

Winter of 1886-87: The Death Knell of Open Range

John E. Mitchell and Richard H. Hart

Mother nature is a gorgeous lady—she has beauty, patience, and a great ability to forgive. But when she is pressed too far her anger is awesome to behold.

This story is a true account of what can happen when man simply goes too far in his use or abuse of our most precious renewable resource—the gentle giant, the rangelands.

If you are young or lucky enough to have not had the misfortune of experiencing nature's wrath, read this paper carefully. There is much to learn from past mistakes as we plan for the future. It teaches you to take special care of the land, have a good reserve of basic supplies like hay, and never over extend beyond your means.

Disasters like this could happen again in many farms, perhaps tomorrow or, even worse, maybe it's starting right now.

Stop, look around. Are you creating a disaster? It's never too late to right a wrong.—Peter V. Jackson

*I may not see a hundred
Before I see the Styx,
But, coal or ember, I'll remember
Eighteen eighty six.
The stiff heaps in the coulee,
The dead eyes in the camp,
And the wind about, blowing fortunes out,
Like a woman blows out a lamp.*

—Old cowboy song

The era of the great western cattlemen began rather insignificantly before the Civil War. By 1885, the range livestock

industry had reached heights unforetold in the annals of history. Involved were stockmen controlling huge areas of open rangeland, owning herds numbering in the tens of thousands, and capitalized by millions of dollars. Twenty years later, however, this extraordinary era had all but ended.

Events and conditions causing the decline and eventual extinction of the open range cattlemen can be tied to factors both outside his control and within it. Perhaps John Clay described the time most fittingly when he attributed their downfall to the confluence of "three great streams of ill luck, mismanagement, and greed."¹ Nonetheless, by the end of the 19th Century range management had begun to become a part of western ranching operations, and the days of the open range were being relegated to pages of history. The winter of 1886-87 provided the pivot point of a way of life never to be seen again. The conditions that came together 100 years ago to precipitate such a calamitous event, however, are still with us; these are the vicissitudes of bad weather and low livestock prices.

The First Cattlemen

Thirty years after the Louisiana Purchase, the American frontier had pushed westward up the lower Missouri River to the town of Independence. Here it was to pause for at least two decades while civilization filled in behind. The primary

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¹Clay, John. 1962. *My life on the range*. New edition. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.



Map of the Great Plains during the 1870s and 1880s.

reason for such a delay could be seen in reports from travelers who had ventured farther west. Lewis and Clark, the Astorians, and the expedition of Major Steven Long described the Great Plains as a frightful wasteland, suitable only for Indians and buffalo.

Gradually, the Great Plains became traversed by more and more emigrants. Then, in 1848 came the magic word that turned the trickle into a flood—gold! The discovery of a few nuggets in a California millrace was destined to crowd the Oregon and California trails with an army of adventurers, each seeking the easy fortune promised in stories from the west.

When overland travelers departed Missouri and Iowa for the west coast, their mindset was one of moving through a vast "desert" stretching on every side to the far horizon. Only the small garrisons at trading posts strung along the way served to dispel such illusions. It was along this trail system that the cattle business in the High Plains began.

The trading posts, which had languished following the fur trading boom,² quickly learned that money could be made from the emigrants trekking west. Three new activities arose along the trail, each actually a part of the business of transportation rather than supply. These were the operation of river crossings, the sale of hay, and the exchanging of fresh for worn-out work cattle. This demand for fresh stock induced many traders to enter the cattle business. In 1858, the discovery of gold in the Rocky Mountains added greatly to the demand for cattle; a market for meat was now established that augmented that for work animals. Thus, by the late 1860s, there existed herds of considerable size along the High Plains and in the adjacent mountain valleys. However, it was the penetration of tracks of the Union Pacific into this country that precipitated the cattle empire.

By 1867 the Union Pacific had entered Wyoming, and soon after, the first stock train bound for Chicago signaled the fact that the utilization of the northern and central ranges had begun in earnest. Therefore, it is not surprising that the same year marked the beginning of major cattle trailing northward out of Texas.

Because of its geographic position, Colorado first felt the impact of the Texas influx. By 1869 a million cattle and twice as many sheep were reported within its territorial borders. Two years later, significant numbers of Texas cattle had been pushed into the northern Plains, primarily along the North Platte and its tributaries. Montana rangeland became fully stocked more slowly because of the lack of railheads and the so-called Indian barrier; that is, lands occupied by tribes such as the Blackfeet, the Crow, and the Sioux.

