



By Thad Box

## When Cowboys Wear White Hats

As a child I played “cowboys and Indians” with sticks for guns. We played in a make-believe world where a lone cowboy rode into town, shot the gun from the bad guy’s hand, and rode away leaving the town peaceful and happy. No one bled. Our picture show cowboy had no girlfriend, no gooeey kisses. He respectfully removed his hat when women were present or he entered someone’s house. Millions of boys my age and younger played a game where a man with a white hat and a good horse could do no wrong.

That image of the rugged cowboy has great power—for good or for evil. Presidents Theodore Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush rode the cowboy image to the White House. The Marlboro Man sold billions of cigarettes, causing early death to billions of innocent people. Cowboys inspired many young people to seek the “white hat” way, to be good and make a difference. But others left gore, blood, and death caused by greedy cowboys seeking personal gain. The iconic image of the American cowboy has become a dividing factor.

Stories of cowboys guiding land use toward sustainability are largely missing. Ancestors of the iconic American cowboy had little or no concept of land ownership. Most were from the British Islands where land belonged to royalty and was worked by tenants. Rights of the tenants were spelled out in 1217 by the Charter of Forest, a document issued alongside the Charter of Liberties in the Magna Carta. For about 400 years leading up to the first British settlements in America, few people who worked the land owned it.

Land use arrangements varied between monarchs and countries. Typically, a king gave large areas of land to a nobleman who, in turn, had it managed by a free-holder or laird. The laird selected tenants who were allowed to hire subtenants. The laird or nobleman often changed tenant rents. Tenants owed rent and military service to the nobleman, but the nobleman owed them nothing. The tenant could own oxen and some other farm animals, thus animals were valued over land.

Beginning about 1600, large numbers of people from Scotland, Ireland, and England came to America, many as indentured servants. Although nonresident noblemen held title to much of the land, it was difficult to keep track of tenants or collect rent. As soon as Indians were killed or pushed out of an area, a Scotch-Irish immigrant could take his axe, rifle, wife, cow, and hogs to a lush meadow by a stream. There he could build a cabin, plow land, plant corn, and hunt game. He seldom paid rent. If someone claimed he was on their land, he simply moved on and built a new cabin on land further west.

Both my wife’s and my ancestors were part of that western movement where the man of the house often said to his wife, “call the dogs and close the door, we’re moving west.” Our ancestors came to Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania in the 1600s. By the time of the American Revolution, they had followed the Appalachian foothills to the Carolinas, and some drifted over the mountains into Tennessee. After the war they went from Tennessee to Alabama.

Then many went to Coahuila y Tejas, where they swore allegiance to Mexico and the Catholic Church as a means of gaining league and labor (over 4,000 acres) of land. For the first time, many lived on land they owned. They kept it through the Texas war of independence and the US Civil War. When land prices dropped drastically after the Civil War, they simply walked away from their deeded land and wandered throughout the west.

Our people were fairly typical of the rugged, independent people who “won the west.” They always looked for something better and were willing to take chances and move on. Like their Scotch-Irish ancestors, they valued livestock and freedom over land and comfort. In just over 100

years, these restless people had won independence from England and settled land reaching to the Pacific Ocean.

Some foreign-educated intellectuals like Gifford Pinchot recognized people of the new country were destroying their land. In the late 19th century, President Theodore Roosevelt protected some land by creating national parks and national forests. But most people considered the vast extent of land between the settled east and the Pacific states as an opportunity to expand into unused, open space. The mountains, deserts, and short-grass plains, however, could not withstand the harsh treatment of new settlers, and dust from the plains covered land and hope alike.

Soon after the Civil War, most states established a land grant university with scientists assigned to improve agriculture. The federal government hired scientists to develop ways to restore degraded forests and other federal land. The science of ecology developed, providing a new tool for evaluating land use. Gradually, a new group of people emerged that thought of land health rather than products from the land. But the application of the new thinking about land health was delayed by America's involvement in two world wars.

Between those two wars, land-care professions began to sprout and grow. Early in the 20th century, the federal government and universities hired botanists, engineers, and pedologists to study the vegetation, soils, agricultural practices, and mudslides from various landscapes. Results of these studies were applied to forestry, grazing, and erosion on public lands. Government reclamation projects during the Great Depression created more jobs for people trained in land-care fields.

When World War II ended, thousands of veterans took advantage of the GI Bill and enrolled in universities to fill the postwar needs of our emerging world super power. Four land-care professions were high priorities on western lands: forestry, range management, soil conservation, and wildlife management. Only soil conservation was directed to the land per se. The others looked for ways to increase production of commodities, rather than the health of land itself.

Before World War I, in 1909, a young Ivy-league forester named Aldo Leopold joined the US Department of

Agriculture Forest Service in Arizona. Forty years later, in 1949, Leopold published his famous essay on the land ethic. It says, in part, "All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of interdependent parts. His instincts prompt him to compete for his place in that community, but his ethics prompt him also to co-operate (perhaps in order that there may be a place to compete for) ...

"In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from a conqueror of the land community to a plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such."

We have about 7.2 billion people on earth today and the population is increasing. As our human population grows, the amount of land, per capita, decreases. Future generations will need more things from a shrinking land base. If we are truly a plain member and citizen of land, then we must dedicate ourselves to system health instead of personal wealth. Land-care professions came into being to help us in that task. Yet membership in land-care professions is declining.

Our efforts to increase timber, forage, hunting opportunities, and so on, took priority over directing our species, *Homo sapiens*, toward actions that maintain healthy land. Our Scotch-Irish background will keep us restlessly moving toward new frontiers. Our challenge will be in directing that innate cowboy drive toward our role as part of the land rather than domination of it. Success will come to those who wear white hats and remove them indoors as a sign of respect.

## Good to Re-read

1. LEOPOLD A. The land ethic: a Sand County almanac and sketches here and there. New York, NY, USA: Oxford University Press; 1949.

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*Thad Box, thadbox@comcast.net.*

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