

Development of the Ranching Industry in Colorado

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Livestock and Land Management

In the beginning, the early settlers in Colorado found and claimed land that had water and, what appeared to be, an abundance of forage for grazing. Land was selected by groups of people migrating into the West. During early settlement, the land was free as long as there were no previous settlers on the land at the time of your arrival. Settlers could claim all that they could protect from other individuals.

Early in the 1800s, it was decided that the government should sell the Western lands so that they could be taxed for national income. The early settlers found no need of purchasing the land if they could use it free without taxation by merely settling on it. If an area became too thickly populated or too heavily grazed, one could move on to other unsettled lands. Only lands with good water were purchased before the Homestead Act in 1862.

Most of the early pioneers moving westward in the 1850's and 1860's were people who were from eastern farms or from minor livestock operations of the southern plains. In both cases, they knew how to handle livestock, but knew very little about managing grazing lands in the arid West.

In the beginning of the range livestock industry along the Front Range of Colorado, it was common practice to provide animals with green growing forage during the spring and summer and allow them to subsist on native dormant forage during the fall and winter. One of the advantages of range livestock production along the front ranges has been the various seasonal ranges that aided substantially to the overall welfare of the grazing animals. The foothills furnished suitable forage for animals during the spring and fall, with the animals going up to higher mountain ranges in the summer, and finally, using the adjacent plains during the winter. Snow was less in the plains than in higher country, and the prairie grasses, even though they were dormant, cured well on the ground. In addition, the drainages from the mountains produced breaks for protection against the adversities of winter. These drainages on the alluvial fans coming out of the foothills onto the plains had an assortment of browse species that, along with the prairie grasses, made excel-

lent winter feed for the breeding herd. Few rangelands in the United States are so admirably suited for yearlong grazing for satisfying the nutritional requirements of livestock.

Before 1890, range livestock along the front range received little or no feed, other than range forage; but by 1890, about 5% of the total feed for range animals came from harvested crops or native hay meadows. By 1930, about 20% of the total yearlong feed supply for range livestock animals came from feed other than range forage. This has increased to as much as 40 to 45% in mountain ranges.

It was realized that wildlife was a valuable natural product of rangelands as early as 1918, after World War I. As a result, it was necessary to evaluate the common use of range by game and livestock. This brought about friction between livestock operators and hunting interests. This conflict is still a major concern for modern-day range resource managers.

Early Grazing Systems: Many sheep herds during early settlement of the West migrated from the mountains during the summer to the plains and foothills during spring and winter. This was much the same as cattle operators who first managed animals when they came to the slopes of the Rocky Mountains in the early 1860s.

Sheep were herded and could be managed more intensively to better utilize the range and water than cattle. Sheep, even in the plains, were herded and moved daily to new feed and water. Cattle were allowed to graze at will, and often drifted 10 to 12 miles or more when left to roam at will on the plains. Sheep also wintered better than cattle on the plains and desert areas of western Colorado. Many large cattle ranchers included sheep with their cattle or actually exchanged cattle for sheep after the blizzard of 1885 and the depression years of 1886 to 1889.

Management of both sheep and cattle changed drastically with the ushering in of a new century in 1900. Rangelands were being fenced; improved animal breeding was becoming more common; animals were being sold by the pound, with the price reflecting degree of fattening; and supplementary feeding was practiced during periods of stress such as drought, cold weather, or blizzards. By 1900, the range was being saturated with livestock, and people could no longer move to new areas when overgrazing reduced the quality of their land. By 1900, many cattle operators herded their cattle from area to area, like the sheep herders trying to provide new feed. This was the introduction of rotational grazing systems, but the idea was not commonly accepted until about 1940. Today, the grazing system is determined largely by the general vegetation types available, such as in western Colorado where desert ranges are available, or on the eastern plains where shortgrasses prevail and where sandhills provide mixed grass types.

Breeds and Breeding: The first livestock to immigrate in Colorado were primarily from Texas longhorn origin, or from animals of Spanish origin from early mission

introductions from Mexico and Arizona. In the beginning it was a matter of furnishing forage and water, with disregard for breeds or quality of forage. It was quickly recognized that the livestock business was a high-risk venture. Bad weather, drought, and extreme winters, along with disease, thieves, and unstable prices, were all factors beyond the control of the operator.