As early ranchers occupied lands adjoining "empty" Indian country, they became increasingly aware of how restricted they were. Nothing pervades western history more frequently than the recurring demands from territorial citizens for reductions of Indian lands. Old-time cowboy E.C. "Teddy Blue" Abbott recollected, "They can't show a place in history where the Indians ever broke a treaty. The white men always broke them because they always made a treaty they ... knew they couldn't keep."³ This painful period came to a head with

the discovery of gold in the Black Hills in 1874, followed by Custer's defeat along the Little Big Horn on June 25, 1876. In 1881, the Northern Pacific reached the lower Yellowstone at about the same time as 1,600 Sioux were being loaded on steamers at Miles City for the trip to a reservation in North Dakota. The last obstacles to the cattle boom in the northern Plains had been eliminated.

The Cattle Boom

The 1880s marked the economic peak of the open-range livestock industry. Following the depression of the previous decade, the time was ripe for investment. Eastern publications were replete with articles describing how vast profits could be made on the range. Readers were told that becoming wealthy required only a minimum investment and a few years time, no risks involved. In *The Beef Bonanza*, Brisbin wrote, "In the West...the cattle run at large all winter—the natural grasses curing on the ground and keeping the stock fat even in January, February, and March. The beef business cannot be overdone. I have no doubt but a company properly managed would declare an annual dividend of at least 25 percent."⁴ Because of its vast empire, Great Britain was the financial center of the world and, hence, had huge sums of available capital which it freely disbursed through large cattle companies.⁵

Between 1880 and 1885, the demand for stockers on the northern ranges greatly outstripped the supply. Longhorns from Texas could not begin to meet orders for them, and eastern stock, commonly called "pilgrims" by cowboys, began to be shipped west. During this period it is possible that as many cattle were shipped west as east.

Introducing eastern breeds into the High Plains drastically increased the risks involved in livestock operations there. They were much more valuable than longhorns; they were less suited to withstand the extreme weather conditions; and they carried the risk of introducing new diseases, especially pleuro-pneumonia.

To investors, however, the opportunity for making a fortune completely overwhelmed any thoughts of risk. Montana growers reaped a profit of from 25% to 40% for their investors during 1882. Given such news, eastern capital literally flooded the region. Cattlemen who had kept records on a shingle suddenly found themselves responsible for hundreds of thousands of dollars coming from eastern and European corporations whose directors relied totally upon their judgment. The notorious "book count" was little improvement over a shingle. Instead of counting all cattle on the range, an owner or prospective buyer checked the books to see how many calves had been branded, then multiplied by five (or four if he was a cautious man) to arrive at an estimate of the whole herd. Liberal allowances were made for "natural increase" while death losses were given but very small allowances. John Clay commented, "It is safe to say that in many cases not half the number of cattle represented on the books were in actual existence."⁶

²The demand for beaver pelts, used primarily in making men's hats, had ended suddenly in the 1830s following the introduction of silk hats by Paris fashion designers.

³Abbott, E.C., and Helena Huntington Smith. 1955. We pointed them north. New edition. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman. 247p.

⁴Brisbin, Gen. James S. 1881. *The beef bonanza; or, how to get rich on the Plains*. J.B. Lippincott, Philadelphia.

⁵Atherton, Lewis. 1961. *The cattle kings*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington. 308p.

⁶Clay, op. cit.

Cattle companies multiplied; for example, in 1883 companies worth more than \$12 million incorporated within the territory of Wyoming (Table 1). The Swan Land and Cattle Company, itself, came in with \$3 million to purchase 500,000 acres near Cheyenne. (Note: James A. Michener had this outfit in mind when he devised attributes of the fictional Venneford Ranch in his historical novel *Centennial*, although its location more closely coincided with the old Warren Livestock Company.⁷)

Table 1. Numbers of cattle companies incorporating in three Plains states during 1881-1890.¹

Year	Colorado	Wyoming	Montana
1881	4	9	1
1882	23	7	3
1883	29	24	6
1884	58	24	17
1885	43	23	15
1886	25 ²	15	27
1887	17	9	7
1888	9	5	2
1889	14	6	3
1890	11	5	6

¹Taken from: Frink, Maurice, W. Turrentine Jackson and Agnes Wright Spring. 1956. *When grass was King*. University of Colorado Press, Boulder. 465p.

