

My vantage point lies five hundred yards to the south and east of the Seven H ranch headquarters in Irion County Texas, approximately three-fourths of a mile off Highway 67 West. Overlooks from a hilltop in the West Pasture and views the grounds owned fee simple and occupied at the time by Hal Edward Noelke, nee Goat Whiskers the Younger.

Doctors (and hospice) declare on this April morning that Hal has a short time left to live.

Important for further designation, the hill is the one where the cowboy Albert Childress proposed to Uncle Goat Whiskers 50 years ago to install a lighthouse beacon to keep us from mistaking car lights on Highway 67 for the lights in the main house on 4 a.m. sheep scattering excursions.

It's necessary, also, for the first time in these writings, that Goat Whiskers the Younger adopts his true name, Hal Edward Noelke, or "Hal." I'll try to be clear as well, by his father, Harry Montgomery Noelke, appearing consistently as Uncle Goat Whiskers after an opening.

From here on the top of the cedar hill in the West Pasture, the medical opinion tables the matter – to be clearer, death warrant denied for my cousin and neighbor.

Sure, the traffic supports the diagnosis. The cars going back and forth are easy to see. However, I think one more charge is left in his being, but please listen to my prediction.

In this sunrise, or the next, he is going to back his white truck from under the carport for a final run to pump his stripper oil wells, go by his shearing operation to check his counts, and wind up to eat lunch with his pal Ann in Barnhart.

History takes my side. Noelkes have lived on the banks of Dutch Woman's Draw through drouths and pestilences and grass fires since the 1800s. Hal's father and mother, Harry Montgomery Noelke (Uncle Goat Whiskers) and his wife Ella Mineta Freis (Aunt Ella), moved to the ranch in the 1920s to target the Depression. About that time Grandfather Noelke completed 50 years' tenancy and moved to San Angelo.

Next to arrive, the two children born to Uncle Goat Whiskers and Aunt Ella. Marian, Hal Edward's sister, spent her childhood on the ranch with him to go to school in Mertzon. On the way up on the hill, I glanced at the dump ground to see if the motor scooter Marian rode to the highway to catch a commercial bus remained. She was one tough ranch girl to brave those cold predawn mornings and icy dark evenings on a cursed motor scooter.

Hal Edward later attended New Mexico Military School, probably for four of the five reasons bronc ranch kids go to military schools with a few extra charges to boot thrown in. He graduated from the Institute to go on to a degree at the University of Texas. Marian studied out of state at Vassar, I think. (I never pass a chance to divert attention from my own records and transcripts.)

Hal's later Army service as an officer in the tank corps in Germany increased his proficiency in firearms acquired at the Military Institute. Memory fails whether he trained his daughters, Elisabeth and Rebecca, to fire rifles as he did my sons after he came back to the ranch.

For sure, the two ranch-raised daughters received heavy doses of cattle and sheep work. Hard to think that those two wild kids, sun-blasted from the shearing corrals, today are Doctor Elisabeth Noelke and Rebecca Noelke Richey, mother, sons and daughters today in urban settings.

One regret arises at sighting his corrals and barns to the north of his ranch house. The more money Hal made from inseminating Maine-Anjou cows in the glorious days of the big exotic cow boom in those pens, the more dough I lost trying to raise crossbred lambs outdoors in shortgrass winters. Hard pressed, I wonder whether I am still jealous

of Hal the scientist or mad at the black bucks, the sloppy inseminators.

Other significant people make up the traffic in sight from the hill. Hal's longtime friend Ann Bailey won the neighborhood's respect years ago, feeding the cowboys and in her spare time penning goats before cold spells on open air four-wheelers.

One day, she became "Aunt Annie." Maybe it was cooking special for the shearing crew, or leaving a book or tablecloth over at the Mertzon house. But any moment that fine lady may roar out the gate headed to care for her own children on top of Hal.

Why or how do I come off being on a cedar hill in the West Pasture where Hal Edward and his father before him sent many a cowboy to round up in bare morning light on spring days like this one? After all these years as his friend, I'm a self-ordained prophet to say there's one more charge left in that cowboy.

Next day, 24 hours later, six-thirty a.m., Daylight Savings Time, ninth day of April, I was wrong.