Alberta Range Cattle Industry 1881-1981

Alberta's Ranching Heritage

Alex Johnston and M. Joan MacKinnon

In 1874, the North-West Mounted Police, now the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, arrived in Southern Alberta. They came to control rampant lawlessness among the Indians, caused by a widespread trade in whiskey. The police quickly established order and provided a Canadian presence on the western plains. By 1880, the Indians had been placed on reservations, political stability of a sort had been attained, markets for beef were available, and a sea of grass awaited occupancy and utilization.

By 1880, also, cattle drives in the previous 15 years had occupied the western plains from Texas to Montana, a region only recently vacated by the Indian and the buffalo. The trail herds were made up of Texas Longhorns, the bedrock of the North American range cattle industry. But in Montana, while Longhorns were entering the state from the southeast, better bred cattle—Durhams, Shorthorns, some Hereford crossbreds—were entering the state from the west, via the Mullen Road and Oregon Trail. It was these cattle that were destined to stock the ranges of Southern Alberta.

In Southern Alberta, policemen began to take their discharges and to enter the new cattle industry from 1877 onwards. Many police were related to, or knew, Eastern Canadian financiers. In 1879, for example, Inspector W.F. Winder visited his home in Compton County, Quebec, and told Senator Matthew H. Cochrane, the county's, and possibly Canada's, most prominent stock-breders, of the opportunities in the West. Winder also discussed the formation of a major cattle company with his father-in-law, Charles Stimson. Both Cochrane and Stimson subsequently were involved in large-scale Southern Alberta cattle enterprises.

The event that triggered the era of the big ranches—the Beef Bonanza—in Southern Alberta was the passing of an Order-in-Council in 1881. It provided for the grant to individuals or to corporations of leases not to exceed 100,000 acres for 21 years at an annual rental of one cent per acre. Within 3 years, the lessee was to have placed on the lease one head of livestock for each ten acres. (As more became known about carrying capacity, this regulation was changed to one head per 20 acres, later to one head per 30 acres, of lease.) The significant point was that the total number of livestock on each ranch was strictly limited. The whole system depended upon land surveys, which were started immediately.

One of the first to take advantage of the new regulations was Senator M.H. Cochrane of Hillhurst Farm, Compton, Quebec.

Senator Cochrane came West in 1881, bought a team and buckboard in Fort Benton, Montana, and headed north to the bunchgrass range of the Bow River Country—today's Fescue Grassland. He chose for his home ranch an area at the Big Hill, about 20 miles west of Calgary, where the modern town of Cochrane now stands. In short order, he leased 109,000 acres on the Bow River, stretching from Calgary to the mountains, purchased about 7,000 head of Montana cattle, and secured the release from the North-West Mounted Police of Major James Walker, whom he appointed manager of the new Cochrane Ranch Co.

The Cochrane cattle arrived in the fall in a drive that has become famous for its harshness and speed. Howell Harris brought the herd to the border, where it was taken over by Frank Strong and 30 men from the I.G. Baker Company. The herd was pushed unmercifully, averaging 18 miles per day, and was herded so closely that animals had little opportunity to graze. One hundred and eighty miles along the trail, the cattle were herded across the Elbow River and counted where Calgary's Palliser Hotel now stands. The tally, dated November 30, 1881, gives names of the Montana suppliers—J. Hickson, I.G. Baker, Harrison and Company, Mullholland and Baker, Poindexter and Orr—and the number purchased. The total was 6,799 head at a cost of $124,780.05, for an average of $18.35 per head. According to the notebook in which the tally was recorded, losses during the winter of 1881-82 were about 1,000 head. About 50 purebred Hereford, Aberdeen Angus, and Shorthorn bulls intended to improve the stock were sent west from Cochrane's home farm.
A second drive in 1882 brought over 4,000 additional cattle to the Cochrane Ranch. Major Walker purchased the cattle, mostly from the large ranching firm of Poindexter and Orr of Dillon, Montana. A severe snowstorm hit just before the drive reached Fish Creek, now within Calgary’s southern city limits. Poindexter, an experienced cowman, wanted to leave the herd in the sheltered riverbottom until conditions improved. However, Major Walker insisted that it be delivered to the Big Hill as per agreement. Disillusioned by interference from the East, Walker left the company soon after and was replaced by accountant Frank White, who had no previous ranching experience. It was a winter of deep snow at Cochrane but orders from Eastern Canada were to keep the cattle on their home range. Thus, although open range was available only a few miles down the Bow River, riders spent the winter hazing starving cattle back to the west. Over 3,000 head of Cochrane cattle died before spring.

