

## Riding the Geronimo Line

*Punching holes for the country.*

*By Barry Perryman, Ph.D.*

I broke out in the Williston Basin oil field of the late 1970s. Located primarily in eastern Montana and western North Dakota, it was known at the time as the most “bust a\$\$” field in the country—deep, hard rock holes, short on hands, and short on equipment. Although oil and gas had been discovered there in the 1920s, the larger Williston Basin wasn’t worked until the 1950s. It then slumbered until the 1973/74 OPEC oil embargo. All of a sudden it was “a\$\$holes and elbows” to punch holes for our country.

During the slumber, much of the drilling equipment had been cannibalized or sent packing to other areas. The rigs we used were castoffs from Texas and Oklahoma, places that did not know about winter. As a former derrick hand, I can truthfully say that I never worked a rig that had heat in the derrick. If you wanted to stay warm 90 feet above the floor while trippin’ pipe, you leaned up against the pipe stand that had just come from 12,000 feet down.

When I wasn’t occupied by some specific task, one of my personal incentives was to test the Geronimo line, which is a half-inch cable stretched from the derrick outward to the ground where it attached to an anchor. You rode it on a little T-handle that had a brass brake to slow you down. The whole contraption was an escape feature in case of a blowout or fire. I rode it on new holes to make sure it actually worked. A small thing like that can be easily neglected.

We were working daylight tour on a rig down on the Little Missouri River one cold but sunny January day when I decided to ride the Geronimo line. One hundred twenty feet above ground I pushed off. About halfway down there was a kink in the cable and I came to a complete stop over the pipe racks, about 70 feet off the deck. After swinging alone for 15 minutes or so, I finally got someone’s attention (rig

engines are loud and you don’t look up to the sky much when you’re working on the ground). Of course, he saw the humor in my predicament and began to get the attention of the rest of the crew. “Just jump!” was yelled several times. However, it did not take long for them to begin swinging the cable up and down, side to side. When the anchor—a barrel of cement that happened to be frozen to the ground—broke loose, I dropped about 10 feet. I quickly began barking directions about chaining the barrel off and so forth. Anyway, I lived to fight another day. But the point is that I had an incentive to take that risk.

Further to my point, in the case of public land management over the last few decades, Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service managers have had little or no incentive for taking risks in rangeland and forestry management. Of the many contributing factors associated with the continuing western wildfire fiasco, a major and almost totally overlooked factor is employee risk assumption.

When I use the term “taking risk,” I mean doing the right thing ecologically in keeping with agency missions for public lands. Taking risk to do the right thing seems ironic doesn’t it? For instance, if a manager, based on ecological science or human safety risk, recognized a need to conduct a prescribed burn or reduce a dangerous level of fine fuel through grazing, the risk of effort and resources was often met

with delays or cancellations by lawsuits from parasitic environmental groups. This led decision-makers to passively, and in some cases actively, deny well-intentioned programs from moving forward. As a worst-case scenario, if a prescribed fire effort actually received approval and subsequently escaped the prescription during implementation, punitive measures were sometimes invoked against members of the management team, squashing incentive even though accidents happen under the best of circumstances.

Public land management by secret consent decrees and settlement agreements has also reduced the incentive for doing the right thing. For decades, this practice allowed environmental groups to dictate policy instead of trained, land-management professionals. The practice was rampant during the Obama administration. From January 2012 through January 2017, Interior signed on to more than 460 settlement agreements and consent decrees, sending more than \$4.4 billion to plaintiffs, while keeping key provisions secret. During Obama’s last year in office, Interior signed on to 96 agreements and decrees at a taxpayer cost of more than \$1.7 billion. Thankfully, Secretary Zinke ended the practice in September 2018.

Rangeland and forest managers are trained professionals capable of managing lands in keeping with agency missions. Even with all the extenuating and contributing circumstances, devastating wildfires can be minimized if these trained professionals are given incentives to do their jobs. You see, it is better to get hung up on a Geronimo line when things are calm than when the rig is on fire. ■

*Your Wasteland Guide is Barry Perryman, who has a Ph.D. in rangeland ecology. He is an educator, researcher, author, speaker and part-time philosopher specializing in natural resource management issues of the western states. Contact [bperryman1296@charter.net](mailto:bperryman1296@charter.net).*

**The rigs we used were cast-offs from Texas and Oklahoma.**