The colonists from the East, from 1870–1890, brought their European cattle with them as they spread slowly westward until they reached the Rocky Mountains. Denver was a western hub for all pioneers, regardless of occupation, before going west.

The major introduction into the West to improve the longhorn cattle was the Hereford and Durham about 1868, and the shorthorn about 1870. Some operators introduced only bulls for herd improvement; whereas, others introduced both bulls and females to change their herd more rapidly. After the Civil War, a better choice of meat was desired in the East, and lamb production from the western range was considerably more preferred than the 3- or 4-year-old steer.

Ranch Size: Rangeland boundaries in Colorado were hard to establish because of Indian claims, which were unsettled until after about 1875. The Indians claimed the land immediately north of the Arkansas River from the mountains east and beyond the Colorado-Kansas border. In addition, the land known as the eastern plains in Colorado was originally listed as Kansas territory before it became a territory of Colorado in 1861.

About 1878, Colorado ranchers started to fence large areas to display their claims on land and water. This also served notice to trail herds that they were not welcome and could not pass through their ranches under any circumstances. Thus, free range was no longer recognized by Colorado ranchers.

At first, large pastures were fenced, ranging from 100,000 to 640,000 acres, that included mainly plains areas from the Kansas border to the foothills. These fenced areas, at first, were largely federally owned lands, and fencers did not have title to the land. This provoked newcomers and the smaller operators who wanted and needed area for expansion.

Illegal fencing of free range was dealt with by the purchase of land and by issuing legal grazing permits for grazing public lands by the Department of Interior. Many fences were adjusted to fit permits, and most ownership boundaries were legally identified by 1900. By 1902, a program for regulating grazing on Forest Reserves was approved, and Public Domain permits were being issued for livestock numbers and general land area.

In 1918, after the first World War, the large ranches of Colorado began to collapse because of over-investment without management strategies to cope with variable climatic conditions and variable market prices that attempted to bring about graded meats for the consumers. Both land and livestock (sheep and cattle) flooded the market and caused a post-war depression rather than a post-war prosperity period. This gave younger people (war veter-

ans) an opportunity to become family ranchers on a small scale. The large ranches, consisting of a million or more acres of land and perhaps 25 to 35 thousand cattle, were divided and sold as several ranches.

Regulations and Land Policy

As late as 1883, almost 90% of the livestock grazing in Colorado was on public lands without a fee. The lack of a suitable land policy for arid rangelands and semiarid mountain range was a major cause for public range problems during early settlement. Many laws and regulations were promulgated for the regulation of grazing and trespassing after Colorado became a territory; but enforcement was impossible because of intermingled federal and private claims. As a result, prior and present use became policy, and these policies were largely enforced by livestock pools and populated settlements. By 1885, the livestock associations throughout the Front Range of Colorado organized against the numerous gangs of cattle thieves. This proved effective, and later, land policies and controversies among rangers were dealt with by the associations.

In 1934, the Taylor Grazing Act was passed, which permitted regulated grazing on the remaining unappropriated land known as Public Domain. This bill was actually sponsored by the national cattle growers of the West. It was not until 1940 that federal land management policies were decidedly oriented to the needs of the land resource. In 1946, the Grazing Service and the General Land Office were consolidated into the Bureau of Land Management for greater effectiveness.

Ranching Problems

In addition to the long, arduous trip west or north to Colorado, the problems that confronted the early settlers were many and varied. There were range wars, harsh climate, predator problems, poisonous plants, and eventually the burden of taxes.

Variable Weather: Livestock pioneers on the front range of Colorado feared droughts and blizzards more than any other hazard, including financial depression. Droughts and blizzards cannot be avoided and, generally, are not planned for adequately. Droughts in most of Colorado reappear with some degree of regularity; droughts of two or more years duration occurred in 1886–87, 1911–12, 1934–37, 1954–55, and 1976–77. Drought conditions of two or more years are serious because the health of both animals and plants is affected. First, because vigor of plants is affected by the dry conditions, and second, because lowered production of the plants brings on overuse of the plant tissue as a result of animals grazing closer in order to subsist. Thus, drought, coupled with heavy grazing, causes range deterioration that may be long-lasting.

