



Thad Box

Trail Boss Prophecy

It was a cold day in Montana that January in 1957 when I attended my first SRM annual meeting in Great Falls. Leo Merrill, E. B. King, Don Ryerson, and I drove nonstop from College Station, Texas, to Great Falls—through country this kid had only dreamed about and into weather I could not have imagined. But that meeting changed my life.

I met heroes, like L. A. Stoddart and F. W. Albertson, I had known only through their writings. I ate lunch between Joe Pechanec and Bob Campbell, early officers of the society formed to set the standards for the profession I had chosen. And I made friends with students, like Don Dwyer, from other universities who were to become my lifelong friends. I soaked in science from the papers and reveled in compassion and humanness of the people who made up the tenth meeting of the American Society for Range Management.

One of the most memorable presentations was by Fredric Renner, a man I knew from his work in range management. His paper was not about grasses, or carrying capacity, or soil erosion—the things that made him a giant in our profession. It was about art. He talked about the paintings of Charles M. Russell and how he, Renner, had been fortunate enough to get the rights to an original drawing by Russell for the logo of our society.

Fred described Russell's ability to see detail and to incorporate that detail into what he put on canvas. He told of ethnologists studying Russell's paintings to understand what Indians of the day wore. Russell's paintings, he said, were not just pictures, but stories about a place and a time.

One winter Russell was taking care of a herd of 5,000 cattle for an investor. The owner sent a letter asking how his cattle were doing. Russell made a sketch of a starving cow, humped against a blizzard with wolves circling. He entitled it "Waiting for a Chinook" and sent it to the owner with a note, "the last of 5,000."

I spent an afternoon in the museum studying Russell's interpretation of Montana in the late 1800s. I could not afford a painting, but I bought two prints: "Waiting for a Chinook" and "Wagon Boss." They, more than any paper I heard at the meeting, have stayed with me over the years. Meeting Charles Russell's art was second only to meeting real, live people like Joe Pechanec and Don Dwyer.

Over the decades we have debated whether the Trail Boss should be our SRM logo. Today, he has been reduced to a single color print of tiny figure on a horse atop the S in SRM. As currently displayed, he represents the worst of what Trail Boss critics fear—we're just a bunch of Wild West cowboys, clinging to the past, lacking depth or vision. If we allow that to be our image, we are more like Russell's wolf bait in "Waiting for a Chinook" than his "Trail Boss."

The painting that eventually came from the trail boss sketch Renner acquired is a landscape of the old west. The boss is seated on his horse in the foreground, watching a herd of cattle being trailed into a new west. It is not a static image. It is a portrait of leadership. It is a prophecy of change.

This prophecy is spelled out more clearly in "Wagon Boss." Here the boss sits in the foreground looking back as covered wagons, each pulled by eight yokes of oxen, snake their

way from a river crossing up onto the sagebrush flat. As these settlers established themselves, they set off a series of changes that we land-care professionals have worked to slow or reverse: Native people were replaced by European descendants. Native herbivores were replaced by domestic livestock. Other animals were extirpated for food, or fur, or simply because they didn't fit the new order.

The earth's crust was turned and crops were planted. New plants were brought in, some purposefully, most by accident. Hindsight shows that within three decades of when wagon trains like Russell painted arrived, the ranges were overgrazed. Alien plants spread. Soil washed and blew from marginal farms. Microclimate changed. And blizzards like Russell painted in "Waiting for a Chinook" virtually eliminated the western livestock industry on the Great Plains.

As the 20th century approached, westerners petitioned their government to send help—scientists to study and repair the landscape that could not withstand the change brought only decades earlier. Land-care professions developed—forestry, range management, wildlife management, soil scientists—to stabilize change and return the land to productivity. And they did.

But the land was different. Change started anew from a foreign mixture of organisms and expectations. And the economy changed. The population grew. People's relationship to the land switched from a man-land partnership seeking survival to a system where land became a unit of production. Land, labor, and capital were spoken as one. And the human population grew.

When Charles Russell painted the "Trail Boss," about 120 years ago, there were 1.3 billion people in the world and the United States had one of the lowest population densities on earth. Today there are about 7 billion people worldwide, and the United States is part of a global economy. By 2045, less than two generations from now, the population is expected to be 9 billion. Change will be more rapid, and its results more extreme, than anything we have known.

It took us about 90 years (1900–1990) to stabilize and begin repair of the damage done to natural resources in the western expansion, the Dust Bowl fiasco, and other human-caused disturbances. During that time, as the land and

biotic community changed, the world population went from 1.6 billion to about 5 billion. Again, we expect 9 billion people in a little over three decades.

We are self-described experts in managing change. We cannot afford the luxury of arguing over whether change is occurring as a wave of new inhabitants, armed with technology we thought possible only in science fiction, dedicate their lives to the gods of growth. Change happens, and billions of new people will speed the rate.

Our science has advanced since Russell's Trail Boss watched the herd of longhorns trail into the land of the buffalo. And science improves each year. We have tools to measure things we know exist but cannot see. We can analyze complex interrelationships at levels from cellular to global. We have teased data frozen for millennia in glaciers to understand the land and climate before humans evolved. We have computers and models to test the "what ifs" we can imagine. We have theories and tools to manage change if we can understand the details and incorporate those details into a program of action.

I know not whether Charles Russell knew he was painting a prophecy of change when he created the "Wagon Boss." Or that the Trail Boss knew what changes those lanky longhorns would bring. But we descendants know that poor decisions of our ancestors changed our land. Their devastating actions were not deliberate attempts to eliminate options for us who followed. The pioneers didn't have the science or experience in this new environment to know how to live sustainably. Their goal was to tame the wilderness. We are cursed with knowing the results of our actions.

Now we new Trail Bosses sit in front of a computer screen with facts, data—information good and bad—only a mouse click away. That will not help us reach sustainability unless we can tell the good information from bad and can fit the details together so 9 billion people will not foul their nest beyond repair. If we fail, we'll find ourselves waiting for a chinook.

Thad Box, thadbox@comcast.net