

The frontier ended in the shortgrass country as the sons and daughters of the pioneers died off in the 50s and 60s, leaving only a fragment of the descendents that live to this very day. Up until their demise, the scene around San Angelo hotel lobbies and auction barns filled every day with booted and hatted gents ready to trade horses, match horse races, or combine an afternoon playing cards or dominoes with matching events for the next day.

The Big Boss and his cronies led the pack of these second-generation sons of the settlers. All fashioned themselves to be sports – big sports. If interest in running horses waned, they'd leave the dance to go outside and pick a winner in a Bermuda grass mat, free-fall wrestling match.

All the little outposts, in fact, were eager to back their man against one from the next town. At one dance at a country club out west, the fight lasted so long it had to be called a draw. Both men had stained and torn white suits. The supporters from Eldorado popped out five 10-dollar bills and said, "Take this, man, and buy you a new suit of clothes." Not to be outdone, the Big Boss and his pal, Austin Millspaugh, pressed a handful of bills in their man's hand, and said: "Take this, stud, to buy you the best suit of clothes in San Angelo."

The story and the dance didn't end there. Hours later on the way back to the ranch close to daylight, the Big Boss

shut off his Ford and demanded his money back from his friend. His friend told me he asked the Boss why he gave him the money in the first place if he was gonna' take it back. The Boss replied, "By gawd, stud, you didn't want 'Aus' and me to look like bad sports in front of those Eldorado boys."

But it wasn't just the Boss; it was the times of big trades and big operators on lambs and calves. There were plenty of cowboys, and black guys to cook for the men on the ranches during roundups. Lots of color reigned in the barbershops in San Angelo and all the adjoining towns. One white-headed barber over on Concho Street kept sloe gin in his tonic bottle. Late on a Saturday, he'd be waving his straight razor over his customers' faces like a maestro sweeping air with his baton.

Just a little later, Ace Reid began to formalize the characters into his gifted work. Ace was the only guy around having enough nerve to tease bankers. The Big Drouth at mid-century made even the bravest wags nervous around jugkeepers. Sometimes an old boy would walk out of the bank after holding his hat in his hand for so long that he'd be halfway back to the ranch before he noticed how much the crown was interfering with the steering wheel.

The other night at a party in San Angelo, I asked a newspaper editor if anybody worked at the paper who'd make a good story, or give a start to make up a story. He just shook his head.

When we sat down to dinner, I had a chance to ask a dean and a professor out at Angelo State University if anybody on the faculty was a distinct and different personality, or perhaps a free thinker. The dean thought a couple of guys in one department he refused to name were a bit different than the rest of the staff. The professor sitting next to him whispered something, but I couldn't catch what was wrong with those two guys. "But on the whole," the dean said, "we can't take chances of being incorrect, or we'll have a lawsuit on our hands."

I also asked the group if they knew any ministers, doctors or lawyers who stood out around town. Again, no one knew of a single soul who would make the start of a good story, much less make a whole story. I'd hoped the editor might have a reporter who owned a jungle cat and had to be told to take a bath when he worked in the office, or perhaps the dean knew a professor who tripped on his shoelaces and spilled oatmeal on his neckties. But I didn't receive any tips or encouragement.

Well, I've given up. I should have known when my mother stopped reading McCalls' magazine and started watching "The Half Baked Dead" soap opera after lunch that man's imagination was coming to an end. I can't keep making up stuff forever. I don't know what I'll do when my grandkids come this summer. Looks like someone in San Angelo would break the rules, even if it were just crossing the street on a green light ...