Prairies to the Pingos

Ed McKinnon

Where
This area extends from 49° North Latitude to the Arctic and from the eastern slopes of the Rockies to the 4th meridian (Alberta) which is the boundary between Alberta and Saskatchewan. From the 49° boundary up to the 60° North Latitude, which are the north and south boundaries of Alberta.

Eskimo and Indians
The area was for centuries the hunting ground of the Plains Indians. Smaller bands were sparsely spread north of there to the Arctic. The Eskimo, while they occupied most of the Arctic shore line from Hudson Bay to Alaska, were familiar with most of the islands above the mainland. In most areas fish, animals, berries and fruits were available for food. Migratory birds came for summer nesting. Buffalo in the south along with elk, deer, moose, rabbits, upland birds, and musk ox, sheep and goats and cariboo supplied proteins and leather and furs. The ocean water supplied seals for meat oil and fur.

Early Settlers
The first white men into this part of this west came by boat through the Great Lakes to Winnipeg. They portaged from Lake Nipigon to Lake Winnipeg, travelled up the lake to the mouth of Saskatchewan River, and then that river to where it splits to North and South Saskatchewan. They followed the north branch to North Battleford, where overland travellers headed southwest to southern Alberta. Some even took the South Saskatchewan river to Medicine Hat country. Most of the traffic, however, followed the north branch into Fort Edmonton. From Edmonton, there was an overland trail to Fort Calgary. Another route went farther up the river to Rocky Mountain House, and west over the hump to Boat Landing on the Columbia River, thence down the Columbia to Portland or Astoria, where ocean boats connected to wherever. It is interesting to know that most of the furs that the Hudson’s Bay Company garnered from the Indians in Northern Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, and also from the North West Territories, found their way down this latter route to the Pacific Ocean, and thence to the great fur markets of the world.

The very first cattle in the Calgary area came from the Red River settlement near Winnipeg, up the Saskatchewan River to Edmonton, and then were trailed down by Rocky Mountain House to the Old Church, on the Bow River west of Calgary. These were a milk herd of five or six cows brought by the Reverend John McDougall, the first Methodist missionary in this area.

One of the early travellers was Peter Fidler, a Hudson Bay trader looking for further opportunities; he came through the area in 1792. He returned with tales of the grass so tall that the buffalo at times looked like they were swimming in it. He told of the clear water in lakes and rivers and of the warm wind from the West that melted the snow in February. These stories excited people about the ranching opportunities and before long individuals and companies were headed west to take advantage of it. Some were from the old countries, bringing their own capital and out to make a quick fortune. Others came from eastern Canada and were looking forward to developing the country and wanted to be in on the ground floor.

The First Ranch
Senator Cochrane was a successful businessman from Montreal who had acquired a farm in the East where he set out to breed cattle. His interest in livestock was a motivating factor in his desire to establish a ranch. He obtained the first lease of many issued by the Government of Canada, in Ottawa. It consisted of more than 100,000 acres, stretching west from the fifth meridian (Alberta) just east of Fort Calgary, and was defined as all the land where the water drained into the Bow River on the north side. The headquarters were established at Big Hill, and the spread was called the Cochrane Ranch Company.

The company was incorporated in May, 1881, with capital of half a million dollars. A former North West Mounted Police officer was established as manager and was directed to acquire the necessary livestock. About 8,000 cattle were acquired, mostly in Montana, and started for the ranch. It was

About the author: Ed McKinnon is a long-time rancher in the area around Calgary, Alberta. He has been active for many years as a member of the Board of Directors for the Calgary Stampede. He is also an active member and past Director of the Society for Range Management.
late in the season; they were pushed hard and arrived at their new range in a snowstorm. With no time to get used to the environment, they were hair-branded and turned loose in the hills. The winter started early. It was cold with lots of snow and winds that drifted the cattle off the hills onto the prairie land. The losses were staggering, and in the spring, only about 1,500 head were gathered up, some of them a hundred miles out of their home area. The Indians and wolves fed on many of them and because of the hair brand in the fall many of them obtained a new owner and a new brand after they shed the winter coat.

