



The Light at the End of the Tunnel

A few years ago a dear friend of mine died whose stock phrase, when asked “How are things going?” would always respond, “I see the light at the end of the tunnel, but I am afraid it is the headlight of the train that is coming toward me.” That is what I felt about my profession until recent events in the last several years have convinced me to believe otherwise.

My views on the profession are probably opinionated, somewhat macabre, perhaps less than optimistic, and may even border on the morbid for the future of my chosen profession. I am certain some would even say they are outdated. This is my 57th year in the various aspects of surveying, mapping and law, but now I believe that my opinion has been modified or even perhaps changed in the intervening months because of certain events, which included visits to Nashville, Orlando, New Mexico State University in Las Cruces and many other cities and states. Let me explain.

At times I believed the modern land surveyor of today is like the lemming who, when led by the leader, will jump over the

Reflections on the Past, the Present and the Future

cliff to self destruction. The majority of my professional time is directed toward teaching, testifying and training. At 76 years old I still go into the field to conduct my own surveys, recover and evaluate the evidence of ancient surveys, and try to advise clients – who are individuals, surveyors and attorneys – as to what I believe surveying needs are.

These days my emphasis primarily is on testifying as to boundary issues, writing and at times associating with litigating boundary disputes, either as a witness or as an attorney, and conducting a few seminars and workshops thrown in for good measure. My professional boundaries are not confined to one or two states; I consult and testify in numerous states in the four corners of the United States as well as advising on issues overseas. I see surveyors from all categories of experience and education using the name “professional surveyor” and “surveying expert” with the more recent addition of a young surveyor with limited experience, and just having been licensed, calling himself a “forensic surveyor”. As Art Linkletter used to say, “Kids say the darndest things.”

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>> By Walter G. Robillard, LS, Esq.

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Attorneys and judges cannot believe what testimony comes from the mouths of these so-called professionals. Unfortunately, I have to admit they are convincing to courts and to juries. How can “Good Old Joe” who has been a member of our community be wrong? Dressed in his traditional garb of the “man of the field” he espouses philosophies that are neither founded on fact nor law but on conjecture and antiquated theories and “rancid opinions”.

Let me share with you some examples I have unfortunately recently encountered:

“No problem, it is perfectly all right to cross a range line to tie into a corner in the next township.”

“The beginning corner is more important than any other corner in the description, and if you don’t start at the beginning corner, the description is no good.”

Regarding an 1832 plat, the line between sections 12 and 13 did not indicate a bearing or distance, so the RLS meant out the bearing one mile north and one mile south and then applied the mean bearing to the silent line. In his deposition he stated “No, I did not get the official notes. I relied on the plat only.”

A surveyor “proved” out a section corner from one cypress bearing tree stump out of four, not taking time to look for the other three recited pine trees.

Another surveyor who, after having located the boundary line, was informed by his client: “I don’t think you are correct. Move your line fourteen feet. I need more frontage.” And the surveyor did.

A surveyor testified “I had to use the four pins to locate the parcel for Mr. A, because they ‘fit’ the deed,” even though they were not called for in any deed. Upon cross examination it was learned that he had set those very same pins some four years earlier for Mr. B, the adjoining landowner. He surveyed the parcel for Mr. A without informing him of the conflict.

A surveyor said his surveys always close. “I never run the last line. I stop and compute the line and then place that bearing and distance in the deed, and that way I never have a problem.”

A surveyor (with a master’s degree in surveying) calculated his quarter corner

from coordinates and not from recovering the original position from the GLO field notes and the plats, then testified that the landowner’s wall was encroaching on the city’s right-of-way by some ten feet.

A surveyor determined that a garage was encroaching on a city right of way after measuring across three subdivisions, none of which were referenced to the right of way. In court he sanctimoniously

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testified that this was the proper method to locate the right of way line. The judge therefore believed that this was the correct method, because the man was an RLS and the city surveyor.

A surveyor located a line described in the 1850 description as a being a “bow-dark” post on a mound on the 31st degree of latitude. He disregarded the calls for the original post, mound and measurement, and replaced three higher elements in the “priority of calls” with a GPS measurement of the latitude, some 250 feet north of the original found post and mound.

A surveyor (after locating his lot line based on calculated GPS measurements from an 1835 map, and having the court determine my line of occupation was the most probable location of the original lot line) became upset and started calling colleagues and asking them if they knew of mistakes that I had made, so he could bring, as he called them, “disbarment” proceedings against me.

I keep asking myself, “Why do I even want to keep surveying?” The train is speeding down the professional track toward our possible destruction as long as surveyors practice work like that for clients, because clients will start seeking out other professions to perform these needed duties and services.

I also wonder if the light of destruction is what I consider the “re-inventing of the wheel” each year at annual state and national meetings where the same

old issues or problems are discussed, re-discussed and really cussed, because there does not seem to be a continuity of information from one group of officers to another.

At one recent meeting I was asked my opinion of the success of Trig-Star. In reply I asked, “How many of the recipients of the money actually used it to study surveying or geography or a related subject?” NO ONE HAS CHECKED,

as I understand it. I suggested that we are starting too late to enlist students. We need to start in the third grade when they start to learn about the world and its maps. We are waiting too long to get out replacements.

