A History of the Rangelands of Western Canada

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Highlight

In western Canada, the grass-buffalo economy of the Indian was replaced by the wheat-cattle economy of the white man, and the Red River cart and boat brigades of the fur trade by the railways and highways of modern times. Ranching was part of the development but its heyday lasted only from about 1885 to 1905.

The first cattle came into western Canada in 1702, 267 years ago. They were brought in, with sheep and horses, pigs and poultry, through the fur trading posts then recently established on Hudson Bay. And so, before we can discuss the rangelands and domestic livestock, we should consider the fur trade and the buffalo.

The British began fur trade operations on the shores of Hudson Bay in the 1670's. In addition to trade goods, the supply ships brought out from the Orkney Islands, and occasionally from the Scandinavian countries, livestock and poultry, vegetable seeds and grain, which were kept at, or grown near, the posts. French explorers, notably La Verendrye and his sons, discovered the water route from Montreal to the prairies in 1732 and, by 1738, had established a number of fur trading posts in what is now southern Manitoba (Fig. 1).

For the next one hundred years the Hudson's Bay Company was content to sit on the shores of the Bay, a period that was called by a British Member of Parliament of the time, "the long sleep by the frozen sea." The French, in contrast, moved inland, taking the trade to the natives and, by the 1780's, were cutting seriously into the fur trade of the Hudson's Bay Company. A result was that the Company realized its mistake of remaining on the Arctic shore, moved inland also, and began to compete aggressively. By the 1790's the Hudson's Bay Company and the newly organized North West Company of Montreal were building posts side-by-side throughout the Saskatchewan and Athabasca countries. Edmonton, the capital of Alberta, was founded during this period—about 1794. By 1810 the competition throughout the northern prairies was bitter.

The struggle for control of the fur trade led to the development of agriculture along the Red River of present day Manitoba and North Dakota. In 1811 the Hudson's Bay Company granted a large tract of land to Thomas Douglas, Fifth Earl of Selkirk, who was a major shareholder in the company at the time. Selkirk wanted the land, which he called Assiniboia, for two reasons: First, he was anxious to resettle small farmers who had been forced off their lands in northern Scotland by the 'Clearances' and, second, he thought that the settlers would provide agricultural supplies and hence improve the position of the Hudson's Bay Company in its struggle with the North West Company. Also, the colony promised a steady and cheap supply of labor in the more distant future. A few colonists reached the Red River in 1812 and established the first permanent farms in western Canada.

Livestock were obtained as soon as possible. Generally, the quality was low, it was difficult to house and feed them properly, and a knowledge of good livestock husbandry was limited to only a few of the colonists. Cattle were most numerous and most important especially after 320 head were driven in from the Mississippi River valley in 1822 and 1823.

But even in 1812 the settlers had cattle on their minds. On the first trip southward from York Factory on Hudson Bay to the Red River, the settlers saw a yearling bull and a heifer at Oxford House, a trading post on the Hayes River, and purchased them for the colony. (Selkirk earlier had provided eight head of cattle at Stornoway, in the Hebrides but they had been left behind when the ship sailed.) The yearlings from Oxford House were brought along in the boats and took readily, to their new mode of travel. "We find the cattle easy to handle," wrote a settler, "They jump out and into the boats of their own accord." The two animals were named Adam and Eve, the settlers obviously hoping that they would multiply and thus provide the colony with ample milk and meat.

The next year—1813—a bull, a cow, and a heifer were purchased from the North West Company post near Brandon House and, with Adam and Eve and their calf, made a total of six cattle in the settlement. Buffalo calves were secured with a view to domesticating them and crossing them with the European bulls, but the calves died during the winter. Later in the year the North West Company bull became vicious and was slaughtered for meat. This was unfortunate because during the winter, Adam went through a hole in the ice in the river and was drowned. One bull calf was left to perpetuate the herd.

Early in the nineteenth century, then, there were cattle on most of the fur trading posts of the Canadian west, usually brought in as calves by boat. There were cattle at Dunvegan, in the Peace River country, by 1823, for example, and at Edmonton by about 1840. A precarious agriculture was estab-
lished in the Red River valley, destined to be the forerunner of waves of farming settlement, which started in 1871.