²The southern Plains suffered a worse winter in 1885-86 than in 1886-87.

In this period the domination of "cattle kings" reached a high water mark in states and territories throughout the Great Plains. T.A. Larson⁸ noted that the term was first used in the 1870s to recognize the most successful ranch owners. By the next decade, however, "cattle king" took on a derogatory connotation, especially in the eastern and European press.

Under the conditions described above, rangelands from Montana to Colorado quickly became overstocked. This increased costs as some stockmen began to buy more land and build fences to protect their own investments. Less solvent operators, who could not afford new investments, moved their herds into marginal or unsuitable areas that had not been grazed. And, so, the land was filled entirely with cattle.

Blizzards and Low Prices

The boom of the early 1880s showed few signs of an impending disaster. Although the winter of 1880-81 was severe, causing many cattle losses, most operators had not yet entered the business, and those who were there probably became forgetful during the mild years that followed. In the southern Plains, however, the winter of 1885-86 was worse than that five years before when a terrible blizzard struck Kansas and Oklahoma. Frank Dobie, in *The Longhorns*, chronicled the losses of tens of thousands of cattle along the Canadian River, and reported the finding of stock in Texas the following spring up to 500 miles from their home range.

By 1886, a general state of anxiety had set in throughout the High Plains, spawned primarily by a catastrophic crash in

the cattle market the previous year.⁹ Prices had tumbled to less than two cents per pound at Chicago in October 1885. In a prophetic statement, the August 26, 1886, issue of *Rocky Mountain Husbandman* editorialized, "Beef is very, very low, and prices are tending downward, while the market continues to grow weaker every day... But for all that, it would be better to sell at a low figure than to endanger the whole herd by having the range overstocked."

Unfortunately, the open-range stockman had few options for protection. Some Montana herds were driven into Alberta where grazing leases were still available. Other smaller groups were moved onto farmland where forage could be obtained. These departures had no real effect on the overall stocking rate across the range, however.

The spring and summer of 1886 were hot and dry, adding to the uneasiness already permeating the region. With the overstocked range, grass was quickly over-utilized. By the end of July, the ranges of eastern Montana and Wyoming had become essentially devoid of both feed and water. Creeks and water holes always considered to be permanent had completely dried up. On September 11, 1886, the *Great Falls Tribune* reported that only two inches of rain had fallen during the year, and, ominously, noted, "Much depends upon the coming winter." The livestock were in an extremely weakened condition as late fall approached.

Although some old-timers predicted an open winter, others pointed to different signs. For example, Granville Stuart noted in his journal, that on his ranch southeast of Great Falls, migrating birds had started south early. For the first time, "white arctic owls came on the range and into the Judith Basin. The old Indians pointed to them and drawing their blankets more closely about them, gave a shrug and 'Ugh! Heap Cold!' expressive of some terrible experience in the long past that still lingered in their memory."¹⁰

Those writing about the winter of 1886-87 have differed on the timing of individual storms, but all agree that they were very numerous and ferocious. On November 16-18, an arctic storm covered the entire High Plains. Central Montana suffered the brunt of the storm, where six inches of snow quickly drifted before the subzero winds. After this storm came several days of drizzle, which partially melted the snow. This slush then froze into an impermeable crust, making it impossible for the cattle to feed.

A second blizzard came out of Canada in mid-December. The Missouri River had completely frozen over by Christmas, and the temperature dropped to -37° at Fort Assiniboine near the present town of Havre, Montana. The cold temperatures were unabated during January, 1887, except for a brief chinook early in the month which again crusted the melted snow to a hard sheet of ice. Fort Keough (by Miles City)

⁹Generally speaking, cattle prices rose significantly between 1879 and 1882, before slumping somewhat in the Fall of 1883. The following year, 1884, marked the last profitable market for cattle during the open-range era. According to records of the Swan Land and Cattle Co., the average price for all animals sold, from fat steers to old bulls, dropped from \$40.67 per animal in 1884 to \$33.80 in 1885 and to about \$26.00 in 1886 and 1887. Shipping costs from Wyoming to Chicago commonly exceeded \$130 per railroad car (about \$10-\$12 per head) during this period, which cut the net price received by one-half during these last two years.