Even this did not discourage the Senator. He secured another 100,000-acre lease on the Waterton River near modern Glenwood, moved the cattle to the new lease, and began to run sheep on the lease west of Calgary. The sheep ranch, by this time reorganized as the British American Ranche Company, was managed first by a Virginian, W.D. Kerfoot, then by the Senator’s youngest son Ernest.

The Cochrane Ranch on the Waterton River ran into trouble in the winter of 1886-87. Heavy snow and cold trapped cattle in the hills. Frank Strong, for $1,000, rounded up several hundred Indian ponies from a nearby Reserve, drove them to the snow-blocked valleys where the cattle were trapped, and then let them go. The ponies headed for their home range on the snow-free Peigan Flats with the cattle following along behind.

In spite of these and other misfortunes, the southern Cochrane Ranch operated with success and profit until Senator Cochrane’s death in 1903. The company then went out of business, the property at Waterton being sold to the Mormon Church for $3,128,000. The company had made the most profitable land speculation in Alberta history to that time.

Other ranches were formed during the early 1800s, mainly by British interests although the Belgian, Swiss, Scottish, Irish, Italian, and French monied classes were also represented. The Oxley Ranche was a classic example of conflict between an absentee owner and a resident ranch manager; each wrote a book about his experiences. The Bar U was formed in 1882; its backers were Sir Hugh and Andrew Allen of the Montreal-based Allen Steamship Lines. The Bar U herd grew to 30,000 head; at one time 2,000 registered Percheron mares were run on Bar U range.

In summary, the era of the big ranches in Southern Alberta was based on American know-how and Eastern Canadian or European capital. Absentee ownership took its toll because owners in Montreal, London, or elsewhere insisted upon making the kind of day-to-day decisions that should have been made by a foreman in the field. The doom of the big ranches was sealed in the late 1890’s with the election of a Liberal government that abolished the Closed Lease System, cancelled existing leases, and opened the ranching country.
to homesteading. No longer protected from homesteaders, and particularly from American dryland farmers who began to arrive about 1900, ranchers were forced to retrench. In 1905, Minister of the Interior Frank Oliver began to cancel and otherwise dispose of the region's water reservations, the last vestige of the special status that traditionally had been accorded the ranching industry. Faced with an enthusiasm for settlement that obviously was not going to abate, the big ranch operators began to sell. Thus, although the ranching industry has continued to the present, it never regained the special status it enjoyed during the period 1881-1905.

Early methods were primitive by today's standards and were based on methods that evolved in Texas and elsewhere in the western United States. At first, cattle roamed at large over vast areas. There were two roundups per year, one in the spring to brand calves and one in the fall to gather steers for market. (Our stock associations began as organizations to control the semiannual roundups.) No one paid any attention to calf crop and ranchers were interested only in the number of 4- to 5-year-old grassfat steers they could gather for shipment to Indian Reservations, Mounted Police posts, and, after the coming of the railroad, to Chicago. There was no supplemental feeding until severe Canadian winters, notably those of 1886-87 and 1906-07, convinced ranchers that they could not expect a cow to nurse a calf and still put enough fat on her back in a short summer to carry her and a fetus through a long winter. Thus, ranchers began to put up hay and to reserve certain sheltered areas for winter grazing. This meant the use of fences, which started to become general with the organization of municipalities and the passing of Herd Laws in about 1910-12. Fencing in the range country coincided with control of the grazing animal, an assumption of responsibility on the part of the individual landowner, and the beginning of range management as we know it today.

