

Shortgrass Country

By Monte Noelke

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Early hours in Mertzson's coffee house are the same throughout the year. Herders and gas plant jockeys normally make up the crowds; few strangers stop to mingle among the predawn cup rattlers. Truckers or routemen drift in now and then, but mainly the group never varies too much.

Before the first pot of coffee was ready this morning, a couple of flower children on motorcycles changed the scene. By the time the lady in charge of the cafe had served the first round, everybody in the joint was glancing at what appeared to be a girl and what I think was a boy/girl combination. (Don't press me on these facts. I don't get enough practice to call the shots in this age.)

The regulars were giving them plenty of space. Four-chair tables were having to serve extra customers. Fellows reading their newspapers had their snoots buried so deep in the pages that you'd have thought it was going to come a hailstorm.

Distances between the two groups didn't really matter. There was no danger of the natives and the new trade getting mixed up. On the darkest night into the Arctic Zone, a hippy would stand out among a bunch of Shortgrassers more than a tree ape would at a barber's college.

The old boys at my table kept punching each other and doing a lot of snickering. Mertzson hasn't had a freak show in a long time. Twenty years have passed since the citizens had a chance to see a bearded lady or a tattooed man.

People forget the thrill of seeing the unusual when all they have to satisfy their curiosity is the occasional news that a two headed calf was born in another state. Without preparation, you couldn't have expected them to react any other way this morning. The sudden smell and sight of a hippy at close range is apt to jar anyone.

Hirsute travelers such as these are the reason that tent shows don't come to towns like Mertzson anymore. With odd looking characters wandering down every city street, the carnival people are hard pressed to charge money to see the spectacular. In fact, I've been reluctant to open my mail for years for fear that I'd inherited a freak show. Banks aren't big enough to finance insolvent shows and ailing ranches. The day may come when people will pay money to see a ranch or a live rancher, but I'm afraid the freak business is ruined forever.

Over-supply is just as hard to overcome in the entertainment field as any other game. Last month as I passed through San Antonio, the side streets close to the old Hemisfair were swarming with enough long haired creatures to make P. T. Barnum's lifetime work look like a Cub Scout circus.

Beaded individuals were sprawled on the sidewalks to the degree that the street cleaners would have had to use whisk brooms to sweep. Old man Barnum was quite a hustler in his day, but he couldn't have ever competed with the sights that were there for the asking.

Having the beaded children visit our coffee house in Mertzson did liven up the place. They played the nickelodeon and gave the coffee drinkers something else to worry about instead of the woes of ranchdom.

I do hope the influx of hippies is a slow process. Too many at once could be more than we could stand.