



Thad Box

Voice of the Land in a Goat Bell

As a child, I lay awake on summer nights listening to the tinkle of goat bells in nearby hills. I was happy. All was well. But some nights I was awakened by a chorus of clanging bells, goats bleating, and Dad pulling on his boots. That was often followed by blasts from Dad's 10 gauge shotgun. I'd cuddle up to Mother and wait to find out how many goats had been maimed and killed. Or if Dad killed a coyote. Or a feral hog. Or if we had to explain to a neighbor why Dad shot his dog.

Bells were our GPS units that told us where our livestock were. They were like cell phones that signaled when our livestock were at peace or notified us when they were in danger.

Years later I was part of a team doing a livestock survey in Somalia.

The people I worked with spoke a language I did not understand, their skin was a different color, they worshiped God differently, and they had no concept of how I lived my life. I struggled for a way to communicate with them.

One moonlit night I lay awake in a Nomad camp staring up at a peaceful sky with both the Big Dipper and the Southern Cross visible. Camel outlines moved against the sky. The gentle sound of wooden bells broadcast songs of peace. Then bells rattled, camels ran, rocks rolled down the hillside. Herders were on their feet, shouting, brandishing spears in the air, running toward the camels.

The hyena, lion, or thief that startled the camels got away. But I realized these livestock people were only superficially different from those who raised me. In both our cultures, we were codependent on our animals. The next day, I talked one of the herders out of a camel bell.

Over the next few months, I bartered pencils and bandanas for bells.

Back at Texas Tech, the manager of a local ranch came into my office to discuss a research project. He spent more time asking questions about the hand-carved wooden bells and their collars of braided acacia bark than he did about our research. On his next visit, he brought me a horse bell with a hand-made collar. A pioneer ancestor had brought it from Missouri.

That was the start of my collection of about 50 bells. I'm not a collector. But I have boxes of bells with stories—a bell that was on sheep killed by a mudslide in Montana, a famous Condamine cowbell from Queensland, a French bell that arrived in Utah with a Basque shepherd. The list goes on.

I seldom bought a bell. And I only stole one. It was my Grandmother Hasty's turkey bell. She was in her 90s at the time and hardly able to leave the house. Her turkey bell hung next to the cow kickers down at the barn. I asked if I could have it. She said it would be mine when she died, but not now. She might want to raise turkeys again. I took it home with me when I left.

People keep giving me bells. Barbara Middleton, who teaches environmental education, pestered me to photograph them, put them on a web site, and write up some of the stories. She says they are a good resource for teachers seeking physical ties between people, their lives, and the land.

One of our jobs as land care professionals is teaching urban folks and kids about rangelands. Barbara convinced me a bunch of old bells fit that mission. Trying to document a small bell collection led me to talk rangelands to many different professionals—linguists, archeologists, anthropologists, businessmen, historians. In each contact, I learned something new about grazing animals, and the person I talked to got a better understanding of what rangelands are and why they are important.

In Somalia I was dealing with a simple, basic relationship of human survival through animals, who in turn depended directly on the land. I didn't know that those people owned some of the world's oldest continuous range livestock operations. Archeologists argue over when and where camels were domesticated, but the word for camel bell, kor, is identical in the Somali, Rendille, and Boni languages. It comes from an ancient root language that might have become extinct thousands of years ago. Camel husbandry was practiced before the current people occupied the area.

Further proof that range livestock business started on the horn of Africa comes from an archeological paper published this year. Donkey bones in the Egyptian pyramids indicate that donkeys were domesticated from the Abyssinian ass.

From European business records I learned that bell makers were among the first to use trademarks in the Middle Ages. That bell makers formed guilds in Slovakia in the 1850s. And bell makers were among the world's oldest businesses in Italy. And that Bulgarian gypsies combined bell making with cattle marketing throughout Europe.

In America prior to the mid-1800s, most livestock bells were made by individual blacksmiths. But in the 1840s, two Moore brothers established a blacksmith shop in Collingston, Illinois, just to make bells for the rapidly growing western livestock industry. After the Civil War, a German immigrant, Augustus Blum, bought the Moore brothers' shop. He invented a die and process for mass producing bells. Between 1866 and 1951 about half the bells sold in the United States were Blum bells.

When a cow bell tolls, it speaks volumes about the use of rangelands. But bells are just one of many physical objects that help teach others about rangelands.

Last year I visited the Range Department at Oregon State University. Before they let me talk to students, I had to pass "the test." I had to identify artifacts in John Buckhouse's office. He had hay knives, oxen shoes, bridle bits, spurs, and dozens of things representing past uses of rangelands. There are enough artifacts in John's office to

teach a whole course in historical use of rangelands. Many other SRM members have artifacts and stories that could reach diverse groups.

There are dozens of collections of barbed wire among range professionals. Spurs and quirts often dangle from walls in range offices. For them, or for my bells, to be useful, they have to be interpreted. Each artifact has to tell a story. The power is in the story, but it must be made available in a form people will use.

Many artifacts belong to aging storytellers who do not know theory and techniques of historical interpretation. And we are even worse in use of electronic technology. I can't use the remote control to change from TV to CD without Jenny's help.

SRM had a start in oral history. Many of our heroes have been recorded.

Those tapes are a gold mine. There must be thousands of interesting artifacts, pictures, and journals among our membership. We have a treasure trove of materials that could make rangeland interpretations interesting to those we would like to reach.

The future of our magazine *Rangelands* is debated. At its beginning, one of its goals was to educate the general public about land, to interpret rangelands to the public. The time may have come for it, or a new publication, to develop web-based presentations with audio and video clips. But to mangle the title from Cormack McCarthy's novel, this ain't no country for old men.

People who do research in educational technology and electronic communication can help us. But we have to agree that *Rangelands* is an outreach tool and not just a repository for technical papers. And we will have to believe educating others is important enough to pay the costs.

I've wandered away from my point that physical items are powerful instruments of communication between people, cultures, and generations. The last time my five-year-old granddaughter was here, she drowned out conversation by ringing one of my bells. I took time to tell her that her great-grandmother milked the cow that wore that bell. And about sheep and goats and how bells kept them from getting lost.

I don't know if she will remember any of that. But other kids came over and listened. And the house was a whole lot more peaceful than it had been a few minutes earlier.

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