

JULY 22, 1993

The lottery in Texas drew a lot of attention in the past few weeks over a many million dollar jackpot. So the newspapers reported, a convenience store up on the New Mexico line sold the most tickets per day. Good news indeed for Texas taxpayers, especially the race horse fans who have been supporting the New Mexico tracks for 40 or 50 years.

In the boom times after the Second World War, hombres in the Shortgrass Country didn't have to go out of state to satisfy their appetites for the fields of chance. The main hotel in San Angelo reserved a big room for dice and card players to game. Poker games lasted for weeks. Sporting men came from Denver and Kansas City and all over the state of Texas.

No one was left out. Matched ropers, or high classed domino players, or reputation pool sharks found plenty of backing. Stories spread of a gambler named Luke losing \$30,000 trying to catch a sleight-of-hand card dealer in a heads-up stud poker game; challenges went out of a fabled domino player, ready to take on all comers with their hands concealed and his turned numbers exposed. Barbecues on the river ended in foot races; any old ranch horse showing the slightest burst of speed might find himself the next Sunday running on a fresh graded country lane.

The Big Boss lived at the hotel in San Angelo and stayed in the middle of the whole slate of gaming. However, on such jaunts as checking on the steers he always wintered up close to Fort Worth. Part of his discipline program included protecting his son's eyes from electric lights and giving them plenty of fresh country air at the ranch. But he used me to work his steers as long as the cattle were in the state.

On one of these roundups, we ended up at night downtown at a Fort Worth club guarded by a doorkeeper. Just as the Boss bought chips, the Texas Rangers broke down the door and stationed a huge lawman in the doorway to bar fleet-footed escapees.

People were screaming and hollering and looking for an exit. The Boss turned to the Ranger and said; "Stud, I'm Sonnie Noelke from out Mertzon. Weren't you with the Rangers who ran us off out on the Pecos River at a chicken fight?" The Ranger shook his head and kept his eyes at their 6 ft. 3 inch level.

"This is my son, Monte Noelke." Then the Boss asked, "Mind telling me where you are from, Stud?"

"Sir, I was raised down north of Waco close to Sandy Bend. " This time opening his mouth wide enough to speak and turning facing us so his big hat brim dido 't shade his face.

"Gawd-a-mighty, Stud, you know ole Watt Epperson from Sandy, He and I went to San Marcos Academy together. Made the best home brew in school. Used a spoonful of rice in every bottle. Good people, them Sandy hombres," the Boss told him.

The other Rangers were beginning to line the crowd up for booking. One lady threw a pistol under a table and customers indisposed by too much whiskey swayed in and out of the lines.

At that moment, the Boss took my arm, and said; "Well, if you'll excuse us, Stud, we'd better go." The Ranger stepped aside; out the door and down the stairs, we bolted to freedom.

The front page of the Sunday edition of the Fort Worth Star-Telegram listed all the names accused gamblers. The Boss read the story out loud on the way home; "My gawd, I missed seeing ole Skinny and his brother Jimmy last night. I'll be damned, just my luck to lose the chance of talking to Smoky and his wife Jane."

Along about Brownwood, he had me stop so he could throw the chips in an irrigation ditch. The last said of the matter was to take the advice of your old father and don't bother to keep poker chips from raided gambling joints...