

Cattle Driving and Ranching on the Great Plains

A Review Essay by Dave Mills

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The cattle industry on the Great Plains has evolved due to numerous factors. These factors, including environmental, economic, geographic, and biological, have combined and evolved over the last hundred fifty years, though the origins of the cattle trade bear little resemblance to the business of today. The cattle industry in the United States saw its humble beginnings after the Civil War, as cowboys drove the range cattle out of Texas to the processing sites farther north. A series of man made innovations such as railroads, feedlots, and barbed wire fences forced the industry to evolve, and led to the demise of that most romantic of plains legends, the cattle drive. Nature also forced the industry to evolve, as ranchers discovered after the harsh winters at the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. One of the earliest examinations of the transformation of the cattle industry was completed by a former cowboy, Edward Everett Dale.

Edward Everett Dale wrote an excellent overview of the subject in his book, *The Range Cattle Industry*, published in 1930. Dale must have been rather unique for his time; he was a former cattleman who earned a Ph.D. from Harvard in 1922. Regardless of how he defined himself, Dale was a widely respected historian at the University of Oklahoma, and held a seat on the Oklahoma Historical Society Board of Directors from 1930 to 1972. His treatment of the cattle industry on the Great Plains was really the first attempt to define the issue. In his book, Dale traces the roots of the cattle industry from the early trail drives to the fenced pastures on the plains. More specifically, he traces the relationship between the range cattle and the feedlots in the cornbelt, where cattle were more efficiently fattened before processing.

Any history of the cattle industry on the Great Plains has to begin in Texas, where wild cattle were abundant and free for the taking. In the early 1800s both the Mexican and later the Texas government gave away parcels of land which attracted many young men eager to start cattle operations. The local cattle needed only be rounded up and driven to New Orleans either for slaughter or shipment through the port to other areas. Other herds were driven north to Chicago. Driving cattle, however, required a thorough knowledge, and many of the men lured to the venture simply lacked the understanding. Many went bankrupt, and the cattle market remained depressed until the 1860s.

The close of the Civil War brought two conditions: an abundance of men out of work and an appetite for beef in the growing United States. The ranges of Texas were abundant with cattle which brought men willing to round them up and drive them north to feed the populations in the east, the army occupying the Great Plains, and the Indians residing on reservations with no buffalo to hunt. This formula of free cattle and a hungry

populace seemed destined to ensure financial success, but the reality was quite different. In the early years thieves, outlaws, and Indians stole cattle and horses, and farmers in Kansas and Missouri were incensed when cattle trampled their crops. Many townspeople formed bands of militia, refusing the herds passage. Finally, disease from the Texas cattle infested other domestic breeds farther north. Most early cattle drives ended in financial disaster.

Salvation came in the form of Joseph McCoy, who picked Abilene, Kansas to build a railroad station away from the major agricultural areas to ship, rather than drive, the cattle to market. He sent riders south to Texas to inform cattlemen of the facilities at Abilene, and shipments began in 1867. Soon other railroads built facilities, shipping cattle to major processing sites such as Chicago and Kansas City. More importantly, cattle were driven to the Dakotas, Montana, and Wyoming where the prairie grasses were more nutritious than in Texas and cattle grew faster and larger, and gained weight on the drive.

Inexperienced cattlemen soon gave way to professional drivers, moving the cattle around the Kansas farms to the stockyards or plains in the north. There were other problems, however. Kansas farmers complained of the cattle drives picking up their cattle along the way, and Texas Fever threatened to decimate the Kansas herds. To combat this, Kansas passed a law prohibiting Texas cattle from entering the state except between December and March, cutting off the best driving time. The Texans responded bitterly, demanding the establishment of a national cattle trail from Texas to Canada to accommodate them. The plan was never realized, as the other plains states feared overgrazing. Cattle drivers were forced to bypass the state, and eventually the cattle

drives came to an end as the number of railroads made shipping a more economical proposition and fences barred the trails.

The cattle industry saw other changes, as cattlemen soon learned that grain was much more efficient in getting cattle ready for market. After the civil war, steers feeding on grass needed five or six years to reach the required size, but steers on grain only needed four years, and later three years to reach market weight. Dale argues that a division of labor began involving the plains states and the corn belt. The plains states had the room to let large herds roam and breed, and the more populous corn states such as Illinois, Iowa, and Nebraska took the young calves and fattened them for market.

