

TRANSCRIPT: DR.ROBERT E. WHITSON INTERVIEW

TRANSCRIPT

An interview with Dr. Robert E. Whitson. Former Professor and Head of Rangeland Ecology At Texas A&M University. Whitson is a 1974 graduate from Texas A&M and an inducted member of the Tyrus R. Timm Honor Registry.

This video was posted June 7, 2011 on the Tyrus R. Timm Registry YouTube Channel.

Could you please introduce yourself and tell us a little about your career?

I'm Bob Whitson, I grew up in the Texas panhandle on a dry land wheat farm. Texas Tech on an undergraduate and master's program, then PhD here at Texas A&M. In between some of that I was in the military as an officer in the military, which spent time in South Vietnam and spent time in the extension service as the area farm management specialist which we worked with producers on issues that were important to them. Decision making problems that they would encounter with all kind of Ag commodities, beef cattle, crops. So I worked in that area in the decision making, helping them with the decisions they need to make. Decided that like I say, came back to school, work on my PhD in Agricultural Economics. I felt like Agricultural Economics gave me the best opportunity to help producers with the decision making process.

Why did you choose to study Agricultural Economics?

Agricultural Economics, in my mind I just started out in range science and it was a more science based natural resource program and I was more interested ranching, being able to grow forage and run cattle and those things. But as I looked at the things that made a difference in whether I could succeed or not, they were business oriented. They were oriented to that process of looking at what the economic factors were. So that was a real interest to me, to combine economics with what I knew from a production Ag standpoint, and how I can put those together and move down the road helping either myself make better decisions, or students that I had in class. So that was always my interest that was always my focus. I felt like Ag Econ provided me the best background, the best training, the best way that I could do that. So that was how I ended up in Agricultural Economics.

What activities at A&M most influenced your career?

All the experiences, and I've had several experiences at Texas A&M. One of them that I really enjoyed and that is seeing students expand their knowledge and understand a complex problem, we would do that in class different ways. But probably the single most experience that I appreciated in my experience here was the application of the land grant mission in a state that knew agriculture and it involved teaching, it involved research, it involved extension service, and I had experience in all three of those. Each one I love, I certainly enjoy my experiences in each one of those and I think people have to be willing to bring new experiences to the table and when you look back on it you say "gosh that was a good experience, gosh I enjoyed that." I enjoyed taking advantage that were out there at that time. So there's probably no single entity that I would point to and say that was my most enjoyable experience. It's a continuum, and you put them all together and the entire time that I had here; from the very beginning, the extension service as an area farm management specialist, through graduate school, through being a professor and what I did in that whole realm of helping people was a very enjoyable experience. I wouldn't trade for [...]

How did the military experience help you in your career?

Military experience was great I enjoyed it. One of the things that I appreciated about the military was that you had a focus, you had a mission, and your whole purpose in life was to get your training, train as a team, train as a unit, and focus on what the mission was. What is it that you're going to accomplish, that you were assigned. So the military gave me the opportunity to focus out there on an objective that at all costs, that was the overriding thing, we had to be successful with that. So the aspects of what did it take to do that, well it took training, it took courage in some cases, it took building teamwork. It took all those things that you had to learn in order to be successful and when you went from the military back into the civilian world, those are the same components that successful people do today. Most of the time it requires team work, it requires more than one subject. You didn't know everything about what you're going to do but you have people in the military that were specialists in areas and they brought that skill to the table. So the same way that knowledge and specializing, bringing those together in teamwork. But most importantly, focus on a goal, focus on your mission. What is it that you have to accomplish above all else. No matter what happened, that had to be an overriding component of every decision that you made. It wasn't that you got off the trail that you wandered here or there. If you weren't doing something that contributed to what you were supposed to accomplish, you were wasting time. So I appreciated that about the military and I brought that into my life as a civilian.

What are your thoughts on being selected to the Tyrus R. Timm Honor Registry?

