

History of the Cattle Industry in British Columbia

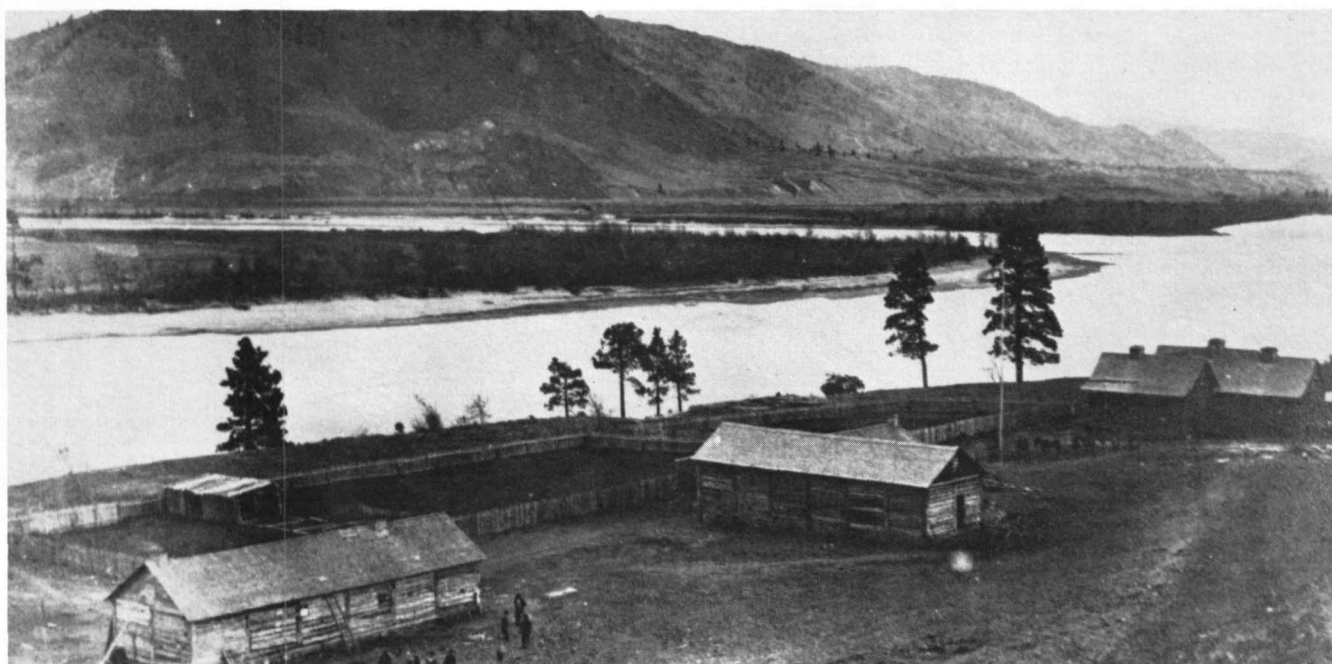
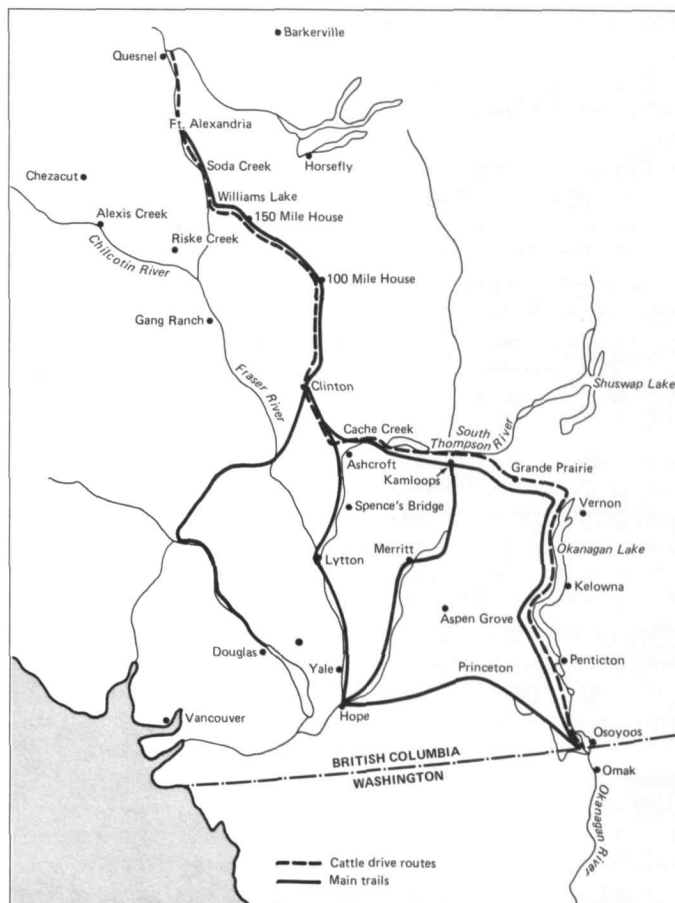
Alastair McLean

