



Thad Box

A Fit Place to Live

My thoughts turn to Februaries past as I look out at snow-covered mountains. February usually announced the beginning of spring in the part of Texas where I grew up.

February was a time for rescue grass and flarree to tease the cows away from burned prickly pear. It announced that cattle feeding was coming to an end for the year. It was a time when white heads of Hereford calves popped up among the grasses like wildflowers. They, come fall, were a lottery entry to a better pickup, new clothes, and maybe a bicycle.

Spring was a time of promise, of hope, of rebirth. The earth offered us potential for a better life. It also demanded that we work the land. We knew how to work. We knew how to grow livestock. But we knew little about making land more productive, and even less about ecology.

In early February 1958, Leo Merrill, E. B. Keng, Don Ryerson, and I left Texas A&M and spring flowers along the Brazos for a northern adventure. We drove to the American Society of Range Management meeting in frigid Great Falls, Montana. It was there that I met many of the people who established the profession of range management—pioneers who cleared the path that made it possible for me to be part of a fellowship dedicated to serving the land.

I don't remember much about the ASRM technical program fifty years ago. But I remember another meeting, sitting bundled up in coats with other students. Dr F. W. Albertson walked by and stopped to chat. I had studied ecology papers by Clements, Weaver, and Albertson—stalwarts of ecology, pioneers of our profession. I was pleased to meet one of the great ones. I hungered for his knowledge about ecology.

But Dr Albertson said little about ecology. He talked about finding purpose in life, leaving the world better than we found it. He stressed the why, not the how, of our future in changing the world for the better. This quiet man, who looked and acted more like a minister than a scientist, made us believe that there was a job to be done, and we were called to do it.

He put the future of rangelands squarely on our backs. He welcomed us to a movement that was going forth to stop blowing sand and restore the eroding lands of the Grapes of Wrath. He charged us to rebuild hope in people as we improved the land. He fired us up, not by preaching, but through sharing his own commitment—especially his belief in us, the eager novices on whom he piled responsibility of rebuilding an abused planet. And we ate it up.

My own father was born 9 February 1905 in a house near the Little Llano River in central Texas. The house was made of lumber from trees cut along the stream. Rangelands had been grazed to near extinction. In Dad's early life, rangelands provided feed for horses and mules to work farmland, milk cows, and hogs to feed the family. Cattle, hogs, sheep, and goats were raised as cash crops. Dad, like many of his day who lived off the land, knew a lot about breeds, bloodlines, and care for animals. Rangeland was just a place to keep them.

Dad died in my home in Mesilla, New Mexico, in the spring of 1995. Lumber for houses was shipped in from Canada. Rangelands had improved, partially due to members of the range profession convincing people like Dad that range health had to come before animal health. But even as rangelands improved, rangelands became less livestock factories and more providers of amenities. Near cities throughout the west, working ranches became hobby ranches. Deer leases, recreation, and ecological services competed with livestock as products from the range.

In late February 1995, I drove Dad through Las Cruces to see his doctor. We waited for a traffic light change in the center lane of a multilane street. Cars stacked up on either side of us. Dad looked around and said, “Thad, you’re an educated man. If you don’t do something about all these cars the world ain’t gonna be a fit place to live.” He died two weeks later.

A fit place to live. It is strange that the thing I remember most about my first few international range meetings was a prominent ecologist asking us to dedicate our lives to making the world a better place. He saw us as agents of change, using our training in ecology and conservation to teach people like Dad that ranges were more than just places to put animals. His “why” message was we should use our talents to make the world a fit place to live.

Dad was born into a world where “a fit place to live” was defined by the ability to conquer nature. Everything the family needed had to be dug from land around them. His grandfather cut trees, milled lumber, and built his house. Each generation grubbed trees from an area large enough to grow corn, beans, and vegetables for the family.

Dr. Albertson realized a fit place to live was one where human action worked with the new understanding of nature. He saw the new science of ecology as an organizing model, not only to live with nature, but to bring people back into harmony with the land. My generation bought into that model. History will tell how well we have done.

In February 2008, the Society for Range Management will meet in Louisville, Kentucky. That is hardly the wild west of today’s America. But it was the Wild West when young George Washington, an officer in the King’s military, marched across the mountains to fight the French for British control of that land. After the Revolution, the new nation spread westward, each wave further conquering nature and bending it to man’s will.

Perhaps Louisville is a good place for modern range people to start applying what we know to a land drastically changed as our forefathers built a great nation. Maybe it is where we can begin to reinvent ourselves to respond to a situation where “if we don’t do something about all these cars, the world ain’t gonna be a fit place to live.”

In fewer than five generations we moved from an era where human muscle and brain were needed to conquer nature, to an era where science offered humans a role in rebuilding natural systems, to an era of realization that human action is a part of nature. My father, who had only gone to the fourth grade in school, recognized that people could not continue to change our habitat as we do today. He believed “educated men” could do something about it.

Dad’s challenge—our mission impossible if we choose to accept it—offers a particular opportunity to those of us who have been educated as land care professionals. We, more than most others, have been schooled in the interconnections and interrelations in systems.

But, perhaps because our profession evolved in the open spaces of western rangelands, we have been reluctant to move outside the land–plant–animal areas. Without doubt, our science has gotten better. In protecting our traditional turf and improving our science, we might have lost ourselves in looking at the detail of our science. Has looking deeper dampened our zeal to make the world a better place?

We have been reluctant to carve out a role in vital “fit place to live” issues such as population growth, climate change, energy use, and free trade. We are getting better and better at making rangelands more productive for traditional uses without asking why improving those uses is needed, or if those uses are still part of making future worlds better.

Perhaps, as we fight through the airport security lines, tackle the freeways and toll roads, and look at land use around Louisville, the wild west of Washington and Jefferson, we will begin the process of coming to grips with the role of land care professionals in a growing, heavily populated nation now dependent on the global economy.

The development of a new model for land care professionals in general, and range managers in particular, is not likely to come from the technical programs of our annual meetings, or from select committees charged to study the future and develop a plan of action.

Our role will not likely be determined solely by science and tools that show us how to change the world. It will come from lively discussions in a bar, exchanges of opinions with those outside our profession, and from informal discussions between our mossbacks and our youngsters. We must understand why we should try to make the world a fit place to live.

February is a time of hope, of promise, of rebirth. Let us not miss our own resurrection.

Thad Box, thadbox@comcast.net