

Things Never Were the Way They Used to Be

Earl F. Burkholder, PS, PE, F.ASCE – July 2018

As I got the story, Rudy Giuliani (former Mayor of New York) was campaigning for office and asked a potential voter what he could do for her. She said, “Make things like they used to be.” He is said to have replied, “Lady, things never were the way they used to be.” Somehow, I feel that I know what he was talking about. For the past several months I’ve been downsizing – that is going through more than 50 years worth of magazines, files, folders, boxes, and memorabilia. Sorting is tedious, time-consuming, and, at times, sentimental. For example, my wife just can’t understand why I still have some of my HS textbooks. Like many, I recall the good experiences and tend to see other events through the filter of maturity and hindsight. In my life and career, I have been able to earn a decent living doing what I enjoy and I am indebted to many for the honor. To all of those, I extend a heart-felt “Thank you.” But, I also know that my recollection of “history” is probably unique to me.

Many know that geometry is one of my hobbies and that I am a “detail” person willing to devote unreasonable effort to “getting it right.” It is cross I bear without apology. Also, growing up on a dairy farm in Virginia (I never will miss getting up to milk the cows), I acquired a certain work ethic and gained a profound respect for the land. Putting all of those together, it is no surprise that I’ve enjoyed surveying, working with other surveyors, and serving the interests of landowners whether farmers, ranchers, investors, or homeowners. Another piece of the puzzle is that Donna and I have two granddaughters living in Minnesota. I presume that everyone understands the importance of grandchildren and are not surprised to learn that we have driven from Las Cruces to Minneapolis many times since I retired from teaching in 2010.

Everyone also knows that the prairies of the great plains stretch on for miles. Most people cross the great plains east/west. The distance is even greater when traveling north/south as well. Yes, Donna and I have avoided the interstate highways many times, but I must tell you, after numerous crossing, we are now looking for another route across Kansas – one could say that the drive is boring, but the terrain is varied, wide open, and the vistas are HUGE. Kansas is also generously sprinkled with big feedlots. Now try to imagine what the plains looked like when buffalo roamed freely or when witnessing a cattle drive on the Chisolm Trail. If you ever get the chance, visit the Chisolm Trail Museum in Kingfisher, Oklahoma. It is well worth the time and effort if you would like to know more about how things used to be.

Kansas is also the home of station “MEADES RANCH,” the origin of the North American Datum of 1927. When our youngest granddaughter was born, my wife Donna flew to Minnesota in advance of the event and, a week later, I made the drive alone. Prior to going, I contacted the landowner for permission to visit the station and he was proud to take me to the site on his ATV. I took several pictures (you can see more pictures at www.globalcogo.com/MEADES.HTML) and call your attention to:

- The station appears to be in good condition, stable, and undisturbed.
- The tablet is dated 1891.
- The landowner was quite hospitable and shared interesting stories about the station.
- Look closely, do you see any fences or wind turbines? The fences are out of sight and there is a reason you see no wind turbines. To some, wind turbines constitute unacceptable visual pollution.

If you are interested in visiting station MEADES RANCH, go to the NGS web site and download the data sheet for the station. Many details, including landowner contact information, are readily available.

In an attempt to bring this article full circle, I need to ask your indulgence. In a browser, search U-tube "The last cowboy song," listen to the lyrics, and view the pictures. Do we surveyors enjoy a similar connection with the land, with the people, and with the past as do the dying breed of cowboys? I get choked up when I hear the lament by Bruce Edward –

This is the last cowboy song, the end of a hundred-year waltz
Voices sound sad as they're singing along, another piece of America's lost.

He rides a feed lot and clerks in a market on weekends selling tobacco and beer
His dreams of tomorrow surrounded by fences
But he'll dream tonight of when fences weren't here.

Other verses are just as powerful. . .

I am a surveyor, retired from teaching. For me, it has been a good run. My generation of digital immigrants has witnessed a profound transition brought on by the digital revolution. Yes, many land ownership principles and concepts from the past remain valid and, as Dan Muth points out in a series of articles in the Benchmarks, we the surveying profession should promote responsible stewardship of the land. But many times, it seems that we are inundated by disruptive innovations and we are challenged to keep pace with the younger digital natives who lack the seasoned perspective of experience.

At the risk of belaboring views already expressed, I offer the following:

Bertrand Russell (British philosopher 1872 to 1970) pointed out that it is the "rarest of gifts to be able to hold a view with conviction and detachment at the same time." At times, being passionate about one's convictions is essential. But, depending on the circumstances, it is also foolhardy to insist, "My mind is already made up. Do not confuse me with facts."

When I taught programming, I emphasized four rules of thought given by René Descartes (French mathematician and philosopher 1596 to 1650) in his famous work, "Discourse on the Method."

1. Never accept anything but clear, distinct ideas.
2. Break down each problem into as many pieces as needed to solve it.
3. Thought must follow an order from the simple to the complex. Where there is no order, one must be assumed.
4. One should check thoroughly to assure that no detail has been overlooked.

And, based upon my own experience I suggest that:

1. The best professional practice is one in which any conclusion is consistent with beginning assumptions and subsequent observations/calculations.
2. Attempting to build a reputation on the foibles of others is futile.
3. Unintended consequences should be avoided whenever possible.

Maybe things can never be the way they used to be, but my aspiration is that we learn from the past and work together to develop a future that we can be proud to say we had a hand in creating.



Land Owner at Station MEADES RANCH - Kyle Bandt, Osborne, Kansas – November 2016



Tablet in concrete – Station MEADES RANCH set in 1891