

OUTSIDE THE BOX

The Power of Neighbors

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska



Checking the horse pasture had been the last of my chores assigned by my parents, who had taken a rare day away from the ranch. The deep gash in the gelding's foreleg extended side to side underneath the fetlock, exposing layers of tissue.

At 12 years of age, I knew the wound demanded attention, but I was in no way capable of intervening. I ran down one hill and up the next to the house and called the neighboring ranch. Faye answered. Within a few minutes she had dispatched her husband to my aid.

Harry was an experienced stockman. Soon the leg was immobilized, the vet was contacted, and the situation was solidly under control.

It was one of many defining moments in my life demonstrating the power of neighbors. During times of celebration, work, play and grief, neighbors were interwoven into nearly every facet of life.

Community loyal

Raised in the embrace of community, where expectation accompanied acceptance, we were allowed to make our own mistakes — but never in a vacuum. Support and advocacy came with a challenge to improve. Our 4-H club leaders were men and women from neighboring ranches who served as some of the first coaches and mentors for young people in our valley. While advice from a parent might be ignored, the same story delivered by a trusted neighbor down the road was received as gospel truth.

Hardly homogeneous, they were Democrat, Republican and Independent. Some were Catholic, others Protestant, a few agnostic. Caucasian and Hispanic alike were

doggedly self-reliant, yet fiercely loyal to the larger community. Yes, we argued — over water, the merits of round vs. square bales, Chevy vs. Ford, whether new ideas were improvements or passing fads, and many other matters both great and small.

With rare exception these disagreements and differences did not destroy relationships. In a remote and difficult environment, it was understood by our community that mutual problem-solving was key to the success of our families and neighbors.

Universal lessons

I do not believe ranching — or life, for that matter — should be conducted in solitude. Perhaps the most important work of our nation is to reinvigorate the power of being a good neighbor and bring back to our culture the lessons learned on front porches or leaning on the top rail of a fence.

These are universal lessons, and my friend Clifton Taulbert, in his wonderful book *Eight Habits of the Heart*, has captured them beautifully. Growing up on the Mississippi Delta, Clifton learned from his neighbors that “the eight habits of the heart are not held captive by race, gender or geography. All they need are human hearts in which to dwell and live out their immense potential all over the world.”

In a long conversation several years ago, Clifton and I discovered that we were taught in different places by different people the same fundamental and enduring principles of community:

As tension and divisiveness tear at the fabric of our nation and communities, perhaps there is an alternative.

— Tom Field



- ▶ Nurturing attitude
- ▶ Responsibility
- ▶ Dependability
- ▶ Friendship
- ▶ Brotherhood-sisterhood
- ▶ High expectations
- ▶ Courage
- ▶ Hope

It is difficult to imagine ranching or a community without one or more of Taulbert's eight habits. These pillars do not appear out of thin air. Rather, they are intentionally built and fortified with daily practice.

When we moved to rural Nebraska, there was a row of trees separating us from our closest neighbor, but no path. I chuckle every time I think of my neighbor's confession some years after we had arrived that his first thought on hearing a college professor had purchased the property was “there goes the neighborhood.”

Today there is a well-worn trail. In the creation of that pathway we had not abandoned the wisdom

that “good fences make good neighbors;” certainly respect for each other's property is critical to avoiding disputes. However, we chose to enter into fellowship, and that decision has enriched our lives.

As tension and divisiveness tear at the fabric of our nation and communities, perhaps there is an alternative. Turn off the news, put away the technology, take a deep breath and sit with our neighbors — cold lemonade in hand, sharing the journey and reconnecting with those lessons and truths taught by grandpas and grandmas, aunts and uncles, and caring neighbors. ▮

Editor's note: Author Tom Field is director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where he holds the Paul Engler Chair of Agribusiness Entrepreneurship. In “Outside the Box,” a regular column in both the *Angus Journal* and the *Angus Beef Bulletin*, Field shares his experience as a cattleman and his insightful perspective on the business aspects of ranching.