¹⁰Phillips, Paul C. 1957. Forty years on the frontier as seen in the journals and reminiscences of Granville Stuart, gold-miner, trader, merchant, rancher and politician. Vol. II. The Arthur H. Clark Co., Glendale, Calif. 265p.

⁷Personal communication.

⁸Larson, T.A. 1965. *History of Wyoming*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln. 619p.



"Hard Winter" by W.H.D. Koerner (1878-1938). This painting is a part of the W.H.D. Koerner Studio in the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, WY. (Copyright Ruth Koerner Oliver, to whom the authors are grateful.)

recorded a temperature of -60° on January 14th. The *Laramie Daily Boomerang* of February 10, 1887, reported, "The snow on the Lost Soldier division of the Lander and Rawlins stage route is four feet deep, and frozen so hard that the stages drive over it like a turnpike."

Perhaps Granville Stuart's journal best chronicled the devastating effects that the blizzard of January 28-February 4, 1887 had on the cattle. "Conditions were so changed from what they were in 1880-81. The thick brush and tall rye-grass along the streams that afforded them excellent shelter at that time was now all fenced in and the poor animals drifted against those fences and perished....Our herd...were all northern grown range stock and occupied the best range in the northwest. We kept plenty of men on the range to look after them as best they could... The herd could be said to be a favored one, yet we lost fifty percent of them in this storm."¹¹

"Teddy Blue" Abbott wrote, "The cowpunchers worked like slaves...no one knows how they worked but themselves. Think of riding all day in a blinding snowstorm, the temperature fifty and sixty below zero, and no dinner. You'd get one bunch of cattle up the hill (away from the airholes in the Missouri River ice) and another one would be coming down

behind you...The horses' feet were cut and bleeding from the heavy crust, and the cattle had the hair and hide wore off their legs to the knees and hocks. It was surely hell to see big four-year-old steers just able to stagger along. It was the same all over Wyoming, Montana, Colorado, western Nebraska, and western Kansas."¹²

With a likely wind chill index hovering around -80° C, stockmen were forced to keep to their houses for weeks as this terrible blizzard decimated the livestock. Unacclimated "pilgrims" huddled in the draws or piled up against downwind fences to die.

It was impossible to tell how bad the losses were on the northern Plains when the storms ended. At first, some who should have known better made light of possible losses. Luke Murrin, tending bar at the Cheyenne Club, needled his clients with, "Cheer up, boys. The books won't freeze!"¹³ The *Cheyenne Weekly Leader* of February 10, 1887, chirped, "The range cattle business in Wyoming has suffered no unusual loss during the present season. Should the spring be as favorable as the winter has been, the season will close with a remarkably small loss."

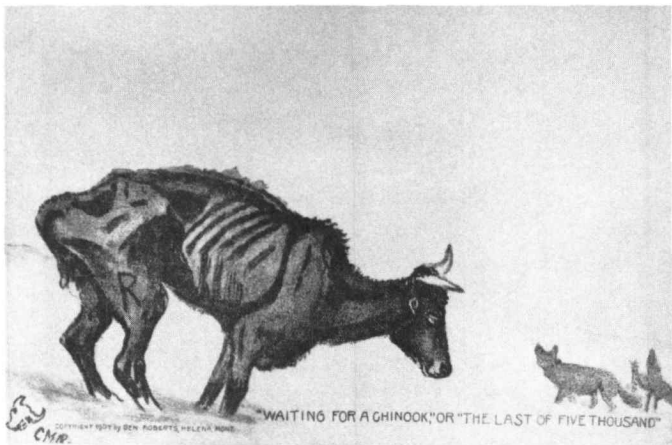
Those out on the range had other ideas. Abbot estimated

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Abbott and Smith, op. cit.

¹³Smith, Helena Huntington. 1966. *The war on Powder River*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln.

that at least 60% of all cattle within the region had died by mid-March 1887.¹⁴ T.A. Larson suggested a smaller death rate of 30% to 40%.¹⁵ Losses among new arrived stock were put at a staggering 90%! As Granville Stuart assessed it, "This was the death knell to the range cattle business on anything like the scale it had been run before."¹⁶



Charles M. Russell's painting of "Waiting for a chinook—Last of the 5000."