The development of the cattle industry in British Columbia has been unique. It was the earliest in Canada. The settlers brought with them their customs and background and adapted them to their way of life and to the community. It represented a distinct and important stage in the settlement of that province. The industry had its origins in the ranching frontier which emerged in the Pacific Northwest after the Oregon Territory boundary dispute was settled in 1846. The industry extended out from the foundation of agriculture and animal husbandry which had been developed in the Oregon Territory by the Hudson's Bay Company posts and which matured later under the American settlers.

The first beef cattle movement to British Columbia probably occurred in 1846 when Dr. John McLoughlin, Chief Factor of the Hudson's Bay Company moved cattle and horses from Fort Vancouver at the mouth of the Columbia River by boat to Vancouver Island and then to Fort Kamloops and Fort Alexandria. Small herds of beef and dairy cattle were kept at Fort Kamloops, Fort Alexandria, Fort Victoria, and Fort Langley.

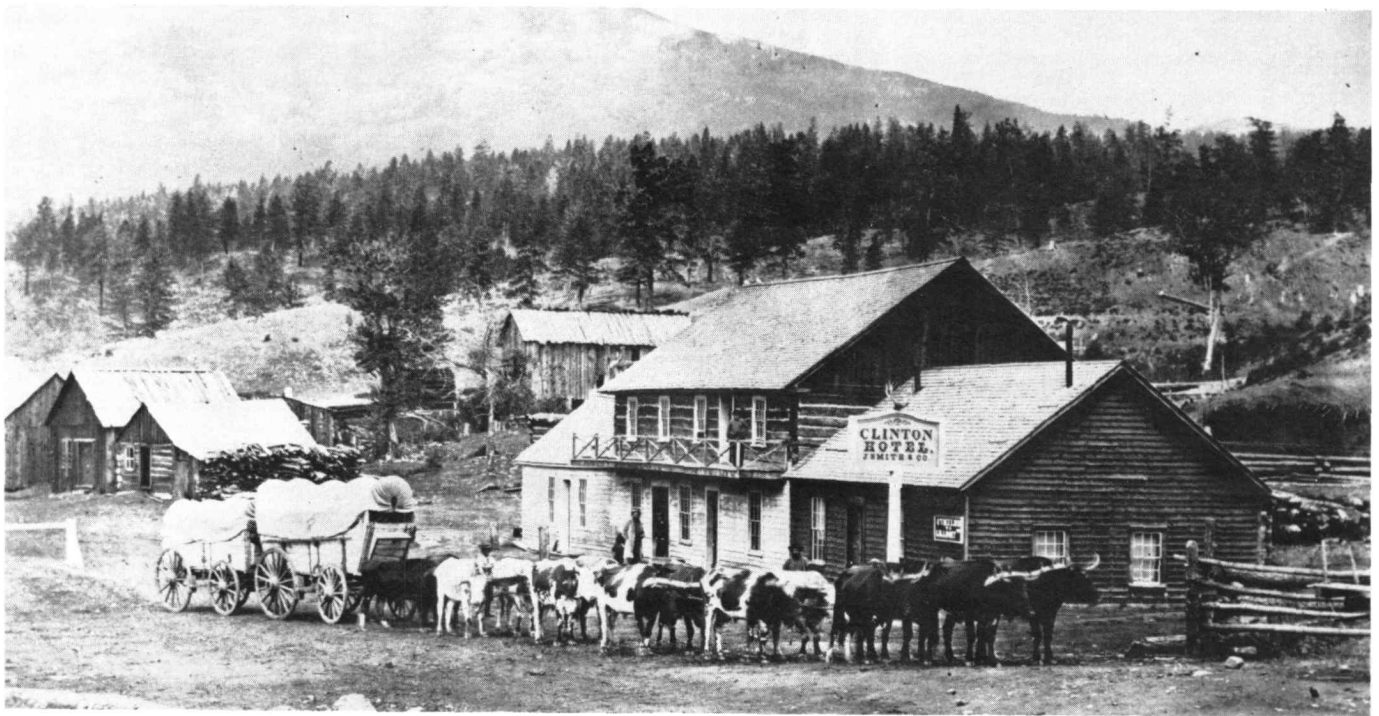
From the time that David Stuart and Alex Thompson from Fort Astoria travelled up the Columbia and Okanagan River

