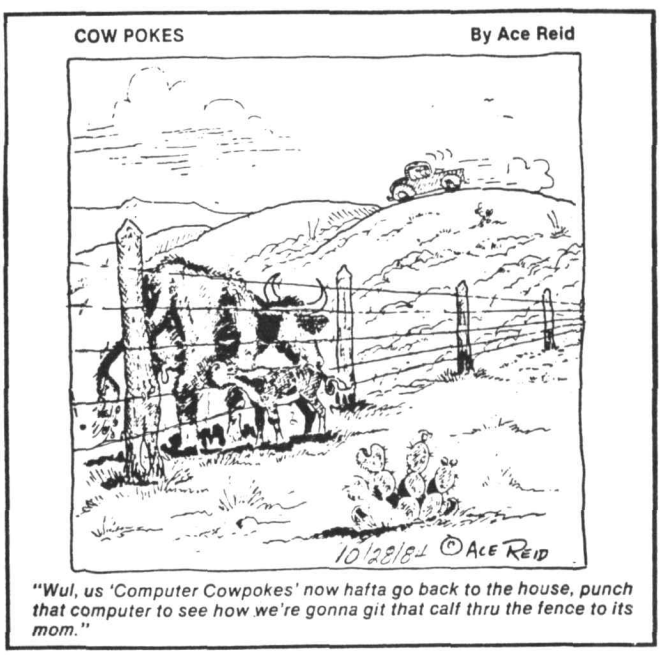
Successful Range Management—Horses, Computers, or Both?

Curt Bates and Floyd Reed

At this time in our Society when we need to counter some of the growing opposition to public land grazing, there's a trend developing which may prove contrary to this goal—a decrease in close working relationships between public land managers and livestock producers. More specifically, "Has traditional horse-back field work been replaced by pickups and computers?" This is presented as a light-hearted look at the matter, but it could become serious as we trade the horse for computers. The idea for this paper was prompted by several incidents. First, a statement made during a producer presentation at the 1987 SRM Convention in Boise, Idaho, which focused on the lack of field-going public range managers. The presenter, a rancher from southern Idaho, described a hypothetical bill the legislature was considering, which he said was aimed at helping the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management get back on their feet—by taking away all their pickups! This little story created a lot of laughter, because it was comical and well presented, but it struck home to some of us in the audience. This same problem has been referenced in previous *Rangelands* articles and discussed over many cups of coffee around the country. The same subject was presented in an Ace Reid Cowpoke cartoon. Many of Ace's cartoons have given us a humorous, but realistic, perspective on ranchers, rangemen, and ranges, and this one seemed to be tailor-made for the subject of this paper. Is it becoming a reality? If it is, are we moving in the right direction?

As we've going about our job of managing public rangelands over the past few years, it's been brought to our attention by many grazing permittees that some of them hadn't been in the field with the range manager in a long time—if ever! Most of them felt this was close to a travesty because their livelihood and protection of the range resource depended on a close working relationship with the public range manager. It didn't matter whether they spent time together on horse-back or on foot so long as they understood one another and could agree on how all interests were best served. Some of those permittees were so tickled to finally have a chance to show off their accomplishments, that they even shared their special plum preserves or home-made wine during the evening cow camp sessions.

This points out the need for range managers to take a look at this situation. Not to imply that home-made wine in cow camp and horseback trips are necessary for all public land range work; it's just our opinion that these methods have been so successful and now seem to be giving way to computer reports and impersonal letters. We're quick to acknowledge that a lot of good public land range work is still being done in many places; but on the other hand there are many cases where good field work is being traded for other things, which are important, but don't result in successes on the ground.



"Wul, us 'Computer Cowpokes' now hafta go back to the house, punch that computer to see how we're gonna git that calf thru the fence to its mom."

