

10SHORTGRASS.DOC

The south side of the ranch house yard brings brambles or jungle to mind instead of garden or yard. Only reason to go there is to check the rain gauge against the one coming in the north gate.

Beddings and bulbs lining the fence and the house's foundation on that side go back to Mother's times. Without her care, little measly bulbs became huge, half-exposed abominations cycled to bloom on a decade sequence. The ornamental vines spread down and through the fence into the adjacent hospital trap to delight the woolie patients and add an exotic poison to die from.

After my tenancy began, what plantings grew on the south side of the ranch house became secondary to what lived on and under the south side of the ranch house. In winter, skunks and snakes hibernated, free to roam under any room. The first of spring, the big shock came when skunks began to test musk glands in noxious fumes strong enough to start the snakes to uncoil and limber the stiffness from tail joints, livening the rattles into motion.

Perhaps the habit of removing my boots and slipping on house shoes indoors made the varmints and reptiles assume the new occupant was some namby-pamby hombre unaware of

number four express 16 gauge shotgun loads to deter four-legged musk or venom intruders.

Isolation made detection or definition difficult. The steady hand smoked Bull Durham tobacco too long before quitting to be able to smell a skunk, much less care how a skunk smelled. The only other visitor, the propane deliveryman, inhaled so many gas fumes on his route he had to use a souped-up detector to locate a gas leak, especially on the 09 Divide, where gales fierce enough to rip the canvas from a sailing clipper are described as zephyrs.

The bothersome part hit at night while reading in the kitchen. The books' names escape for the moment; the eerie sensation of some beasts watching does not. The feeling may come from eating so much pickled okra. Mother left 30 quart jars in the pantry when she moved to Mertzon.

Bachelors struggle to balance their diets. Pickled okra is good food if your spirit holds and you don't begin to feel sorry for yourself. Times the propane truck driver came indoors to relight the furnace, he claimed the best part about pickled okra was hearing the jar lid pop while being unscrewed.

But alone at night, seated slantwise by the round table, the habit developed to pause and cock my eyes to

glance over through the long crack in the kitchen floor. Strong feelings – self-conscious ones – arose. A snake or a skunk might be peering from below.

The house creaking and the tin roof cracking increased the sensation. I sensed it wouldn't matter if a polecat looked through the crack until the glare made him squinty-eyed as a tiger eel. Nevertheless, there was no guarantee that a rattlesnake might not find a hole to crawl up from underneath.

Country folks know, however, that snakes cast spells dark enough to break a Blue Jay's heart. Don't believe that stuff about cats hypnotizing rattlesnakes. No cat, dog, or beast of the woods is going to hypnotize a snake, unless the snake feels like seeing whether coming under the spell might relieve an abscessed fang or place a rib joint back in line.

Way back, while camping on Spring Creek, boys gained plenty of experience plenty fast in water and terrestrial snake lore. We told ourselves over and over that a cottonmouth moccasin snake couldn't bite you underneath the water. Boy Scouts trained us to put a rope around the tents to keep a snake from crawling over. The manual overlooked, however, that shortgrass snakes ate the sisal off ropes and

loved to sleep under canvas cots. Nevertheless, we sure avoided eye contact with any kind of snakes.

Blame for the myth that cats hypnotize snakes may trace to the tale I once wrote about finding a snake dead at the old ranch on a rock sidewalk. The story went like this: One morning going out to pen a night horse, a four foot long rattlesnake (the snake is two feet shorter here than in the original script) lay dead across a walk with a thin razor blade-size slit on top of the head – the only clue. Credit for the kill was given to an otherwise worthless house cat named “Bad Mousy.” Record shows now that if “Bad Mousy” killed the snake, it was the only act she ever accomplished for anyone except herself in the nine lives she laid in the sun behind the ranch house.

Snakes no longer share access to the polecat dens around and under the house. As time has dimmed the bead on my shotgun’s barrel, the dens have escaped down to the barn.

It’s a fair trade. Environmentalists cannot charge cruelty. The barn is a better den than under the ranch house.