

On the Fort Davis trip a few weeks ago, I finally faced making a 20-mile side trip to Marfa. The old ranch and Army horse cavalry town held deep memories of other days, but a big change was underway in a migration there from the cities. I dreaded the new scene.

My first time in Marfa must have been 1936. We heard – or I heard – bugles blowing at Fort D.A. Russell morning and night. On the way south with my stepfather to look at some country for sale, we stopped, stunned by the roadblock as recruits trailed off the post bareback on tall, lean Thoroughbred horses. Smart-looking officers rode McClellan saddles with sabers swinging on thick brown leather belts, backed by noncommissioned officers threatening, shouting and cajoling the blistered, saddle-sore troopers in a staging of great suffering for those hapless dudes.

On the same morning, the ranch we rode over held the remuda in a lariat corral formed by the Mexican cowboys, making a big circle holding their ropes, while the boss roped the morning mount. I knew at that grand moment, watching the loops swung from the left side to the right of the boss's body, then floating up and over to tighten on an

old pony's throat latch, that one more winter of school was going to be too much for this cowboy.

Later visits were during the early years of working for this newspaper. On one trip, a tomahawk of a beer joint held a dance so vigorous in sliding slick soles and stomping boot heels that it took both the band and the jukebox to provide the reels. It bothered not a soul that a fiddler drew his bow across "Ida Red" while "Yore Cheating Heart" droned from the audio of a flashing nickelodeon. Seems like the cowboys on a Saturday night then fit a mold. All the acts ended the same, as the hair fell down over the eyes, the shirttails came out in back, and they made one final squalling hurrah before the bouncer sent 'em careening out into the street.

One rancher of the time, impossible to match, stuck enough being from underneath a tan three and one half-inch brim hat turned down in the front, to show off a dun-colored mustache lined underneath in tobacco stain. Dark splotches of dried blood on the high crown of the hat from dehorning calves, (the country was stocked in Hereford cattle then,) authenticated his origin and craft.

Sober, he was wilder on horseback than the theme of J. Frank Dobie's Mustang book. Indisposed by Four Roses or Waterfill Frazier whiskey in Marfa or Mexico, his piercing

howl and forceful swagger through and inside the swinging doors ignited tension hitherto unmatched after General Pancho Villa's forces raided both sides of the Big River.

On the chosen day, we drove direct to the Paisano Hotel. The coffee shop was closed. Off the courthouse square, a small garden place served crisp salads and cold sandwiches under a big shade tree the same as, or related to, a cottonwood.

Iced coffee, fresh ground, sold at a buck and a half a glass, confirming the influence of the city crowd from Austin and San Antonio. To enforce my self-imposed blab order, I dabbed my mouth with a napkin to keep from retelling the story of the cowboy Jay Kay, who marveled how city people drank coffee without cooling it in a saucer, the first time he rode the cattle cars to Fort Worth.

Once we found the bookstore, we saw three smooth-cheeks sitting in steel chairs drinking wine at a round table on the sidewalk. Not from a bottle, but from glasses served from the bar inside the bookstore. The girl wore shorts and a halter arrangement for a top; the boys slouched in long pants, cooling off in the wide expanse between belt lines and shirttails.

Across the street, the arch on the top of a brick building read 1913. The bookstore was sure no 1900 model.

It was all city – new shelves and soft chairs furnished with a big, big inventory of books.

In the history section, I searched for a book on Marfa and failed. The strain of bringing 1913 back to town began to build. The bartender looked tender all right in a white shirt and black pants.

She resembled old Smoky from across the tracks – who in the 60s suggested a wild kid finish his steak off the barroom floor for misbehaving by wielding a meat cleaver to prompt him – as much as Miss Elizabeth Taylor, the star of screen and record matrimony, favored old John Wayne. (Miss Taylor was in mind. She acted in a movie set in Marfa once, "The Giant.")

My friend came just in time to block a story. The kids left in a Corvette. Opening the car door for her, the numbers flashed: "One-nine-one-three – you are out of date, little cowboy."