

# MYSTERIOUS PEOPLE WITH ROUGH HANDS

*A hardworking world reserved for the self-reliant. By Stephen L. Wilmeth*

**A**t a recent public gathering on a windswept Arizona flat, Democratic Rep. Gabrielle Giffords rose and spoke to a crowd made up largely of folks with sunburned faces and cowboy hats. She was there to talk about the tragic death of rancher Rob Krentz, who was murdered by a drug-cartel operative on his ranch, which spans the Arizona-New Mexico border in the Bootheel of New Mexico.

In her opening remarks, Giffords referred to the constituency of Americans who lived in the area as “those almost mysterious people with rough hands.” They indeed were there, those almost mysterious folks. They were standing respectfully in front of her wanting desperately to hear words that suggested that she understood what they needed to hear. But many of them had been to too many of these meetings only to hear the same words. Many thought that Rob’s death deserved more dignity than yet another round of discussion about border security, but that’s what they got.

The Obama administration will minimize the truth of Rob Krentz’s death by suggesting that it was an unfortunate, isolated incident that is not part of any trend. The press will generally support that conclusion and the border battle will continue. There will be little said about the conditional access afforded the Border Patrol on the almost 40 miles of Mexican border on the south end of the valley where the crowd had gathered. Too few leaders will question the authority of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Services’ Benjamin Tuggle, who in 2009 wrote a series of letters to the Tucson sector chief outlining the conditional access that the Border Patrol was going to have in the San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge where the murderer both entered and exited the United States. Even fewer will ask why less than five miles of that border section had full and unencumbered access afforded to the Border Patrol. The public will not know that. What the public will know is that the two U.S. senators from New Mexico had immediately demanded that the Department of Homeland Security install a Forward Operating Base near the border to protect American citizens. The New Mexico governor

had gone one step further and ordered the National Guard to the area for the same protection. What the general American public will not be told is that the same two senators and that governor have introduced legislation and/or support legislation to create yet more conditional access to the border by Border Patrol in the form of more wilderness design-



© MADELINE BLAKE

ation. And as for the New Mexico congressman who represents the area, well, he is still “studying” the issue.

It is no wonder that many of those mysterious rough-hands folks decided not to attend the meeting. They have no true congressional representation. In issue after issue, in battle after battle, their concerns are minimized or ignored. Of course, in public meetings and work sessions, their input has been received, but when their positions oppose those of the environmentalists, the latter’s demands are given priority.

On a recent Saturday, a rancher on the New Mexico side of the border called his neighbor and told him he had gathered a cow and calf that belonged to him. The pair were in such-and-such corral, on water and with feed, and they would be fine until the neighbor could get to them. The neighbors then talked about cattle markets and loads of calves that had gone to Clovis and La Junta during the week. The conversation had nearly

concluded when the neighbor owning the pair had indicated that if he didn’t get there that afternoon, he would be there the next day. In closing, one of them offered a flippant comment about their view of the world compared to the rest of the world that didn’t have Saturday morning or Sunday morning “rough-hands” demands. “Maybe they are just smarter than we are,” the other said.

No, “they” are not smarter. But they don’t live in the same world or experience the almost mysterious rough-hands people. The rough-hands world is one of self-reliance and constant immersion in hard physical labor most of the time, but supportive and attentive to the plight of a neighbor when necessary. It

must be that way in order for them to survive. Such a relationship doesn’t necessarily exist in the lives of those whose Saturdays and Sundays are days off.

It would be interesting to have known what Gabrielle Giffords thought when she concluded that windy evening meeting. Money will be spent and the politicians will profess success in their actions, but what about the real story? Will those rough-

hands people who have harnessed their hearts to working on the land continue their way of life? The death of their respected colleague Rob Krentz is symbolic of the dilemmas they face every day.

Whatever the politicians do or don’t do, standing there in that big country with those rough-hands people gathered around made some of us more aware of our diminishing society and of our special and historic way of life. Come Saturday morning and, for that matter, too many Sunday mornings, we rough-hands people will continue to be fully engaged in life...maybe not with much time to spare, but what an immense life it is that God has allowed us. ■

*Stephen L. Wilmeth is a rancher in Luna and Dona Ana counties, N.M. He is a dedicated believer that the presence of cattle on federal lands along the Mexican border is vital to the security of the American people. Take cattle away and illicit activities fill the void each and every time.*