You know, I'm honored. Truly honored to when you look at the prestigious group of people that are in that group and when you saw those names, many of them I knew, worked with, seen, or been associated with. To be in that group was a great honor, and I'm so proud to be included in that group of Ty Timm Honorees. I knew Ty Timm, and he was my department head when I came here. So especially meaningful to me as I saw what influence that he had and I looked at those people in that list and it was a proud moment when I look at who's there, and I'm a part of that group, and so I'm very proud.

What advice do you have for students unsure of career decisions?

Well, keep an open mind as they look down the road I think Agricultural Economics is a great discipline to be in to go different directions. I think it gives you a lot of skill, a lot of training in areas that are important to a wide range of things, but you know you have to, in some ways, create your own opportunities by things that you do and things that you're willing to consider. But don't ignore opportunities, don't overlook if there's an opportunity for you to take your building blocks that you've done and you've been successful at this job, and this one, and this one. Combine all those and there's another one out there that you could put those three or four things together and move to that next spot, do it. Challenge yourself, stretch out there and go for it. So you know I would just say that success is measured a lot of different ways, and a lot of it's in your heart you know when you feel that you've been successful at what you're doing, what does it matter if other people think you are. But truly, you can make the most of what you can do by applying all those things that we talked about, with dedication, hard work, training. Yeah a little luck doesn't hurt somewhere thrown in there to have the right positions open up at the right time, but don't be afraid to go for them. Don't sell yourself short with "I don't know if I can do that." Be realistic, you won't get the job probably if its way beyond what you can do, but certainly don't be afraid to go for something that stretches you out there and forces you to work a little harder at something than maybe where you're at right now.

How were you able to manage time for family, work, and other priorities throughout your career?

Well that's a good question, and sometimes people get overbalanced, they spend all their time at work you know they work day, they work night. What I have found is that you have to find a good balance for you. There's no formula. There's no one out there that's going to say well if you're working more than 8, 10 hours a day you got to quit. You've got to find that balance, and you look for the things that you can do as quality time, that you do as a family, or that you spend time with the family. There's no replacing a spouse that is extremely understanding and supporting of things that you're doing. But don't put everything on one thing. You know you can't just give up your life as a family, spend quality time with your children, spend time as a family doing things that will help you grow, both within your family, within your spiritual arena. All of those things take a proper balance so that again, you just don't get overburdened in just one area, so you just can't think about anything else. I found there's nothing better than having several things, I like to have a lot of multi tasks because, if I get bogged in an area and I feel like I just don't know what direction to take. It's very helpful in my mind to have other things to say "okay let's do this for a while."

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Well just how much they should realize, the amount of confidence when you looked around that room tonight and you saw all of those people, successful people, who were willing to invest their time, their energy, their knowledge, in ensuring that when our students walk out the door that they have the benefit of what went on before them. So plan that when you get out and they're successful, they're going to be in the room with new groups of students and they're going to be imparting the same kind of things that these folks are. So in other words, it's a continuum. Realize that you are part of a continuum, what happened before is where you're sitting in terms of the chances and opportunities that you have to be successful. Now you owe that when you go out and you're successful, you owe it to the next group. Aggies are famous about helping aggies when they need it, and I don't mind telling you the success, and the advice I would give is that there's so many people who believe in aggies and believe in young people and what they're doing. They look around that room and see who's investing what in them, you can't replace it with money. You can't replace it with all those things. First of all, be appreciative. That of course tell those folks how much you appreciate them and what they do, and then be willing to give back. What they'll find is that they grow more in success by giving back in that sense than they got as a student. So, advice, you're part of a big family, you're part of aggie tradition, and you're successful because there was a whole bunch of people in front of you that were successful and there's an automatic assumption that you're an aggie, you're trained at Texas A&M, and you're going to be successful. So you've got the benefit of the doubt over a bunch of people that are also out there that have finished the program. There's going to be the benefit of the doubt given because of long years of support and experience that comes an aggies way, just be willing to give it back at some point and I know you will. Aggies have always done that.

Ronert E. Whitson | Transcript
Tyrus R. Timm Honor Registry | Department of Agricultural Economics | Texas A&M University

Transcribed by
Grant Miller
September 21,2020