While the feedlot may have been more efficient at fattening cattle for market, no aspect of the cattle industry excites the imagination more than the cattle drive. In 1903, Andy Adams wrote *The Log of a Cowboy* based firmly on his own recollections as a cowboy in Texas, and in response to the unrealistic accounts being written during that time. *The Log of a Cowboy* is considered by some to be the definitive work on cattle drives in literature. Adams book is incredibly realistic, and the facts contained in this fictitious account greatly illuminate the hardships of the undertaking.

In the story, the main character leaves Georgia as a young boy, bound for a cattle ranch in Texas after his father returns from the Civil War. The main character spent his youth working cattle on the family farm, and at the age of twenty leaves on his first cattle drive, taking a herd of longhorns to the Blackfoot Indian Reservation in the northwest corner of Montana in 1882. The herd is a large one, numbering 3,100 head, whereas the average herd at the time numbered around twenty-five hundred.

The framework of a cattle drive as detailed by Adams was interesting. The leader of the expedition was called a *Segundo* and was responsible for every aspect of the drive, to include delivering the correct number of cattle, feeding men and animals, outfitting the chuck wagon, and maintaining a schedule to meet the delivery date in the contract. The cook was responsible for feeding the men and setting up camp each night, and the horse wrangler was responsible for the care and collection of the many horses throughout the drive. The *Segundo*, cook, and horse wrangler did not pull night duty, riding the outer perimeter of the cattle to watch for trouble. That duty was left to the hired men.

Each man was expected to provide his own saddle and bridle for the many horses he was to use throughout the drive. A cowhand was given up to ten horses, and might change mounts three or four times per day as horses became exhausted working day after day. Each man would drive cattle from sunrise to sunset, and would pull night duty for two and a half hours each night, whistling as they rode to reassure the cattle. Sleep was a precious commodity.

Throughout the book, Adams uses the *Segundo* giving advice to the younger riders as an opportunity to emphasize the expectations of the hired hands. For example, the comfort of the men is not important, for men were cheap, but cattle cost money. Second, never let the cattle know they are being driven, but let them think they are moving voluntarily. Finally, the leader advises his men to take care of their horses, for a man on foot is useless.

The actual function of driving the herd was carefully orchestrated. Two riders, called point men, rode out near the front of the herd, but to the rear of the leaders. By “pushing” the leaders in one direction or another, the entire herd could be directed. The

main body was controlled by the remainder of the men, called swing men, who ensured that the cattle did not wander off, and warded off stray cattle that might try to join the herd.

Stampedes were always a concern, but the cowboys knew from experience that a herd of cattle that was well fed and well watered was much less likely to act up, though stampedes were the results of fear brought about by unexpected events such as lightning, a clap of thunder, or the scent of a wild animal. The only remedy to curb a stampede was to get to the front of the herd and try to turn it, so that the entire herd was eventually running in a large circle until it tired. Unless the herd was turned, the entire herd might end up scattered in all different directions.

At the conclusion of the cattle drive, the condition and number of cattle was verified against the contract. It may have been necessary to count the cattle several times until a number could be agreed upon. When the cattle were disposed of, the horses were sold off as well, since it was too much trouble to ship them or drive them back to Texas where numerous horses were always available. Other unnecessary items were sold off or thrown away, and the men received their pay. Eventually, the men would purchase railroad tickets for the journey home.

One of the destinations of Texas cattle was the northwestern plains in Montana and Canada, an area examined by Warren M. Elofson. A rancher in his spare time, Elofson is also a professor of history at the University of Calgary and the author of many books that focus on the Great Plains. In his book, *Frontier Cattle Ranching in the Land and Times of Charlie Russell*, Elofson argues that the cattle industry on both sides of the border was initially conducted in much the same way and underwent transformations for

the same reasons: climatic, geographic, cultural, and market conditions. To prove his point, Elofson compared two regions, one in Alberta and the other in Montana, and in the end determined that the international boundary was more of a psychological demarcation rather than a barrier separating disparate people.

