

Lessons from the Old Timers

Ever hear the phrase, “The older I get, the smarter my father gets”? I have always been in awe of how much folks in the 1800s and early 1900s knew and understood about the world around them. When you think of how much time most people back then had to spend every day just raising, gathering and preparing food, building shelters, and hundreds of other essential daily activities, it is amazing how much they learned about the world around them.

A friend recently sent me a copy of a Forestry Bulletin from 1904, entitled “The Timber of the Edwards Plateau of Texas: Its Relation to Climate, Water Supply and Soil”, by William Bray. It is not that I learned that much about the Edwards Plateau from this 30-page report that is not well known to many people today, but that it was as well understood by some folks over a century ago. We tend to think that we are so much smarter than people back then with all of our modern education, books, electronic gadgets and all the time to read and learn.

Bray described the geology, topography and boundaries of the Edwards Plateau (EP) as thoroughly and accurately as anyone I have ever read. He considered the EP as the rainwater catchment area for all of the rivers that flow from the EP into south Texas and that make the latter region as productive as it is.

Bray understood the importance of vegetative cover, both grassland and woodland, in preventing erosion and discussed several places between here and Austin where trees, including cedar, were overharvested on the slopes of canyons which led to severe erosion, as well as the drying up of local springs and creeks. He described the sources of all of the rivers in the EP and even published the flow rates for a dozen springs and rivers as measured in December 1895!

Bray provided a general description of the EP as wooded canyons and grassland plateaus. He described the transformation from “prairie to timberland” in these words, “These ranges have been overpastured and the grass...has become unable to wage an equal fight against the shrubs...settlement has stopped the periodic burning of the grasses which...prevented the timber from gaining on the prairie.”

Bray discussed cedar at some length, including its value for posts, poles, and building material as well as for firewood. In terms of cedar brakes, he wrote, “The writer knows of no region in which any species of cedar is so uniformly abundant and dominant as is the cedar in the limestone country of Texas”.

Bray also quoted Howard Lacey, a rancher/naturalist on Turtle Creek near Kerrville, “Some of my own cedar was burned about five years ago and the ground is now

covered with shin oak and Spanish oak sprouts...There is a vast quantity of cedar on the upper waters of the Frio, Nueces, Llano, Guadalupe and Medina rivers”.

Bray discussed the importance of timber as a commercial product, saying, “A large part of the support of the hill country population comes from the sale of wood for fuel....Much is still handled at Marble Falls, Kerrville, Boerne” He was concerned that some places were being overharvested, saying, “So long as small owners depend...for their income upon the sale of wood, the temptation will be strong to denude rough, thin-soiled hillsides which would far better be kept with a protective timber covering.”

We know that most of the cedar in the Hill Country today has grown up since the significant harvesting that took place in the late 1800s and early 1900s, or since the latest fire. Bray was concerned about fires too, saying, “There are few types of forest which more invite destruction by fire than the cedar brakes of dry central Texas.”

Bray’s biggest concern for loss of “timber”, from either fire or harvesting, was that wherever trees are destroyed, the bare ground would be very much susceptible to erosion, loss of soil and therefore, loss of water holding capability. He said, “In the first place...trees break the force of the rain...further, debris of the forest floor holds back the fallen water...the spreading and interlacing network of roots...binds the soil fast against erosion”.

What seems incredible to me, is that experts today are still working to teach and put into practice all of the lessons that were known to their predecessors over a century ago.

Until next time...

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the books “Hill Country Ecology,” “Hill Country Landowner’s Guide” and “A Beginner’s Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners.” He can be reached at jstmn@kctc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org .