The next summer another drive was made, but hay was put up near the ranch and attempts were made to winter them with hay supplementing the grass. The snow was deep and crust, making grazing impossible. Another severe loss caused some jangling with the shareholders and Cochrane ranch lasted only a year or two more. The deed was obtained for the home section and it was operated for a number of years on a smaller degree, becoming one of the successful ones in the area under private ownership. It has now been designated as a historical site with a mounted cowboy in bronze overlooking the ranch headquarters.

The story of the Cochrane Ranch was repeated by quite a few other operations that started in high hopes and ended in disaster. The ones that succeeded adapted to the environment and worked with nature rather than trying to bend nature to suit the desires of absentee shareholders or individual operators.

**CPR Block**

The area east of Calgary was handled by a much different arrangement than other lands in the province. The Canadian Pacific Railway Co. built the railroad that brought about the Confederation of Canada from coast to coast. They received a land grant of 25 million acres on both sides of the right-of-way, to sweeten the pot for the building of the railroad. As the construction progressed across the prairies, the company became aware of the irrigation potential of a large block of land in Alberta, where the soil was suitable and water was available. A deal was made to exchange essentially worthless land around the Lake Superior area in eastern Canada, that had been granted for the construction bonus for a solid block in the area they had in mind for the water development.

In all there were three million acres, north of the Bow River between Calgary and Medicine Hat. As this area was to be water-serviced where feasible, and sold under agreements of sale by the CPR to colonists from all over the world, it remained unfenced until the construction was finished. The rangeland outside of this area was open for government homestead, but some of the larger areas were sold to large corporations, generally financed by British capital, and held for cattle and sheep ranching. The livestock, mostly cattle and horses, that could not be held on these private ranches were dumped in the CPR block, making it the last open-range grazing in the province.

This took place from the early part of the century until it was mostly developed and sold to whoever showed up. About all the buyers had were a small down payment and the desire to farm under irrigation. Most of these people were new to the system, and nearly all were under-financed. There were, however, a few individuals and companies who were well equipped with both know-how and dollars and they were able to make a real success; some are still operating today.

But most of the settlers failed. By the time they had scraped up the annual cash payment for the rates to the water, and had done all of the shovel work spreading it, handled the weeds, suffered through hail storms and, the worst part, found no ready market for vegetable crops that would make the whole system viable, they were overcome by frustration and left. With the depression of the 1930's at its deepest, the CPR was hurting, too. The company's contract to supply the water to the few that were left became an impossible burden. The CPR tried to bale out through the Alberta government, but the government did not see fit to do anything about it, and the company ended up giving the whole project, with a substantial amount of cash, to the small group who were left on the land.

The block was split into two districts. The western district was serviced by a dam on the Bow River in Calgary. It extended north and east from Calgary and covered about a million acres. This area was rolling land not suitable for ditch irrigation. The drainage was bad and the salt seep was too prevalent. Consequently, until sprinkler systems came into use, the water was used mostly for small hayfields and stock watering.

The eastern district, which was larger, got its water from the same river, from a dam built adjacent to Bassano. The ground being less rolling, with sandy loam soil, a good sand-and-gravel underlay, was ideal for the gravity-ditch system. The gradual slope to the south and east made natural drainage and through the years it has developed into a very good district. Production of vegetable crops both for market use in the vegetable refuse, along with lots of hay and silage, makes lots of cattle feed. The area not suitable for irrigation is used for range cattle production, one of the largest dry-land range areas in the province.

**Cattle Drives**

The early cattle drives came from the South, up through Wyoming, Montana and Idaho. Ranchers moved into the foothills area of southern Alberta and in a short while their cattle ate off the grass that had been growing for centuries. It had been grazed under the management of the Almighty, by buffalo, elk and deer. These animals had been naturally
selected by the survival of the fittest and they grazed by the migratory system.

As the grazing diminished by overcrowding, the herds were pushed further out to the prairie area where the grass was shorter and rainfall less, with water holes farther apart.

