

*You cannot turn your back upon a dream/for phantoms have their reason when they come.* Robert Lowell in his poem "Ghost."

Someone in the family, perhaps a grandson or granddaughter, needs to know that a five year-old dark sorrel mare lies 50 feet due north of the railroad at Noelke Switch in an unmarked grave. The westbound midnight freight of the Santa Fe Railway killed her on Christmas Eve of 1952 at the Noelke Crossing.

The engineer's report described her standing on the main track, blinded by the light of the onrushing train. The engineer said further, "I switched off the lights, blasted my whistle, but she never gave an inch."

Christmas morning, the section foreman called, offering to bury her right away. I deferred. The section gang, we agreed, needed the day to medicate on menudo and bed rest. Christmas Eve had been a big night in Mertzon.

On the 26th, the section crew buried her in a hand-dug grave on railroad property, according to company specifications for interring farm animals. On the same morning, Jose Aguirre, Elton Howard, Feliciano Rocha, and myself rode across the tracks, driving 800 ewes, facing a north wind, heading for fresh pasture to hospitalize a flock of bitterweed poisoned sheep.

The tail end of the herd wobbled across the rails, afflicted by the poison. We looked some better than the drags, concealed in white salt sacks tied up under the chin straps holding hats in place, over faded green overalls braving the winds. Our task, however, was better than that of the six-man section crew hitting the hard-packed red clay with shovels and picks, jarring their scalded eye sockets and hammering on tender nerves.

We took turns walking behind the herd, using the woolies as a shield to warm a bit from the high winds blowing off the iced-over mesquite limbs. Part of the time, one rider held back the lead to wait on the sick ones.

As I remember the ride, no one spoke or rode close to me. Don't recall the horse I rode. Couldn't have been Badger, as he was too tall for me to reach the stirrup while wearing a winter costume. Would have been a blessing if that old fool spent all his limitless Christmases on railroad tracks, county roads, and U.S. highways. Would have been my pleasure to free him to range on the Dallas-Fort Worth turnpike if there had been a way of cooling the Big Boss's love for such a deranged mass of horseflesh directed toward making cowboys miserable.

If motorists had been able to look off from the icy track at the highway crossing, they'd have thought we were a band of horsemen looking for stray camels to play a part in the Lawrence of Arabia movie, instead of being simple

herders. By then, the white salt sacks had worked loose from around our necks and the baggy coverall pants strangled our legs under our chaps. Lucky indeed was the one of us who hadn't lost a glove, or even owned matching gloves. (Saddles don't have an instrument panel. Way to tell below freezing is when breathing the cold air hurts as bad as a tonsillectomy.)

But move forward to this past Christmas of '05 and a midnight trip by Noelke Switch on the way back to the Divide. I stopped and pulled over in the space directly across from the railroad crossing. Grew still and watched the moonlight reflect on the rails as I had many times before in the old days.

Suddenly, dust began to rise from the shipping pens. Poke sticks long as lances aimed by mounted men, punched cattle up the alley to the loading dock on the railroad.

Heard a horse set back tied to the big mesquite in the run-around tuned to a manila rope snapping. Heard a Mexican cowboy's cry, "Hi-yai cabrones." Heard hooves tapping the chute floor in a rapid staccato of the successful drive.

Boxcar doors slammed; a rusty brake screeched under a massive wheel. Smelled coal, creosote, smoke, tar and wet sand – all part of the dark, dingy, rigid, black world of rails. Thought for a minute I heard Elton's voice singing the hymn he sang on the ride to the house. Longed that last moment in the moonlight to once again to feel the might of a

horse under a tight saddle and to be the horseman looking down on a railroad hand on shipping days at Noelke Switch.

The mare's name was Doll Town. I guess I liked her. I know I liked to ride her better than the ones that kept me in a state of disgrace among the riders and the ridden. I know she was buried with the sweat marks of my saddle on her back. Can say for sure she was a better horse than Ol' Badger. He was so sorry and mean, he'd have wrecked the train upon impact.

I followed the tracks four more miles to the next crossing. I read after Christmas that families become stronger when they know the parents' past. Guess I will tell a grandson or granddaughter where Doll Town rests. Maybe some night on Christmas, they'll see the replay in the moonlight.