

Essays of a Peripheral Mind

Requiescat in Pace

By K. M. Havstad

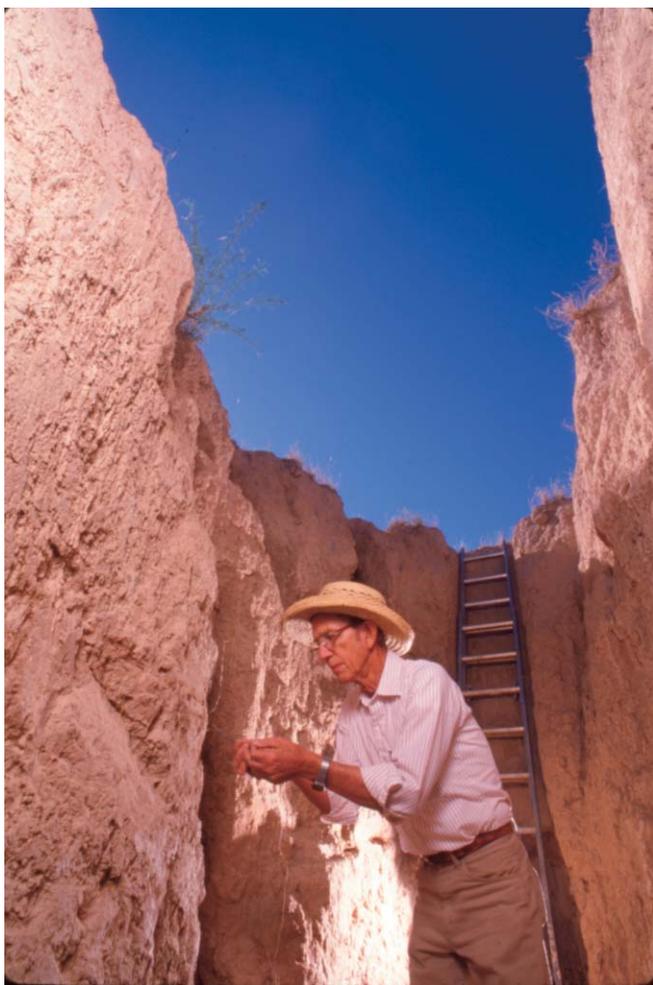
My sister, an attorney in northern California, reads *Rangelands*. She is a type of person we want as a reader as we work to expand our audience—someone outside the profession, well educated, interested in aspects of her surroundings, a member of the general public not readily familiar with our issues and perspectives—and someone who could be an advocate for both this profession and our goals. She will find some spare time on a weekend once every few months, and read through a random selection of articles. I'd like to say she came upon the magazine of her own accord, and with more aggressive marketing we might reach others like her to broaden the awareness of rangelands and their management issues. However, she receives a subscription I had initially arranged. Yet, now that she is an interested reader she has offered to pay the subscription fee. There is cause for optimism in that offer. Being the dutiful brother, I have declined, though not due to some graciousness, but in the knowledge that my numerous transgressions inflicted in her direction during our childhood years still require some accounting. She will receive *Rangelands* for life.

Recently, she informed me that she routinely reads the obituaries, the occasional Requiescat in Pace article recounting the life's accomplishments of recently deceased colleagues. Two things of note have caused her to read these articles among her selections from any one issue of *Rangelands*. First, she finds them extremely well written. It is obvious to her that the person writing about a long-term friend and colleague takes great care in trying to effectively recount that life and the accomplishments of the departed.

This can be writing at its best: focused, impassioned, respectful, intent upon capturing the importance of a person's life. In some sense this prose likely also presents a reflection of the writer's pride in sharing in that profession and career. Second, she is taken by the richness of the lives that are portrayed in these recountings, and the impacts that are characteristic of people in our profession. She finds that those impacts upon others and upon the management of our natural resources are often quite impressive. The places people work, the recognition the Society often awards these members, the importance of the activities they were engaged in all become apparent in these writings. We within the profession may see these kinds of resumes on a regular basis. However, to the general public, these are people who have labored mostly in obscurity, yet these recountings indicate that their lives are often rich with accomplishments, accolades, and rewards usually recognized by only a very small circle of people.

Here is a list of people whose professional lives have been described in recent issues of *Rangelands* or the online *Member News*: Everett Doman, John Hunter, Tex Lewis, Wayne West, Robert Gibbens, Gerald Tomanek, Joe O'Rourke, and Eleanor McLaughlin. I often think that we are a profession of just 3 degrees of separation; if you don't know somebody, you do know somebody who does know that person. I did not know all of the people listed above, but I am sure I know someone who did. I sat down and read through these obituaries. My sister is right. Though some of these people labored in relative obscurity, their lives were rich, and they had colleagues who respected them and

captured the accomplishments and nuances of their lives in a caring and eloquent manner. Though I did not know all of these people, having read these obituaries I had a real sense of who they were as professionals and, to some extent, as private citizens. One of these people I knew quite well was Bob Gibbens, and thinking about his life confirmed these impressions. Bob was a very private man, uncomfortable on a podium, but unbelievably dedicated to his profession and his craft as a scientist (Photo). I know he took great pride in his work, and his career provided him opportunities to work in some of the most beautiful landscapes in the western United States, from Yosemite to the Red Desert, and



Robert P. Gibbens working meticulously in the late 1990s at one of his field sites in the northern Chihuahuan Desert.

he left a wonderful written record of his observations. He could be gruff and distant, but he always, eventually, warmed to a conversation, be it sports, cars, or rangelands. And though he worked in obscurity to much of the world, he was an interesting person who made a significant contribution. In this fashion, he is like the other departed souls I can think of within the profession that I've known over the years.

Last week, jammed into my 29F window seat on a flight back to the States, I had every intention once at cruising altitude to open my laptop and continue working on an essay about sustainability and unintended consequences of our actions. This is a topic I have been discussing of late with colleagues, and a subject I need to further explore. But I found myself recalling my sister's comments about these deceased colleagues. These thoughts put me in a reflective mood, and I set aside the essay on unintended consequences. With the 28F seat in front of me tilted back in my face, the 29E seat to my left filled to overflowing, and 2.3 ounces of peanuts looming in my immediate future, I found some calm in these reflections, and that calm translated into this unintended essay. One outcome of these thoughts was a fairly simple conclusion, not an epiphany, but maybe simply a reminder, that I am unbelievably fortunate to be able to work within this profession. In retrospect, given this fortune, I find some embarrassment in allowing professional disagreements with colleagues to have, in a few cases, grown into personal misgivings and even rancor. I have not become so naive as to think that I and everyone of my colleagues are wonderful people, or that our professional disagreements are not of some significance and consequence. What I realized was that I had forgotten that the profession is filled with people like Bob Gibbens, keen on what they are doing and contributing, and trying to overcome their own limitations in doing so. In the end, they leave behind wonderful records of contributions, and their own records of professional animosities and conflicts are faded and forgotten. Like many things, it took someone else, in this case a sibling, looking from the outside in to shed light for me to recall the many compensations of this professional environment, its opportunities and challenges, and its people I've come to know.

Author is Supervisory Scientist, USDA/ARS Jornada Experimental Range, PO Box 30003, MSC 3JER, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, NM 88003-8003, khavstad@nmsu.edu.