I started my own “Map Star” program. It’s small and limited to what I have been able to afford. Working with a social studies teacher we designed our own country and mapped it. We made topographic maps, planimetric maps, social maps, political maps, etc. There were no bounds. Those who were weak in math excelled in graphics. Imaginations ran wild. Each student was given a GS quad map from which to pattern his or her maps. Then each student “defended” his work before a committee that selected the winner. The grand prize was a globe of the world (it would have been money, were it available). What have we as adults accomplished?


Well, that was my concern until I went to the recent ACSM meetings in Nashville and Orlando. There I saw that “the light” at the other end of the tunnel was not the headlight of a train speeding rapidly toward our profession and bringing destruction, but rather “the future” that was exhibited in the eyes of many surveying students from several universities who were taking part in the “Surveying Olympics”. *That* is the light we need – the light I witnessed in their eyes when I talked to them about reading old deeds or finding a bearing tree that was marked in 1815. I was amazed with the designs of the ancient Roman

surveying equipment they designed. My own grandson, in fact, admitted his crew violated a basic principle I had taught him (that is, to always double check your work) when they forgot to double check the azimuth calculations in Orlando. "Pip," he said, "we screwed up."

To me, that is "the light" in the tunnel. I recently called it "professional meltdown". Can it be avoided? Although I am not under oath, the reader must take what is written as factual, because I was there. I do understand these facts are related as I saw them and if reported by another person they may have a slightly different slant. In order to limit possible personal liability for slander or libel I will not state names or areas, but only the situations. Ask yourself, "Has it happened to me?" The light is also the same light of former students who approach me at meetings or seminars, or that grizzled "old timer" who said "I never could have passed my licensing examination without your book." Each of these people had a dog-eared copy of *Evidence* or *Boundary Control* under their arms, and timidly approached me to autograph them.

I see a light in the eyes of students when I talk about finding old lines and how to read old deeds and field books in which their creators used words that are no longer in use today. I see a light when students come up to me and ask me about one of my overseas trips. I see a light when they talk about a course they are going to take next semester from their favorite professor.

Although there are detractors alive and well in today's world, thankfully they are the minority and hopefully they will eventually die out. The young students, although not great in numbers, will eventually overcome the sad minority of mediocrity that we must accept today.

Maybe what I must do is turn around and realize the light I see is not the "headlight" of the profession, but rather the light of its caboose. It is the light of those who will not make it in the modern world, and are afraid of the young men and young women who will fill the rosters of tomorrow. 

Walt Robillard, principal of World Boundaries, is a specialist in local and international land boundary disputes. He has taught at major universities, co-authored college textbooks, and is a popular presenter at seminars and continuing education courses for attorneys, surveyors, engineers and foresters.

Thanks to the Profession

from Sarah Robillard

On Sunday, July 2nd, 2006, at 11:23 A.M., my wife of 54 years, Sarah Robillard, peacefully gave up the fight for life after many years of sickness. I am writing this because Sarah was intimately involved with my professional surveying life. She considered all of the wives of surveyors as close fiends and over the years she entertained many of them in our home and at ACSM meetings. When I was President, she accompanied me to numerous meetings from Washington to California, Illinois, Arkansas, to mention a few, and on numerous trips overseas to FIG, the United Kingdom and even South Africa where I was honored as a special guest of the Institution of Land Surveyors. Wherever she went, she made friends and upon her death this fact became very evident. I received scores of sympathies from more than 15 states and foreign countries. Messages on the Internet, and numerous letters, gifts and cards, fruit and other things I received were heartwarming to my family and me. My family and I have tried to recognize those wonderful people who wished us tidings, but because the list is too great, please permit me to take this opportunity to say "Thanks to The Profession" on her behalf.

The profession gave her many happy memories. I would like to relate some that she took to her grave with her. The profession was good to her and she appreciated it. She probably was one of the last remaining of the "old guard" of ACSM. Many of her surveying friends preceded her – Evie Elder, Elanore Stanley, Virginia Boyd, Virginia McEntyre – just to mention a few. These "surveyors' wives" were part of her life and memories and they meant so much to her. She enjoyed seeing them at ACSM meetings and at state meetings and even in our home or theirs. Our "Professional Doors" had no locks.

Some of the memories she took with her include:

The time she won a red dress at the Arkansas meeting. She went into a telephone booth to change into it so she could model it to the surveyors. It was a hoot.

The time she was honored at a dinner and bridge party by the wife of the President of South Africa, a friendship that lasted for over twenty years until Mrs. Botah died. The time she was the guest of the President of the Royal Institution Surveyors at a dinner at RICS' headquarters in London.

The time she and I were guests of the Kern and Wild Companies in Switzerland where they treated her like she was the Queen of Switzerland.

The time when she asked the FIG delegate from China if he would like to go eat American.

The time when she asked a Russian surveyor from Siberia if he lived there because he wanted to or because he was a guest of the Russian Government.

I could go on and on, but please, realize each act of kindness to her she loved and appreciated, even those many surveyors who were asked to get her Coca Colas at meetings.

I ask your forgiveness in not responding to each act of kindness, and wish to extend our appreciation to the entire profession. It is a profession she loved, a profession that gave her many eternal memories she took with her. She thanks y'all, as does the family. R.I.P.

– *Walt Robillard*
Daughters Nora and Nan
Grandsons Grant and Tony