

After a blank cowboy lull back in family history, new-age Noelkes began to pursue academics. The little lull you may have read about before was my determination to waste my life as a cowboy, or that's the way Mother put it so many times, and that seems to be an appropriate expression.

The next generations, brother, sister, children, and onto grandchildren, took off for the glow of the cities and foresook ranch life. (How about that one? "foresook ranch life.") The skip was meant to fake recognition of the letters in degrees every spring. Ultimately, however, Honors, Bs and A degrees all meant the same: "Adios, little cowboy, we won't be home for shearing or marking. The work was all done last fall."

In the same sequence, unpapered aliens might as well have gone off to college. Federal law and illegal transportation shut down the traffic in the shortgrass country. Officials anywhere from Congressmen on down passed and enforced laws against the unpapered people being over here, with care to keep maids and yard men in the background.

One thing that goes with all higher academics is higher graduation ceremonies. Purple bows, mortar board hats, orange or blue sashes, and long black gowns. You know

all that stuff, or you couldn't have lived long enough to hold up this page, much less read. Plus, you don't have to be named Noelke to be admitted to Slide Rules and Logarithms School or to the Musical Method of Tattoos Academies. The country is free. Education is what costs money.

However, you'll never go around a university during graduation that you don't become better informed and educated. Like at a granddaughter's celebration a few weeks ago; at the party after the ceremony, a chap from Houston said the best-priced haircut in all his part of town was at a car wash on Magnolia Street manned by unpapered aliens. You'd of never thought of that on the ranch.

"Next time you are in town, go by. Costs two bucks, takes five minutes, and the lady at the cigar box will give you a complementary massage." (the old-time neck rubs) He went on being a polite gentleman and changed the subject. He asked what I thought were the most important things I learned at the university in all those years he'd read about in this column.

He hit a sensitive button. The first eternal forever lesson occurred at an all-night five-card poker game on East 16th street hosted by a group of Greeks who took a

green kid from Mertzson's full nubbin, down to the last copper. He never went back for seconds.

This lesson shifted his residence from the fifth floor of the Stephen F. Austin Hotel on Congress Avenue to a downstairs, four-bunk college room at 1500 Brazos without forwarding the details to his family or the dean's office. His hotel room had had maroon velvet drapes; the Brazos Street joint had yellow roller blinds.

The second important lesson occurred after starting work as a weekly insurance collector and salesman in the area from East 10th down to the Colorado River. Mark that baby hot, and wild and tough – the roughest in town in those days: kids down there could roll a cigarette before kids in the Lake District learned to take the plates off the table at Sunday dinner.

Nine women lived on my route in a second-story hotel on East Ninth. The insurance was fifty-cent weekly premiums on children, probably with grandparents. Notation in the collection book read: "Call early, or might interfere with business hours." Common sense said: "You better get up and down those stairs, little cowboy, plenty fast." Everything around gave off an atmosphere emitted by old wallpaper, cracked stairs, and rusty door latches.

And up at the head of those stairs, the book didn't say that on this particular unforgettable morning there would be a dead man on the bloody floor, a detective holding a black tablet, and the gnarled landlord plenty mad at the dead man for the interruption. All of us were businessmen, except of course the dead man, who let's just label as a retired agent. (All right, pick a substitute for "pimp.") The women had all fled.

The detective scowled deep and angry, and said the forever-more words: "Red, you ain't seen nothing, have you?"

You give an answer that has lasted all these years up to this line: "No sir, I sure haven't."

Whether you care or not, please listen to the end of the story. Down the street on Sixth, a bar girl named Rosa told where the nine women hid out on the San Antonio highway. The death missed the daily newspaper and court report. For a long time, cops allowed the redheaded salesman to park anywhere on Sixth Street.