The plains were still primitive although the Indian and the fur trader had put them to use. The Plains tribes had created an economy and a civilization based upon the buffalo. They had done this by means of the horse, which was at home on the plains, and the buffalo skin tipi, which was a product of the herds. The way of life that the Plains Indians created was such that few men anywhere in the world had ever known more independence or a greater security.

To the fur traders, the plains were a source of provisions. And provision posts, which were also fur trading posts, lined the northern edge of the open plains from modern Winnipeg to Edmonton. To these posts were sent the dried meat and pemmican of the summer hunt, the fresh and frozen meat of the fall hunt (Fig. 2). Thus the winter collection of furs from throughout the northern forests depended primarily on the provisions afforded by the buffalo of the southern grasslands. Gradually the buffalo were reduced in numbers and in range until, in 1879, the last of the Canadian herd was driven by prairie fires into Montana and was hunted to near-extinction there.

With the passing of the buffalo, the Indians faced starvation. And, since their traditional food supply was gone, they turned to other animals. The pronghorned antelope was reduced to a fraction of its former numbers; the elk was killed or driven from the plains. Smaller game, and even gophers and other rodents, suffered in turn. By 1880 the Canadian prairie was virtually devoid of grazing animals and, because the late seventies and early eighties were much wetter than normal, the grass grew profusely. Even though prairie fires continued to remove the topgrowth in the fall, winter and early spring months, the prairies benefited from non-use and produced a cover of grass the like of which had never been seen before and which will never be seen again. Light use continued, in fact, until about 1919–1920 when the prairies were again fully stocked, this time with domestic livestock.

There is one other aspect of the Indian trade that should be mentioned in a discussion of the history of domestic livestock and the rangelands.

The Hudson’s Bay Company dominated the fur trade in western Canada for 200 years but never made any real effort to penetrate the southern plains. The penetration of that area was accomplished in the late sixties and early seventies by prospectors and traders from Fort Benton, Montana. Eventually these traders—among them J. J. “Johnny” Healy, Alfred B. Hamilton, J. B. “Waxey” Weatherwax, Dick Berry, and others—established about 26 trading posts in southern Alberta and southwestern Saskatchewan. Alcohol was their most profitable stock-in-trade and so the forts came to be known as “whiskey trading posts.” The most notorious of these was Fort Whoop-up, located at the junction of the St. Mary’s and Belly Rivers, near modern Lethbridge.

Fort Whoop-up and depravity are still synonymous in the minds of many southern Albertans. Diluted alcohol was traded at Whoop-up, murders did take place during drunken brawls, Indians were poisoned by laudanum in the alcohol mixture or were frozen to death while intoxicated. At the same time the fort became a political
issue since it was operated by Americans on newly-acquired Canadian territory. Also, the Hudson's Bay Company, which had traded in rum with the Indians intermittently for one hundred years, was particularly incensed at the loss in trade represented by Fort Whoop-up. Missionaries added their voices to the growing clamor for action by the Canadian government.

It might be noted in passing that there was much to consider on the positive side. Fort Whoop-up represented the beginnings of commerce in southern Alberta. From the late sixties until about 1885, the business life of the area moved in a north-south direction. Early Alberta ranch enterprises were financed by banks in Helena, goods came into the country by bull train from Fort Benton, even letters posted in the area bore a U.S. postage stamp (Fig. 3).

More important, the mere presence of Fort Whoop-up on Canadian territory had much to do with the formation of the North-West Mounted Police, now the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. A massacre of Indians by wolfers in the Cypress Hills in 1873 culminated a decade of lawlessness and forced the Canadian government to create a mounted police force to bring law and order to the West. This newly created force marched westward in 1874 and had as its primary objective the subjugation of Fort Whoop-up and the suppression of the whiskey trade (Fig. 4). Col. James F. Macleod, who led the police into southern Alberta, entered the fort on October 9, 1874, and unsuccessfully searched it for contraband whiskey. The whiskey trade, for all practical purposes, ended with that act.

The coming of the Mounted Police in 1874 meant that law and order preceded settlement in the Canadian West and thus that the region was to be spared the usual tragedies of the frontier. It meant, also, that many of the first ranchers were to be ex-members of the North-West Mounted Police, adventurous young men mostly from eastern Canada and the United Kingdom, a fact that was to have its impact on the range industry.