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Hudson's Bay Company Post at Kamloops—1865

Kamloops Museum & Archives Photo



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Bill Boze ox team at Clinton Hotel on way to Barkerville—1871.

valleys to Kamloops in 1811, the fur brigade trails had been paving the way for settlement by developing the main travel routes. The Scots traders and French-Canadian voyageurs brought colour to the region and left considerable folklore. They, however, had little impact on the land. These colourful adventurers were not inclined toward settlement, however, nor did the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) policy encourage it, since the company had exclusive licence to trade with the Indians and to occupy the lands adjacent to their posts for raising fodder for animals and garden produce for domestic use from 1838 to 1858.

The start of the settlement period was heralded by the

discovery of gold on the Fraser River and the expiration of the HBC trading licence in 1858. Within two months after the first miners crossed the International boundary from California, General Joel Palmer crossed the Border at Osoyoos from Fort Okanagan in Washington Territory and travelled through the Okanagan Valley and on to the Thompson Valley with a cattle drive and wagons pulled by oxen. The next year he took a drive as far as Fort Alexandria on the Fraser River. Over the next decade, about 22,000 head of cattle followed from the Oregon Territory mostly to the Barkerville mines. Settlement of the Territory in the 1840's had provided a surplus of beef for export by this time.



Kamloops Museum & Archives Photo

Roundup just south of Kamloops

Cattle Drives

Cattle drives have remained a significant part of the ranching scene from the beginning. The earlier cattle drives from Oregon to the goldfields followed the old Brigade Trail along the Columbia River to the mouth of the Okanogan River and then north to Okanogan Lake, turning westward near Vernon and through Grande Prairie (now Westwold) to the Thompson River and west to Fort Kamloops; then along the south side of Kamloops to Savona's Ferry, crossing the river there and continuing westward to Cache Creek; northward along the Bonaparte River to contact the Brigade Trail from the north. Later, numerous other trails were defined to the coast and Okanagon, notably the all-Canadian trail developed after the Oregon Territory boundary was settled.

The drovers were mostly Americans who, for the most part, did not settle in the country. Nevertheless, they influenced stock raising and handling techniques as well as ranching practices. Men such as Ben Snipes, Jack Splawn, John Jeffries, and Major Thorp, went on to leave their names in pioneer lore of the northwestern states. Others stayed on in British Columbia to build some of the first and biggest ranches.

In 1859, Joe Greaves drove sheep from Oregon to Olympia, Washington, from where they were shipped to Fort Yale on the Fraser River and then trailed 250 miles along the Brigade Trail to the Cariboo. Greaves followed this with many cattle drives. His most ambitious drive was in 1880, when, with about 20 riders, he drove 4,000 head from Kamloops south on the Okanagan Trail to Oregon then turned east to Cheyenne, Wyoming, to the Union Pacific Railway, thence to the Chicago Market. Two years later, he brought together the might Douglas Lake Cattle Company in the Nicola Valley.

The Harper brothers probably could have claimed the greatest total distance of trail drives in British Columbia

before they founded the vast Gang Ranch. Probably their longest drive was undertaken by Thad Harper in 1876. He drove from Kamloops to San Francisco, a distance of about 2,000 miles with about 1,200 head in 18 months, having summered in northern Idaho on good feed and water.

Johnny Wilson and Lewis Campbell drove many trails, including numerous trips to the coast before they settled in the Thompson Valley. Their most notable drive was to Dease Lake near the northern boundary of the province.

