

Journal of RANGE MANAGEMENT

Conservation Ranching in the Oklahoma Panhandle

A. P. ATKINS

Rancher

Guymon, Oklahoma

CONSERVATION Ranching is an efficient standard of production which gives maximum returns over a long period of time without noticeable depletion of the range. That is a sort of Mother Hubbard definition which covers everything and touches nothing, so I intend to confine my discussion to a few phases on which experience has given me some definite convictions, and which may interest those gathered here at the Third Annual Meeting of the American Society of Range Management.

I should probably preface my remarks by stating that my 25 years of experience in the cattle business has been principally in the Oklahoma and Texas Panhandles, where I am now operating a 10,000 acre ranch in a rough, broken, hard-land area. We raise a little alfalfa for winter feeding and some wheat, which in most years furnishes green winter pasture for part of our cattle. We consistently winter most of our cattle on the range, with cottonseed or soybean pellets for a protein supplement. My land is all fenced and is watered principally by wells and dams (sometimes called tanks). The altitude is 3000 feet. Annual rainfall averages a little under 20 inches, but varies as much as 50 percent in a growing season. Some of my observations might not be valid under different conditions of soil and climate.

Drouth is a constant threat all over the western plains, and overgrazing has been the traditional weakness of stockmen ever since Abraham and Lot overstocked their range in the Land of Canaan and had to dissolve a prosperous partnership as a result. All stockmen are born optimists or they wouldn't be in the business. In a good, wet spring, when the grass is a green carpet on the hills, it is a temptation to believe that it will rain all summer, that the market will be high in the fall, and that the smart thing to do is to buy more cattle. It has been said that every cowman in Texas loses his brains every spring and doesn't find them again until fall. Frankly, I haven't always been immune to that disease myself. In the decade now referred to as the "Dirty Thirties", when dust storms were depositing college professors in Washington and they wanted to give everything west of the Mississippi back to the Indians, I found myself in the middle of a five-year drouth with 500 white-faced cows and a badly overgrazed range. Every fall, it seemed, I was moving a large part of my cattle to some other locality where I could find a little wheat pasture or feed of some kind to winter on. I assure you it was a bitter experience which I don't care to repeat.

I dug out of it this way: I cut my cow herd in half and divided my summer range into three approximately equal

parts. It's customary in our locality to let winter range lay idle during the summer, but I left a third of my summer range empty, too—through that summer and the following winter. The next spring I moved in on it as soon as grass started. In our area, cattle generally require supplemental feed until around the first of May. On deferred range, such as I have described, I have turned loose as early as the first week in April with good results.

In succeeding years, I rested (or deferred, if you prefer to call it that) the other two-thirds of my summer range in turn—one-third each year, in rotation, and then repeated the process. In case of drouth or other emergency, I always had a reserve to fall back on.

I found other advantages—my cattle were more concentrated and easier to look after. I had less fence to ride at any one time. Fresh pastures are more sanitary. I think it is possible that some disease organisms may die out in an empty pasture. In the spring, cattle really love to get into a rested pasture, where they can fill up quickly, instead of chas-ing all over for some lonesome sprig of green grass. They eat the old grass along with the new, and the feed is more solid. I would estimate, and I think there are experimental results to bear me out, that a pasture such as I have described, with the previous year's coat of grass untouched, will summer practically twice as many cattle as one that has been stocked the year before. Although the advantage might not be so conspicuous on sandy land, I found that on those tight soils my grass continued to improve with additional deferment. The old grass sheltered and protected the tender new growth in the spring, checked runoff and retarded evaporation. The seed crop from the previous year had an ideal environment for germination and growth.

I have heard some men object to deferred grazing. They complain that the grass gets so rank and coarse that cattle don't like it, and that deferred pastures are weedy. I'll admit that weeds will be more noticeable where the grass is thin. But as the grass gets thicker, the weeds will generally be choked out. In years of heavy autumn rainfall, our grass does deteriorate in quality, and probably more so where the growth is rank and moisture persists longer. Notwithstanding, I still maintain that the improved stand and vigor outweigh any nutritional deterioration that may occasionally occur. I have seen grass that had "laid out" a year rent for double the usual price—which is a pretty good estimate of its value.