Both regions began their cattle operations with rather humble beginnings. In Montana the cattle business grew out of the need to feed local miners in the 1860s, and the first herds were made up of exhausted and crippled remnants of the wagon trains heading west. In comparison, the first herds bound for Alberta arrived in 1875, principally to feed Indians in the region. At first the first ranching operations in both regions were characterized as small endeavors.

If ranches in the regions started out small, they did not remain that way for long. Land in Montana was free, and land in Alberta was leased from the government for as little as one cent per acre. With the availability of so much land, a small number of ranches incorporating huge tracts of territory grew up quickly. As the size of these ranches indicated, operations generally only included grazing. Cattle were turned out to feed through summer and winter and were left to fend for themselves. A couple of times a year, the ranchers would round up all of the cattle in the area, brand and castrate the calves, and separate out the fat steers for market. By the middle of the 1880s, Montana was experiencing a cattle boom, and thousands of cattle were being driven north from Texas or else shipped from various locations from around the country to meet the demand.

Immigration onto the plains was not limited to cattle, as Elofson calls the late 1800s the “European Invasion” of both regions. Young, white, immigrant males came to

the plains looking for work in the expanding cattle business. Though some men had experience working with cattle, most young men came from the east or straight from European countries, hoping to find work and prove their manliness in the process. Of interest to Elofson were the “remittance men” who came from England with no skills or desire to work, but well financed by family members in England hoping the work would make men of them.

English mothers were not the only ones trying to populate the Great Plains with young men. The cattle boom and high beef prices led the beef industry, railroad industry, land industry, and other companies with an interest in raising cattle on the plains to promise quick profits for a minimum of investment. Literature at the time had a simple formula: the prairie grass was bountiful and free, cattle were cheap, and all one had to do was let the cattle eat and rake in the money. Other publications touted the healthy effects of life on the plains and promised to turn slight youths into strapping young men. Other factors such as western novels and Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show excited the imaginations of numerous people and contributed to the influx of settlers on the plains.

Many historians point to the massive influx of people as the reason the ranches were downsized so dramatically, but Elofson points to the severe winters as the main reason. The winter of 1886-87 was so brutal that Montana ranchers lost forty to sixty percent of their herds. The snow and ice was so thick and covered the ground for so long that the cattle simply starved to death. Another contributing factor was that by this time the ranges in Montana were so overcrowded that most cattle were undernourished going into the harsh weather. Elofson argues that the Canadian region was less unaffected by

the harsh winter that winter, as most ranches in that region were located in the foothills of the Rockies, they were more protected, and the ranges were not overcrowded.

While the ranchers in Montana had learned to adapt to the weather, the ranchers in Canada had not. By the time the devastating winter of 1906-07 hit, Montana ranchers had changed their methods of operations, and were relatively unaffected. Conversely, Canadian ranges were overcrowded by this time, ranches extended from the protection of the Rockies out into the prairie which offered little protection, and the only food available lay covered by hard-packed snow and ice. The Canadians had not learned the lessons that Montana ranchers did thirty years before.

Although the brutal winters affected the two regions at different times, Elofson maintains that both areas learned the same lessons and responded similarly. Huge ranches that depended solely on range grass year round were vulnerable to severe weather in the winter. Ranches necessarily dwindled in size from hundreds of thousands of acres to only a few thousand. Numbers of cattle were reduced from thousands to hundreds per ranch. The smaller scale allowed numerous changes that led to greater efficiency.

Cattle were no longer allowed to roam free on the ranges all year. They were first fenced in pastures in winter, and eventually pastured behind fences year round, leading to greatly improved herds. Improved techniques in range management and storing hay to feed through the winter reduced the number of cattle killed each year. Pastures were planted with improved strains of grasses that provided more nutrition, leading to healthier cattle. Cattle kept in pastures could be sorted by grade and undesirable traits culled out of the herd, and bulls and cows could be mixed at planned intervals to ensure calves were

born in the spring and not the middle of winter, ensuring their survival. Finally, European cattle were introduced to improve domestic bloodlines.

If the business of cattle drives and ranching operations was to get fattened cattle to the processing plants, Frank Hastings had experience on the receiving end of the business. In his book, *A Ranchman's Recollections*, Frank Hastings recalls his experience, first as a ranch hand and then as a manager of a huge ranch in Texas, and finally as a cattle buyer for the larger processing houses. The book was an interesting one, and Hastings writes it in the excessively humble prose popular at the time. Of particular interest is his writing on the leaders in the meat packing business, the Armour and Swift families, for whom he later worked.