One of the more publicized drives was the ill-fated drive that Norman Lee undertook from Alexis Creek in the Chilcotin to the Klondike goldfields in 1898. The beef was lost when the river rafts broke up close to Dawson City.

By the late 1860's, the market provided by the Cariboo Gold Rush had slowed up and the developing ranches had to drive their cattle to the markets outside the Interior, mostly to the coast. John Shaw, in 1875, trailed 450 head from Kootenay Lake to the Bow Valley, in Alberta. In 1896, Jack Splawn from Washington, carried out his last drive from British Columbia to Washington. Joe Greaves and Uriah Nelson sent the first Canadian Pacific rail shipment of cattle to the coast in 1894, from Spences Bridge.

Among the latest cattle drives, held until recently, were those from the Chilcotin country to the railway at Williams Lake. The drives started as far west as Anahim Lake and covered about 250 miles.

Settlement

Settlement first occurred in linear form along the Brigade and other trails, as well as the Cariboo Road, in the early 1860's. For example, Alkali Lake Ranch, 1861; 150-Mile Ranch, 1861; 100-Mile Ranch, 1863; Gang Ranch, 1863-80; and the Okanagan Mission near Kelowna, 1859. Centres developed at watering sites and good pasturage along the way, for example, Lillooet, Cache Creek, Clinton, 100-Mile House, 150-Mile House, and Soda Creek. Shortly thereafter



Branding at Lewis Campbell's ranch east of Kamloops



Paper chase at Grande Prairie—1900

Kamloops Museum & Archives Photo

the side valleys were settled. Kamloops was not settled until the late 1860's because it was off the main Cariboo Road traffic, and the drovers, for the most part, were not interested in settling. It was almost a decade later before the Nicola Valley was settled. By the early to middle 1880's, most of the main ranches had become established in the Okanagan, Similkameen, Nicola, Thompson, and lower Cariboo regions.

Many, if not the majority, of the ranches were first established by well-educated, middle class British immigrants. They brought their own form of culture with them. They rode to the hounds, played cricket and polo, enjoyed afternoon teas and soirees. The men were willing also to assume community, administrative, and legislative responsibilities. They played, therefore, an influential role in the developing of the interior of the province and brought stability and continuity to this sparsely populated country.

The Chilcotin region started to develop when, in 1873, the government opened land along the Chilcotin River from its junction with the Fraser River almost to the point where it meets Alexis Creek. Examples were the Withrow Ranch in 1865 and the Cotton and Deer Park ranches near Riske Creek (1866-71). At that time their nearest supply point was Yale, over 300 miles away. Here again, people settled along the river first, but by 1900 had moved back onto the meadows of the plateau. The Chilcotin was afforded a measure of recognition when Fred Becher built the first hotel and store at Riske Creek. At one time it was the best stocked store north of Vancouver. Meals in the hotel were 25 cents and whiskey was one dollar a bottle—25 cents less if you brought your own bottle. The Chilcotin Road was built in 1888, starting at Williams Lake. First the route was via ferry from Fort Alexandria or Soda Creek until the Chimney Creek bridge was built in 1904.

Consolidation

The coming of the railway set off the next big stage in the development of the ranching industry since it afforded easier access to markets, improved the availability of supplies, and increased the population and the demand for meat. The tracks were laid along the Thompson and Fraser rivers in 1883 and 1884 and trans-Canada trains were running by 1886. This caused a shift in trade routes, location of settle-

ment areas, and the nature of the ranches. The stage terminus moved from Yale to Ashcroft, for example, and railway divisional points helped communities, such as Kamloops, gain new life. In the late 1880's and 90's, large ranching companies were in ascendancy and strongly influenced local politics. Soon after World War I, all land suited to cattle ranching had been acquired, but consolidation of ranches continued for some years. The Pacific Great Eastern Railway was built from Squamish at the coast to Lillooet and Quesnel and was operating by 1917. This railway caused a shift in the Cariboo settlement centre from 150-Mile House to Williams Lake. Railway and road construction to the Cariboo eliminated most of the road houses and removed the local markets for hay and garden produce; this changed the character of the region greatly.

Cattle Breeds

Many of the early cattle brought to British Columbia were of mixed breeds from the northern United States. However, the Hudson's Bay Company utilized the dual purpose Durham (Shorthorn) breed and probably some Devons at their forts in the Oregon Territory and Dr. McLoughlin brought some of these to British Columbia. James Steele brought some purebred Shorthorns from eastern Canada in 1877. Aberdeen Angus gained popularity around the turn of the century. The first carload of purebred Herefords was brought into the Nicola Valley in 1888 from Alberta and Quebec, by the Douglas Lake Ranch.