Droughts of two or more years have a lasting effect in that the range plants have been reduced in abundance, soil has eroded, livestock have been reduced in numbers and probably sold on a sloughed market, and water sour-

ces have gone dry. In addition, local depressions result, and enterprising people move and find a means of living elsewhere. Thus, whole communities remain only as mere vestiges of their former development.

Blizzards are common along the Front Range, but do not appear to have the regularity of drought periods. The most widespread and devastating was the blizzard throughout the Great Plains in 1885–86, which lasted for several days and appeared day after day with sub-zero temperatures and high winds. The second most devastating occurred in 1903–04 on the plains area and brought severe cold and high winds. A third blizzard in March 1932 was widespread on the eastern plains of Colorado and caused high losses among livestock, particularly range cattle. Such losses are not insured, and the actual losses often are the final straw for ranchers who must declare bankruptcy. Even though the livestock operator may have some supplemental feed for winter feeding, it is not always possible to get it to the livestock because of deep snow and weather conditions associated with the extended days of blizzards.

Sheep numbers were not as affected as cattle by these blizzards in 1885 and 1932, but the average cattle loss was estimated at 40% in Montana to North Dakota, and south to the southern plains states. Some ranches lost 70% of their entire breeding herds. Other blizzards over a smaller area were just as devastating, even the one in 1932 that caught many unprepared in the northern plains and caused losses amounting to 80 to 90% of their herds.

Predators: Perhaps the third most troublesome livestock problem, after drought and blizzards, is the nuisance of ever-present predatory animals. Such losses have been heavy since the early settlers reached Colorado in the 1850s. The major predator problems were wolves, coyotes, mountain lions, bears, and eagles. From 1869 to 1879, bounties were paid for each of these animals. In 1885, the bounty act for predators was repealed by Governor Grant, who said that livestock people were no more deserving of protection than people in other industries. In 1889, a new bounty act was passed for scalps of wolves, coyotes, bears, and mountain lions. In 1896, counties and districts were asked to pay part of the bounties. To this day, the counties and the federal government pay bounties or furnish trappers to control predators.

Management strategies to cope with predators were, of course, trapping and hunting. Later, livestock people learned to avoid certain areas where predators were abundant when the calves or lambs were young. But even then, losses were reported to be as much as 30% of their lambs, and 10 to 15% in the case of calves.

Poisonous Range Plants: Losses from poisonous plants were observed early in the livestock industry on the Front Range of Colorado. In the early 1870s, loco weed, larkspur, poisonous parsley, death camas, and scrub oak were identified as problem weeds on the ranges. Many losses were reported to be as much as 80% in some sheep herds, and seasonal losses among cattle as high as 50%. All sorts of preventive measures were voiced from herds-

men, but few were beneficial. In 1881, a law was passed to offer a bounty by each grazing district along the front range and eastern plains for each pound of locoweed when dug below the root crown and dried for weight calculations. The loco bounty law was violated in every way possible and, as a result, the law was repealed in 1885. The plant that was second most dangerous was tall larkspur, which was found mostly in the mountainous districts. This plant, even today, is considered a killer of cattle to be dealt with. All sorts of treatments were suggested, but prevention by herding animals away from infested areas was considered the best plan to pursue.

Treatments of poisoned animals by early settlers were many and varied, such as drenching with salt and linseed oil, stabbing with a knife for bloat, positioning animals so their head was downhill, and bleeding animals by cutting a three-quarter ring under the base of the tail so they would bleed and dilute the concentration of toxin in the body. Later, more sophisticated approaches were recommended by giving a prescribed medicine to the animal, but in most cases, by the time the plant was identified and medicine provided, it was too late to prevent death. In many respects, this is still true today.

Taxes: The pioneers of the Western range were opposed to any sort of tax, even though taxes were essential for supporting the government. Local taxes or assessments to accomplish the formation of county governments or livestock associations were accepted but resented by most people. Taxes by the federal government on their homesteaded or purchased land were indeed unacceptable, but were ultimately paid under protest, or the land reverted to the county for unpaid taxes.

Taxes on cattle were assessed by age and numbers, and the location of livestock at tax time was often very difficult to determine. Livestock were removed to various districts from time to time to take advantage of the lowest tax district. In 1883, it is said that cattle people, especially the large operators, paid taxes on only about 5% of the owned livestock. Sheep were easier to locate and count than cattle, so they were more frequently taxed in proportion to their numbers.

