

26SHORTGRASS.DOC

Spring means the blue-headed turkeys migrate from Spring Creek and the Concho rivers up onto the 09 Divide to harvest the jumbo grasshoppers. Jumbos load the craws so heavy, the wild turkeys pitch forward after a week on the bountiful feast.

Big grasshoppers test higher liquid content than the kind smashed on windshields. Their salivary systems emit a brown spit that we thought as kids to be from a cud made from cedar bark.

Provincialism taught that horned toads were related to dragons and black widow spiders possessed curses. Scorpions' tails uncoiled meant rain by the next day. Step on a tarantula barefoot and the best to hope for was that your toenails turned black.

Turkeys act different on the rich grasshopper diet. The long-legged toms, with drumsticks attached far from ankle to the second joint, perform dances so passionate that roadrunners along the way hatch six weeks ahead of schedule.

In the caliche on the county road this spring, the gobblers made circular patterns, cut by wing tips dragged in the dust. The signs are easy to imagine as Phoenician symbols or Native American pictographs.

They resembled marks in the road that bandits make, or tramps use to guide other tramps to easy handouts, except there were no bandits on the road or handouts on or off the roads. Nevertheless, the imprint looked mysterious and strange.

Seems like a good time for you to see how it feels to make up stories week after week. How, say, it felt to walk down a road familiar as your life's story, to discover a strange circular ribbed imprint two feet in diameter.

Next, suppose your deadline falls due in 12 hours. Now, don't move or walk off from the sight. Keep an eye on the mysterious wagon wheel size image a full three inches deep in a hard caliche road.

A time check shows now that your deadline closes 15 minutes and 30 seconds nearer than a deep breath ago. All right, repeat this oath: "Scouts are brave, Scouts are trustworthy," and "Scouts are plenty gawd-a-mighty naïve if they think they can become brave, trustworthy or honest and stay afloat in the newspaper game."

The test over (and you passed), move around to the barrow ditch side. The whole article takes 800 words, by the way. Poke around with a stick in the thick grass. Look for signs – signs a bobcat or mountain lion buried scat

close, which your granddad knew meant a killer cat thirsted for blood and craved fat gobbler meat.

Concentrate on the whole scene to reconstruct a killer mountain lion so ravenous, his kill so swift and sure, that only six feet of sign remains where the gobbler's huge body writhed and pitched in the dust.

No blood sign? Well, the lion dared not drink in the ranchers' water troughs; too smart for that giveaway stunt. He drinks blood - has to - in amounts to make a cavern bat think he's converted to vegetarianism.

Don't feel right about this so far? Try a human angle. Every morning, the news exposes a new cult. Do a quick review on curses. The circular dust imprint makes a sundial face. Egyptians, oldtime ones, believed a shadow cut in curlicues in sundial faces means drouth so severe that the pyramids' joints pop apart.

The word "drouth" and the phrase "the pyramids' joints pop apart." Roll those around. Look off or stare down the road for a bit to open and broaden the mind. Examine the diagram in sweeps instead of detail. "Drouth" and "Egyptian" - repeat those a few times.

Then turn back to the house without a stop by the coffee pot.

A second check shows your deadline trimmed by 48 minutes. Note that 45-plus years' experience under deadlines fails to teach how to make up 45 seconds, much less 48 minutes.

Can't say about anyone else's mother, can you? But I can say mine pleaded for me to do something useful with my life from my boyhood to her demise. In a fleeting moment, I wonder if the envy would revive for Hemingway's life and all the glorious fans hypnotized by his talent and brawn in a mass of adoring women.

At the desk – this desk – the (your) story begins: “Turkey gobblers become so amorous on jumbo grasshopper diets on the 09 Divide that they brush love notes with their wingtips in the dust. On a walk last week on the county road, a circular design appeared in turkey language. Racy stuff entitled “You Make My Wattles Red.” The word racy, however, incriminates the human scribe more than the turkey poet, who can't be...”

Take all this as a warning of how many excuses arise to wander off on an article instead of taking a walk. You have to hand it to those old gobblers; they understand the basis of fertility and the power of love letters.