

# The “Trust Me” Syndrome

**A**

s I continue to “practice” in the surveying field (maybe in a subconscious quest to finally “get it right”), it is sometimes disappointing to see the image our profession occasionally projects when I browse through recorded maps and plats. After almost 40 years of “practicing,” I have had the opportunity to draft a few maps of my own and to see and work with a lot of others. Many are good and some are bad (including several of mine, no doubt). The one thing that I have come to value and appreciate in a map is its ability to impart the “message” of one’s work in a clear, concise, and tidy manner. For some surveyors, that ability seems to come naturally. Too often,

though, the logic or purpose of the survey is not clear. For example, while required in many states, in Washington state a “narrative” is not presently required on surveys. About 15 years ago, I started adding “narratives” to my Washington surveys because I felt that they made the map more “user-friendly.” Many times, stating the purpose of the survey facilitates understanding why and how it was done. The narrative is also a good place to discuss any other peculiarities that may otherwise go unnoticed.

Invariably, one must add notes here and there to justify and explain certain boundary decisions. What annoys me are records of survey and subdivision plats by surveyors who don’t bother to document the boundaries shown. The need for

>> **C.E. “Chuck” Whitten, LS**

justification either “never occurred” to them, they “don’t care,” or they are “too busy” (or too lazy) to take the time, or any number of other excuses. It usually comes back to haunt the offending surveyor years later when litigation commences. That is a poor time to try to remember how the bearing and/or location was determined for the lines that are now under scrutiny, and equally hard to justify to the opposing counsel as well as one’s own.

Some maps, however, are amazingly simple. They show four lines around a rectangular tract with irons set at the corners and not much else (maybe a tie to a section corner). I think those surveyors should at least add a big red “TRUST

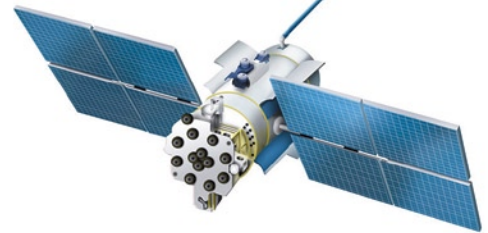
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- when it has to be **right**

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ME” stamp across the property depicted as being “located and monumented.” That would remove the uncertainty that others may have. Although brevity is many times a virtue, in these cases, it is like saying either “I didn’t have enough room to elaborate on what controls the boundaries shown,” or “I’m the only one that needs to know that information,” or “I don’t remember how I came up with this,” or “It’s none of your business.” In other words, just “trust me.”

At the other extreme are those maps that look terribly official (to the layman) because they are filled with important-looking notes, dimensions, or meaningless lines and data that have no bearing on the real issues. Add a few certificates and presto, they too, become a part of our recorded legacy. I’ll bet most of us have looked over a map and noticed a spelling error. Then you see another one in an adjacent note and then a disjointed sentence further on that leaves you confused as to what is supposedly being said. At that point, the next thing most of us look for is the name of the surveyor

who authored the product. The stain on his or her reputation is now starting to set. Taking more pride in one’s work initially can usually prevent later embarrassment.

I try to stress to the younger, aspiring surveyors in our office that you need to justify each boundary line depicted. Whatever determines the position and/or direction of a controlling line should be shown. In the eyes of the end-user—be it another surveyor, attorney, or title insurance company—it is sometimes not so important that your judgment was right or wrong. It would just be nice to know what your judgment actually was! I’m sure my younger charges are tired of me asking where the “TRUST ME” stamp is when I review their maps, but at least now they are starting to think about it regularly. If you are an artist, you are not held responsible for the interpretation others make of your work. (That is probably why artists are not licensed and can get by with “poetic license” instead.) Unfortunately, this is not the case with maps and plats that become memorialized in the public records. Not only do your

clients and third parties (including the public) hold you responsible for the accuracy and content of those products, they also form opinions about the author of the work based on how well it is or isn’t presented. Surveyors can avoid the need for a “TRUST ME” stamp on their maps by simply viewing them from the perspective of an end-user. We could all benefit from regularly recalling the words of the Scottish bard, Robert Burns, who, in 1786 wrote a poem entitled “To A Louse, On Seeing One On A Lady’s Bonnet, At Church” that contained the immortal line: “*O wad some Power the giftie gie us, To see oursels as ithers see us.*” *A*

**Chuck Whitten** is Vice-president of Hagedorn, Inc., a surveying and engineering firm in Vancouver, Washington. He has been licensed in Washington and Oregon since 1970 and 1972, respectively, has spoken at numerous local seminars, (specializing on retrace-ment issues), and is a member of the Land Surveyors Association of Washington, ACSM, and NSPS.



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