

26SHORT.DOC 11-26-98

Shortgrass citizens still live in the outlying towns, yet country people in the sense of other times are fading away.

Mertzon probably stocks 150 head of chickens today, counting laying hens and the few flocks of fighting cocks, compared to a townsite once covered in Rhode Island Red hens and White Leghorn roosters. Milk cows aren't staked on the cedar hills for schoolboys to practice riding anymore, and the horse population is down to 10 head. Long gone are such sounds as Burro Miller's jack braying on a late summer evening, or bulls bellowing in the pasture adjoining the city limits as the weather cooled in the fall.

Young boys continue to ride bicycles to fish off the low water bridge in the spring. (Small town kids aren't allowed to drive on the highway until their 11th birthday.) But wooden benches no longer sit in front of the stores for men to rest up from tiring domino matches and stressful political debates.

Males and females use the same shop for haircuts. Instead of chairs full of men smelling of Lucky Tiger hair tonic and all forms of tobacco, the two sexes mingle in the lacquered odor of sprays and smells of singed hair. Waiting time is spent in such diversions as the pictorial emptiness of *People* magazine, or staring at such brain-numbing television shows as "Dip the Bucket of Passion," or "Four

Feet in Love." (Reference points for television shows are hard to monitor if you don't own a set.)

On weekends, a friend and I walk in the more provincial setting on the other side of Spring Creek at Sherwood, the old county seat. Golden leafed pecans and lighter gilded soapberries brighten the roads in autumn light, along crumbling irrigation ditches, long dry from disuse. Street signs mark Wabash Avenue and Missouri Street leading to maybe two houses on four blocks.

Where the mercantile and the post office once stood across from the courthouse, cracked slabs of flaking concrete foundations and sidewalks gradually allow the mesquites and shifting dirt to reclaim the spot for nature. An array of trailers park where the Odd Fellow's Lodge once met in the finery of fez and silver-plated sabers.

The road winding off the hill from the east is the same one the stagecoach from San Angelo raced spans of horses down, the tongue riding high on the collars, trace chains rattling slack against the gravel, brakes screeching against the iron rims of the wheels, and the driver holding the lines, blowing a bugle heralding the bi-weekly post.

The trails my grandfathers and uncles and aunts followed to pick up the mail after the stage run are overgrown by a profusion of garden vines and bedded flowers mixed with wild cactus and dense brush. Blooms from honeysuckle vines or sweet potato plants gone wild mark the final chapter of the vacating of the land.

Ruins and deserted property are scattered about the town. The vacant house I know only as the Kagle Place belongs in a William Faulkner story in Mississippi. An overgrowth of vines fills the front yard; gingerbread scales under the eaves drop from formation onto drooping gutters. The garage, once a buggy shed, is Model T Ford wide. The only hope vandals will not destroy the old house is that miscreants may recall how many rounds of .22 ammunition a former owner fired at imaginary spooks on moonlit nights. Ghosts, you know, are good watchmen.

After heavy rains, erosion uncovers handmade square nails and broken bits of blue and white dishes on the vacant lots. Here and there, a shard of brown glass from a snuff bottle, or a rusty harness buckle work from the ground. Old knife handles and misshapen forks too weathered to read the trademarks sift through the fine dirt to surface.

I poke around in the loose dirt with a stick. I wonder what if I were to find a button from the Confederate uniform of Great Grandpa Ferdinand Noelke, who lived up the street, or what if I were to find a live cartridge from the gunbelt of Black Jack Ketchum, the infamous train robber, who hid out in a cave on the Middle Concho? Just to unearth a piece of a spur rowel would bring Black Jack into focus, tying his horse down on Baptist Hollow to walk up town to play cards in back of the livery stable. Uncovering one old pewter button is all it'd take to revive the image of Ferdinand picking his way up to the store. He'd be in his dotage,

wearing a pair of elastic banded house shoes instead of his old army boots and swinging a hickory cane the way he once wielded a saber on the battlefield.

I linger by the Kagle Place on every walk, remembering a prim, gray-headed lady quilting on a frame hanging in her parlor. The smell of biscuits cooking in the oven of a wood stove comes back and I curse the day the laws of nutrition banned eating redeye gravy.