



Thad Box

The Worth of our Work

My Granddaddy was regionally famous for his Texas sugar-cured hams. They were candy to the eye. Their smell promised a meal fit for a king. Their taste equaled food in the finest restaurants. George Hasty could turn a range hog into culinary art.

Before Granddad died, he directed his knives and sugar-cure recipe be passed on to me. There are three knives, all hand forged: a 20-inch butcher knife for killing and carving the hog, a curved scraping/skinning knife, and a thin boning knife. All were designed by Granddad, and made from scrap metal by his brother-in-law, Noah Norris.

The instructions are handwritten in pencil on a faded tablet sheet.

They begin, "Take 1,000 pounds of freshly killed hog meat. Rub it hard with sugar-cure mix." The mix is "five pounds salt, five pounds red pepper, five pounds black pepper, five pounds brown sugar, and five pounds salt peter."

The recipe gives details for cooling, handling, smoking, and storing the cured pork. His careful description of the process made it obvious he wanted me to get it right.

It was a few years after his death that the knives and instructions were passed on to me. By that time I was teaching in college. I had not butchered a hog in years. And I was pretty sure I would never kill and cure my own hams. But his gift was special to me.

I was humbled that he wanted me to have the family recipe. It mattered not that I raised no hogs. His instructions spoke volumes about what work should be. Work is not to make money, or even to survive, but to create and to give. The end product should be something of quality, something that makes living worthwhile.

Quality work cannot be produced without proper tools—shaping hams could not be done with cheap, store-bought knives. Careful application of knowledge should be planned—each step in the curing process must be done promptly and in order. Details are important—the ratio of green pecan and dry mesquite chips in the smoke affects both taste and appearance. Quality is seldom determined by a single act. It is the outcome of a process. However, the worth of work is not determined by a blue ribbon at the county fair. True worth is in the effect on people who use the product.

A recent survey showed that Americans who have work in this economy are becoming more unhappy with their jobs. The Conference Board research group found only 45% of Americans are satisfied with their work—the lowest level ever recorded by the board in more than 22 years of studying the issue. In 2008, 49% of those surveyed reported satisfaction with their jobs (Washington Post, 5 January 2010). The most common reason for dissatisfaction was that the work was not "interesting."

In 1974 Studs Terkel gave working people a voice. He published an amazing book of interviews, "WORKING." This oral history provided a window on the thoughts of Americans who were rarely heard: hospital aides, prostitutes, skycaps, gravediggers, book binders. Most people took pride in their work. In even the most menial jobs, work was a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread. A gravedigger explained that he did not just dig holes: "A human body is goin' into this grave," he says proudly. "That's why you need skill when you're gonna dig a grave."

Three decades later, Adam Cohen (New York Times, 31 May 2004) wrote that high-tech and new management styles left workers little room for creativity or independent thought. As much as 4% of the work force was employed in call centers, reading canned scripts and being supervised with methods known as “management by stress.” Even professionals were kept on a tight leash. Doctors deferred to managed-care administrators. In 1997, they spent an average of eight minutes talking to a patient, less than half the time they spent a decade earlier.

Granddad never worked under those conditions. He enjoyed work. He knew the work he did affected people. With handwritten instructions on a yellowing page, he taught me that work, although it should be enjoyable, was not about the worker. It was about the effect of one’s work on others. I found such a job, almost by accident.

I was a child of tenant farmers in the Great Depression. Dad wanted to be a cowman. Through hard work and determination he managed to put together a small herd of cattle, a flock of sheep, and some angora goats by the time I was a teenager. My life was filled with hard work and family fun.

The year before I was drafted into the army, a rare snow-storm hit Texas. For eight days our main work was hauling feed to the cattle. Every day Dad and I played checkers. I fancied myself a good checker player. I beat most of my friends. When we played, Dad and I won an equal number of games. Dad suggested we play to see who fed the cows. I agreed. Dad won in about four moves. I never got a king. I suggested two out of three. Dad won easily. I pleaded for three out of four. Three straight losses and I went to feed the cows. As I loaded hay and cottonseed cake into the pickup, Dad came out grinning. He said, “Let me help you do your work. Then we can play some more.”

Then drought hit. I was drafted into the army. Dad’s assets dwindled. By the time I was discharged, about all Dad owned was debt. Using the GI Bill, I studied to be an ag teacher. There I discovered that range management,

economics, and ecology were more important in ranching than purebred livestock. A couple of graduate degrees later, I found myself doing research and teaching at a university.

The drought of the 1950s led me to a profession where my work’s worth could be seen and felt. I entered range management with a vague idea it was my responsibility “to feed a hungry world.” It fit my ambition to be a “cowman.” It fulfilled Stud Terkel’s requirement that work should be a search for daily meaning. And it fit Granddad’s implication that the worth of work is in its effect on people.

Most land-care professionals followed similar routes, drawn into service because of animals and land. But the world changed. Most of the earth’s billions of people have declining contact with the land. Many do not eat meat. Climate is changing. Sophisticated tools give us unprecedented analytical information. Raising cattle on rangelands, our cause to feed hungry people, now is not our primary work. We serve the land through new approaches. Our work is managing system change with science as our tool.

A prosperous tomorrow depends on good land health. It is essential for us to keep options open for future generations. Finding a way to help land stewards live the good life while maintaining sustainability is a job that fits the principles of Granddad’s recipe for curing ham. It reminds us that quality is seldom determined by a single act. It is the outcome of a process. The worth of our work is in the effect on people who husband the land we serve.

If Granddad were alive today and won a million-dollar lottery, he wouldn’t buy flat-screened TVs, snowboards, iphones, or jazzed-up sports cars. And I’m sure he wouldn’t buy a suit and tie for himself. But he’d probably find a way to make life easier for his neighbors.

Granddad’s sugar-cure mix makes a tasty rub for baking ribs. And mixed with oil and red wine it is a good grilling sauce. But it is not just a recipe for food. It is a meme, our family value for honest, quality work.

Thad Box, thadbox@comcast.net