Ranching in Beaverhead County, 1863–1960 | Transition through three generations

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RANCHING IN BEAVERHEAD COUNTY: 1863-1960
TRANSITION THROUGH THREE GENERATIONS

by

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Date
Historians have generally concentrated on the first generation of pioneer ranchers in their studies of the Western frontier. These men fostered the image of the "cattlebaron," and the legend of the American rancher was born. This image, however, was only accurate for a short time in the history of the frontier, and then only partly so. Although the legend of the rancher/cattlebaron remained, the reality of his persona transformed into something quite different over the decades with the passing of the pioneers. This study concentrates on nine ranching families in Beaverhead County, Montana over 100 years in order to examine the changing circumstances, both economic and otherwise, of the three generations of ranchers. Did the image of the "cattlebaron" continue to be representative of the second and third generations?

This study utilized public documents such as probates, mortgage records, deed records and tax assessment lists to gain a knowledge of the economic prosperity over the generations. Family histories were also utilized in order to put together a background of the nine families. Both these sources were supplemented with books and articles on ranching and Montana history.

Of the nine families, fewer than half were able to keep the ranches through the second generation. The economic conditions in the second and third decades of the twentieth century were responsible for most of the second generations inability to maintain the family ranches. Loss of access to the open range, decrease in prices for agricultural goods and heavy mortgaging were the main reasons for the losses, either by sale or bankruptcy. By 1960, only three families continued to ranch on the land settled by their great grandfathers. The image of the rancher as the "cattlebaron" was inaccurate for the second and third generations, who had to adapt to an environment far different from their forebearers.
INTRODUCTION

The public has usually considered the American rancher and the infamous and legendary "cattle barons" of the American West as one and the same. Portrayed as powerful, wealthy, and independent, on the screen and on the pages of Western novels, these "Lords of the Prairies" ruthlessly drove the saintly yeoman from their rangeland. The image, an extension of the "Myth of the West" as a whole, was never wholly accurate at its inception and has become increasingly inaccurate as the decades pass and the economics of ranching change. Nonetheless, the image remains dominant in the minds of the public, perpetuated by Hollywood's movie factories and the fertile minds of American novelists.

If there ever were a time when the "legend" of the cattleman came closest to living up to his image, it was during the years of the open range, before and directly after the turn of the century. Grass was plentiful, the land was open, and the Federal government played only a minor role in the lives of the ranchers. The opportunity existed for many pioneer cattlemen to build successful ranching operations on the public range, and many took advantage of these favorable circumstances to do so. For this really rather brief period of time in the history of the West, the
rancher came closest to playing out successfully the role of the "aristocrat of the country," and it is this image that has inaccurately remained with him into the present century.

Although the romance and bravado of the rancher remained with his image, the economic and environmental circumstances of his existence changed dramatically with the onset of the new century. What became of the sons of the "Cattle Barons," whose fathers had become legends, often building successful enterprises (though often hardly "empires") to turn over to the second generation? Did the prosperity continue to flourish as successfully and as long as the image has? Historians and novelists have concentrated less on these men, the sons and the grandsons of the pioneers, because little of the glamour, danger, and excitement surrounded their lives as it did their more colorful pioneer fathers. They nonetheless played as important a role in the maturing of the West as did their forebears. The "Cattle Baron" image remained with, and perhaps plagued the sons, for if the myth of the "cattle baron" were exaggerated in the 1890's, it was grossly inadequate in the 1930's. Ironically, the challenges facing the sons of the pioneers, their finances, and their
lifestyles, more accurately paralleled those of their legendary enemy, the struggling yeoman, than they did the "Cattle Barons" with whom they continued to be associated.

