

# Historical Livestock Grazing Perspective

James A. Little

I AM A THIRD generation rancher involved in a family operation that currently runs cattle on mixed ownership land including the State of Idaho, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and USDA Forest Service land. After the death of my grandfather, three of his four heirs ran sheep until the early '60's. One uncle sold his sheep rather than fight with the Forest Service. My father, on the south fork of the Salmon River, fought the Forest Service but they severely cut the number of sheep he could run to protect the stream until the operation was no longer economically viable. He sold the sheep and converted what range that could be to cattle. My aunt ran sheep until her death in 1984. My brother and I were designated executors of her estate, so we got a crash course in sheep ranching following her death.

My grandfather, Andy Little, came to the United States in 1894 and over the years amassed a large and far-flung sheep operation whose numbers peaked in the late 1920's. As history shows, a lot happened before he arrived.

LIVESTOCK GRAZING IN THE WEST started in the 1860's to provide food for the emerging West. As domestic livestock came west, hunting pressure on big game animals reduced because of the alternate meat source. The vast areas of the West were a gold mine for livestock entrepreneurs. Cattle and sheep outfits grew extensively and the "use the forage before somebody else got it" philosophy was prevalent. In the winter of 1886-87 there were huge losses that changed the West forever.

In 1897 the extensive overgrazing by sheep and cattle was investigated and a report written stating that as sheep outfits moved from Oregon and Washington across Idaho and Wyoming, the animals ate everything bare, carrying ruin in their path. The report charged that sheepmen were the principal cause of the forest fires and that sheep hooves destroyed the sod and undergrowth.

That same year, Gifford Pinchot presented a different view. He indicated that cattle, horses, and sheep could all graze without serious damage on the public forests provided that the herders kept them away from particularly fragile areas. He argued for five-year grazing permits, stockman responsibility, and established penalties including revocation for permittees who did not show "good faith" in the protection of the forests. He recommended permittees bear the cost of administration through grazing fees.

STUDIES SHOW THAT BY 1900 southern Idaho grazing lands that were initially covered with sagebrush and an understory of perennial bunch grasses were now covered with Russian thistle, mustard, and bunch grasses.

Next came the problem of transient sheep that were difficult if not impossible to regulate.

The predecessor of the Forest Service, the Bureau of Forestry, was formed in the 1890's to start some management of the forest. It was said that in the winter of 1899, the General Lands Office furloughed all rangers by October 15, for the winter. In 1902, an investigation on grazing and other uses found that most stockmen favored reserves because of overgrazing and transient use concerns.

AS IS THE CASE WITH GOVERNMENT TODAY, it took a lot of time for change to occur. It was obvious, that without control of the range it was impossible to apply any management. That lesson was slow in coming. When my grandfather got established, one of the serious problems for him was the transient herds of sheep that had no base. They were always competing for available forage. My father recalls that the only feed that could be protected and saved for critical times such as shearing, was the forage close to the ranch that they could watch constantly.

In recounting the history of the Forest Service, grazing fees came up and were debated in every ten-year period. Also discussed were the numbers of wildlife competing for forage and available habitat. The debates also included discussion about grazing permits being a privilege as opposed to a right.

As the Forest Service got a better handle on permits and users, the impact was felt on the Department of Interior lands. It wasn't until passage of the Taylor Grazing Act that the necessary controls were in place so management could be implemented to improve range conditions. It has been a slow process.

As management of the grazing areas improved, so have the big game numbers. It is shown time and again that properly managed livestock grazing creates a desirable and preferable habitat for big game.

ONE OF THE MORE IMPORTANT actions in the 1930's by the United States Forest Service was the attempt to improve forage-acre standards and palatability tables. This resulted in a conclusion by the Intermountain Station published in 1939, that the previously allowed forage cropping of 75 to 90% had to be reduced by some 34% to bring about range improvement. Some of the methods to achieve the improvement included: allowing non-use on allotments; spraying poisonous weeds; limited range reseeding; water developments and fencing; livestock tagging; reduced stocking rates; and changing lengths of grazing seasons. The rancher in turn saw the value of these efforts. There was less recorded trespass and more co-operation towards the improvement of the range. In the files of our offices we found a very complete inventory



*Photo by Brian Hay, courtesy of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.*

form that has not been used in recent times. The form gave the Forest Service a lot of information and reflects the record keeping that was done on some forests. I know that the information was valuable. The obvious problem of coordinating the Forest Service efforts with the grazing permittees in the 1930's was that nearly all livestock operators were in serious financial trouble. That casts a large shadow on any range enhancement efforts.

In the late 1940's the Forest Service came under strong attack for the perception that they were capitulating to the stockmen by failing to reduce livestock use. Data compiled for the House Public Lands committee showed that the agency had reduced AUM's in Idaho by 49%, in Nevada by 40% and in Utah by 36%.

