My Personal Experiences in Ranching for Profit and Conservation

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MY PERSONAL experiences in ranching for profit and conservation have been confined largely to the Quarter Circle U Ranch, in Southeastern Montana. The home ranch lies in the Tongue River Valley between Miles City, Montana, and Sheridan, Wyoming. The elevation is approximately 3,200 feet in the Valley and 4,300 feet on the divides. The annual precipitation is about 13 inches and the temperature varies from 110 degrees above to 50 degrees below zero. The ranch has a varied land pattern consisting of deeded land, state land, Section 15 Taylor grazing land, Indian land, and a national forest permit.

It is not my intention to be boastful of this ranching operation in describing my personal experiences and I certainly do not intend to tell others how to run their ranches. Varied types of ranches and ranges require varied types of management. The Quarter Circle U Ranch is very similar in most respects to many others in that area, except for one set of facts of which I am proud.

The ranch had its beginning in 1882, when my father, not too long from Boston, driving a freight wagon south from Miles City, saw a likely spot and decided to settle down on the site that is now and always has been the ranch headquarters. He started with a squatter's right and no capital. The present operation runs 2000 head of cattle on 70,000 acres no mortgage and some money in the bank. This has been accomplished without changing hands, without going broke, without striking oil, without marrying money, and without marketing any product but cattle. It has been built up solely by the use of its range grass.

The cattle are a breeding herd of good quality grade Herefords, and our normal operation is to sell past-yearling steers in October. Our bulls are turned on the range June 15, and the calves are branded at that time. Replacement heifers are not bred until two years old. Calves are fed hay and concentrates for about three months—January, February and March. The grown cattle mostly graze yearlong. We have approximately 250 acres under irrigation and put up about 600 tons of hay each year. If my memory serves me right, our range grass is now in better condition than it was 35 years ago.

The turning point in range improvement was the enactment of the Taylor Grazing law—changing open range from a dumping ground to a controlled operation, with an incentive to improve the
forage. Then followed proper fencing and development of stock water for better distribution of the livestock and more even utilization of the forage. I am of the opinion that the recent large increase in livestock numbers in the western states can be attributed largely to the stock water development program.

Attention was then given to a proper stocking rate. For profitable ranching I think it is a distinct advantage to have some knowledge of the principal forage plants and the approximate carrying capacity of each pasture. At the present high price of land and grass, it is necessary to stock a range at the maximum rate consistent with good range management; that is, at a rate that will not reduce the quality or quantity of the forage and yet will yield the maximum pounds of beef per acre. This maximum stocking rate can only be realized after necessary range conservation practices have been carried out.

One conservation practice that has been very successful on our ranch and in most of Montana is the seeding of abandoned dry land fields or barren flats to crested wheatgrass. Our fields of crested wheatgrass have produced many tons of hay that we carry over for use in emergencies.

There seems to be no limit to the amount of conservation work that can be done on a large ranch, especially water spreading and land leveling, but there is a limit to the conservation work a ranch can afford to do.

In our area, the principal grasses are western wheatgrass (Agropyron smithii), bluebunch wheatgrass (Agropyron spicatum), needle-and-thread (Stipa comata), blue grama (Bouteloua gracilis), sideoats grama (B. curtipendula), Junegrass (Koeleria cristata), plains bluegrass (Poa secunda), little bluestem (Andropogon scoparius), and at higher elevations Idaho fescue (Festuca idahoensis). The principal browses are winterfat (Erothia lanata), rabbitbrush (Chrysothamnus lanceolatus), greasewood (Sarcobatus vermiculatus) and several of the saltbushes (Atriplex spp.) and sages (Artemisia spp.).

Western wheat grass and needle-and-thread are by far the most important year-long grasses from the standpoint of both density and palatability. The least relished of the above grasses are bluebunch wheatgrass and little bluestem, but they play an important part in winter grazing when other grasses are covered with snow. Of course, at that point cattle will also be eating the tops of sagebrush, soapweed, willows and cottonwood branches. However, they do very well on this diet for a short time.

With only 13 inches of rainfall annually, our range is on the verge of being a dry, arid area. Opportune rains at critical times in April, May or June can make a wonderful grass crop. Failure of those rains to materialize results in a short grass year. When grasshoppers don’t come with the short grass, the cattle still do well in summer, but short grass years are not conducive to range conservation. With no protection, no litter, no mulch, more rain is required to make grass the following spring. Tall grass years are often not quality grass years and stock sometimes get thin with grass up to their bellies, but tall grass years are necessary for improving range condition. Years in which bluegrass and blue grama both head out are our big grass years.

Our overall carrying capacity is 35 acres per animal unit—2000 cattle on 70,000 acres—but this figure, of course, includes all feed produced and purchased. Consequently, the carrying capacity of the range land would be a figure somewhat higher than this.

I venture to make the statement that there is too much variance in seasonal growth of range forage to establish an economical average carrying capacity
for any range. The failure of one cloud to rain on a range at the critical time can mean the necessary adjustment of the annual carrying capacity by a considerable percentage. Therefore, it is important to have a herd of cattle that can be adjusted periodically to fit range conditions without sacrificing the breeding herd. As many of you know who have had to buy a breeding herd, the ability to retain one of your own raising, after years of careful culling and breeding, is an important factor in any ranching operation. Any time one is forced to reduce his herd, it is painful, but my experience is that the least painful way is to be on a yearling steer marketing basis. Thus, when shortage of feed forces a reduction, one can sell any percentage of the calf crop in addition to the yearling steers that conditions make necessary. This plan enables one to hold his breeding herd intact, and it does not take long to get back to a normal operation.