Range Administration

The colonial administration gradually recognized the stock raising potential of the Interior and the role it could play in food production. They encouraged the small ranching population with a generous pastoral lease system and a legislative framework which ensured some control but with a minimum of bureaucratic interference. The Lands Act of 1870 allowed a 160-acre preemption, which was soon increased to 320 acres, for one dollar per acre, plus the purchase of 640 acres at from one to five dollars per acre. Nine years later, leases of up to 100,000 acres were introduced for one cent per acre.

Grazing in the early days was confined almost entirely to the grasslands so it was not long before these areas were

fully utilized. Also, cattle and horses were left surplus on the range following the loss in markets resulting from the collapse of the gold rush and completion of construction of the railway.

Many ranges were overgrazed before the turn of the century. Ranges were being fenced by that time, as homesteaders arrived. Soon consideration was being given to utilizing forested range for summer grazing. Cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*) entered the range country in 1915 and spread rapidly. Severe grasshopper outbreaks were reported from the Nicola Valley as early as 1889. Both above situations suggest poor range condition at that time. Temporary respite from overstocking came during a number of severe winters between 1879 and 1897 during which thousands of cattle died since no winter feed was put up. The realization of the necessity for putting up winter feed that resulted from these experiences represented another major shift in ranching practices. The horse population was reduced temporarily by markets of the Boer War and World War I. However, feral horses were again causing great damage to the range by 1930.

In 1876, the "Cattle Ranges Act" appeared. It provided for recognition of "Commons" and was a means of affording some protection from alienation for key ranges and for regulating use, although 2 years earlier an amendment to the Breeding Stock Act of 1873 recognized the right of ranchers to graze on Crown Lands.

Administration of Crown (public) grazing lands, however, was relatively haphazard, until the passage of the Grazing Act in 1919. It came mostly through leasing under the Lands Act, also the Crown Lands Pasture Act of 1911. In 1919, T.P. MacKenzie in the Department of Lands designed a Grazing Act for British Columbia and was later named Commissioner of Grazing with the Forest Branch of the Department of Lands and headquartered in Victoria.

Continuing concern for the depleted condition of the range resource developed to the point where an inquiry was conducted by the Chief Forester in 1930. To bring administration closer to the ranchers, the Grazing Division was moved to Kamloops in 1932. Gradually, the Grazing Division was increased in number of professional staff at Kamloops and the other forest districts. The Crown ranges have shown great improvement over the past four decades, largely as a result of the experience and dedication of the professional

staff to sound administration and range management.

In 1978, the Forest and Grazing acts were rewritten and passed by the Legislature. The acts emphasize pursuit of maximum productivity goals for both forest and range resources with due concern to the long-term economic and social benefits.

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, carried out a survey of range conditions. This led to the establishment of a research sub-station of Manyberries at Kamloops in 1935, under the direction of Ed W. Tisdale. The station was closed in 1940 because of World War II, to be re-opened in 1947 as an independent research station. The present station has a staff of six scientists and covers the disciplines of range management, forage crops, cattle management, soils, plant biochemistry, and plant physiology as they apply to the rangeland resource.

Producer Associations

Another step in the maturing of the cattle industry in British Columbia was the banding together of ranchers to form cattlemen's associations. At least seven local associations had been formed by 1914 when the B.C. Stock Breeders Association was organized. In 1919, the Association organized the first Bull Sale in Kamloops with a view to improving the quality of bulls on British Columbia ranches. These sales have been held every year since. In 1929, the association was renamed the B.C. Beef Cattle Growers' Association (later renamed the B.C. Cattlemen's Association). This Association has been a strong voice in determining the direction and welfare of the beef industry in British Columbia since its organization.

The ranching industry largely determined the character of the Interior of British Columbia. It provided substance and colour to the region and shaped its heritage. Ranching itself has changed over the century since its beginning from an extensive, casual, pioneering way of life to a modernized business enterprise. Management of the range and cost of production of beef have improved over the past 40 years. We can all hope that it will have as colourful and exciting a future as it has had a past.

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