

19SHORTGRASS.DOC

By the time we registered for workshops at the University of Iowa, the college hotel was booked. One downtown where we had stayed previously offered the same rate, plus complementary van service to the campus. So we took a comfortable room close to restaurants and a 10-minute ride to classes.

First morning, a Sunday, one of the two elevators stopped elevating. Big wedding party scattered among the six floors decided to go home at the moment of the failure. I came in the lobby from a walk as the mob of recovering celebrants shuffled out of the service stairway, carrying bags instead of plastic cups of champagne of the night before.

Through the door in top form from the cool morning walk, the twirling of my walking stick cast such a windmill shadow in front of the reception desk that one ol' boy shied so far off course, his roll-on spun into a deep, screeching wheelie. I considered comforting the lad, but remembered how long a fit lasted for a hot-blooded colt fearful of shadows.

Twirling a walking stick goes back to walking in Mertzon before all the town dogs started sleeping indoors and stopped biting walkers outdoors. The shadowmaker I

carried in the hotel came from the lost and found closet. The cane or stick wasn't a cane or a stick at all, but an abandoned piece of telescoping aluminum tube for short-statured lightweights applying for disability benefits, or caught in a tight corner and needing a walking stick for a stage prop.

On purpose, I leave mine home. By the time I pack different weight clothes, rain coat, sunscreen, parasol, chap stick, extra shoelaces, and maybe a sewing kit, passing through inspection feels like an imposition on the government agents. Asking the inspectors to scan a walking stick, plus my other necessities like arch supports and corn pads, files and clippers, inhalants and eye drops, dental flosses and pastes, and ammonia swabs and chloroform patches to meet emergencies, seems too much.

Descending the four flights of stairs earlier allowed time to review the best places to borrow a walking stick. Underneath bar stools is one spot where they are forgotten. Streetcars and buses net a few. Old grannies grow careless in casinos and at horse races but are poor losers and the worst of sports, if you are caught nicking one. It was a stroke of good fortune finding the cane in the lost and found after weighing the possibilities.

The first class met after indoctrination on Sunday afternoon. The University of Iowa writing workshops rank among the best in the country. The catalogue listed my class as "The Art of Metaphors." Omitted was the fact that course attracted students experienced in launching rockets, medicine, research, law, libraries and education.

As each person gave an opening resume, the reason I was admitted became clear. I was admitted to make the rolls well rounded, to add a common country touch – the old Norman Rockwell, Carl Sandburg "aw shucks" flavor. Heartland America mixed into urban sophistication to balance the roles, to bring out true democracy in the classroom.

Self-introduction to an unknown audience is too much temptation for a storyteller. I was already using my full first name, Montgomery, for a dodge to keep folks from thinking I was saying "Bob" for "Monte." Further, Oscar Wilde warned, "Keep telling the truth and it'll catch up with you."

Twenty-five years – no, longer – ago, I learned not to admit to being a journalist, or more precisely, a scribe at a livestock journal. Writers unable to parse the syntax of Mary Had A Little Lamb scorn newspaper people.

The rocket scientist drew the most attention. He admitted that President Reagan ending the Cold War ruined his career at Cape Canaveral blasting off rockets. When the busybody of a peacemaker, (my version) Mr. Reagan, made a pact with the Russians, he lost his job to shower the heavens in explosives.

Second was a guy who majored in cell research. Like many students, he wanted to write his memoirs, except in non-technical language. As my turn came closer, ideas arose like offering to ghost a treatise for the cell guy and the rocket shooter. Offer a deal in the most commonplace language away from and outside the dock workers' hall in Galveston, Texas.

At my time, I lowered my head a bit. Said, "I'm Montgomery Noelke from the eastern edge of the Chihuahua Desert in Texas." Raised my head. Continued in deeper dialect: "Ah raise sheep and cows, git my mail at Mertzon, fear the Almighty, and trap coyotes for extra income."

The teacher replied, "Thank you, Mr. Nolek. Class dismissed." The classroom door was a lot further walking back than coming. Can't say whether my classmates grew quieter as I passed, as my hearing isn't that acute.