

26SHORTGRASS.DOC

A Monday morning on County Toad 131 paralleling the railroad right of way in the right lane, stirring up caliche and black dust, probably transported or blown from part of the land across the fence deeded to W.M. Noelke and now of title to W.D. Noelke.

Above and apart from speculation arises the thought that you the reader may have known all this beforehand. None of the stories originated in a newsroom.

Maybe you were in the big corral across the tracks at Noelke Switch. In the drouth of the 1950s the dust thickened to near darkness in the pens at roundups. Maybe you heard the cook banging on the wagon rim for a dinner bell, or witnessed the horse and man wreck coming off the railroad hump at too steep a decline and too sandy footing.

In all these decades, the thought never arose that the audience moves with the writer. You might have been over at Uncle Goat Whiskers' pens the morning the old dickens threw five times more sheep in the runaround than there was space for.

Did he have two thousand ewe lambs weaned in that herd? The dust was too thick to count them. Whiskers didn't hire cowboys to keep books. All we'd had to write with

anyway was blue marking chalk on the saddle house wall –
“ewe lambs, 2022 head, Oct. 1965.”

You sure wouldn't have heard the dinner bell from the Monument Ranch above the uproar at Uncle Goat Whiskers' headquarters ranch. No, señor, Uncle Goat Whiskers cursed louder than a wagon rim chimed.

His old ranch house still tremors from him stomping in the back door in high-topped black boots in a raging storm to terrify and insult his wife with: “Dora, did you burn them sinkers again?” (“Sinkers” equals biscuits; “Dora” is short for “Dumb Dora” or Aunt Ella, his ever-suffering wife.)

No, compadre, if you made dinner at Whiskers' outfit, we'd have noticed you. After an eight-hour morning, survivors bond. We wouldn't have punched you in the ribs, either. When you do without food that long and swallow straight corral dust without any water, a punch below the ribs might collapse the whole torso.

You are certain to remember if you were around, the bay horse in the Big Boss' remuda that rolled with every saddle ever pitched on his back. But you may know all those horses if you stood early in the mornings in those pipe corrals, clutching your bridle, hoping your draw wouldn't be some idiot like Shorty, or the fool ol' crazy Streak, or

that blind Clementine bitch that ran over three fences with the kid from Sonora's rigging and left him hobbling on foot in the White mill.

Stanley Frank or Elmer Kelton, or Steve Kelton one should have warned way back that if you write stories 45 or 50 years, you don't know who comes along or who disappears or even who subscribes. Those three editors all worked on ranches and newsrooms on the way to fame and fortune.

Comes back in the close about eating dinner over at Deep Well at the old ranch one cold spring roundup in a rain so hard the water poured off the points of our hat brims.

Strangers could have walked up without being seen and joined us in the hard rain, much less been recognized. Two brothers from Sherwood were along, if you remember. The oldest, ol' Jake, rode a half-rigged straight-fork saddle with a toesack blanket and iron stirrups swung by altered hame straps. He mounted that long-backed bay Thoroughbred sapsucker of a polo prospect we called "Pavo" or "Peacock." (His shadow resembled a peacock's. His gait was rougher.)

But you'd remember the riggings and the brothers if you were present, because there never was another one like the man or the saddle. Far as that goes, it wasn't every day you would have seen as long and gangling and high-

headed a beast as 'ol Peacock, running at full speed over rocks as slick as a ice skating rink for Jake to rope 40-pound lambs.

Double, triple, and quadruple chance the stories will be lost and forgotten. The way we never see each other – audiences disappear, too. You can't hold up your hand to be called upon or recognized or located.

Be assured we won't run into each other out on the switch crossing on a moonlight night. I stopped that love scene a long time back. This one, however, couldn't be stopped. The article had to come out about the chances of the road dust once being land that belonged to Grandfather or my brother.

Sentimental melodramas like that will put you on the sidelines, if not completely out of the game. Thing is, old men have a hard time dealing in the past and living in the present.