Cowboy artist Charles M. Russell portrayed the story most eloquently in his watercolor sketch entitled, "Waiting for a chinook—The last of 5,000". Charlie worked for two stockmen living in Helena who ran some 5,000 head in the Judith Basin. Their foreman, Jesse Phelps, also operated his own small ranch, the OH. Russell was at the OH later that winter when one of the owners, L.E. Kaufman, wrote Phelps inquiring about the condition of their herd. To help show how bad things were, Charlie painted this sketch on a piece of pasteboard to go with the letter Phelps was to write. Upon seeing the painting, Phelps remarked, "Hell, Louie don't need a letter."¹⁷ When Kaufman received it, he promptly went out and got drunk.

In spring, when cattlemen were finally able to ride out to assess the damage, a dreadful sight awaited them. Dead animals were piled in coulees, along streams, and against fences. The live animals amounted to little more than skeletons; most were in such a weakened condition that they could move only with great difficulty. Such carnage aroused a sense of disgust among many of these men. Years later, Granville Stuart wrote in his journal, "A business that had been fascinating to me before, suddenly became distasteful. I wanted no more of it. I never wanted to own again an animal that I could not feed and shelter."¹⁸ The *Cheyenne Daily Sun*, representing one of the strongest cattle-oriented towns in the High Plains, was moved to editorialize on December 8, 1887, "A man who turns out a lot of cattle on a barren plain without making provision for feeding them will not only suffer a financial loss but also the loss of the respect of the community in which he lives."

Perhaps justly, the biggest winners during the boom years became the ones who lost the most following the winter of 1886-87. Large corporations which had purchased land and/or cattle using borrowed money at high interest rates were gone almost immediately. The Swan Land and Cattle Company, for example, went into receivership in May, 1887. As a result, thousands of head were sold even though prices sank to all-time lows at the Chicago market. By fall, 1887, some ranges contained no livestock at all.

As so often happens in nature, the times following such a bleak period were glorious indeed! The heavy snowpack, responsible for the deaths of so many cattle, paradoxically became the source of sufficient soil moisture to produce excellent stands of grass for those animals that survived. The following year, 1888, was also favorable. Among some stockmen, then, there emerged an optimistic hope that their way of life had suffered only a passing defeat. John Clay took comfort from the fact that "we were still alive...a great many of our people (the cattlemen) had courage and, better still, they had lots of range."¹⁹

Nonetheless, the old open-range livestock industry as it was known was over. Stockmen were now aware of the tremendous risks associated with placing cattle on the plains without the benefit of reserve feed and shelter. Along with this awareness of risk came a realization of the high costs involved in providing these necessities. Just as importantly, the sources of outside investment, especially from the east and the British Isles, all but dried up. A new era was about to begin.

Introduction of Range Management

Although the events described above had decimated the cattle herds of the Northern Plains, the rangeland still remained, awaiting use by a new generation of ranchers. These men and women would learn that the livestock business requires a stewardship of both the animals and the land, that is, range management. Of immediate consequence was the realization that an assured source of winter feed was necessary for all livestock operations' survival on the High Plains. As a result, the amount of hayland in Montana and Wyoming more than quintupled between 1880 and 1890, according to census figures.

Table 2. Beef cattle and sheep numbers (thousands) in Montana and Wyoming during 1880, 1890, and 1900, as reported in the Census of 1910.

Year	Montana		Wyoming	
	Cattle	Sheep	Cattle	Sheep
1880	417	279	517	450
1890	1,418	2,353	922	712
1900	735	4,215	542	3,327

Initially, it was sufficient to merely fence off haylands;²⁰ however, as time went by, people began to research ways to produce bigger and better crops of hay. The *Northwestern Livestock Journal* of March, 1887, reported on the introduction of improved grasses onto hayland belonging to several

¹⁴Abbott and Smith, op. cit.

¹⁵Larson, op. cit.

¹⁶Phillips, op. cit.

¹⁷McDowell, Bart. 1986. C.M. Russell: cowboy artist. *National Geographic* 169(1):60-95.

¹⁸Phillips, op. cit.

¹⁹Clay, op. cit.

