

The room clerks at Fort Davis' Limpia Hotel stayed so busy on the wire, the only way of establishing contact was by whispering while they held a hand over the mouthpiece. Twice before arrival, the front desk assured they were booked on the weekend. Two more times after check-in, they confirmed the broom closet on the second floor was the only empty space on Saturday night. But I wasn't sure, as the bubbling of the coffee urn on the counter overrode the muted exchange.

Once a man becomes too deaf to hear a lady whispering, he'd best not try to hear better by moving close. Good way to gauge the proper zone is to stay outside the range of such alluring concoctions perfuming the space as "Desert Backlash" or "Penelope's Throb." Being deaf is a defined handicap with marked boundaries, yet remembering the thrust of a stiff-arm by a 135-pound gal enveloped in a fog of perfume causes variable behavior in all ages of males. (May need a second try here, but appreciate the delicacy of the subject.)

Going on the clerk's information, or what might be the clerk's information, I moved us to a small adobe house behind the Veranda Bed and Breakfast five blocks down the

street. The owner talked loud enough to hear. She also posted signs on and about her property in the event a tenant heard and did not heed.

Part of the posting described the main building of 20 rooms and suites as having opened in 1883. "The walls are two feet thick adobe, most of the floors oak or pine planks, the ceilings 12 feet high, and the period furnishings are from Europe and the U.S."

She allowed us to wander down the long T-shaped hall to inspect the rooms at will. The Overland Trail passed within a block of the hotel, so the mere touch of a doorknob or a glance through a lace curtain to a dirt street offered plenty of stimulation for a storyteller's imagination.

Her guarded language describing the hotel's history is an example of fact-finder versus a fact expander. Compare these approaches, please: "Locals report the last Comanche war chief Quanah Parker stayed here on two different occasions." Now add a bit of gloss: "In the cold winter of 1883, the most fierce warrior of the Comanche tribes, Chief Quanah Parker, stalked into the lobby, his buckskin clothing chilled stiff from the stagecoach ride, his huge teeth chattering so bad it made the beads on his war bonnet rattle."

And for the chief's second visit, set the scene to move from Limpia Creek to the hotel in 1885: (A young boy dashes in the hotel) "Gosh-a-mighty, there's an injun chief watering his red and white horse down on the creek. Gotta lance longer than a flagpole and a quiver full of poisoned arrows. The mean sapsucker is looking for the hotel and the livery stable. (Break.) You gonna have to go tell him, as mom don't like for me to talk to injuns, much less injuns with lances long as flagpoles and packing quivers full of arrows with poisoned tips."

To go further, who and where does the "locals report" part come from? I investigated and discovered north of the hotel, preemption spreads over a couple of town lots in dog pens shaded by blue plastic tarps. Under the shades in stages of repose, resting to howl after neighbors go to bed at night, lounged a pack of hounds that the corner sign claimed to be support for a mountain lion trapper.

If indeed the sign is current, and those saucer dogs sleeping under the shades belong to the trapper, I will defer to any size report spread by the locals. In the long dry springs fighting to raise a lamb crop in the cedar breaks, the ranch and neighbors hired, boarded, endured, and financed a string of trappers running dogs. All were verbose actors who'd make the grandest impersonations on

the stage and screen of Alaskan trappers and African hunters seem like a peep show in a one-ring circus playing the backwaters.

Changes or suggestions, however, were not in order with the owner. On the 60-degree mornings we sat outdoors to read, facing plastered adobe walls draped in flowering vines that sheltered warblers and wrens flitting undercover. I asked permission to crack a hydrant to lure the birds into the open space.

At first she answered, "No, tomorrow is the day to water in back." She did relent, but was clear that Chief Quannah wouldn't have bullied his way around her hotel.

Sure can't fault the hotel services in Fort Davis past the rush season labor shortage. The last night at "The Veranda," the moon broke full over the kennel next door. And, yes, those dogs do belong to a lion trapper. Would have to be so to bay that long and loud into the stillness.