

20SHORTGRASS.DOC

By time to leave for the fall trip to the Coast, the road began to stretch before the branch highway hit Interstate 10. The 80-mile an hour I-10 speed limit shortens my naptime. Our turns come in laps; I barely have time to close my eyes at such a clip.

Used to sleeping in a stationary bed in a wind-warped ranch house, the road whine pointed dreams to Uncle Goat Whiskers' crew's infamous stunt of chousing Uncle Hub's steers to such a ridiculous pitch that the *novillos* tore down the entire east side of the headquarters corrals.

My partner knows to stop before the next frame of the dream features Longloria's crew contracted to shear the old ranch with four hands to peel that many thousand head of ewes in the spring of 1970. The Longloria episode launches a fit of screams and dashboard kicking convulsions equal to a male mountain lion caught in a cable snare.

Once in sheep country close to Roswell, New Mexico, a four-drop shearing machine passed, belts aloft in the draft of a 30 year-old truck licensed in Texas. Had she not known that Mother thumped my forehead as a little tot to stop spells from eating too much divinity candy, it would have been a long drive to treat an hombre with a swallowed tongue.

Eighty-five on cruise switches the conversation topics from "Those shore are good five-inch top cedar posts Ol' Cal got the Highway Department to buy," to "Seems like there were more waterings along the old road in Sutton County." Double-bred, ranch-raised girls develop special patience. That doesn't mean, however, that she might not like two weeks off on the Coast from "Signs sure point to a hard winter." A short vacation is bound to be welcome after the likes of "Cattle bound to slip with corn so high."

Citification in hill country towns like Kerrville mars the trip. Such drags as the kid at the motel desk's response at registration to the pickup's year model brings homesickness for her ol' granddad's truck and makes you wish to connect those dewy cheeks at least to the "Bs" in the alphabet. Before the grandchildren developed wanderlusts, untamed and untrammelled by boundaries or ocean shore, I ranch schooled two boys past thinking that dumping a pencil sharpener was hard work. I haven't scored since.

Interstate 10 to the east drops back to a pokey 70 miles an hour from Kerrville on into San Antonio to hit I-37 to the coast. Exits on the Mission City freeways allow 12 seconds at 65, from first signs to a sharp two-lane exit split between Corpus Christi and Del Rio, margined to six, maybe seven seconds to execute.

The copilot needed binoculars to read the overhead signs way ahead. Above the whine of the tires and the stench of the carbon smoke, the copilot's job expanded to swipes with alcohol tissues to cleanse parts of the windshield.

Big lizards on the Galapagos Islands able to drink salt water, it is told, inhale straight exhaust fumes from diesel engines. Enlarge this to read, "We are not now or ever going to match the big lizards on the Galapagos Islands on any count."

The San Antonio newspaper helped navigate from there on to Corpus Christi. Candidates listed in sections linked to the campaign signs stuck along the road charted our progress south. The counties cover huge territory. Perhaps the threat of unemployment plus recession made the worthies post more signs. Began to take a long time just to cross precincts the way the incumbents' signs repeated to challenge the hopefuls on experience and integrity.

She read a thick book; the road tread droned, "Ain't Nothing But Trouble." I gripped the wheel once in a flashback at an exit sign to a town where my compadre Dave used to ship his yearlings. Nearly could hear boot heels thump — the rake of spur rowels on the catwalk.

Once by a dirt tank stood a bay horse like he rode the day we drove those green calves to water on his place. Could have been "Old Scooby." Dave was the only cow jungle cowboy ever known who wore a Scotch tam on whim.

At Sinton, a farm to market made a short cut from I-37 to lead to Mustang Island or Port Aransas, our final destination. The Highway Department's cartographers missed one number in FM 385. I keep forgetting which one.

We never throw a map away. We pack three state maps torn in six different limp folds. Be a good lesson to use at Annapolis to teach midshipmen the importance of navigating by the stars.

"My gosh-a-mighty," I thought, "old Greatest of Great Grandfather rode horseback from Port Indianola on the Coast to the bank of the Concho River without a compass in 1868." Part was, and part is, that his grandson lost the instinct by '08. But we made the island before dark, thanks to a dim sign she caught by the side of a turn.