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West Texas Encounter

by Gerald Wheeler

I eyed a tattered Star dancing above a TRADING POST sign propped by 2 X 4's on a rusty tin roof of a dirt-colored barn on a desert horizon. A few minutes later, I parked my pickup between a Studebaker with a missing windshield and spring seats, and a bullet-riddled Ford like driven by Bonnie & Clyde. I scanned a school bus that crashed before I was born, a fleet of tractors used in the dust bowl, skeletons of Harleys and Schwinn's. I negotiated a patch of hubcaps thick as weeds and an obstacle course of spare tires, then came upon an altar of gleaming insulators surrounding statues of Jesus and Mary. I tripped over a half-buried wagon wheel, bumped into oil drums the size of boulders and a wheel barrel pouring horseshoes and bolts. But, when I saw a Texas long-horn skull charging over a bead-curtain door, I couldn't resist.

Suddenly, I gazed at walls of trumpets, clarinets, trombones and cellos, stacks of dusty band

uniforms, a wardrobe of granny dresses, rows of porcelain dolls, shelves of silverware, antique bottles and rusty tools. Looking for a pocketknife, I wandered into a room packed with machetes, picks and shovels. Soon I came upon a bearded man in a corner. He was crouched in a trance over a Radio Shack TRS-80 computer. He was wrapped in an Indian blanket, smoking Bull Durham, wore a weathered Stetson, faded jeans and scarred Tony Lamas.

When I tapped him on the shoulder and told him what I wanted, he blinked his steel eyes, retrieved a paper from a printer, stood and said, "Sorry. Outta pocketknives, but I'll sell y'all mine if y'all sign this petition to git Amtrak ear." Then he pointed the stub of his index finger out the window at a red caboose next to a mountain of railroad ties. Said, "My name's George Black. I live over thar. I'm the president of the chamber of commerce."



Photo by J. Stoffers