Since the very beginning of range management, the horse and close, on-the-ground work have been a part of the rangeman's image. The early day rancher on horseback working on the range with cattle has been recorded in every means possible, linking the horse and range managers in an everlasting way. The logo of the Society Range Management shows this without any apology in the Trail Boss. And, the early day public land range managers or "Forest Rangers", were also generally depicted as a man and horse protecting the public range lands. All

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Editor's Note: This paper was presented at the CELEBRATING RANGE MANAGEMENT SUCCESS Session, 42nd Annual Meeting of the Society for Range Management, Billings, Montana 19-24 Feb. 1989.

of this helps support the idea that successful range managers have relied on the horse and long hours on the range to accomplish their tasks for many years. Are we ready to disregard that success?

Early-day range managers were required to take entrance exams, which included a demonstrated ability to use and care for horses. The 1907 "Use Book" of the Forest Service contained direction which stated that a Forest Officer "must be able to take care of himself and his horse under very changing conditions," and "they must possess a good working knowledge of the livestock industry," and "must be able to ride all day, pack, and furnish feed for their own horse." Those requirements would eliminate a lot of today's public land range managers and many public land officials don't place any value on these skills. Of course, things have changed a lot since 1907, but the use of a horse back then implied a lot of time on the ground. Has that need changed? In many places professional degree and high tech skills seem to be more important, and therefore these skills are fast going by the wayside.

A strong factor in past relationships between ranchers and range managers was the fact that the Ranger or range manager was out on the ground, working with local people and local problems. The fact that he was on horseback a lot of the time meant that he had first-hand knowledge about the country and conditions. The rancher knew that and respected him for it, which in turn developed into good working relationships. The reason for many of today's appeals and conflicts is probably due to the fact that good relationships have been replaced with impersonal letters.

C.M. Russell, the great western painter, said, "You can see what man made from the seat of an automobile, but the only way to see what God made is from the back of a horse." Charlie must have had range managers in mind when he made this statement, because there's no doubt that you just can't do justice to a range inspection from a pickup. Sometimes those few extra steps, so easy on horseback and often avoided on foot or in a pick-up, may make a tremendous difference in the outcome of a range inspection. Not to say that some don't do it anyway, but indications are strong that office time is taking precedent over field time in many cases.

We're not trying to convince the reader that all range people should work from horseback (although that's not a bad idea); our purpose is to focus attention on the trend away from adequate field time, which seems to be coincidental with the de-emphasis of horse use. Plus, it just doesn't seem right to see a range manager with spurs and boots sitting behind a computer rather than on a horse, so we believe it should be talked about, at least. As long as ranchers, such as the one from Idaho that prompted this paper, continue to use horses, there will continue to be a need for public range managers to be competent on horses. Some of the dedicated foot backers and bicyclers may not agree, but as far as the authors are concerned, there's no justice in walking somewhere you could just as well ride a horse to. There are too many cases where it doesn't get done by any means and this is our real concern. So, amen to Russell's famous comment, and for those of us that think there is still a place for horses and close permittee contacts in the modern range world, let's maintain the utility of horseback work and promote the art of "spittin' and whittlin'."

We acknowledge that the pickup and computer have their places in modern range management, and both have improved some aspects of the job; but the mind-set that uses these tools solely and ignores the success of past methods overlooks some important facts. As professionals we must be sure that all the recent data gathering will produce results _ _ on the ground, not just more printouts. Saddle-time (or foot-time) helps assure this. We also acknowledge some other things about pickups and computers, such as they won't buck you off, don't step on your feet, they're easier to shoe and maybe some other things, too. But so what? When was the last time you saw a movie or read a book about the romance of a computer and its operator, or the best way to break a pickup to lead. In any case, we've presented some points about successful methods of the past that tend to be over-looked in today's routine, technological articles. We realize that many readers will not agree with our observations; but we haven't agreed with all of theirs either. Ours are not stated to offend or criticize, but only to balance the perspective. And, we're not trying to prove anything either, because there's on old range saying that says "if you have to prove you're right, you're probably wrong!"

