



Thad Box

## Land as Seen From a Bee Tree

**I**n the summer of 1935 I received my first lesson in bees. Our family relaxed in the shade of the old sitting tree. Dad said he was going to the river to see if the bees were watering. It wasn't far to the Little Llano River, and we had worn a good trail carrying water for the house. I grabbed my hat and followed him.

I ran to catch up. The sand was hot and it burned my bare feet. I ran from one shade tree to the next and let my feet cool before the next dash. There were grass burrs and other stickers between the trail and the trees. And rattlesnakes rested in the shade when the ground was hot. You had to watch where you put your feet.

As I stood in the cool shade under a post oak, Daddy stared at the river from the shade of a pecan tree. I ran as fast as I could and jumped in the water. Dad said a word he never spoke if women were present, and he chided me sternly for scaring away his bees. He told me to finish getting wet all over and sit quietly by him.

Honeybees lined up where the wet sand met the water. Dad explained that worker bees tanked up on water and took it to the honey tree. Their job was to fly directly home. Our job was to watch where they went and find their tree.

Daddy taught me to pick out an individual bee and follow it up into the sky, then look for the sun reflecting off its wings. Then we would follow another, and another, until we figured out the direction they were flying. We selected an object—a tall tree, a rock outcrop—at the horizon along that line. Then we located several objects between us and the distant marker. That way we could keep on track as we waded through brush, looking and listening for bees.

That was easy for Dad because he had boots. I spent more time avoiding grass burrs and snakes. He was always ahead, having fun. I was miserable, but I would not dare to let him know it. After what seemed like hours, I caught up with him standing under an old post oak. He had a big grin on his face. He said he was tired and asked me to check the tree.

I could hear buzzing and looked up. Hundreds of bees were crawling around a knot hole, and dozens more were flying in and out.

I jumped and screamed, "Daddy, I found the tree."

"Yep," he said, "you found your first bee tree. And you'll never be the same for the rest of your life."

Unfortunately, we couldn't rob the tree of its honey or put the bees in a hive and take them home. There was a big X carved in the bark, the universal sign the tree had been claimed. Below it was a smaller mark. Dad said it was the mark used by the Overstreet boys. He would try to trade them rights to the pigs of his earmarked red sow running on their land for the rights to the tree. He wanted those bees; it was a big healthy swarm.

That area was open range for hogs when I was a child. All the land was privately owned, but earmarked hogs went where they pleased. Any weaned pig could be claimed by anyone who had a "hog right" of earmarked hogs, regardless of whose land they were on. Folks with a marked sow and a good dog like our Lacy might gather a truckload of maverick hogs.

And wild things—deer, squirrels, ringtail cats, coons, quail, fish, and bees—were there for those who got to them first. Posting land or preventing someone from hunting wild things was not a neighborly thing to do. A good hunting dog, a rifle, and sturdy teenage boys added more to the table than cows or a corn crop.

But guns and dogs did not find bee trees. It took a special person with a good eye, patience, a sense of direction, and the ability to see the kind of country that produced good flowers. There among thousands of trees, a bee hunter had to know what kind of tree bees liked. He had to think like a bee. Such a person was different from those who plowed the land and grew beans for the table and cotton to sell. Or those that almost extirpated deer and quail from overhunting. Once a bee tree was found, honey was taken, and bees were put in a box and were moved to an area with abundant flowers and water.

From the time the first Europeans arrived in America, they replaced native animals with domestic imports and hunted most wild ones to near extinction. One prey species, the honeybee, was captured and semi-domesticated—to be sold, traded, or passed to the next generation (sometimes even in wills). Bees became private property, or as Grandpa said, our littlest livestock.

Honeybees, like many plants and animals, may have been naturalized immigrants from other continents. Whether they were native or exotic, wild populations or domesticated hive dwellers, they, like the people who cared for them, became part of the new land.

This issue of *Rangelands* examines the role and plight of pollinators. Scientists who wrote these papers, those of us who read them, and the bees and the trees are all members of the biotic community we call land. Our thoughts and our actions toward other residents, even the smallest creatures, determine whether we survive as a species.

Honeybees, and other wild pollinators, are in danger, but not because of overhunting. We humans have changed

the interrelationships in our community where wild things, large and small, must compete with us and the domesticated species we have introduced.

Grandpa considered land a piece of property that should be used for the benefit of its owner. Capturing wild honeybees and making them livestock, shooting chicken hawks, or using chemicals to kill pesky insects were rights derived from our position as the dominant being created in God's image. Stewardship was guided by the Old Testament where man was given dominion over all living things. As the science of ecology developed, we began to understand that living systems depend more on cooperation than domination.

Seventy-two years ago, in 1939, Aldo Leopold presented a paper that redefined our role in land stewardship. "A Biotic View of Land" described land as a functioning biological community. Published in the *Journal of Forestry*, ideas in the paper became the basis of our current understanding of land. From it, Leopold developed his concept of a land ethic: "... a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it" (Vol. 37, Issue 9, pp. 727–730[4])." He said that an ecological interpretation of history shows that man is only a member of a biotic team.

Our job, as land care professionals in the 21st century, is to help humans understand that land does not serve them, they are part of the land. We must guide eight billion people in our global economy to accept their roles in the biotic community. Technology seduces us to think it will save us, but sustainability of our species depends on cooperation within the land community, not dominion over it. Our main job is teaching our fellow human beings that they are indeed part of the land.

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Thad Box, [thadbox@comcast.net](mailto:thadbox@comcast.net).