

DECEMBER 20, 1984

On the night of the San Angelo Christmas Symphony, every space was filled in the auditorium. The patrons seemed to be humming the music in advance of the program. I had a good seat, down front, right in the center.

The tuning of the orchestra was a litany of keys and strings and bows straining to prepare for the scores to come. Handsome ladies, coiffured in silvers and greys, glided down the aisles followed by husbands freed of the offices of their day. Little girls came by, prim and dainty, adding to the beauty of the pageantry. At the same moment, their brothers sank deep in their seats, suspicious of any event that brought on such starched white shirts and wool pants.

In this burst of Christmas excitement, and the crowds and the red flowers along the stage, I suddenly turned and told my friends who were hosting the tickets that I was never again going to tell the tale about the western band that was hired to play for a church dance out at Mertzon one time.

It was a big sacrifice on my part. I'd put in a lot of effort polishing the way the priest got so provoked because the band spent over an hour of the contracted time tuning up their guitars and running the scales on the accordions. The Father belonged to an ancient religious order. One that I suppose, had engaged wandering troubadours and minstrels in the times of the monarchies and hired gourd rattling mystics on the dark continent and maybe their flute playing counterparts in India. Yet that didn't mean that His Honor knew how to deal with a cowboy group that played on one-half talent and one-half longneck liquid refreshments.

However, where I went wrong is that I didn't stop telling the story in honor of audience changes or better changes in costumes. I started out telling it to old boys wearing soft collared blue shirts and didn't stop when on stuffier occasions their wives would have them all girdled up in three-button burying-suit coats and tight fitting shoulder vests and close-woven flowered neckties.

Please consider this advice if you fashion yourself to be a storyteller. Don't carry the handicap of trying to entertain folks that have on their dark clothes, especially men in tuxedos. If you'll notice, a cummerbund puts the exact amount of pressure on the bottom of those stiff shirt fronts to pinch off the "h" in the sound of laughter. All you are going to be getting is an "eee, eh, e" and a dull sounding "arfing" noise that'd make an old time vaudeville hand start looking out for the rotten tomatoes.

The part I didn't like (and this was the first time I'd ever given up one of my stories) was that my friends didn't pay any attention to what I said. They started guessing at random which ones I was going to stop telling. Real unfeeling cuts like my favorite about the guy that was a beachcomber and had to live on seagull eggs, and another good one about a race dog trainer out in El Paso that knew 14 different recipes for cooking greyhound food when he was too broke to eat at a restaurant.

I hadn't planned on taking early retirement from telling stories I spent the rest of the evening regretting that I'd publicly announced my intentions. But I couldn't resist the spirit of the music and gaiety of the season. On the sly, I can still change up the characters and the setting, so all may not be lost forever.