

Outside the Box

Literature, shepherds and artistry.

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska–Lincoln



Sauntering into Literature of the American West — a course that would check another box off

the general studies list — my expectations were solely focused on getting a requirement out of the way so I could move on to something interesting pertaining to agriculture.

As it turned out, there was more value to be gained. As I read page after page of creative and thoughtful writing, I was immersed in the culture, character and dilemmas of human communities living on a remarkable and challenging part of the planet. One passage from all those chapters and books still stands out as the most transformative to my thinking:

“And that night as I lay in my sleepless bunk staring into the white haze that entered my deep window, I fancied that in the milky mist I would see the prairie as I had seen it all my life and would never see it again, with the grass in summer sweeping my stirrured thighs and prairie chicken scuttling ahead of my pony; with the ponds in fall black and noisy with waterfowl, and my uncle’s seventy thousand head of cattle rolling in fat; with the tracks of endless game in the winter snow and thousands of tons of wild hay cured and stored on the stem; and when the sloughs of the home range greened up in the spring, with the scent of warming wet earth and swag after swag catching the emerald fire, with horses shedding and snorting and

grunting as they rolled, and everywhere the friendly indescribable solitude of that lost sea of grass.”

As these words from Conrad Richter’s novel *The Sea of Grass* leapt from the pages, the intersections of landscapes, natural systems, seasons and ranching came into sharper focus. Thus, I began the process of learning to see the world not only through the prism of primary colors, but to appreciate the seemingly endless hues and shades of creation.

In the early years of my career, it was the allure of producing exceptional breeding stock that captured my attention. I was fully immersed in all things related to beef cattle. However, vital lessons have a way of finding their way

back into our field of vision.

Turning point

Some 20 years after being inspired by the story of transformation on a New Mexico ranch, I found myself kneeling in the grass on a New Zealand sheep farm taking forage measurements with a shepherd who had an enthusiasm and grasp of forage management far beyond that of my own experience. Certainly, he saw the landscape in macro view. But his curiosity extended to the complexity of what was happening at the ground level, as well as beneath the surface at the root level.

Backed by an extraordinary level of forage and soil data, coupled with a detailed understanding of cost and return,

that farm had instituted grazing systems, cover-crop strategies and water-development projects that shattered my definition of good grazing management.

As we toured beautiful and productive paddock after paddock, it felt as if we were walking across the canvas of a legendary landscape artist. In that moment there was a change in my understanding — management was no longer a set of silos of expertise and science-based knowledge. Instead it was a complex and interlocking mosaic that called not only for analytical thinking, but the application of human creativity.

In our quest to create profitable, productive and vibrant ranches, there is certainly the need for technical, as well as business expertise and skill. However, leaving creativity out of the equation is a missed opportunity. Grassland, forage, and landscape management calls for the fullness of our perspective and talent; a demand to bring not only our intellect, but also the elegance and depth of artistry that comes from the heart and soul.

When the landscape becomes a canvas, we can apply artistry to our role as stewards. The approach of the craftsman will make a difference in the present and for generations to come. **ABB**

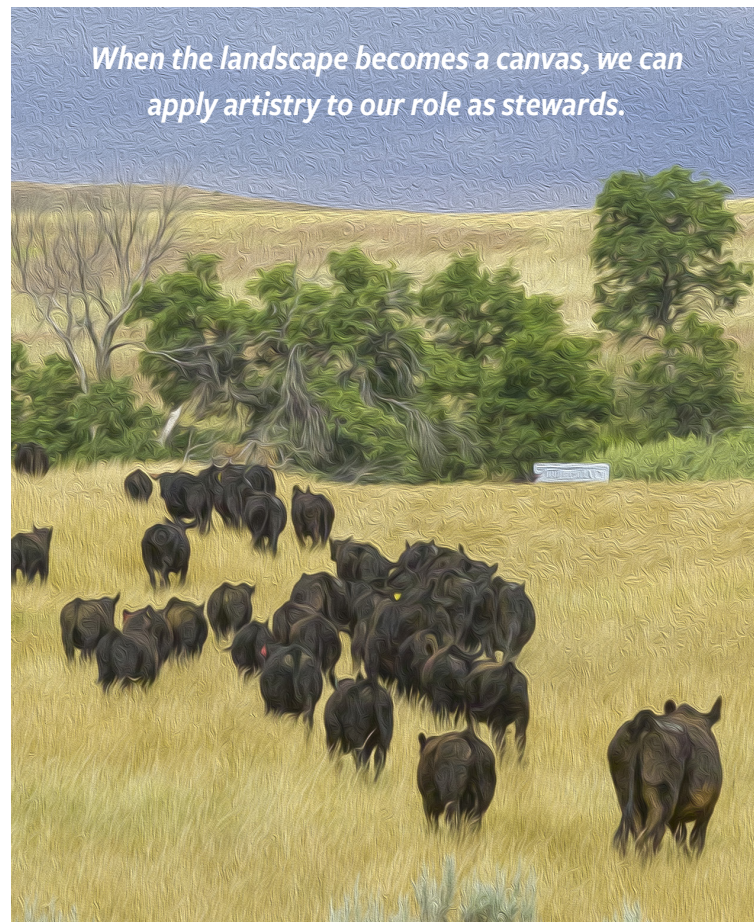


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Editor’s note: In “Outside the Box,” a regular column in both the *Angus Journal*® and the *Angus Beef Bulletin*, author Tom Field shares his experience as a cattleman and his insightful perspective on the business aspects of ranching. Field is director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