



Thad Box

On Seeking True Wealth

“**W**hat True Wealth Means” is the theme of a magazine from a brokerage firm I sometimes use. The cover picture is a beautiful winter landscape. Dressed in trendy western clothing, a woman and a boy ride horses in snow. A big dog, possibly a Rhodesian ridgeback, follows. The magazine claims to “Cultivate Your Personal Wealth.”

Feature stories are about starting a dream business, investing in your values, and sharing your wealth. One of the executives of the firm defines true wealth as matching financial plans with personal goals. He writes that true wealth is realizing hopes—a dream home, a new business, quality education for your children, a generous legacy. All are admirable goals. But, all suggest that true wealth is measured by money or things.

The year before I was drafted in the Army, a rare storm deposited 7 inches of snow across central Texas. It covered the ground for 2 weeks. The only hay we had were a few bales for saddle horses. Grass cured on the stump. We fed a little cottonseed cake to weak animals, but ordinarily cattle wintered on grass.

The day of the snow Dad and I bundled up in long johns, overalls, sweaters, and the warmest coats we had. We wore so many clothes we could hardly mount our horses. We rode through the snow looking more like fugitives from Siberia than models for western clothing. Our cow dog was a mutt of questionable lineage. He was as miserable in the snow as we were.

Our cattle were in pretty good shape, hunched up in brushy draws where there was some protection. If the snow melted in a couple of days, they would be all right. Anything longer and they would have to survive on cedar and other brush.

Goats were another matter. Angoras couldn't take cold. A few had frozen. Others piled up, smothering some beneath them. We spent the rest of the day getting survivors to a shed. We ordered a truckload of crushed corn and cottonseed meal. Once the weather warmed and snow melted, the goats we saved could go back on the range.

It snowed again that night. The weather forecast said cold weather would be around for at least a week. Dad decided our best hope was to fire up the old pear burner—a piece of ranch equipment that was becoming rare even when I was young. It was essentially a flame thrower for singeing thorns from prickly pear cactus. Livestock could then eat cacti as survival feed.

A pear burner consists of a gasoline tank attached to a 6-foot pipe with a coil on the end. Air is pumped into the tank. The pressure forces fuel down the pipe to a coil, which when heated, vaporizes gasoline. Ours started with a roar like a jet engine. Flames shot 3 feet out from the coil. The hard work began. Our feet were cold as we waded through snow. But the bellowing dragon melted ice and turned prickly pear pads into hot meals for our cattle. At night we returned to a warm fireplace and a hot meal prepared by Mother and

Sis. Mother read Zane Grey books to the family by firelight. Dad and I played checkers. The winner fed the goats, cut firewood, and stayed close to the house. The loser took the pear burner and fed the cows. Dad was a good checker player. I learned a lot about a pear burner.

The weather eventually warmed. Both Dad and I took construction jobs to pay off debts for the emergency feed. I got my draft call and went into the Army. Dad lost everything in the drought of the 1950s. What happened could be considered a catastrophe.

Now stockbrokers send me magazines and investment companies buy me lunch. But I've never had more true wealth than when I played checkers with Dad in front of that fireplace.

This issue of *Rangelands* is dedicated to youth and young professionals. That means we older folks need to dedicate ourselves to giving the next generation the values and principles that will sustain those that follow them.

Students studying business are more numerous than those in all land-care professional fields combined. Polls suggest the main desire of young people today is to get rich. They want more money, more things. They line up at stores days before some new electronic thing comes out. Improving the world is not in their top 3 "wants." Obtaining and managing wealth are valued more.

Research in animal behavior by the Behavioral Education for Human, Animal, Vegetation and Ecosystem Management group at western universities indicates young of most species learn from watching their elders. Our youth have learned their values, whatever they are, from adults in their lives. Scary, isn't it?

What young land managers learn next will come from watching us. Those of us who claim to be professionals are called to demonstrate our dedication to sustainability, not only for those who follow us in our profession, but to those who go into business, those who earn their living in trades, or those who enter politics and public service.

To positively influence the larger population, we need to live our lives in such a way that those who come in contact with us learn values that will sustain future generations. Our teaching must go beyond managing rangelands. It must include principles of social justice as well. We cannot expect SRM or our publications to do that for us.

Each month one of our magazines comes to my mailbox. In each there is a page that features SRM objectives, a statement of respect for people's rights, and our contribution policy. But nowhere do I find our Code of Ethics or our professional Standards of Conduct. They are on our Web site, but one has to dig to find them. They are buried away under education, included in the discussion of certification of professionals.

Our organs of communication, like much of the research we did during the last century, mainly address the how rather than why. They are short on principles and long of instruction. If a stranger, young or old, comes into contact with our publications or our Web site, they will see we value doing good things. But they will not learn a great deal about who we are and why we do what we do.

Most people I know entered the range management profession because they wanted to make the world a better place. They valued their contribution more than money they earned. This is the defining part of who we are. We must not let that get lost in what we do.

We have the ecological tools to show how natural communities of plants and animals thrive or fail. We know how to manipulate factors to give communities a chance to rebuild themselves. We also have life experiences to relate the biological principles of a rangeland community to the larger social and cultural system where we live our lives. We have an opportunity to demonstrate that true wealth occurs where community flourishes.

Sustainable communities thrive where love inspires ordinary members to put welfare of others, and creatures they husband, above material things. We are never richer than when compassion replaces possessions. The authors of our Declaration of Independence were wise enough to know that pursuit of happiness trumps property.

I have thrived in my profession because of the many people who value ideas and the opportunity to learn. Those who use science to evaluate the world around us nourish me. My heroes lived in a way to inspire me to seek sustainability, not just beef or grass or beautiful landscapes. They acted, not to convince or to agitate others, but to stimulate thought. I will be very wealthy indeed if I can some day reach a point where I can do something similar.

Meanwhile, let us think together about how we can demonstrate what true wealth really means to those around us. Consider the suggestion that wealth comes from community. Examine the role of service in building community.

Contrast wealth residing in cell phones, ATVs, fine wines, and fancy automobiles with that found in aspens shading a mountain stream or little bluestem blowing on a prairie range. Or in clean air and pure water. Or in systems research to allow us to adapt to global warming.

Better yet, test the outrageous idea that true wealth may come from sitting in a rocking chair, reading a book to a child.

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