

In the interim between depressions in the 1920s, San Angelo and surrounding outposts fielded polo players to the point of having one team of ladies. Prosperity and the market for Army cavalry horses along Thoroughbred lines fostered the regal game.

Along about 1927 or 1928, the Big Boss and his cronies played matches across the state and once as far south as Mexico City. Much color and boisterous behavior accompanied players only a step away from being back on a ranch breaking horses or riding in country rodeos. Instances involving post-game indisposition from tossing down bootleg spirits far exceeded the northeastern tradition of drinking French champagne from silver loving cups.

The cast varied from descendants of British nobility and a member of a wealthy northeastern shore family, to hangers-on from racetracks with no more pedigree than nicknames, to traders hoping to change a ranch horse into a polo prospect.

Stories of one chap, a titled colonel from the Northeast, proves he was better suited to raise and train Thoroughbred horses on a Texas ranch. His persona was unfit for staid drawing rooms, turfed polo fields on Long Island, and stuffy clubs in big cities of the Northeast.

Risking repetition, I'll make my case with one story of the Big Boss's that is imprinted in mind as clear as the evening we sat behind the bunkhouse so many years ago. It was the one time the Boss's team played the team from the Northern Military District of Mexico. After the match, the Mexican general invited a bunch of "Americanos" up to his suite at the Cactus Hotel in San Angelo for refreshments.

The Boss said, "Must have been luck, Stud, depending on your taste whether it was good or bad luck. But the general's guest list filled fast with the thirstiest, wildest bunch of bronc polo players and dirt track horse racers available in all of West Texas from a long list of choices there and about."

("Stud" was the term he used to address all men on all occasions, from Park Street to horse stalls.)

Pausing to light his cigar, he continued, "It'd been impolite not to accept the general's invitation, especially since he had diplomatic immunity to pass all the whiskey his old car would pack across the border. (Remember, it's Prohibition time.) But by custom, I suppose, the general ups and takes a bath soon after the party begins."

Here the Boss's expression reached the point of appreciation — no, merriment of appreciation.

"Damned if the colonel doesn't jump from his chair and tear into the bathroom to start trying to drown the general. Gawd-a-mighty, trying to drown a guest in a bathtub, especially the very almighty commander of the Northern District of Mexico, is bad manners, Stud, - if not a breach of etiquette."

Really going now, he said, "Must have took two or three to pull the colonel from the bathroom. But in the melee a rounder named Piggy disappeared or ran off. With the colonel raising hell, wanting to fight, and the general trailing water over the floor to the bar, it was hard to make a roll call."

Savoring his win, he said, "Been all right to lose Piggy as long as he didn't fall down the stairs or elevator shaft, as he'd been being lost and disappearing ever since he was a kid. Been all right except his partner Benny had downed the crying portion of the Mexican whisky."

In triumph, the Boss continued, "Benny started moaning and wailing, 'My ol' pal Piggy drowned in a bathtub! My ol' pal Piggy is gone, and his ol' mother is going to blame me.'

"About that time a guy named Billy, acquainted with both those skates, discovers Piggy roosting on the big towel rack above the commode, dry and whistling a tune from

Mother Goose as clear as Mexican whisky allows lips to pucker."

Whether this proved that the colonel needed to be on the open range depends on weighing military and diplomatic protocol against the forces of beverage alcohol and bush league polo players. Grand thing about the Big Boss is he became lifelong friends with the general and partnered with the colonel on a horse deal that was only ended by his death. (The Boss's.)

Be hard for polo to make a comeback today. Ranching costs so much more than playing polo that not many folks can afford both games. Some have gotten a little relief by calling running a hunting business ranching and calling teaching school and pumping oil wells a sideline.

One warped mallet hangs on the wall of the saddle shed. One of the painted feed buckets lies up under a feeder crusted with corn cobs from the spring we trapped hogs on the big draw after the Boss passed. Not much color left unless you want to count the vivid memories of listening to the stories behind the bunkhouse.