We believe there is still a place for traditional values *and* traditional methods, and for the future of public land grazing, neither should be traded off completely. We enthusiastically support the advancement of technology in our field. We must have, and utilize the best there is, but let's not forget some of the methods that brought us this far. Our final thoughts are summed up in the following poem:

Computerized Cowpokes

There was a time not too long ago,
When cowpokes and range cons were in the know,
And used horses and mules just like they should,
Then came pickups and technology to make life good.

And now, along comes another device,
And, we all agree that gadgets are nice,
But the ones they call computers,
Should be left to scientists and 3-piece suiters.

Because, can you imagine the blunder
When the range con with all his plunder,
Goes out with his computer to fix the fences
And move the cows under such pretenses?

Can the winkin, blinkin green screen pull cows from the mire,
Or pull staples and stretch the wire?
Can proper use be measured in a "meg-a-bite"?
And can "floppy discs" replace dally's tight?

No, friends not for a while at least,
In spite of the popularity of the beast,
The old way is safe from all this nonsense
Because the computer in all its glory can't replace the horse and common sense.

Or can it?

Cattle-free by '93—A Viewpoint

E. William Anderson

"Cattle-free by '93" is a slogan being heard frequently enough in resource management circles to warrant careful consideration of its implications. It refers to a movement that has existed for some time which has a goal to eliminate all livestock grazing from public lands.

As desirable as it may appear to remove all livestock grazing from public lands as the remedy for solving both real and perceived resource problems, which certainly do exist, a more factual, in-depth, and practical solution is needed. People who advocate this slogan's concept need to be cautioned as to the serious second- and third-order consequences that very likely will take place—in addition to local, county, and state economic impacts—if public-land livestock grazing is terminated. The results could self-destruct the very objectives they wish to attain, which include restored riparian areas and improved watershed quality, wildlife and fish habitat, and recreational opportunities.

According to the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife, about 50% of eastern Oregon's critical deer and elk winter range exists on private lands. A large proportion of eastern Oregon's riparian areas, including many of the most important ones, have been in private ownership since the homestead era, when they were often the basis for filing homestead claims. Consider the potential second- and third-order consequences that will occur if livestock grazing is eliminated on public lands:

- Critical wildlife winter range usually coincides with spring turn-out range for livestock. Suitable and adequate turn-out range is the most limiting forage-related factor on many ranching enterprises, including those currently involving public rangelands. Without public-range grazing, these ranches will be faced with limited and inflexible management options which often mandates excessive utilization, especially of early-grazed units. The resulting ecological deterioration of these critical winter ranges on private lands appears contrary to the apparent objectives of the slogan's proponents. The high proportion of critical wildlife winter range on private lands in eastern Oregon that would be affected adversely should be sufficient to cause serious reconsideration among those who are genuinely concerned with the wildlife winter-range problem.

There is a solution: increase flexibility of livestock management options so as to provide the opportunity to install practices that will improve quality and quantity of both private and public spring turn-out range. Two proven practices should be considered. First, practice moderate utilization which leaves sufficient stubble on forage plants to provide for the plant's growth requirements as well as for erosion control, watershed improvement, and wildlife habitat. Second, with management flexibility it is possible to top-off a turn-out unit, and move the livestock to another unit about mid-growing season, which allows grazed plants to produce regrowth before the end of the growing season. This regrowth is higher quality autumn-winter forage than that from ungrazed plants. This practice also contributes to improved plant vigor—more production.

- In respect to riparian restoration, removal of livestock grazing from public lands will certainly concentrate livestock grazing on private lands, including private riparian areas, thereby causing limited and inflexible management options. The result will circumvent the truly great need to restore riparian areas, no matter where they occur, for the benefit of wildlife habitat, fisheries, water quality, livestock, and other downstream benefits. In view of the high proportion of riparian areas on private lands, those who genuinely want to help restore all riparian areas should seriously rethink the approach proposed by this slogan.

The solution is to increase flexibility of livestock management options so that seasonal rotation of grazing and the use of specially created riparian units are practical options.

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