

Speaking with People and Objects in Our Profession

An interview with a fence post

Given the devotion of this issue of *Rangelands* to reflections on the role of grazing systems in rangeland management, it seemed appropriate to include in this discussion reflections on the role of fences. What feature of the landscape, what object of labor, what capital expenditure intended for resource improvement has been more physically central to rangeland management than a fence post? If you are going to imagine that a fence post could make a contribution to this topic, you might as well find an elderly fence post to provide historical and experienced perspectives. Fortunately, a classic fence post set as part of an H brace in the 1930s was nearby and an unwitting but suitable object for this one-sided discussion. The fact that it has withstood the ravages of time, fire, wind, fungi and termites, trespass, and revised grazing plans might say at least something about its capacity to withstand the fictitious rigors of this interview.

A Stationary Presence

Question: Within the gamut of tools available for managing our natural resources, how do you view your role in rangeland management?

Answer: Ubiquitous.

Would you care to expand on this answer?

You have to admit we are everywhere, that we have omnipresence on any landscape. Yet, our roles are determined by others in terms of where, why, when, and for how long we exist. Like any tool, it is a question of use rather than the attributes of the tool itself.

Can technology improve on what you provide?

Were you paying attention? Let me rephrase: maybe the real question is whether any technology in and of itself improves on management of natural resources. Did the widespread availability of barbed wire in the 19th century advance the cause of rangeland management, or was it misused in places resulting in improper distribution and numbers of livestock on some rangelands causing widespread overgrazing and degradation? Did the widespread availability of steel t-posts in the mid-20th century and electric fencing products later in that same century lead to rangeland

improvement, or further fragmentation of landscapes? In the 21st century we are on the verge of virtual fencing that employs geographic information systems, satellite positioning systems, and individual animal control of movement, and we will be able to pose the same question. It's not the technology, it's the user.

Technological advancements may not truly be advancements, then?

Now you are on track. Let's switch systems. There have been significant advances in fishing technologies, for example. We have new netting systems, new traps, and new ocean-based farming systems. In some cases, these technologies have allowed overfishing, which can then have cascading and deleterious effects on related systems, such as coral reefs, which then leads to declines in other marine fauna, reduced goods and services from these marine systems, an increased need for government regulations, and on and on. So, a fence post is not different, except that we are everywhere. In places we have distinct values, and in other places we do not. It is all a question of how we are employed and deployed. We fence posts are not intrinsically good or evil, rather a conduit for the will of humans (rightly or wrongly).

You seem to have plenty of time to be informed on an array of other subjects and current topics?

Well, it's not like I have an active role in what I do. I was placed here over 70 years ago, and I have a fair amount of time for other idle pursuits. You must admit, given that you are interviewing a fence post, maybe you also have a bit of excess idle time.

If you were less interesting I might agree with you, but I am learning something in this exchange. You cannot perceive learning as an idle pursuit, can you?

No, and I will grant you that is an important point. The fact that I have been set in this place for over 70 years has given me time to observe and learn. I am constantly reminded that learning is the one constant, especially for an object such as me that faces neither death nor taxes.



An elderly fence post (USDA file photograph).

Speaking of place, do you have any thoughts on where you were set over 70 years ago?

I clearly remember the day I was placed here, and the effort those men expended in setting me firmly in the

ground, carefully upright and tightly braced. They were determined and experienced. It was honest labor on their part. Yet, over the years, I have often wondered why this place was chosen, and if the reasons it was selected in the 1930s are still valid today. In a landscape that is so dynamic, should the presence of something so influential on that landscape be so permanent? This is a question I have often pondered, and my conclusion is that decisions today should not be so strongly driven by the decisions of years ago.

Given that I am posing questions, this leads to the obvious question: do fences really make for good neighbors?

There certainly have been cultures that existed without fences, and one of the early uses of fencing was for defense, so maybe the fact that the neighbors weren't very friendly led to good fences. Xenophobia, even today, may be a motivation behind most fencing, especially of borders.

With all the various figures of speech imbedded in our language involving the word "fence," including "sitting on a fence," "mending fences," and "don't fence me in," do you have a personal favorite?

May all of your fences have gates.

Interview conducted, edited, and condensed by Susan R. McGuire, a pen name used by the author of this article. Her "interviews" with members of our profession, inanimate objects, biological specimens, and other subjects of passing interest are an irregular contribution to Rangelands. All costs of publishing these interviews are sponsored by a research unit of the Agricultural Research Service, the in-house research agency of the United States Department of Agriculture, whose rangeland scientists are a segment of our Society.