

Riparian Notes

Note Number 14, July, 2005

Steve Nelle, NRCS, San Angelo, Texas

Old Pickup Trucks and Riparian Areas

You may be surprised to find out that old pickup trucks and riparian areas actually share much in common. I began discovering this truth after acquiring a 1950 Dodge pickup. Please don't ask for a logical explanation about why this truck was needed. Maybe it was the fact that it is a stout, no frills vehicle; a link to a more simple era. No plastic, no power steering, no power brakes, no power windows, no AC, no computer, no radio. Maybe it was a pragmatic notion that old trucks increase in value each year, while newer trucks decrease in value. Maybe it was the challenge of taking an old broken truck that no one else wanted and seeing its potential.

Unfortunately, the truck had to be towed to the house since it was completely non-functional at the time of purchase. The first job was to become familiar with all the parts and components and assess the condition of each. Hours and hours were spent crawling underneath or with head buried under the hood, looking carefully, trying to take note of everything. The list of things that needed replacement or repair was long: radiator hoses, fan belt, clogged fuel line, busted brake line, brake cylinders, master cylinder, brake shoes, bad wiring, bad muffler, bad tires, leaky fuel pump, and the list could go on and on. It all seemed a bit overwhelming; but there are priorities when doing such work. It can't all be fixed at one time.

After getting a new 6 volt battery and rebuilding the carburetor and rigging up an auxiliary fuel system, the old flat head engine started right up. It was amazing that the old thing sounded as good as it did after so many years of neglect and non use.

It was equally amazing to discover all of the things that were still in working order, including the starter, generator, water pump, oil pump, distributor, headlights, gauges, wipers, and even the heater. This gave new hope that this truck could actually be restored to a basic level of function without spending a small fortune.

So how does this relate to creeks and riparian areas? Like the old truck, some creeks are ugly, neglected and non-functional. The list of riparian problems and limitations sometimes seems monumental: down-cutting, channel widening, poor access to floodplain, poor sinuosity; poor width / depth ratio, lack of stabilizing grasses and sedges, poor recruitment of riparian woody plants, overgrazing, mowing, human trampling, etc. Where does one start in trying to restore a broken creek? It can't all be fixed at one time.

Like the amateur truck mechanic, the riparian mechanic will first need to become familiar with the basic parts and operation of creeks. A keen sense of observation is needed to learn the parts and dynamics and how the parts work together and how the systems are interrelated.

In some cases, merely changing one or two little things is all that is needed to start an amazing recovery process. A change in grazing or mowing, for example, will lead to an improvement in vegetation, which will in turn help stabilize banks, slow floodwaters, drop sediment, build floodplains and improve sinuosity. As the natural processes are allowed to occur, creek restoration begins to take place.

The difference of course, is that a creek is much more than a machine. Creeks consist of living components and natural ecologic, hydrologic and geologic processes which work together in an amazing way to restore themselves. Human intervention is often needed to tweak and adjust the processes, but major long term inputs of labor, capital and energy are usually not required.

Like old trucks, creeks are special in the eyes of those who understand and appreciate such things. And both will continue to increase in value as time goes on. In the next issue, the concept of basic functionality will be described – for old trucks and riparian areas.