At this point, I might briefly review some of the practices and experiments that research and application have proven successful. Many ranchers are experimenting with cross-breeding to get extra size on their calves. In my area, it is hard for me to believe that you cannot achieve the same goal by careful breeding and culling of Hereford cattle. First of all, select bulls that will produce large uniform calves, then cull those cows with poor-type calves as they are the poor milkers and, finally, cull those cows that are out of condition when others on the same range are fat. At the same time, cull the heifer calves from these cows so that there is no danger of these undesirable characteristics being continued in the breeding herd.

In selecting heifers for replacement, select those that are growthy. A heifer’s first calf is usually indicative of her future calves.

The experiments that have been carried out of indexing bulls have proven that those bulls that are efficient gainers will transmit that quality to their calves. Many present-day ranchers in my country have not yet had their fair share of ranching experience. I am speaking of those that have been ranching only since 1937—15 years. Most anyone without previous experience in ranching, without previous experience with cattle and without previous experience with weather, could make a success of the ranching business during this period. It might be called the era of the cattle barons. When one bought land it went up—when one bought cattle they went up and in general, the weather cooperated. (Now you can even buy the weather.) There is rather definite indication the past few months that this easy life is over—that one will have to rely on his past experiences and manage carefully to continue to make a success in ranching. Some will not make the grade.

I would like to tell you of some experiences that tend to make one into a conservative in ranch management.

The summer of 1919 was very dry and grasshoppers were bad. Grass and water holes were low and cattle numbers were high. As a result, by early fall the cattle were thin and unthrifty. Early in November, it began to snow and on Thanksgiving Day it was 40 degrees below zero. Of course, everyone started gathering and the riders carried guns to shoot those cattle that could not come in under their own power. That was the only time in my experience that I have actually seen cattle die in their tracks. In December, we located some pasture near Colorado City, Texas, and shipped nearly a thousand head down there for the winter. We are sixty miles from the railroad so getting those thin cattle on the cars in that weather was no picnic. They did well in Texas and we shipped them back in the spring. Of those we kept home
nearly 50 percent winter-killed. It only cost us $15.00 a head to send those cattle to Texas and back, but we never got the $15,000.00 out of them.

In the spring of 1931, it did not rain; the grass did not green-up except in the swales and we could see early in the season that we would not be able to winter all of our cattle at home, so we bought some hay and pasture in the Big Horn Basin of Wyoming. My recollection is that we paid $8.00 a ton for the hay with the pasture and ranch facilities thrown in. We trailed about 800 head the 60 miles from our ranch to the railroad then had to trail them another 50 miles from the railroad to the ranch where they were to winter. They wintered well and we took them home again the next spring. Those cattle never paid us back for that trip either.

In 1934, we had a maximum of grasshoppers and cattle, and a minimum of grass. As a consequence, we had the Government cattle purchase program with which most everyone is familiar. We sold over 1000 head off of our range—not all were our cattle. In case you have forgotten the prices, top cows brought $22.00, top calves brought $8.00, with the smaller ones at $6.00—this was per head—not per 100 lbs. We thought we had made a shrewd deal when a priest from a Catholic Mission in Western Montana caught up with our herd one day and we sold him a carload of the top calves for $12.00 a head.

In 1936, we had drouth and grasshoppers again and the grasshoppers nearly starved. They finally had to resort to pine needles and the bark on fence posts. Whenever you laid down your hat or chaps, the grasshoppers would gather and start to eat.

In 1937, it rained a little and the ranching business started to pick up, but we were doomed for one more irritation before good times set in. In 1938, the Mormon crickets swarmed over our range and we had to build several miles of tin fence to keep them away from our buildings and garden.

I mention these experiences to remind you that ranching has not always been the glamorous, profitable enterprise that many people believe. It takes conservatism in ranching to weather the storms that I have hurriedly related to you. On one hand, one can count the ranches in any community that haven’t gone broke at one time or another without outside income. Some plungers have made a fortune, gone broke—then made a fortune again. Even now—1953—after 15 year of good prices, some ranchers are going broke.

In conclusion, I would like to say that if the experiences of our own ranching operation and my observation of other ranching operations have taught me anything it is to be conservative.

After we talked the bank out of enough money to get our cattle back home in the spring of 1932, we resolved never again to put a lot of expense into them to carry them over because usually that money is never recovered. When conditions force one into that kind of a situation, others are in a similar position, prices go down and the expense money is lost. We resolved that year to keep our cattle in balance with our feed supply.

It is often a mistake for ranchers to plunge themselves into debt by extensive purchase of machinery, for extensive ranch improvements, or for extensive land improvements. These things should be accumulated or accomplished gradually as money is available.

A good quality breeding herd, a sound range conservation program, a sound balance between livestock and feed and a sound financial policy, are the essentials of ranching for profit and conservation.