

15SHORTGRASS

Every Tuesday, eight of us meet for lunch in San Angelo. Same crowd of retired guys covered here before of spent herders, a retired doctor, a former state senator, an active builder, an auction ring rancher combination, and a tax fixer and arranger.

The agenda lands somewhere in the mid years of the last century. Were the birth and detailed record of grandchildren and great-grandchildren not a ruling topic, most likely the setting would never reach the 1960s.

Costumes or fashions range over time, also. The doctor, for example, a noted specialist in diaper rashes, famous also for raising dough for eleemosynary projects related to sick kids, wears a bicycle-like cap from the days he rode to work by pumping across town. The senator's dress goes back to holidays from the state house to his career as a county agent, pegging him as "relaxed town and country style." Others may wear a golf shirt or a casual item, like an old dress shirt without a tie or a crisp number going back to more active business days.

All of the description of dress leads back to the first story about this gang, the variations in hairstyles. Without an audit, a good guess is most go to barbers instead of the new-age hairstylists.

The topic is a very sensitive one. Admissions range from muttering, "My wife cuts mine," to a common one, "After old so-and-so retired, I moved, but never have liked his work as much as I did my old guy." Further, understand that at no time in this story or the past ones do these gentlemen of such impeccable records in private schools and august universities and bound by codes more strict than King Arthur's show the slightest tolerance for one strand of my month-long gray whiskers, or for one lock of my roan collar-sweeping hairline.

Please listen to my side: barbers and barbershops go way back in time to when I shined shoes in a shop at Mertzon. Perhaps, just perhaps, sweeping up hair around the one-chair operation after school and on Saturdays changes the attitude toward dull hair clippers and sharp-pointed scissors.

Review the scene. Here's a 12 year-old redheaded kid on a bleak Saturday evening in a 20-by-20 sheetrock room heated by a coal burning stove, side-stepping the loafers and customers' feet, ignoring the gibes, to reach the area of the barber's chair and sweep up three hours worth of cuttings off hombres far removed from shampoo, shaving soap, combs and razors.

He hears, but ignores: "Red, I hear you been ..." and "You better quit that, kid, or you'll stunt yore ..." on to "Hah-ha! You are a case, boy, for shore ..."

Two pertinent laws come to mind after all those years. First, cowboys got their hair cut on payday. Second, shine boys kept their mouths shut every working day.

Minor questions dated to then are little tats like: Does watching a drunk barber shave a drunk cowboy shape a young man into a conformist unequaled away and apart from the regimens of Hyannis Port? Or, does social consciousness peak in 12 year-old boys by inhaling secondhand cigarette smoke, bent over a shine stand next to a guy wearing tennis shoes and 60 days away from changing his winter underwear?

Later, much later in life, my maternal grandfather's barber, "Blind Carl," further affected my choices, too. His customers braved "motion haircuts." Carl lost the sight in one eye in a cotton gin accident. The short radius of his barber work weakened the other one. But years of playing solitaire games of Chinese checkers with big marbles on breaks increased his tactical skill to the point where he knew bumps on the human skull to degrees that'd make a phrenologist cradle chicken eggs to recover his touch.

Nevertheless, to have long hair in the back, we scrunched down in the chair. For sideburns thin and high,

we cocked our heads, first to the right, then to the left. More of the top came off by leaning forward in the chair. Should he drop his scissors or misplace his comb, we had to arise and help look for the missing tool.

In slack times on Tuesdays, criticism cuts plenty deep on tonsorial preferences. Cold winds on the 09 Divide stimulate growth, like a beaver's fur. I become so distracted by being with those guys I forget to defend myself even to the point of omitting the childhood infatuation with Tarzan and the Apes and a later obsession to emulate the full head of hair of General Sam Houston.