There was little change in ranching methods in Southern Alberta from about 1900 until after the Second World War. Horse ranchers, never numerous, began to go out of business in 1925. Sheepmen, another group that were never very important in the region, began to disappear in 1944. The marketing of cattle changed from 4- to 5-year-old steers in 1900 and earlier to the selling of 14- to 18-month-old cattle in the 1930's and later. A feeder industry developed with the marketing of younger cattle. Since the 1940's, important developments in Southern Alberta ranches have been the subdivision of large fields into smaller ones for better animal control, the development of stock-watering facilities for better animal distribution, and the seeding down of a portion of the ranch to suitable grass-legume mixtures for increased feed supply.

While one must remember that, today, about 80% of Southern Alberta cattle are produced on the farms of the region, these various developments have resulted in an increase in numbers from about 325,000 head in 1900, 1.0 million in 1920, 2.6 million in 1960, 3.3 million in 1970, and 4.2 million in 1980. The period of greatest increase has coincided with the 40-year period of serious forage crops research and extension by Agriculture Canada and Alberta Agriculture during which range management principles for the region were established; introduction, improvement, and forage crops breeding programs were accelerated; agronomic principles relating to forage crops were determined; fertilization of native range and cultivated forage crops was studied; nutritional differences among forage crops and seasons became known; annual pastures and crop residues were more widely utilized; and the grazing season was extended in various ways including the complementary grazing of tame forages and native range. Paralleling these developments in forage production were important discoveries in animal breeding, animal nutrition, animal health, and animal insect control. The pool of germplasm available to Southern Alberta breeders was enormously increased by the importation of exotic cattle from Europe and elsewhere; crossbreeding techniques were developed to make maximum use of hybrid vigor. The elimination of the warble fly now appears to be possible and a cheap, effective control of hornflies is available. Most of the benefits of these discoveries, at least until very recently, have been passed along to the consumer in the form of cheap meat.

Alberta is proud of its ranching heritage and has taken
steps to commemorate it. One hundred and fifty acres of the home range of Cochrane Ranche, near Cochrane, Alberta, has been designated as a provincial historic site. Over the years this area had been used for a number of different purposes. Here the Collins Brickyard, which produced up to 80,000 bricks per day, operated from 1901 to 1925. The Cochrane Ranche Manager's Residence was used as a cook-house, but burned down in 1906. The Shelley Quarry Company quarried sandstone nearby during the 1910's. Later the land was used for mixed farming before reverting to ranch land in 1949. When the realignment of a nearby highway threatened to destroy the site where the Cochrane Ranche headquarters had stood, the Provincial Government of Alberta decided to purchase the land in order to preserve it. A bronze statue was commissioned to commemorate the early ranching industry. The one and a half times life size statue of a horse and rider by local sculptor Mac MacKenzie, titled Men of Vision, overlooks the spot where the ranch Manager's House and the Bunkhouse stood and represents a cowboy who has just found the ideal headquarters for a ranch. The 3,600 lb statue was unveiled at the formal opening of Cochrane Ranche Historic Site on May 21, 1979.

A visitor centre, which opened in August 1980, explains the history of the ranch. Using mainly quotations from second manager Frank White's revealing diary, the displays incorporate artifacts found in archaeological excavations at the site along with period photographs. A slide show relating the history of the Cochrane Ranche is also available to visitors. An interpretive trail loops through the site. Sign posts point out significant historical and physical features as well as noting some of the types of plants and animal life still found at the Ranche that the early ranchers either used or had to contend with. Well over 100 species of wildflowers are found within the site and beaver, deer, hawks, and the occasional coyote still make their homes here. In addition, consideration is being given to reintroducing an area of native prairie.

Visitors from all over Canada and the United States, as well as many European countries, have visited the ranch site. Over 10,000 visitors enjoyed its relatively unspoiled setting during the summer of 1981 alone. It is hoped that by comparing early ranching techniques and history with today's methods, visitors will leave Cochrane Ranche Historic Site with an insight into the history of the area and a better understanding of the requirements of the modern beef industry, still the most important factor in the economy of this part of Alberta.

Editor's Note: I was particularly interested in the dates of this article, 1881-1981. My father was born in 1881 and lived until 1971. To Americans living south of the Canadian border the spelling of words is intriguing. But this adds spice and variety to Rangelands, what we thrive on.