

Books on Texas cities list Sherwood as a ghost town 2 miles from Mertzon. True, ghosts do live in the old courthouse in Sherwood, but not in numbers to constitute a town. After midnight in the empty district courtroom, spirits of long-ago trials shadow the moonlight through the tall windows.

By sitting still on a wide rock window ledge, the words of the traditional opening of a long-ago judge come back: "In the event, sir, you are found to be not guilty, a condition I seriously doubt will happen today..." Or, the rerun of a hot summer day when jurors were impaneled in a damage suit by the examining attorney for the Kansas Missouri and Orient Railroad. "Mr. Smith, can you honestly tell this court you can render an impartial decision for or against the railroad company in keeping with the charge of equal justice for all under the laws and constitution of this State and Republic?"

A lull silences the room, and Mr. Smith becomes erect and replies: "Yes, I can. I have always wanted to get even with the damn railroad company."

But move away from the moonlit courtroom to a later trial date on an even hotter afternoon in July of 1936, at the cemetery some two miles from the courthouse. Ten or twelve men, among them my maternal grandfather, have taken off their suit coats and take turns shoveling dirt into an open grave.

A tall figure dressed in a gray suit and stiff-collared white shirt intones the solemn warning of what is to pass for the deceased, victim of a well-placed shot from a 44 Colt revolver and expiring without repenting for his sins. Hearing the preacher's words rise and drop to a whisper, and watching the men perspire, realize I am the 6 year-old boy clutching his grandfather's hand, flinching at the shouting of doom and destruction and hell and Lucifer.

Hours later trace my grandfather and grandmother driving back to the ranch in a long gray touring car with wide wooden floorboards in the back seat. Over to the west, mean thunderclouds and hot-tempered lightning flash and roar across the skies.

The little boy, myself, hears the words of the preacher: "GOD WILL GET YOU! He'll make you pay at JUDGMENT DAY!" At the moment, the little boy plunges off the back seat to hide from the certain approach of this God fellow, to avoid Him in the blackness of oncoming clouds.

The other night at a birthday party, the cemetery scene returned. A guest, upon hearing I was from Mertzon, said his grandmother lived close to Sherwood in the 1880's. She told him many times of how people brought their horses and mules and farm tools and cleared the land for the cemetery.

At the dedication ceremonies, his grandmother remembered a state senator being the featured speaker. Now this senator was a fierce champion of the anti-saloon league in public, but on his own he nourished a fondness for bourbon whiskey.

Delay after delay hit the program. By the time the worthy was introduced, he had accepted liberal libations from the pro-saloon element. So when he arose to speak, he made a statement old granny never forgot: "Ladies and gentlemen, I hope we'll live to see these hallowed grounds filled from hill to hill!"

Every time I go through Sherwood, I think of these stories and visualize the town like my Uncle Goat Whiskers remembered it from his boyhood. Whiskers said, "We'd hear the stagecoach come racing off the hill announcing the arrival of the San Angelo run by blasting bugle calls, with the driver whipping the horses in full run and the brakes screaming against the iron-rimmed wheels to keep the coach off their heels. Every boy around would race toward Aunt Mary's hotel to see who was coming to town."

Each June is homecoming time for Sherwood. Barbecue is served under an arbor east of the courthouse and speakers arise to commemorate the past. The cemetery hasn't filled up from hill to hill, yet some good souls continue to maintain the grounds....