When some of the ranchers who had made their headquarters in the prairie country, especially north of the Bow River became aware of the need to protect some of the area close to their wintering grounds, they built drift fences out from the river to safeguard their immediate holdings. This protected grass was used as wintering grounds, and in the spring as calving areas. This was really the first evidence in the Calgary area of a kind of range management.

These fences were mostly built using natural breaks and coulees as borders and no attention was paid to the legal survey. Consequently, when the farm people came in and acquired titles, the drift lines had to be done away with and fences built in the legal positions.

With the building of fences, the grazing became limited to smaller areas and livestock were allowed to graze only the forage that was within the area. This soon depleted the range and, in most cases, it took the next 50 years to bring the grass back into thriving and profitable production.

A Short History of Canada and Alberta

Ed McKinnon

On July 1, 1867, the united provinces of Upper and Lower Canada (which become the separate provinces of Ontario and Quebec) joined with Nova Scotia and New Brunswick to form the Dominion of Canada. Up until this time, the area had been under the control of the British government, which had appointed a Governor General, to see as best he could that some kind of authority was exercised. The various colonies, such as Upper and Lower Canada, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland had their own kind of government, a legislative assembly elected by the people, and an executive council appointed by the governor. They were more or less on their own, but under the protection, of the powers in London. The other areas of the territory were loosely held by the Hudson Bay Co., which had been given authority to govern all of the land that was drained by rivers flowing into Hudson Bay. The business of the company was the fur trade with the Indian people, and it was presided over by a Governor who was elected by the shareholders of the company, and responsible to them. Another name for this area was Rupert's Land.

The rest of the area, with exception of Vancouver Island and the lower mainland around the mouth of the Fraser River, which had been established as a British Colony, was designated as the North West Territory, and was assumed by the British to belong to them.

The North West Territory was turned over to the Federal government in 1870. The same year, the Government of Canada purchased the rights of the Hudson Bay Co. from the shareholders, and it became part of Canada.

With the promise of a connecting trans-continental railway, the colony of British Columbia joined up in 1871.

Prince Edward Island finally came to terms in 1873, and Newfoundland held out as a British colony until 1949.

The provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta were formed

in 1905 from the North West Territories and Manitoba had joined 30 years earlier. The Yukon and North West Territories remained as territories under control of the Federal Government.

Canada now has ten provinces and Yukon and North West Territories covering 3,560,238 square miles, an area somewhat larger than continental United States.

The federation is governed by a parliament, elected by the people, a senate appointed by the government, members of which have to resign at age 75, and a Governor General selected by the government.

The parliament is elected for a period not to exceed five years. It is based on the British parliamentary system, where the party with the majority is the governing body, and the minorities sit as the opposition. The Governor General is a representative of the British Crown and, his functions are mainly ceremonial. The Federal Government is in charge of things pertaining to the interest of the whole country, such as transportation, navigation, international trade, collection of duties, immigration, etc. The capital of Canada is Ottawa, situated in the eastern part of Ontario.

The provinces have a similar system. There is a legislature, elected by the provincial residents, and a Lieutenant Governor appointed by the Federal Government. The provincial governments are concerned with administration of municipal affairs, education, public works, agriculture, and the control of public lands and natural resources. The provincial legislatures are required to conduct a session yearly—usually running from February to May—and most years there is also a shorter fall session.

The Far North

The people of the Yukon quite recently have elected their first Legislature but they still have a Commissioner appointed by the Federal Government who has final control. After a break-in period they are supposed to have status similar to that of the other provinces, with local control and an appointed Lieutenant Governor.

The North West Territories have members elected by the residents to the Federal House of Commons, who can bring their problems to the attention of the Government of Canada, but they have no local autonomy. There is still a Commissioner appointed by Ottawa who is in control.

This system leaves the Government of Canada in full control of all of the land and resources of the area between the Alaska border and the Hudson Bay, north of the 60th parallel, to the Arctic Ocean and 200 miles out beyond the shore line.