



Thad Box

Disposable Stuff and Sustainability

What we know about our earliest ancestors comes from their bones. We get hints of their lives from stuff in their trash piles. We know a bit more about lives of those who lived a few millennia ago because they left tools and things they made. We learned more when a written language was invented. Stories, art, and writings in the last few thousand years give us an insight into what people thought as well as what they did. With this limited information, we try to piece together what happened in the past, live our lives luxuriously in the present, and work as if there is a future for our species.

I am in the process of transferring to a university “arrowheads” my mother’s cousin picked up on his farm in Texas between 1918 and 1947. The man who collected the stone tools, Little George Norris, was born and raised near Fort Mason Crossing in Burnet County. Since the first human being arrived there, the shallow shoals had been a reliable ford on the Colorado River.

The first European settlers occupied that area in about 1850. Experts tell me that some of the stone tools may have been first made 10,000–4,000 BP. They could have been used, changed, and modified by a number of cultures.

A good stone knife might be used by several generations and end up miles from where the rock was quarried. It could be rehafted and sharpened and find its way across continents, centuries, and cultures. Drills might last for generations. But people who used those items could not survive new diseases, ideas, and tools of Europeans who brought things that became obsolete before they shot the last bison.

From the time of the Jamestown settlement to the 1930s, even European immigrants had few personal possessions. My ancestor John Morris Box took up a league and a labor of land in the Mexican state of Coahuila y Tejas in 1834. He died in the Republic of Texas in 1842, leaving over 4,000 acres of land, his livestock, and at least one slave to his children.

His personal property was listed as one hand saw, iron square, crosscut saw, old axe, one pair stretchers, log chain, clevis, mattock, iron wedge, small kettle, small skillet, wash pot, oven lid, tea kettle, small baker (Dutch oven), pot hooks, shovel, rifle gun, musket, patent clock, family Bible, Walker’s dictionary, table and five chairs, shelf ware (dishes), two pails, bucket, churn, churn stand, bed, spinning wheel, and two pairs of cotton cards. He was a wealthy man for his time, but everything he owned except land, livestock, and slaves could be loaded onto a single wagon and pulled away by a team of mules.

Following the Civil War, land was valued at 5 cents on the prewar dollar. His grandson put everything he owned in a wagon, drove away from east Texas, and settled near the farm where the projectile points and stone tools mentioned above were unearthed by horse-drawn plows.

As a child, I hunted arrowheads on fields where my tenant-farmer father grew corn and cotton. Our personal possessions were few. Our house had no indoor plumbing, no

electricity, no screen doors or windows. Paper filled cracks in the walls in winter. Chickens, hogs, and dogs sought shade under the house in summer. We had no money.

Money came with a wage economy that grew from make-work programs of President Roosevelt's New Deal. Roads were improved, rivers dammed. Hydroelectric generators and rural electrification projects brought power to our home. Seven decades after the first dam was built with public money, the area of rural poverty has become a high-tech research and technological generator of jobs and wealth.

First settled by Europeans a century and a half ago, the landscape is now covered in asphalt roads and mortgaged houses filled with gadgets powered from a Depression-era, make-work project. Trash is hauled to a regional disposal facility. People who live in the houses do not hunt bison or till the land. They work in cities, exurbs, and suburbs growing out from Austin.

We know little about the land before the first Europeans arrived. Land deeds, letters, early surveys, and journals provide descriptions based on the limited experience of the writers. The first scientific descriptions were in maps made about 100 years ago.

My geographer son gave me two early maps of the area. W. M. Beaman and H. H. Hodgeson made a detailed topographical map of the area in 1900–1901. It was published as the Burnet quadrangle of the US Geological Survey in 1909. The second is a map the Geological Survey made for the Texas State Board of Water Engineers in 1930–1931 to be used in planning the dams. Data for the maps came from their earlier topographical surveys of the Burnet and Marble Falls quadrangles, air photographs taken by the Air Corps of the US Army, and an on-ground survey made in 1925.

I do not know if the aerial photographs made by the Air Corps in the 1920s still exist. There were other aerial photographs made by the Soil Conservation Service, the Lower Colorado River Authority, and other agencies over the next 80 years. Land care professionals and other scientists often compare such a series of old maps to document change.

Elsewhere in America, there are similar stories. The first people carried bone or stone tools on their bodies as they sought food and shelter. For centuries they, and the peoples who replaced them, had few possessions. They were dependent on the land, the climate—the environment around them.

The human population grew as we moved from an agrarian society to become part of the global economy. Humans

switched from being dependent on the environment around them to using technology to alter their environment for their comfort. To enhance their lifestyle, they embraced a culture based on growth and an economy dependent on consumption.

We are fortunate to have stone projectile points, journals, maps, and aerial photographs as glimpses of what our land was like through history. But point-in-time measurements are just snapshots of the result of change. They do not provide an understanding of process. It is the management of and adaptation to the process of change that allows sustainability of our species.

If *Homo sapiens* is to survive, we have to understand and accept humans' role in changing their environment. Anyone who has followed a plow knows that man changes soil and vegetation. And those who lived through America's Dust Bowl days know massive alterations of land and vegetation can change local climate.

The current controversy between scientists and climate-change critics over whether human-induced changes simply exacerbate "natural" climatic cycles or drive the major changes detract us from the very actions needed for humans to survive: understanding, managing, and living with change.

Unless we understand the process of change, we cannot manage it. We cannot understand process by comparing snapshots in time. A people who put a man on the moon ought to be smart enough to figure out that sustainable systems are based on interactions that lead to survival rather than growth.

The same culture that used science to reach the moon became the richest nation in the world by selling throwaway stuff in an ever-growing economy. That system is not sustainable. In less than a hundred years, we have gone from a culture of producers with few possessions to consumers held captive by our stuff. An economy dependent on constant growth plus a people addicted to accumulation is a recipe for disaster.

I have a stone drill found in Texas about 70 years ago. I don't know where the stone was quarried, in what century the drill was flaked, or what the person who made it hoped for his children. But I do know that if we don't replace growth and accumulation with sustainability, that drill will outlast the species that made it.

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