I don't claim to have originated the idea that idle grass is profitable. I once knew a rancher in the drouthy Pecos River country of New Mexico whose success was based on the fact that he consistently kept half of his range empty. He bought cattle at bargain prices when his neighbors got tired of waiting for rain, and he died a wealthy man.

I have been interested watching changes in range composition, that is the changes in kinds of grass that grow under improved conditions. In the dry years I referred to, we particularly noticed the loss of our little bluestem which formerly grew in abundance on the hillsides. It was replaced by side-oats grama, apparently a hardier grass. We also lost most of our western wheatgrass. A range survey of my ranch, made by the Soil Conservation Service in 1941, does not mention little bluestem or western wheatgrass among the dominant grasses. Today, little bluestem is increasing on the hills, and western wheatgrass and other cool weather grasses grow in profusion in the draws and low places, and furnish considerable protein in the early spring and late fall when other grasses are dormant.

I don't give the entire credit for the improvement of my range to deferred grazing alone. A series of favorable years has improved all the grazing land in the Panhandle which has had any sort of decent treatment. And while I think that a rest every second or third year will show a quicker improvement on a badly depleted range, a fourth or even a fifth year deferment might be satisfactory under favorable conditions. I do think that some systematic plan of deferred grazing can be a practical and profitable part of range management.

Having made some recovery from drouth and overstocking, I was soon ready for a little expansion. But I was more cautious than before. Over a period of years, I had observed two types of operation which had been consistently successful in our area. Some men ran cows exclusively, selling the calves every fall (except perhaps for replacement heifers); while other men specialized in steer calves, buying in the fall, carrying them a year, then selling and repeating the process. Each has advantages and disadvantages. On a rising market, the steer men make the most money. It's pretty hard to beat that 300 pounds or more that a steer calf will gain in a year if you treat him right. You can generally sell him for less per pound than you paid and still make money. And you can almost run two steers on the same acreage as one cow. Steers require a minimum of care and attention. A steer won't "get on the lift" in the spring even if he is thin, and he won't pick a blizzard as the time to drop a calf. But it's like the old man said about hiring college boys for harvest hands: you're always going after some more. And on the declining side of a market cycle, steers can lose money and hurt pretty bad.

A cow, unless she is a fence-crawling rogue, isn't apt to stray off like a steer.

If she has been properly vaccinated against abortion, and is kept in thrifty condition, she will nearly always show up in the spring with a calf, and sometimes the calf will sell for more than the cow was worth the year before. You can buy her pretty high and if she is a good cow and lives to a ripe old age, she will still pay off a lot of mortgages. With a herd of cows, you always have something to sell besides the current calf crop; maybe a few calves that were too young to wean last fall, a few fat dry cows, or just a few old culls, but always something that will bring in a little money when you need it.

My preference always has been for cows, but I studied all these things over and I wondered why not combine this cow and steer business, as some of the large operators have done for years. I saw an advantage that is particularly desirable in case of drouth. By stocking lightly with cows and carrying the calves over to yearlings, if the next spring turned out dry, I could sell the yearlings or send them to the Flint Hills, and have enough grass left for the cows. In a very good year, I could buy additional steer calves for temporary expansion. I know a rancher in the Nara Visa country of New Mexico who uses the same plan, except that he combines cows with sheep. He claims that he can trail sheep two or three hundred miles without a shrink. In a dry year, he moved his sheep out and kept his cows. I've never handled sheep, but the point I want to make is this:

Ranching should operate along sound, proven, established lines, but in a country that is subject to drouth, it is important to have a plan of operation that is flexible enough to meet the variations of weather. Of course, we always have market fluctuations to worry about, but cattle that are well wintered and have

good grass for summer, will always leave a better taste in your mouth than cattle that don't shed off until June and aren't fat until September.

