Thad Box

Passing the Baton in the Sustainability Relay

Last Christmas some of my children and their families met with Jenny and me in central Texas. My son Paul brought his family from Australia with a specific request for his girls to hear family stories and visit ancestral lands. I went down a few days early to put together a tour of places I had lived and to locate things that might interest my grandkids.

My sister and I went to Llano County to find the old house where we both were born. There were no longer family farms along the road. The areas I remembered as having corn, beans, and the sweetest watermelons ever grown are now covered with mesquite trees, prickly pear, and “No Trespassing” signs. The ranch where Dad killed white-faced cattle as part of livestock reduction during the Great Depression is now in small pastures stocked with new houses, boar goats, and recreation vehicles. Part of my great-grandfather’s old place is enclosed with a fence 6 feet high. Behind the netting are European red deer, a couple of species of African antelope, and a sign that says, “Elk Meadows.”

The place where I was born now belongs to a distant cousin. I knocked on his double-wide trailer and met him for the first time. I asked permission to photograph the old house where I was born. I remembered it about three-quarters of a mile up the creek from where we stood. He said there had never been a house there, at least not in his memory. But I went to look for it anyway.

We stopped on the county road. There was so much *tasajillo* and other prickly things that the women folk stayed in the car. My brother-in-law and I walked down a trail that might have once been a road. Nothing looked familiar. My foot bumped a granite outcrop with notches gouged by undercarriages of long-ago Fords. Off to one side I saw a kidney-shaped boulder. Suddenly, I became again a six-year-old building a pen for horned toads in the curve of that rock.

I hurried down the road toward our old house. There was a large metal tripod with an automatic deer feeder standing where our Jersey cow was milked. Deer and turkey tracks mingled with footprints from a hunter. A manufactured, camouflage-colored deer blind stood where the outhouse once had.

The large live oak tree that shaded our house was there. Rotting pieces of lumber, a scrap of corrugated roofing, and a rusty bed railing were all that remained of a once happy home. The only things that connected me to the land where I was born were memories, a granite rock, and a live oak tree. All the rest had changed. The culture and the industries that once used the land were ephemeral.

Llano County is near the outer edge of a creeping exurbia that flows westward like lava from urban/industrial volcanoes of San Antonio, Austin, and Houston. In the last few years I have had conversations or correspondence with Mort Kothman from Mason and Jake Landers further west in Menard. Exurbia has not reached them yet, but hobby ranchers

and recreation seekers buy up ranches that once supported families of pioneers in our profession.

Urban and exurban areas change the air through increased burning of carbon-based fuel. They also draw the lifeblood from the land—water from aquifers beneath rangeland. The saga of my ancestral homeland is repeated again and again in every American state where rangeland exists. The charge of land-care professionals has moved from making a living from the land to understanding and husbanding large economic/ecologic systems.

This issue of *Rangelands* discusses transfer of ranches from one generation to the next. A paper by Jonovic and Caballero argues that land transfer between generations is encoded in three concepts: culture, vision, and investment strategy.

Perhaps these are just human-created artifacts that represent snapshots in time as the controlling factors of the ecosystem—climate, geologic materials, organisms—change. Maybe it is live oak trees and granite rocks—enduring things that indicate the intrinsic capacity of the land—that really control whether a ranch can successfully be passed from one generation to the other.

Maybe we are not to judge the system, but to keep options open for future generations. Our job is to understand what makes systems sustainable. It is to produce the science and philosophical framework needed to apply what works in a new world order that operates with global trade and a world work force.

To gain understanding of intergenerational land transfers, we need to embrace concepts of private and public roles of land that are not included in surveyors' notes of metes and bounds or in attorneys' opinions of a clear title. Economists view a ranch as a business that belongs to a person or persons. Land, along with labor, capital, and management is only one part of that business. Ecologists believe land is a biotic community of which people are a part. To the pioneer, land was "my ground that I work to feed my family." To the patriot, land is that totality of home, safety, freedom—homeland. To Woody Guthrie, "This land is my land, this land is your land. . . . This land was made for you and me."

Is there a single concept among those that we dare ignore when a ranch passes to the next generation? Is there one that does not relate to sustainability?

Last fall, here in Cache County, we voted down a plan to tax ourselves to keep agricultural land open. Public funds would have been used to buy conservation easements on ranches that allowed owners and their heirs to capture the

development price of their land and guarantee the land would not become housing developments. Voters rejected the idea that we have a communal interest in the environment. Keeping land use options open for needs of the next generation was not accepted as a primary goal for community sustainability.

Opposition to such propositions, as well as those to clean up the air, reduce water use, prevent soil erosion, or other conservation programs usually center in two areas of concern: increased taxes and restrictions on private property.

Sustainability depends not on property of an individual, but on efficient function of the community. Sustainability occurs when those living in one generation pass on conditions suitable for the next generation. Simply stated, sustainability depends on providing suitable habitat for our grandkids' children.

In my last column I quoted Aldo Leopold as saying that our tools do not suffice for the oldest task in human history: to live on a piece of land without destroying it. But living on a piece of land is not a viable concept to most in this generation. Only a small percentage of Americans live on farms, but everyone breathes air fouled by exhaust from idling cars and uses more water than residents of any other nation. One's piece of land is not defined by a record in the court house, but by the web that binds us to the soil.

Our piece of land is a single share in a sustainability quest for a one-community world. This quest is a relay race where each segment is run under vastly different conditions. The length of any segment is not known. Opponents in any segment may change. We know not where the finish line occurs. Each generation runs its race, then passes the baton to the next.

Our role in the race is to come together to form a community that values itself enough to sacrifice in this generation so land's bounty is available to those who live after us. Sometimes that sacrifice comes as taxes, simplifying our lifestyle, or in sharing private property with others.

We each have personal responsibility to run our best race. We cannot foul our nest and expect our offspring to survive. Land is not just a piece of real estate with ownership recorded on a piece of paper. It is a community of which we are a part. That community does not belong to us. We belong to it. We belong to the land.

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