Prior to buying cattle for the packing houses, Hastings was the manager of a large cattle ranch, whose main interest was selling to the processing houses. With any business, certain problems were bound to arise. Specifically, Hastings recalls the scourge of Texas Fever, a deadly and contagious disease that decimated cattle populations. In 1871, the governor of Illinois called a conference and invited representatives of all cattle states, with the exception of Texas, to find a solution. No one knew what caused the illness, but ticks and other parasites were suspected. If ticks were the culprits, many remedies to eradicate the tick infestation were tried, including running cattle through huge tanks of crude oil and injecting ears with gasoline. Eventually, Texas Fever subsided as quickly as it arose, and the business continued moving forward.

As a buyer, Hastings dealt with processing, packing, and shipping the beef carcasses throughout the country. Refrigerated railcars were invented as soon as 1875, allowing the major packing houses such as Armour and Swift to send fresh beef around

the country after it left a central packing facility. At the packing houses, all parts of the animal not used for meat were used in other products: bones were used to make piano keys, knife handles and buttons; fine ear hair was used to make “camel hair” brushes; and blood was used for many products, including the early production of photographic paper.

If the northern plains had to adapt to harsh winter conditions, the southern plains generally did not. *Buffalo Creek Chronicles* is an examination of a modern cattle ranch in Oklahoma spanning some sixty thousand acres and handed down through several generations. The ranch had to adapt to other conditions as the industry evolved, but in some ways has managed to cling to its heritage of traditional cattle ranching.

“Jimmy Few Clothes” earned his nickname at the age of fifteen when he applied for a job as a horse wrangler on a cattle drive in 1892. He was so poor that the other cowboys had to loan him clothes, thus earning him the nickname that he kept with pride until he died. Jimmy was a regular cowboy on the drives from Texas to Oklahoma, and he began to acquire land in Oklahoma along Buffalo Creek with his wages. By the time cattle drives became outdated at the beginning of the 1900s, Jimmy had acquired enough land to start a cattle ranch.

The ranch, like so many others at the time, took in cattle from Texas, fattened them on Oklahoma grass, and eventually shipped them north to processing plants. Jimmy eventually passed on the ranch to his son Bob, who only managed to hold on to the ranch during the depression by taking a lucrative job preparing drilling sites for numerous oil companies. Throughout the depression, neighbors continuously asked Bob to buy their farms, and he paid what he could. These farms had failed as many others did in the era of the dust bowl, but Bob recognized that native prairie grasses were well adapted to

drought conditions and held the topsoil well. He planted all of the farms back grass and turned them into grazing land. During the depression, Bob's ranch eventually grew to its present size and condition, rich in native grasses.

Diaries of cattlemen from Texas noted that grass on each side of the cattle trails was grazed down to nearly nothing, and that buffalo in their huge numbers similarly devastated the grass, but in both cases the animals moved on and allowed the grass to recover. Cattle on rangelands were relatively stationary, and grasslands were not given a chance to recover. In addition, fire is necessary to manage grasslands, but occurs relatively rarely with the absence of Indians on the plains. Therefore, a series of modern techniques has evolved to manage the range grasses. Cattle are moved from fenced pasture to fenced pasture in order to ensure that overgrazing does not occur.

To commemorate the old days, a cattle drive is held on the ranch each October. Texas Longhorns are brought out of the pastures and driven around the ranch until lunchtime, when everyone stops at the chuck wagon for the noontime meal. Other odes to the past are much more obvious. Traditional cowboy dress is still worn by many on the plains as an expression of heritage, but others still wear the apparel as a matter of practicality.

Practicality may have forced changes in dress, but it also transformed the industry itself. Nature and man combined to force cattle off of the ranges and into a more scientific and controlled environment. Cattle no longer roam the northern plains as they did after the Civil War, fending for themselves summer and winter. They are now managed on fenced pastures or feedlots, given copious amounts of hay and grain throughout the year, eating until a truck arrives to take them to processing sites. Even the

cattle evolved, as improved breeds and strains were introduced. Though the modern cattle business will continue to evolve and change as external forces require, the origins of the cattle industry and its mystique will be a part of plains history for eternity.