I think the days of easy profits for "street corner" ranchers are about over, and pretty soon the men will be separated from the boys—automatically. To stay in business we will have to manage efficiently and cattle that don't make good, economical gains are apt to show up in red ink. Some of you probably remember the days when every ranch had a hospital bunch in the spring. One way of deciding whether a cow needed special consideration was to ride up behind her and slap your chaps with a quirt. If that startled her into a trot, you left her alone. If she just barely moved, you cut her into the hospital bunch. That kind of wintering doesn't pay any more, if it ever did. Our taxes and expenses are too high nowadays to make a living by starving cattle, and nearly every one in the cattle business admits it. It's been preached for years, and there are experimental results that prove that in extreme cases, fewer cattle will actually produce more pounds of beef on the same acres. Yet, judging from some pastures that I see frequently, there are still men in the southwest who think it's against the law to let a blade of grass get more than three inches high. And there are still too many who think that you have to be rich to afford good bulls, although a quality product that commands a premium price is certainly within the definition of Conservation Ranching that I suggested at the beginning. Sometimes you can buy a plain animal cheap enough to make money on him, but I don't think you can afford to raise him.

Let me describe a standard of production that I have found reasonable to attain in terms of a commercial cow herd. The cows should weigh between 1000 and

1200 pounds at maturity. They should be uniform, relatively good milkers, culled for production and bred to the right kind of bulls. They should have at least a 90 percent calf crop at weaning time, and a small herd should do better—say 95 percent. They can be managed and bred to drop at least three-fourths of their calves in the two or three months preceding green grass. My cows start calving February 1. In the fall, I expect their calves to be big, mellow-hided, rugged fellows that will weigh between 450 and 500 pounds and be so uniform you can lay a board across their backs and touch every calf.

Reverting now from specific to general comments, I'm going to suggest that range conservation is largely a matter of proper management and wise use of what Nature has provided. It means the selection of the kind and quantity of livestock to make the best use of any given range. It means providing stock water in ample quantities and securing grazing distribution. As far back as Jacob's time, man has tried to breed the kind of livestock he wanted, and even further back, he controlled their grazing and production the best he could. There still are and always will be limitations, of course. The successful stockman doesn't argue with his animals, he takes advantage of their natural traits to accomplish what he wants to do. All of which require patience and understanding. More than ever we need a scientific knowledge of the range itself—its soils and its grasses, which are the raw materials which we convert into meat and wool and leather.

The old saying about the eye of the master fattening the cattle is as true as ever, provided the master educates his eye and keeps abreast of technical developments and discoveries. A generation ago, Senator Ingalls of Kansas eulogized grass so eloquently that his remarks are

still quoted. Yet until very recently, even the ranchers who made a living from grass could seldom name a half-dozen species on their own ranges.

There was a time when a man who could ride and rope and read brands, live outdoors the year around and eat his own cooking, if he had just a little business judgment and plenty of intestinal fortitude, could be a successful rancher. Today, along with his knowledge of cattle, he needs to be a lawyer, an income tax expert, a skilled mechanic, and a veterinarian. It also helps if he knows a few other lines, but unless he learns the lessons that experience and science have tried to teach us in the last fifteen years, I don't think he will stay in business many years more.

Ranching has passed through many periods of stress and change. A romantic but wasteful era of uncontrolled grazing on open range yielded to the inevitable in our country years ago. The tragic drouth of the Thirties brought public recognition of wasteful misuse of private as well as public lands, and demonstrated a woeful lack of technical information on grass—the very foundation of the Live-

stock Industry. It's hard for me to understand today why an Agricultural College in a state with as much fine grassland as Kansas, once considered me qualified for a diploma in Animal Husbandry with only the most superficial knowledge of the principal natural resource from which I was expected to make a living. I suppose it was preoccupation with other problems which seemed more pressing that relegated research and instruction in range problems to a minor status until so recently.

Speaking as an ordinary stockman, I want to acknowledge the debt that the Livestock Industry owes to you range men and other specialists of the United States Department of Agriculture and the various State Colleges and Experiment Stations, many of whom are members of this organization. When you were finally given the opportunity and recognition you have always deserved, you developed and disseminated what amounts to a whole new science in range management in a very few short years. I think future generations will give you credit for the salvation of the Western Range.



AUSTRALIA HAS RANGE PROBLEMS TOO

It seems to me that the signs are ominous for the future of this big continent unless we substitute practical effort for conflicting argument. Especially does this apply to the cattle industry, the future welfare of which is dependent not on political theorising or grandiloquent but impractical plans, but on the concentrated application of practical knowledge of cattle and country plus scientific research into the problems by which the industry is handicapped.

By "Culkah"
The Pastoral Review and Graziers' Record
Australia