The situation, as it was in the late seventies, might be summed up in this way: The Mounted Police had arrived in 1874, bringing law and order; the Indians had signed Treaty No. 7 in 1877, which shoved them off onto reservations, thus making their humiliation complete and creating problems of alcoholism and unemployment that plague us today; the buffalo had vanished in 1879, indirectly leading to a market for beef and making grass available for domestic livestock; and, it was known that cattle could winter on the northern plains. Further, the take-over of the American West was complete, cattle were available, men of knowledge and experience were present south of the Line.

During 1876 and 1877 traders such as George Emerson and Tom Lynch trailed in horses and cattle from the south. These were sold at North-West Mounted Police posts and to a number of the '74 men who were preparing to leave the force and to take up ranching. Thus it was that the early Alberta ranch enterprises started around Pincher Creek, Fort Macleod, High River, and Calgary—all centers of police activity in those early days.

There were many difficulties during the first few years. The Indians were starving and, according to the ranchers, were running off and
pany did all it could to encourage the ranching industry. The railway main line alone, which merely skirted the ranching country, was started immediately. The branch lines opened more and more needed settlements and the company, mercifully, averaging fifteen to twenty head per twenty acres, still later to one head per thirty acres of lease.) The significant point was that the total number of livestock on each range was strictly limited. When the lease was stocked there were provisions whereby the lessee could purchase up to five percent of the area at two dollars per acre. (Again there was a change in regulations during the depression of the nineties and some ranch companies were able to buy out their holding at $1.25 per acre.) The whole system depended upon land surveys, which were started immediately.

With the introduction of the new lease regulations, the ranch company appeared on the scene. Men were attracted by the tales of profits to be made in the cattle business and by the opportunity to secure enormous amounts of land at slight cost. Local managers were generally practical stockmen from the United States but owners were from Eastern Canada or Europe, completely ignorant of western conditions. One of the most famous of those early ranches was the Cochrane Ranch Company, owned by Senator M. H. Cochrane of Hillhurst Farms, Compton, Quebec. This ranch, with its history of failure and tragedy, and of eventual success, was typical of many others of the period.

Senator Cochrane came west in 1881, bought a team and buckboard at Fort Benton, and headed north to the Alberta foothills. He chose an area at the Big Hill, about 20 miles west of Calgary, where the modern town of Cochrane now stands. In short order he leased 100,000 acres on the Bow River, purchased about 7,000 head of Montana cattle, and secured the release from the North-West Mounted Police of Major James Walker, whom he appointed manager.

The Cochrane cattle arrived in the fall in a drive that has become famous for its speed and cruelty. Howell Harris brought the cattle to the border where the herd was taken over by Frank Strong and 30 men from the I. G. Baker Company. The herd was pushed unmercifully, averaging fifteen to eighteen miles per day, and was herded so closely that animals had little opportunity to graze. One hundred and eighty miles along the trail, the cattle were herded across the Elbow River and were counted where Calgary's Palliser Hotel now stands. The tally, dated November 30, 1881, gives names of the Montana suppliers—J. Hickson, I. G. Baker, Harrison and Company, Mullholland and Baker, Poindexter and Orr—and the number purchased. The total was 6,799 head at a cost of $124,780.05, for an average of $18.35 each. According to the notebook in which the tally was recorded, the losses during the winter of 1881–82 were about 1,000 head. There seemed to have been about a 42 percent calf crop in the spring of 1882.

A second drive in 1882 ended in
being sold to the Mormon Church for $3,128,000. The luckless company had made one of the most profitable speculations in Alberta's history to that time.

Other ranches were formed during the early eighties, mainly by British interests although Belgian, Swiss, Scotch, Irish, Italian, and French moneyed classes were represented. The Oxley Ranch was a classic example of conflict between an absentee owner and a resident ranch manager. The Bar U, now owned by Allen Baker, was formed in 1882; the backers were Sir Hugh and Andrew Allen, of the Montreal-based Allen Steamship Lines. The Bar U cattle herd grew to 30,000 head; at one time 2,000 registered Percheron mares were run on Bar U range.

