* and stay up with trusts and such like. (Back when the building housed the Central National Bank, the jugkeepers taught herders advanced lessons in finance without scholarship funding. In dry springs, you'd see old boys leaving the lobby marching stiffer than a rusty-jointed tin soldier.)

Once I reached the office on the wire, I promised the next time I was in Angelo I'd come by and peel off a 50-dollar bill for the family down south's memorial, a Christmas present for my brother and sister, and help for the five college students. Didn't tell him my prior limit for college students was new two-dollar bills, as I didn't want to boast.

Thought for minute we'd lost connection. After a silence, he asked, "Anything else, Mr. Noelke?" (He'd been calling me "Monte.")

"Yes sir," I answered. "Don't use my dough to send the boys to Angelo State University. Not only are my brother

and sister-in-law professors at the college, several of my friends teach at ASU. All are strict and cranky. If I have a conflict of interest, I want the conflict and the interest to work in my behalf, not have the kid I'm sponsoring flunked by known taskmasters."

Not much happened after my stipulations. I understand. Back when I bankrolled college students, my patience was thin. If I started a semester with a sense of humor, it dimmed the first six weeks and disappeared the next six weeks for good. For further proof, a fortnight ago I sent my grandson studying in Santa Fe at St. John College a novel. His dad dashed a scalding note the next week, stating in blunt language that as long as he was paying the bills to send his son through college, I should keep my books at the ranch. From the way he carried on, you would have thought I'd sent my grandson a case of absinthe with a road map to the Mexican border on the lid of the box.

Took a lot for me to offer to contribute fifty bucks for higher education. Higher education emptied the saddle racks at the barn. A doctor and his wife gave more than 10 million bucks for a new building at Angelo State this year. Had he and his wife used one-fiftieth of that amount building a big pool hall with snooker tables and pinball machines handy to a draft beer spigot, a few lads might

have been forced to drop all that college nonsense. I told Doc the same, but he didn't seem to understand. Of course, it is difficult for a brain surgeon to relate to a herder who can do his most tedious job without taking off his White Mule gloves.

Christmas sure loosens us up. The day I went by the wool house for vaccine, the warehouseman was ordering more socks. I hope the Boys' Ranch sends nice cards. Strange the administrator didn't ask for my address. Guess he has it in an old file.