

28SHORT.DOC 11-28-02

The longest high water confinement at the old ranch was the flood of 1957. Spring Creek Draw ran wide and deep for five days. By the end, an African American cook named Alex and myself rationed tobacco and skimmed on the coffee. Alex was the cook famous for telling us, "The time to get the pie is when it's passed the first time," a rule that works a thousand times out of a thousand tries.

In October on a Gulf Coast trip, a short recollection of being stranded by high water came to me in Corpus Christi. Six and a half inches of tropical rain fell on one afternoon, spiked by an electrical storm and a tornado that killed one person. My friend and I were in a mall bookstore constructed, I'm sure, with side walls and flat roof every bit as strong as the straw hut of three little pigs fame.

Rain fell in such solid sheets that the big windows turned the green of Mexico glass. Cars parked at the curb faded from sight. Clerks hovered in the employee's lounge. We were left to read on small stools. Coffee pots emptied early in the storm to smolder on hot plates brought back memories of old Alex and me sitting at the bunkhouse table, watching brown flood water wash into the front yard, telling and retelling old stories.

At five, we wound around the flooded mall to a hotel. Detouring high water, we parked 200 feet from the front entrance. The hotel had no rooms. Telephone calls from the desk confirmed that all the other hotels were booked, and high water on the access roads prevented returning to our place on Mustang Island. Returning to the bookstore would have been precarious.

Our only hope for a room was a cancellation at 6 p.m., our only choice to wait in a lobby dominated by a television newscast flashing pictures of the damage the tornado wrought five miles away. The repetitious weather news was broken by campaign ads of the most disgusting verbiage and projected images man can assemble short of portraying the degradation found on restroom walls.

I told my friend that if the TV continued, I was ready to drown. Ready to risk the road back to the island in Port Aransas if it meant crossing the Bay on the open deck of a ferry, lashed to a mast pole in pouring rain, braving 20-foot waves backed by a roaring headwind. For every three minutes of weather news, the station showed 10 minutes of such delightful play of politics as a short on a staggering candidate being tested for DWI on the highway to a claim that one of the hopefuls was connected to the Mafia in Mexico.

Minutes after the six o'clock deadline, the clerk ended hope for a room in any of the hotels. Forced to leave Corpus, we found one access road open to the freeway. Traffic crawled over the long arched bridge crossing the Bay; water lapped on the edge of the highway. Using binoculars in the falling eve-tide, we made wild guesses at the bumper depth of the cars ahead of us.

Nobody should feel sorry for people who have ranch houses on the high ground of the 09 Divide for washing away on a trip to the Coast. Once in dry clothes, I remembered reading on the bulletin board at St. David's Church in Austin how the organist, Fanny Croaker, took her first vacation in 15 years to be washed away by the Indianola hurricane of 1886. How the Big Boss claimed his Uncle Joe never missed Sunday church in Cuero, Texas in his whole life span of some 80 years. Thought also of a neighbor way back, taking his family in a new Mercury automobile to see the Gulf of Mexico for a summer vacation. He arrived at the coast just before dark, allowed time for a good look on the beach and started back home to be at the ranch to milk the next evening.

My son's Port Aransas house stands 12 feet above ground on telephone pole stilts. Wrapped in a blanket, covered by a raincoat, a panorama opened off the balcony

facing the beach. Lightning illuminated the massive white-capped waves hitting in such force to splash over the green-topped sand dunes. Shells, water and seaweed sloshed ashore, dropping cracked Japanese fisherman's floats mixed with broken cords of shrimper's nets, destroying a day's work of abandoned sand castles to end a kid's dreams.

Crescendos of thunder shook the stilted house to elevate my exhilaration. "By gosh," I thought, "this is the way to get the pie the first time around." Fannie, the neighbor, and Uncle Joe cut their own trail. Alex never was caught on the wrong side of Spring Creek again. And from now on, the only time my conscience is going to hurt is when I miss a chance to take a trip.