As we progressed into the Second World War, men went to war and their families moved to town. That favorably impacted big game numbers. State fish and game agencies become more vocal to the point that some land management agencies acquiesced to the pressure and are allowing big game to be located in areas where they have never been before.

**THE LAND MANAGEMENT AGENCIES** and many permit operators mulled over range management and the tool that was used most to deal with range problems, namely to reduce numbers of livestock on the range. There were several researchers trying to find manage-

ment scenarios that would speed range betterment as well as providing for big game needs, visual quality, and fish habitat. Some of these individuals were Bill Anderson, whose concept of coordinated resource management planning is widely used; Allan Savory, a new advocate and developer of Holistic Resource Management; and August Hormay, who developed rest-rotation grazing.

**Where does the wolf fit in?**

In Forest Service Bulletin 72 issued January 19, 1907, titled "Wolves in Relation to Stock, Big Game and the National Forest Reserves" the introduction says, "The enormous losses suffered by stockmen on the western cattle ranges and the destruction of game on forest reserves, game reserves and in national parks through the depredation by wolves have led to special investigations by the Biological Survey in cooperation with the Forest Service to ascertain the best methods for destroying these pests."

**BIG GAME IN MOST AREAS ARE NOT WILD** anymore. They use logging roads to travel on, they spend time around farms, and at times are quite curious. This makes the interactions of the landowner and the game management agencies more important. Most states have some form of depredation compensations to deal with damage to hay, stock and private winter pastures. This is

used only when the damage or losses become significant.

Being in the ranching business, I can speak for most ranchers who are growing weary of the pressure placed on us to pay higher grazing fees and provide more habitat for big game animals that, in some areas, have been introduced. If some of the proposals to increase grazing fees become law, those economic impediments will strain the stewardship of public lands.

It is extremely important that big game managers and advocates don't lose sight of the fact that critical winter habitat, which in most cases is private lands, is the limiting factor in the big game life cycle. There is a point that we have to decide. Are the intrusion and obstacles worth the return?

I have yet to meet a stockman who is not interested in or

who does not enjoy seeing big game as he works his farmland or grazing area. I think that livestock operators and big game interests have enough in common that cooperation in dealing with the habitat and opportunity issues is a must.

If the cooperation is not forthcoming, then there is a scenario that sees the landowners selling off their bases of operation. That could mean selling off water rights to urban areas that are crying for more water or breaking up ranching units into small, more densely populated areas. Big game and hunting interests are the losers. The proposed increased in grazing fees would trigger this type of scenario in many areas of the West that depend on public lands grazing as an important link to keeping them in viable business.

## Seeking Common Ground on Western Rangelands

K.L. Cool

Is a crisis pending regarding the management of western rangelands? Apparently many people believe so, or they wouldn't be trying to solve it with bumper stickers and slogans: Environmentalists promote "cattle free-free by '93." Ranchers respond with "cows galore in '94."

Perhaps the bumper sticker campaign is aimed at generating support from the vast majority of citizens who do not have a direct stake in the management or use of western rangelands. This great American public, if motivated, may dictate a political response that unfortunately, like the bumper stickers, will be far too simplistic.

**Resource managers** and public land users have a vested and direct interest in healthy rangeland ecosystems—a common interest in clean water, fertile soils, and healthy plant communities. Without healthy rangeland, there is no forage for livestock; there is no habitat for big game.

State fish and wildlife agencies acknowledge there have always been problems, and there will continue to be differences. Game damage, access

disputes, resource allocation arguments, and other issues all have the potential for honest disagreement.

State fish and wildlife agencies, hunters, and outdoor recreationists also have a vested interest in the success and continuation of family ranch units. Subdivisions, corporate ownership, nonresident ownership, and the uninformed notion of non-consumption—which I define as "no beef, no hunting"—are perhaps the greatest threat to our collective heritage and our future. It is time to recognize the threat the bumper stickers represent and work together to resolve conflicts between big game and livestock, real and imagined. To do this, we must focus on one fundamental issue: maintenance of rangeland.

Wildlife is a product of the land, and choices regarding the land's use ultimately dictate what will prosper and what will perish. Modern wildlife management can be compared to a blender that contains some of the following ingredients:

1. Public ownership of an often-transient wildlife resource.

2. An infinite variety of individualistic landowners.

3. Private decisions on what is done on and to private land.

4. Advice on how this wild resource is to be managed coming from Manhattan, Montana; Manhattan, Kansas; and all too frequently, Manhattan, New York.

5. Animals that don't know the difference between private and public land; wild animals that come and go as they please, burrowing under, jumping over, crawling through, and at times tearing down fences.

In most western states, big game and livestock competition is a subject of long-standing controversy. In Montana, elk are most often involved. All the characteristics that cause friction between livestock producers and wildlife interests are present. We frequently experience severe drought; we have expanding elk populations; we hear from recreationists who be-

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