

19SHORTGRASS.DOC

We unloaded the car in four trips upstairs to a second floor landing at our Port Aransas spot. Each pass, we checked the skies for the mare's tail clouds to estimate the time of a cold front's arrival true to form for ranch meteorologists. The winds felt fiercer every time the car door opened on the north side.

Our reflections in the car window glasses might be familiar - grim or determined helps locate the right words. Would have been more help to find the yardman to carry our books up the steep climb to the apartment. We travel with more books than outback bookmobiles. We must fear book burners or a rebirth of the Dark Ages. Our travel dictionary alone weighs more than the car's spare tire.

Yesterday, in fair weather, we chose to unload a few personal belongings. The yardman watched in hopes that he'd get a shot at my hip pocket. But oh, no, we opted to play the self-reliant pioneer stock and plainsman role. Like, why her family visited the Texas coast before paved roads reached here. And, my ol' Grand-pappy Ferdinand Noelke landed from Germany in his crib a hundred miles up the coast in the 1840s. Hells-a-fire, he might have floated ashore from a shipwreck. Old folks always kept mighty tight-lipped on our family history.

There wasn't any Gulf cold front going to stop these two stalwarts. Two nights before, she challenged wild raccoons in her ranch yard with a broom and a flashlight. Hadn't been a fortnight since a renegade possum lured to the back door at the ranch with a rabbit call received terminal notice that marsupial scat is unacceptable on pickup hoods.

So flash powerful, dramatic images, right in front of a beachfront property, to be destroyed by a gust of wind that spun her around on the sidewalk like she was on rollers instead of her suitcase. Followed by the next blast that slammed the car door on my hindlegs to end an awkward maneuver of reaching across the backseat for a sack of books. In short, the perfect finale to smash all that pioneer heritage myth.

From the living room, a big window over a balcony opened to views of the beach. Four solitary walkers passed, paced by energetic dogs oblivious to the crash of a rolling and pounding surf in nautical might unattainable for the canine mind.

Your guess is good as mine where the idea came from to put down a half-cup of hot chocolate to go for a walk. Sure wasn't from doctors' orders. Doctors don't prescribe beach walking into 45 mile hour Gulf gales for bodies so wracked

that a puff of wind blows them front face over into a car seat.

I wish you had been around to speak up, or that my pal hadn't been shocked speechless. Her silence might have been from not wanting to hear the tenth time about the Christmas holiday cattle drive on the '09 that Paul Carr and I made over to the Eldorado road in 20-degree weather. I bet that's why she kept quiet. Old cowboy stories grow weary to everyone except old cowboys. She did drape her scarf over a chair as a subtle hint that, colorful as the red bandana looked around my neck, a scarf made more sense.

The new walkway up and across the big dune pointed east. Off the walk, banked sands made footing boggy to reach the empty beach road. Across the road, the winds lifted wide streams of white sands over a tidal floor swept smooth like moonscape must look. Swept so deep and hard the seashells laid in half-exposed ovals in the hard sand crust.

I turned full face into the north winds. I can't tell you now how far I leaned forward. The scarf loosened, sending the ends fluttering over my shoulders. My hat brim folded against my ears and alternated folding over my face. I am sure I breathed. I am sure I was partially blinded at

times. Two walkers passed headed south. I don't remember whether they led dogs, or the dogs led them.

Waves pitched high to break the silver gray sea into peaked meringue froth. The aquatic smell from raw fish seeped up under – or from – my gear. I stabbed the hard sand pack with my walking stick to steady myself. Up equal with where I thought my son's old place rose above the dunes, I gave up – capitulated to a natural force never experienced before, even in fierce prairie northers.

The tail wind moved me right along. My mark in the sands for the walkway had disappeared, but a lucky sighting of a numbered pole served for a landmark.

Indoors, not much remained of daylight at four o'clock. My pal heated a pot of tea. Steam off the cup dissolved the grit in my eyes. Somewhere in the building, a fault hummed lyrics from the storm.