²⁰Ruth Koerner Oliver (see Fig. 2) recalls a common phrase of farewell among Montana ranchers during the 1920's: "Hope you winter well and have a stack to go!" (Personal communication)

ranches along Wyoming's Powder River, for example.

Some stockmen diversified rangeland use by grazing sheep instead of cattle. By 1900, the number of sheep had greatly surpassed cattle populations on the northern Plains (Table 2).

Finally, advances in range management, then called plant

and animal husbandry, followed the creation of land grant universities throughout the West. At times progress was slow or setbacks, such as the introduction of undesirable annuals and noxious weeds from foreign countries, would occur. Nonetheless, the range livestock business has come a long way since that calamitous winter of one hundred years ago.

Joe Gilchrist Remembers Ranching 60 Years Ago in Western Canada's "Short-grass Country"

Sherm Ewing

The early morning sun shines through broken clouds and brightens the hill tops; in the valley, smoke curls up and the smell of bacon fills the air. Scattered around the meadow—still soggy from yesterday's hail storm—tents and trailers stir with life as 200 campers begin rolling out for the final day of the 1986 International Mountain Section summer tour. Ed Nelson, looking up from an enormous bowl of pancake batter, notices a car fish-tailing down the steep trail into the campground.

"Here come Joe and Muriel," says Ed.

"Yep; it must be morning," says Dan McKinnon, as he dumps a can of coffee into a large pot. "It don't take those Gilchris long to spend the night."

As the old folks walk across the meadow from their car, son Tom and his wife Lois emerge damp and shivering from their old, patched, straight-walled roundup tent. Grandsons Keith and Neal—twin teenagers—groan comfortably in their yellow nylon, back-packer special, thinking of breakfast. Three generations of Gilchris aren't that unusual on IMS campouts; other families have attended for decades. Often the older generations elects to "camp" at a motel in the nearest town as Joe and Muriel have done.

Joe, watching family and friends crawl from tents to form a breakfast line, says: "It took me 40 years to get to where I don't HAVE to sleep on the ground."

Joe Gilchrist joined the American Society of Range Management—now SRM—in the early 1950s. Years earlier—before our Society was born—he and his brothers Rube, Chay, and Sandy sold out their Gilchrist Brothers ranching operation built from original homesteads near Maple Creek, Saskatchewan, over a period of 30 years... years that included

the terrible drouths and tough winters of the late 'teens, and the tragic decade of the "Dirty Thirties". Born on the second day of the century, by 1914 Joe had joined his older brothers as a full working partner in a ranching enterprise that by 1945 included 7 well-equipped, feed-producing, deeded ranches, and hundreds of thousands of acres of "crown" grazing lease just north of the International Boundary.

What we now call "open range" was certainly a thing of the past: the Border was fenced, the railroads were fenced, some areas of cropland were fenced; but in the short-grass country of western Canada, pastures were still very, very large. Gilchrist Brothers ran their cattle on range that stretched from White Mud or Frenchman Creek, south of the Cypress Hills in southwest Saskatchewan, to Deer Creek, north of the Sweetgrass Hills in southeast Alberta.

I asked Dr. Alex Johnston, Historian—Range Specialist at CDA Research Station, Lethbridge, for 40 years—to describe the area we know in Canada as the "short-grass country."

"It's classed as mixed prairie," he said. "The term 'short-grass country' is pretty much a misnomer. Dominance of real short-grasses such as blue grama, in that area, is pretty much the result of severe overgrazing."

"What these environmentalists can't get through their thick skulls," Johnston continued, "is that severe overgrazing is what caused the short-grass name and reputation. And when they see the large grasses come in, they think, 'Oh, geez, these ranchers don't know what they're doin.'"

"The grasses that dominate, generally speaking, across that whole vast tract, are *Stipa comata*—spear grass, needle-and-thread—june grass, Sandberg's bluegrass, and blue grama. In certain areas, with heavier soils, the wheatgrasses would be fairly important—mostly western wheatgrass, *Agropyron smithii*, and that sort of thing, you know."

"Most of the soil is glaciated, but a long time ago... not in the more recent glaciations. It's like the Montana situation:

Editor's Note: This article shows that the early ranching days were not all the fun that is shown on TV and the movies. These thoughts and recollections of our past should never be forgotten. They form the basis of our present ranching industry. Without people such as Joe Gilchrist, the 'West' would not have been settled.