

16SHORTGRASS.DOC

Crossing the state line into New Mexico from Texas opens with a big yellow and red monument-shaped, wood-framed sign proclaiming: "Welcome to the Land of Enchantment." In faded imaginary letters also appears good counsel from other days: "Better slow down, 'Tex,'" or yore morning shadows be crossbar patterns on a cold cement floor."

Off the screen, Texans better slow down on the Land of Enchantment's highways or be ready for the front bench to await a less enchanting experience of appearing before a magistrate eager to give a driver's education lesson in New Mexico traffic law, including tuition fees – memorable tuition fees.

Heavy indeed the right foot becomes passing over the Texas Panhandle, speeding by the turn-rows of thousands of grain and cotton fields abutting the flat, wide highway. And the journey from the ranch to the end of the breaks and on to the Plains offers little more than a couple or three hours' time to rehearse distracting background tunes, like humming "I Want To Be A Cowboy's Sweetheart," or whistling "Cotton-Eyed Joe."

I wanted to write the above before the notes made on last month's trip to New Mexico dimmed. The dialogue

between my friend and me is omitted in any of the sequences. Monologue might be a better choice of words, as I talk the most.

Good thing she ranches and comes from a bloodline of women tolerant of the side talk accompanying the grand craft of woolies and hollow horns. Be mighty tiresome to ride seven or eight hours closed in a car if you are unprepared for such fulfilling comments as: "Did you see that thin baldface cow by the dirt tank? She shore raised a good calf. Bet she does every year." Bit further: "Used to be a sheep outfit along here belonging to Jones or Davis. Sure had big Corriedale ewes." Then a clincher miles later: "The name was Jones, I think - raised Deboulllets."

The ranch connection of New Mexico to Texas binds herders. So much space and so many memories, however, hamper safe passage across the long stretch from the state line to Roswell. The dim outline of the mountains off to the west brings images of the past - no, ghosts. Signs and cattleguards further revive old stories.

On one frame, ol' Lloyd, ranching on the Peñasco River, comes into sight. Lloyd storms in singing Native American chants, beating on an imaginary tom-tom. Quick switch, he's breaking off to imitate sound-shattering bone rattles held aloft over bent body, to launch his buffalo

dance in a watering spot too tough to be able to find a bouncer in all of the state of New Mexico.

The setting becomes fuzzy, like a dream. Part of the time, Lloyd sits on the wood bridge crossing the river to his ranch house. The Chief, (his music and dance teacher), wears a feathered headband. Next, dim and barely in focus, Lloyd wears a headband, dresses in a tuxedo and squats on a carpeted floor, joined by three black-costumed gentlemen in late evening disarray.

Now memory clears. Remember a story about the New Mexico livestock delegation taking Lloyd along to Washington to lobby for an important bill before the Senate? Lloyd kept his word to behave. Wasn't his fault (or his idea), that three distinguished Senators from the Northeast wanted a bit of Western flavor to conclude a dull evening, and opened a powwow down on the floor of a formal hall at some three o'clock in the morning. Knowing Lloyd, he probably warned the Senators that the worthies' madams might be slow appreciating ballroom war whoops and buffalo dancing for the first time, especially a post-midnight production fueled by too much firewater.

But watch a mystic hombre sometime recover from contact with the nether world stout enough to cross his

brain waves, and you'll understand how emotional drifting into the past belts a one-time cowboy like myself.

We stopped in Vaughn to eat. At 12 a.m. Mountain Time, I ordered soft poached eggs to start recovery from such a traumatic experience. Sizing the waitresses' tenure dealing chicken fried steaks off the arm, I remembered too late that four notations in a small tablet is enough to record all the poached eggs served per year west of a line beginning in Del Rio, Texas, and running north into Oklahoma along the New Mexico line. (One trucker once claimed to know how many yolks broke falling into the pot.)

In the end, however, the waitress brought a stack of pancakes, being unable to translate my drawl for parched-aigs into anything closer. In thirty-plus minutes, she whirled a plate onto the table of poached eggs with shell bits glistening in a pool of hot water. The yolks were cue ball texture, the rest runny slithers of albumen.

She must have been a city girl, as she failed to ask where we were from. Took two times to convince her I didn't want the pancakes, complimentary or to go.