

# Essays of a Peripheral Mind

Elmer Gantry

By K. M. Havstad

It has been several decades since I first read Sinclair Lewis' novel *Elmer Gantry* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc., 1927) during high school. Lewis was awarded a Nobel Prize in Literature in 1930 for the body of his work, including this satirical novel of America's cultural beliefs, twisted ambitions, and religious hypocrisies. All of these themes and more were embodied in this story of Dr. Gantry, a charismatic, morally corrupt fundamentalist preacher. It is a classic piece of American literature, worthy of a reread even 80+ years after its original publication.

As a way to either reacquaint you with this story or provide a brief introduction if unfamiliar, I offer the first and last sentences of the original text:

Chapter 1, page 1: "Elmer Gantry was drunk. He was eloquently drunk, lovingly and pugnaciously drunk."

Chapter 33, final paragraph, last sentence (Elmer Gantry speaking to his congregation): "We shall yet make these United States a moral nation!"

Even from these brief excerpts you can sense the personal conflicts, the deeply-rooted hypocrisies, and the satirical elements of this novel.

For some unknown reason, Lewis' novel came back to me while I sat through a presentation during the recent 16th Wildland Shrub Symposium in Logan, Utah, in May 2010. It was during a specific talk that I was struck by the thought that Elmer Gantry was actually alive, thumping the pulpit, and preaching scientific hypocrisy across the western watersheds of the United States.

Of course, it wasn't a fiery sermon denouncing the vices of adultery, alcohol, or gambling that prompted this recollection.

It was a sermon denouncing the sin of overgrazing.

The preacher of this particular sermon was a man I do not know, and I absolutely offer no commentary on his moral or ethical fibers. My comments regard the nature of his professed beliefs within the context of his sermon at a scientific meeting. Even though he couched those beliefs in the language of science, there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that this was all about his beliefs. Many have stated, in various fashions and contexts, that "we measure what we believe." What was reported on in this sermon in Logan were measurements that reflected a belief that livestock

grazing was a sin against nature. To even label what was presented in support of this belief as "pseudoscience" would give it an air or respectability it did not deserve.

The printed abstract of this sermon used the words often associated with scientific credibility: "study," "reveal," and "consequence". Yet, the random point data presented lacked any reasonable, controlled, stratified design that would allow credible analysis. Certainly, these scattered point data would not justify the larger landscape interpretations that were offered. The presumed credibility of these data must have been solely hinged upon the methods used, as other elements of the scientific method were woefully absent.

I had the real palpable sense that I was trapped under the big top in the Church of the Biological Fellowship of Scientific Drivel.

As you would expect, of course, the salvation from this sin, the redemption of nature, would be through prohibition, in this case the banning of any livestock in the public land West. You would think that our society, of any, would have learned the lesson that prohibition is no reasoned, mature, learned solution to sin.

Following are two of the additional, anecdotal comments used by this preacher in support of his personal beliefs in response to my questions from the pew following his incredulous sermon.

"I have looked at millions of acres of rangelands [to arrive at these conclusions]."

Ok, but I have looked at thousands of miles of ocean from the window of an airplane, and that doesn't really make me an oceanographer. The issue is that measured beliefs, no matter how often or widespread they are gathered, won't stand up to any kind of secular scrutiny. They certainly won't reveal studied consequences. They are just measures of what is believed, right or wrong.

"The livestock industry isn't economically sustainable."

There are 32–34 million head of beef cattle in the United States (of which only 6 million are spread across the hundreds of millions of acres of the 11 western states). Beef production in the United States is a \$60+ billion industry. Despite this economic impact and importance, 46% of beef producers rely on off-farm income. The producers don't really control price of their product. The beef industry has been

built over decades to be reliant on diverse agricultural and nonagricultural sources of income. To say it is not sustainable because the beef cattle portion alone may not support many of the small farms and ranches that contribute to production is nonsensical. That simplistic assessment conveys a naiveté about this industry that further diminishes the credibility of this sermon.

Heaven help us.

Yet, here is the real irony that persisted as I sat in the pew seeking repentance.

We are sinners: Mea culpa. We know full well that there are rangeland areas that should not be grazed, and that there are instances of overgrazing today. Yet, that is why we profess our belief in resource management. That is why we try to worship within a Church of Biological Fellowship of Scientific Integrity. That is why we know that the solution is not prohibition, but working to adhere to applications of principles of adaptive management. Our sins aren't overgrazing, but a failure to honestly assess and monitor our conservation practices. We haven't walked the talk of our resource management faith in many places and instances. Ironically, part of the problem has been constant

distractions created by the Elmer Gantrys of this world. Some of our problem, though, has been our willingness to listen to a whole range of Elmer Gantrys that practice in our profession. I must admit to preaching myself at times. In the end, though, we need to remember the basic, science-rooted principles of our resource management faith. They have been outlined for many years. Central to this practice are honest measures not of what we believe, but of what we can objectively, repeatedly, and scientifically observe. It is not so much that the scientific method provides answers. When used, it can provide the framework to learn, as long as it is not adulterated in some perverse fashion to support our individual personal beliefs. In the end, we have to actually practice the principles of adaptive management that we preach.

Amen.

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