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History of the Cattle Industry in British Columbia

Judy Steves and Alastair McLean

Foreword

Alastair McLean, retired range scientist for the Agriculture Canada Range Research Section in Kamloops, is the Kamloops Chapter host for the 1989 SRM summer meeting and tour. Alastair has been recording the history of range management and the cattle industry in British Columbia. Following is a compilation from his publications on this subject.

Gold

The British Columbia (B.C.) Cattle Industry basically started with the 1858 "Cariboo Gold Rush" in central B.C. Previous settlements in the area had been discouraged by the Hudson's Bay Company, which held an exclusive licence over B.C. to trade with the native Indians. This trading license expired the same year as the gold strike, opening the province for settlement.

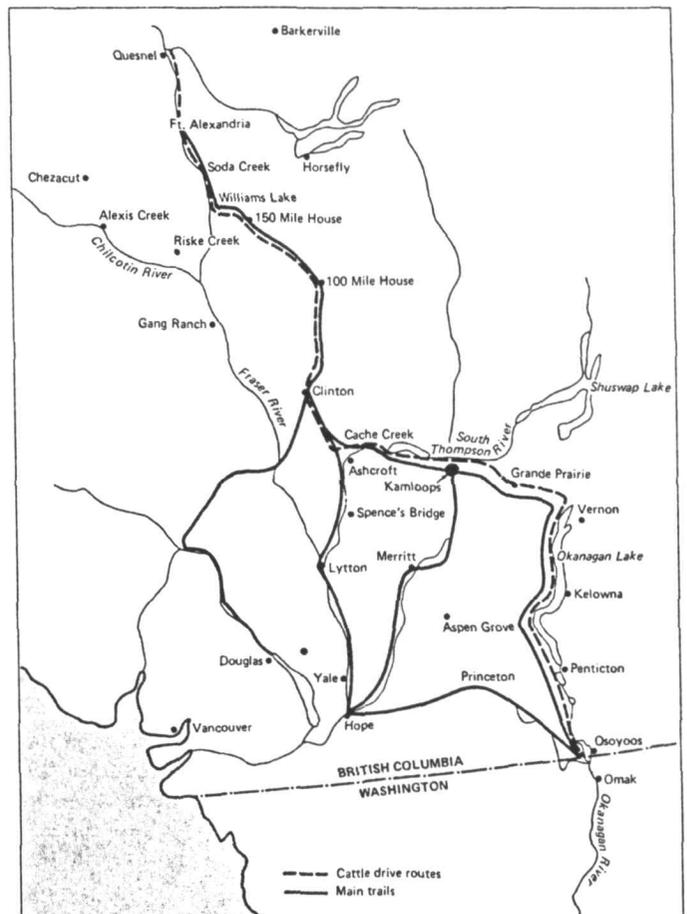
Drovers herded cattle into the Region to provide meat for the multitudes of gold seekers. From 1859 to 1870, about 22,000 head of cattle were driven from Oregon Territory to Osoyoos in southern B.C. and 450 miles north to Barkerville (50 miles east of Quesnel).

Settlement

The early settlement patterns in the interior of B.C. were determined by the fur trading and gold rush trails. Most ranches were established by adventuresome European immigrants. Settlement centres developed at watering sites and good pasturage along the Brigade Trail, Cariboo Road and other trails in the early 1860's. Examples of these towns are Lilloet, Cache Creek, Clinton and 100 Mile House. Kamloops was not settled until the late 1860's since it was off the main route to the Cariboo gold fields. By the early to mid 1880's, most of the main ranches had become established in the six rangeland areas of B.C.: the Okanagan, Similkameen, Nicola, Thompson, Lower Cariboo and Chilcotin regions.

Cattle Drives

By the late 1860's the cattle market provided by the gold rush had almost dried up. Ranch managers had to find beef markets outside the B.C. interior—primarily Van-



couver and Victoria. Cattle trails generally followed those established by the fur traders along water courses through the main valleys. Most cattle drives ended on the Fraser River at Yale or Hope where cattle were shipped to the coast by river boats. When the Canadian Pacific Railway was completed in the late 1880's, the drive routes ended at shipping points, such as Kamloops.

Many of these trails still form part of B.C.'s main highway network. An example is the Coquihalla Freeway, a

costly major enterprise built in 1986 by the B.C. Government. The highway has its origins as a cattle trail used by Nicola Valley ranchers, the rich grassland area south of Kamloops, to drive their cattle to Hope. In 1876, the government spent \$26,850 to improve the Coquihalla trail. However, the trail fell into disuse upon the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1885. Nicola Valley ranchers drove their cattle along the easier route up the valley to Kamloops and shipped by rail from there. However, the Coquihalla route was revived one century later, to provide a quick route from the interior of B.C. to Vancouver. Travel time from Kamloops to Vancouver was halved from 6 hours to 3 hours.

