

Mother drove a white horse pulling a rickety buggy to go to grade school in Sherwood beginning in 1909. Such evidence is of record. However, the best guess as to where she developed refinement and grace from such a rugged life came from staying with her grandmother while going to college in Fort Worth.

Her Granny originated from a Kentucky plantation culture, increasing the mystery of how Mother learned one facet of Southern gentility without being influenced by her role model's strong racial prejudice and fierce Confederate sympathy.

The reason the information is so skimpy is that until the Selective Service Act, I'd answered to "Don't try to change the subject, Big Boy" as readily as to "Monte Noelke." The ones of us spending extra time in the fifth grade became faces without names at our desks or the supper table. We had no incentive to answer present, or ask questions, when every time the teacher looked your way, she sighed, and said something under her breath, or your mother avoided looking up from her plate at meals except to brush away tears.

Mother knew the teaching game from the inside. She taught two years in an eight-grade, two-teacher school in the Hispanic section of Mertzon. She also understood janitor duties. Every morning, she built fires in the two classrooms. She and the other teacher took turns sweeping

and dusting the floors and desks. I helped by cleaning the blackboards and dusting the erasers.

Of this part of the story proof exists today. In grade school, I dusted so many erasers after class that X-rays now show the same elbow damage as baseball pitchers, except my joints creak before a wind-up.

Inhaling the clouds of chalk dust did reduce sinus drainage so common to Depression Age country boys. Class photographs of the fifth grade show we holdovers not only too tall for the rest of the class, but as bleached as an albino cave insect from the cosmetic effect of white chalk dust.

Mother's grandchildren gave big reasons to be tolerant. Radical fashions, costumes, hair styles, theories, ideas, music, dance, diets, off-beat and on-beat religion enveloped my eight children in stages into expression by objecting, joining, protesting, picketing, sit-ins, lie-downs, vigils and marches.

With eight choices, Mother must have chosen the ones holding the least disapproval rating on any given semester or summer episode. I regret now I didn't study her style.

For example, one grandson working on an island in the Mediterranean Sea writes with no shame that he's read one of my articles to a girl in a bar. Where that high-stepping adventurer of a novice sailor receives permission to read my stuff off a stool to potential female barflies is unknown. And what about his sister forsaking her old granddad's ranch to work for a slick magazine staffed by

corrupt city folks in New York? Not to overlook the case of my daughter's son wasting all he learned about ranch cooking in a snobby chef's school, majoring in crepes and those suzette dishes too hoity-toity for a sourdough and cornbread kitchen.

One point Mother cherished was the rule that gentlemen took off their hats indoors. First time she saw men in San Angelo eating wearing hats at restaurants, she came close to fainting.

Keep in mind, ranch women tempered to shoot rattlesnakes in the flowerbeds and rabid skunks in the barn are not classed among the world's faint-hearted. Nor are women willing to sit in a ranch house all night with a lady who had just shot a neighbor three times in the stomach with a .30-30 Winchester, prospects for the vapors.

Spring break, my youngest son brought his kids to visit the ranch, reviving memories of her. On one of the nights we looked at the family album. It was a peaceful scene. I don't give hints on raising grandchildren. Best eye glaze known is to say: "When you kids were home, you never failed to..., " or "If I'd talked back to my daddy..."

But before they came, I began to worry about table manners. I noticed five old straw hats hanging by the back door. We still eat at Mother's dining table. I hadn't seen the children in months. Fads hit Austin - changes rage across the capital city fast and furious. Without moving a step, the scheme hit to require all the guests to join me

in wearing hats indoors and taking our hats off to go outdoors.

Outdoors, the dry, hot March winds dried their little noggins and curbed their large appetites. Indoors, the hats preoccupied them, arguing to swap hats or go back outside for deeper sunburns.

By mealtime, removing the hats became a privilege – relief is a better word. Also, it made me happy having an audience indoors to listen to my stories. Was the closest I've ever come to influence in raising a grandchild. Reverse strategy in bronc mules and unruly children is often the best method.