

*This is the second of two articles submitted by Scott Pittman about his travels with Bill Mollison. We welcome readers' submissions on the themes of observing our environment and incorporating permacultural ethics in our lives.*

## Travels With Bill - Part II

By Scott Pittman

Home in Santa Fe, thinking back to the final half of my journey with Bill, now four months past, I miss him. His energy and example were a rare experience I hope to carry with me and emulate.

We left Santa Fe at 5 a.m. the day after Thanksgiving, heading to Blanco, Texas, and the DuBose Natural Farm. Our route took us south towards Roswell and Carlsbad, New Mexico, - ranch country! A few isolated trees and miles and miles of overgrazed grassland. Going through Clines Corner, I remembered that just 20 miles west was New Mexico's proposed site for the giant accelerator that would have taken millions of gallons of water to cool - all pumped from an aquifer which is already strained and drained to grow alfalfa and sod for the suburban lawns of Albuquerque. Fortunately, New Mexico lost the bidding war - unfortunately Texas won.

As we proceeded south, it was much drier with the few trees browsed sheep-head high. The landscape looked table flat but erosion patterns revealed considerable slope. Each small community looked like an oasis from the distance and, closer, revealed an amazing diversity of tree species, mostly ornamental. Bill and I were struck by how the landscape reflected generational differences. The original settlers, not hooked on Safeway, had planted fruit and nut trees, now dying and neglected on the outskirts of town, while subsequent generations have preferred ornamentals with no "messy" fruit drop to stain sidewalks and driveways. Most new plantings weren't even oriented as windbreaks - although the wind is a major problem every spring. It's as if the population suddenly became environmentally illiterate, doubly puzzling in southern New Mexico where virtually all income is derived from agriculture.

Between Carlsbad and Pecos, Texas, we drove through forests of oil pumps and storage tanks with miles of rutted dirt service roads connecting them. A sand storm made visibility so bad that we had to creep down the highway, straining to see ahead. A few forlorn cows, tail to the wind, huddled, waiting out the wind. What desolation!

Periodically, we spotted the tree-lined banks of the Pecos River to the east, where it paralleled our route for 250 miles, though you wouldn't have expected surface water from the appearance of the land.

The Pecos is just a ghost of its former self because it has been used for irrigation all along its course since the Spanish arrived. I'm sure the Pueblo Indians near Pecos, New Mexico, used it before the Spaniards, but there is a major difference between the irrigation of small fields in the isolated villages of central New Mexico and the concrete-lined projects that water hundreds of acres of alfalfa further south. For me it

reflects an attitude: in the older villages, there is still respect and gratitude for water, there are still fiestas to San Ignacio (patron saint of farmers), and fields are blessed by the local priest, although this tradition exists marginally and the church is losing interest in these poor parishes.

The alfalfa and walnut farmers see the Pecos as their commodity. This lifeblood of the desert gets no more respect than does the bag of 20-10-10 fertilizer thrown from the back of a truck. Is this a result of too abundant capital allowing one to not worry about husbanding the water since one can just buy more or drill another well? It certainly represents a different mindset than that of the Hopi, who have to make even the morning dew count if they are to produce food.

At the town of Pecos, the river turns east toward Iran, Texas, and Bill and I continued south to Ft. Stockton, then east on Highway 290, constantly losing elevation. We moved through a series of eroded escarpments and the vegetation changed from snakeweed and grassland to juniper and oak forests.

Texas has attempted to eradicate mesquite, so far unsuccessfully. Miles of mesquite that were once 15 to 20 foot trees are now a mass of dead limbs and trunks surrounded by a profusion of root suckers. It looks as if someone tried to use a chemical herbicide (Agent Orange comes to mind) and successfully killed the crowns but not the roots. Texas, like New Mexico, Arizona, and Oklahoma, is still fixated on cattle raising and stripping the land of all vegetation perceived as impeding that effort. As far as I know, little effort has been expended in finding other ways to make these large land holdings profitable through multi-purpose design use.

It was obvious from all of the deer roadkill that they are benefitting from the mesquite browse. We counted 40 dead deer in about 50 miles of one stretch of highway. As we got into the oak/juniper forests, it was hazardous to drive at night because of the deer. There were miles of deer fence to keep them off either the highway or the ranches. It was never clear which.

It was amusing throughout the trip as accents changed from Arizona flat to Texas twang; no one understood Bill. I became translator at all stops. Waitresses would listen through the first sentence and then, with glazed eyes, stop hearing until I translated from Aussie to Texan.

We finally reached Blanco, an old German settlement in the Texas hill country. The DuBose Natural Farm - a permaculturalist dream - is situated on the Little Blanco River with enormous pecan trees. The farm has a diverse topography with open fields and oak and

*continued on page 9*

ex  
d  
o  
s  
a  
  
a  
n  
  
a  
i  
a  
t  
i

i  
/

i

n-  
w  
he  
re  
vis

in  
at  
a-  
ps  
cal  
of

as  
nd  
re-  
of

ite  
rst  
his  
er-  
to  
on  
for  
on

ing  
so.  
in  
ohn  
63.  
till

on-

### Travels With Bill *continued*

juniper forest. Paul and Patricia Dubose hosted a permaculture design course which was attended by people from all over the United States, including the Virgin Islands and Alaska. The people were excited and dedicated to developing self-sustaining lifestyles. I made many friends and was recharged with resolve to get permaculture on the ground and in the minds of more folks. The graduates left full of hope and new ideas. Thanks to the Dubose Natural Farm community, I think we will be hearing a lot more from Texas in the future.

In Texas, we also spent a day with the "Sustainable Ag" division of the Texas Department of Agriculture. I was struck by the staff's lack of knowledge of sustainable agriculture although I appreciated their good intentions. Their college degrees obviously do not equip them to deal with a totally new system of agriculture. I'm not going to hold my breath that Texas Agriculture Commissioner Jim Hightower will be able or willing to recruit the right people to change Texas Agriculture, but I admire his intentions and wish him and his department the greatest success. Just using the word "sustainable" as a descriptive adjective for agriculture is a bold step in Texas Ag-bureaucracy.

As a result of my journey with Bill, I see more evidence of the downhill run of our environment, and of the uphill run of the work before us. We hold the tools and the knowledge. What we need is the commitment of our convictions. We must all support each other to accomplish the tasks we have before us.

*Scott Pitman is Director of Southwest Regional Permaculture Institute.*