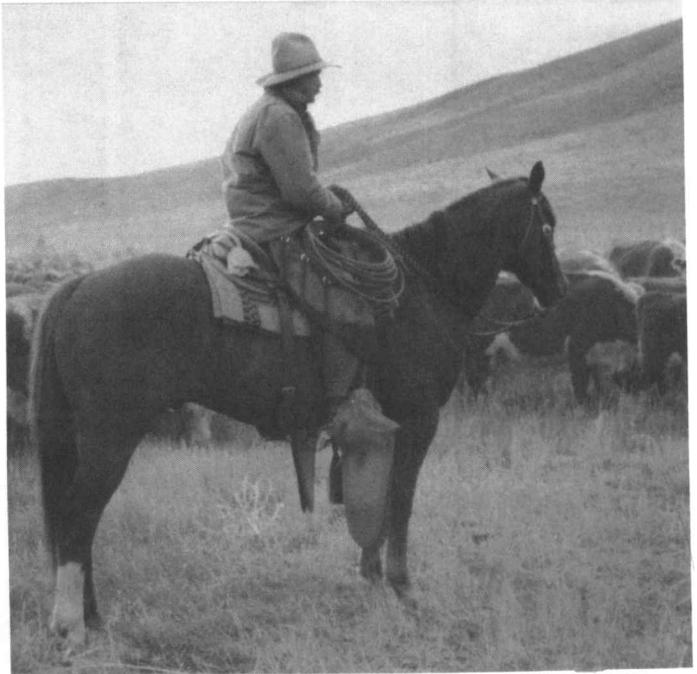


Photo by Sig Galk, Vancouver, B.C.

lands. The inability of the poor condition grasslands to support cattle prompted cattlemen to use forest rangelands. Severe winters in 1879 and 1897 resulted in the starvation of thousands of cattle and prompted ranchers to produce hay for winter feed. At present most of the interior lowlands have been cultivated primarily for irrigated alfalfa production.

Administration of Crown (Public) grazing lands was relatively haphazard until the early 1900's. Concern for B.C.'s rangelands resulted in the establishment of the "Grazing Act" of 1919 designed by T.P. MacKenzie (later named Commissioner of Grazing). This Act was replaced by the Range Act and Forest Act of 1978. The Crown rangelands are presently administered by the B.C. Ministry of Forests. Provincial forests, including grassland ranges, are managed to promote the integration of resource uses on rangelands. These include timber production, forage production (for both livestock and wildlife), recreation, water, fisheries and wildlife resources. The Kamloops Region is one of the more challenging regions because of the variety and concentration of resource uses on the Crown lands.

Grazing on Crown lands is administered by range staff of the Ministry of Forests through 5-Year permits or 10-Year licences which specify when and where livestock will graze. Of all the Forest regions in B.C., the Kamloops Region runs one of the largest numbers of livestock on Crown Rangelands: 77,343 head of cattle, 332 horses and 1,160 sheep. This is administered by Range staff under 389 permits and 127 licenses. The Kamloops and Merritt districts, within the Region, contain most of these livestock: Kamloops district grazes 27,981 head of cattle and 12 horses and Merritt District grazes 26,401 head of cattle



Landmarks of days gone by.

(Photo by Sig Galk Vancouver, B.C.)

B.C.'s history also includes some colorful cattle drives. One of the most ambitious drives was completed in 1880 by Joe Greaves (one of the founders of the Douglas Lake Cattle Company). When the Cariboo gold rush markets collapsed, he and 20 riders drove 4,000 head of cattle from Kamloops to Cheyenne, Wyoming, where they were shipped on the Union Pacific Railway to Chicago. The Harper brothers (founders of the Gang Ranch, one of B.C.'s most extensive ranches) are noted for the longest drive from Kamloops to San Francisco in 1876. They drove 1,200 head 2,000 miles in 18 months including wintering in northern Idaho.

Range Management

Grazing in the early days of the cattle industry was year round and confined mainly to the grasslands. These areas were soon fully utilized and overgrazed, resulting in weed infestations of cheatgrass and knapweed by the early 1900's. These weeds are still a problem on B.C.'s grass-



Logging is B.C.'s #1 industry. Forested crown rangelands provide up to 80% of crown range grazing. The integration of forestry and ranching is an ongoing challenge.

(Photo by Sig Galk, Vancouver, B.C.)

and 162 horses on Crown rangelands. (1988 B.C. Government data.

Range management in B.C. is primarily based on a vertical rotation pattern during the growing season. The animals are wintered on the valley bottom range areas at about 600 metres (2,000 ft) elevation and spend the summer on ranges at roughly 1,500 metres (5,000 ft.). Cattle are normally wintered on the alfalfa fields or lower grassland ranges and fed domestic hays. They are turned out onto grassland ranges in March and calving takes place just before or after turnout. In late May or early June following branding, the cattle are moved to higher elevations primarily on forested ranges. Cattle move progressively through the various grazing grounds ensuring a good supply of grass. In September and October calves are weaned and beef is shipped to cattle markets or ranch sales are held. By the end of November most of the herd has been moved to the ranch for late fall grazing or winter hay feeding.



B.C.'s range rotation includes grazing hayfields in winter, lower grasslands in spring and fall and upper forested ranges in summer. (Photo by Sig Galk, Vancouver, B.C.)

Range Research

The need for research on range problems in British Columbia was recognized in 1931 when L.B. Thompson and Dr. S.E. Clarke of the Range Experimental Station at Manyberries, Alberta, conducted a survey of range conditions. This led to the establishment of a research station at Kamloops in 1935 under E.W. Tisdale. The station was closed during World War II and it reopened in 1947, at which time Alastair McLean joined the staff and remained there until retiring 38 years later. The present station has a staff of six scientists and covers the disciplines of range management, forage crops, cattle management and nutrition, soils, plant biochemistry and plant physiology as they apply to the rangeland resource.

Conclusion

The ranching industry largely determined the character of the Interior of British Columbia. It provided substance and color to the region and shaped its beginning from an extensive, casual, pioneering way of life to a modernized business enterprise.