

MAY 13, 1993

During an afternoon walk to the river in Mertz on this spring, an old friend dragging a trailer with a sorrel horse aboard stopped and announced he had a horse for sale. The first question was whether the horse was gentle and the next was how old he was. His reply was, "Sometimes, he's gentle, " and "About nine or 10 years old, I'd guess.

Without further discussion he pulled back on the road and I continued my walk. Then I began to think more on the matter. So much time had passed since he'd seen me horseback, he'd forgotten how unsuitable a "sometimes gentle horse" was for me. Unless the drought and the recession had disturbed his memory, he knew a "all-the-time gentle" was my brand of horseflesh.

I couldn't remember when we'd worked together the last time. He started helping at the ranch when he entered high school. By then the Boss only cut me mounts to ride that didn't show any more chance of being polo ponies than I did of being a horse tuner, odds of which, for horse and rider, were about in line with the Santa Fe Railroad hiring San Angelo's then oversupply of livestock truckers to be engineers on their freight trains.

The only man on the outfit who took my side was the cook. After milking the cows, I strained the milk and churned for him on Sunday mornings, if I wasn't too sore from all the spills of the week's work to turn the crank.

But maybe after all these years no one recalled how much walking and tracking bridle rein trails characterized my fate in the old days. Out of respect to the craft, I'd stopped wearing cowboy clothes to town years ago. It's one thing to be a disgrace as a bronc rider and another thing to be an imposter. I realized, of course, that licensing requirements to wear cowboy costumes were lax.

The best replica of Buffalo Bill Cody around San Angelo, for example, belongs hands down to the colorful way the grounds keeper at one of the country clubs dresses on his days off. He really stands out in his sweat stained black hat and matching grey streaked whiskers. Makes Sundays away from the ranch mighty discouraging to have him come in a Mexican food restaurant and watch him cause every young waitress in the house to tremble and make the tourists talk under their breaths.

Out on the greens at the club he wheels a cart around a whole lot like modern motorized cowboys ride their scooters and motorcycles and 4-wheelers. Instead of my being so jealous, I might find him useful at the ranch to rush messages from the pasture, or report accidents off the country joining the highway.

After my compadre with the sorrel pony offered to sell his outlaw, I took in three old hats to be cleaned and blocked. I'm going to loosen up and start wearing Wild West garments to town.

Black hats set the style at the dance halls, and all three of mine are sissy looking gray felts. Nevertheless, old pictures of pioneer cowmen show them favoring high crowns and rolled brims.

Under hot steam, those of mine will come out uncreased and "make those black jobs look like they belonged to a Northeastern dude. Then all will be needed is an ol' boy to say, "See that salty looking feller over there from Mertz on, he's older than the mountains and still buying broncs to ride."