Other big ranches of the period included the Quorn, the 76, the Circle, Maunsell Bros., the Cypress Cattle Company, and the Walrond. The Walrond was taken over by a syndicate of ranchers a few years ago and is now operated as a grazing cooperative. In 1886 A. E. Cross, a veterinarian from Montreal, homesteaded a quarter section on Mosquito Creek and began to run horses, losing to wolves about 10 percent of his colts each year. The Cross homestead has grown into the A7 Ranch of today.

The Matador Land and Cattle Company should be mentioned although they didn't acquire their range on the South Saskatchewan River until around the turn of the century. The Matador was the only ranch company, organized in the seventies, that lasted until the 1950's and operated at a profit during much of its life. The home range was in Motley County, Texas; the Saskatchewan Division was used to summer steers before their sale on the Chicago market.

By 1896 the heydey of the big ranches was over; by 1905 a trickle of homesteaders had become a flood; the last decisive blow to the cattle barons was struck by the bad winter of 1906-07. But although the era of the big ranches was over, the take-over of the North American range was not. A large block of land, located south of Bassano and called the CPR Block, had been reserved by the railway company. It had been treated as open range, apparently, and supported a large number of cattle and horses. In 1929, because of changes in the tax status of the land, it was decided to open the CPR Block to homesteading. And so the last roundup of the open range was organized. The McKinnon wagon took part and Charlie and Don McKinnon, well-known Calgarians, rode in that roundup. When it ended, an era ended—an era that had begun in Texas at the end of the Civil War. Domestic livestock had rolled in a flood from the ranges of Texas to the Bow River of Alberta and beyond. Along its length, the ranching front had encountered the farming front which in the mean time had advanced from the east. The two groups held their relative positions for a short time only when increased pressure from homesteaders, breaking up of leases, and optimistic railway construction forced the rancher back to the position that he now occupies.

Today there are about 3 million head of beef cattle in Alberta, about 6 million in the three prairie provinces. About 50 percent are produced on farms of less than a section in size, only about 15 percent are produced on places of more than 1,600 acres in size. The resource that supports these animals includes 43.8 million acres of native range, 5.0 million acres of cultivated pastureland, and 5.2 million acres of hayland. About 12 percent of their grazing is obtained from crop residue and stubble fields. The range area is extending northward. The North Saskatchewan River was thought to be the northern limit of range cattle 30 years ago. Today there are herds far beyond it. Community and cooperative pastures have increased throughout the region and now comprise about 9 percent of the rangeland and support about 6 per-
The tundra supports far lower numbers of large grazers than other natural areas, averaging less than 100 lb per square mile. Forage quality of tundra plants is high because of rapid growth and wide variation in seasonal progression of growth. The native grazers, caribou and muskoxen, have evolved rapid growth rates and selectively feed on the highest quality forage available. Wild populations of caribou and muskoxen appear to offer the best potential for conversion of tundra vegetation into commodities utilizable by man.

The recent discovery of apparently large reserves of petroleum on the northern coast of Alaska has crystallized an already building interest in the North American arctic. A full-fledged rush of men and materials into the North is now underway and may far surpass in magnitude the rush of gold seekers to the Yukon and Alaska at the turn of the last century. The impact of this activity on the people and the economy of the Arctic has been much discussed in the news media and in the halls of government. Very little attention, however, has been given to the land and its vegetation, either from the standpoint of the possible harmful effects of uncontrolled mineral exploration and development, or the potential contribution that the tundra may make to the economy and welfare of the increasing human populations in the Arctic.

The arctic tundra is often referred to as the “barren-grounds” or the “arctic desert,” and in winter the bleak, windswept tundra landscape may take on the superficial appearance of a desert, barren of life. But the tundra is by no means lifeless. The artist-naturalist, Ernest Thompson Seton (1911), shortly after the turn of the century, coined the more descriptive term “arctic prairies” in his enthusiastic narrative of a canoe voyage into the barren-grounds northeast of Great Slave Lake. In summer, the tundra literally becomes quiescent during the long arctic winter, but virtually all of the bird life arrives after extended migrations from milder southern climes. While some mammals, such as the arctic ground squirrel (Citellus undulatus), like the insects, are dormant during the winter, most mammals of the tundra remain active throughout the winter and continue to eke out their existence under the harsh conditions that prevail. Lemmings (Lemmus sp. and Dicrostonyx sp.) and many other rodents avoid

References