Livestock Associations

In 1867, the Colorado Stockgrower's Association was formed for protecting themselves from thieves and for regulating grazing on open range. The association provided for brand inspectors, formation of pool grazing agreements, and predator control legislation. The Colorado Stockgrowers' Association was one of the first state livestock associations in the West, and for that reason, was a leader and a model for other states.

In 1897, the National Livestock Association was organized and immediately recommended leasing of public lands to stockmen. However, small stock farmers and sheepmen opposed this type of legislation because they feared that big interests would be favored at their expense.

Markets and Marketing

The first cattle marketed by packers was in 1858, but

consisted primarily of broken-down oxen. The packing industry of Denver had its early development in the 1870s, but had its most rapid and profitable years from 1900 to 1910, after which it was considered a large and profitable industry until its decline in the late 1920s.

The coming of the railroad to the Front Range of the Rockies in 1870 helped stockmen ship their produce to cities in the East. The railroad also provided a source of materials and equipment from the East to aid in more efficient management of livestock and the land resource.

Denver was linked with the coast-to-coast Union Pacific in 1870. In the same year, the Kansas Pacific from St. Louis to Denver was completed. This gave Denver rail service to both coasts and all important points in between. The Rio Grande was completed in 1872 and, thus, Denver was a central hub from all rail connections from north to south and east to west. The railroad furnished feeding stops between Denver, Omaha, and Chicago. By 1880, ice box cars were provided so that dressed meat could be shipped from Denver to Boston. As a result, Denver became an even larger meat-packing center.

Livestock commission companies were very active in Denver by 1880, and charged only 50 cents per head to be sold. The Transportation Commission in 1905 adjusted charges so that they were compatible with the producers throughout Colorado. By this time, livestock were sold per pound as calves, yearling steers, and even mature animals, as graded carcasses with respect to fatness (not graded by formula).

The Packers and Stockyard Act of 1921 was passed to regulate interstate commerce in dispersion of livestock products and to prevent price fixing by the big five packers (Swift, Armour, Cudahy, Morris, and Wilson). From about 1921 to 1928, government acts were passed to provide meat inspection, meat grading, packer prices, and rail shipment fares. The Packers and Stockyard Act was primarily to control price fixing by packers, but it was not really corrected to the satisfaction of the American National Cattlemen's Association until about 1929 when packers started buying directly from the producers at their own place in a country environment. This eliminated rail fare, commission fees, and stockyard feeding costs. This gave the producer a feeling of greater independence, which led to greater use of local auctions that set their prices by daily bids that could be accepted or turned down by the producers. This practice started early in the 1930s and is still avidly used by smaller operators.

Present Range Livestock Management

In Colorado, we have primarily private range in the eastern plains and primarily federal range in the mountains and in lower desert ranges of western Colorado. The problems in day-to-day ranching in the mountains of the west and the plains of the east are dramatically different. There is a hidden feeling among the plains ranchers that the government does indeed favor the mountain ranchers because of the public land grazing privilege. Mountain ranchers would insist that all grazing land in Colorado

has low taxing benefits and that they have purchased the grazing permit, which is somewhat like an investment in land on the plains.

Because of multiple-use interest on public rangelands, the livestock industry has had to make concessions in use and production per unit area of land. Big-game animals have increased and may be allowed to continue this trend for some time. Environmental concerns for riparian areas have focused considerable attention on the welfare of these areas that normally receive the brunt of livestock grazing. Federal land management agencies are currently giving riparian zones a high priority in protection from grazing.

Ranches of the Front Range and the eastern plains, today, are managed on the teachings from past experience. They have learned that they must be flexible in order to meet the shortages of range feed brought on by weather. They must graze conservatively to allow for adequate vigor for the plants that must endure adversities of variable climatic changes. They must provide the proper range types for different seasons; otherwise, they must supplement animals to meet the nutritional requirements.

Ranchers are constantly changing their breeding practices for increased efficiency of converting range forage into marketable protein for human consumption. Breeds are presently being selected for low fat, yet retaining high palatability and lean meat production.

Many young ranchers in the area are now college graduates and are anxious to learn about new research information or experiences that are helpful in proper management of their livestock and forage resources. Let us hope that the science of range management can keep pace with these young entrepreneurs.

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