By chronicling a 100 years of nine pioneer ranch families in the Beaverhead Valley - from the building of the ranches to the harder years of the second and third generations - it becomes clear that the prosperity did not always endure as long as the image. Eight of the nine families all came to the Beaverhead Valley early in the 1860's, began ranching operations, prospered, and became leaders in not only their own community but often also in the state as a whole. Although the fates of the families and the ranches were different, they all had to adapt to changing conditions as the decades passed and the economics of ranching changed.
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I

EARLY BEAVERHEAD COUNTY: MONTANA TERRITORY

Beaverhead County is typical of the broad valleys that characterize southwestern Montana. The altitude in the grazing areas of the Beaverhead range from 5,218 feet near the Dillon area to over 7,000 feet in the Big Hole Valley. The average rainfall is 10-12 inches per year and the annual mean temperature is 43 degrees, ranging from 25 to 35 degrees on the average in the winters. The total land area in the county is 5,547 square miles, making it currently the biggest county in the state.¹ The WPA study done on Montana agriculture in 1940 reported that Beaverhead county was reputed to be the second largest livestock county in the United States. Due to high altitude, the study comments, "most of the area is not adapted to farming but affords

¹ Fact Sheet/General information, Beaverhead County Chamber of Commerce, Dillon, Montana.
excellent range and winter feed for livestock."

The Dillon area was a "Common Ground," or hunting area used by the Flathead, Nez Perce, Shoshone, Lemhi, Bannock, Crow, and Blackfeet Indians. No particular tribe used this area as their permanent territory, although different tribes passed through the area on their way to buffalo hunting grounds to the east, and skirmishes, horse stealing, and tribal rivalries took place in the Valley and surrounding areas.

The men of the 1805 Lewis and Clark expedition were the first recorded whites to visit the Beaverhead. In this area their Indian guide Sacajawea became reunited with her people, recognizing the rock at the head of the Valley the Shoshoni had named "Beaver's Rock," and from which the river and county took their name.

In years following the expedition, such well known

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2 Montana Writers' Project, Works Progress Administration on Montana agriculture, Beaverhead County (Historical Society Library: Helena, 1940, microfilm #250, reel #14), p.25. Hereafter cited as WPA report.


trappers as John Colter and the Hudson's Bay Company explorers Alexander Ross, Peter Skene Ogden, and John Work traversed the Beaverhead in search of furs. The country then became a hunting ground for the Rocky Mountain Fur Company of St. Louis about 1830, and later James Bridger travelled through the Valley, as did Henry Vanderburgh of the American Fur Company in 1832. \(^5\) Father DeSmet arrived with the first wagon train in Montana in 1841, and crossed into the headwaters of the Beaverhead from Fort Hall on his way to the Bitterroot. Many of the emigrants trying to get to the Salmon and Clearwater gold fields also passed through the Beaverhead, following the Oregon Trail to Fort Hall and turning north to cross the Divide into the Beaverhead to search for a pass to the headwaters of the Salmon. \(^6\) The lasting impact of any whites in the Valley did not come until the first permanent white settlement, after the gold strike on Grasshopper Creek in 1862.

In that year the discovery by John White set off the first significant gold rush in what was later to become

\(^5\) Ibid., p. A-1.

Montana Territory. By the end of 1862 the settlement had an estimated 400 people, and in 1864 when Montana became a territory, Bannack became its first capital, and reached an estimated 8,000 in population at its peak.\(^7\)

Cattle wintered in the Beaverhead Valley even before the first white settlement at Bannack began to flourish. As the grass along the Oregon Trail became scarce from constant grazing, enterprising traders and herdsmen drove their cattle north into the sheltered valleys of the upper Missouri in what later became western Montana, and wintered along the Beaverhead, Ruby and Deer Lodge Valleys.\(^8\) In 1849 Richard Grant, a former superintendent of trading posts for the Hudson's Bay Company, brought cattle from Salt Lake City to graze the valleys of southwestern Montana. His sons James and Johnny lived near the junction of the Beaverhead and Stinkingwater rivers, with other traders and some Indians also living near by. Because of the Mormon war of 1857-58 many traders took refuge in the mountains of western Montana. Much of the information on the grazing resources of

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\(^7\) Brown, *Historical Overview*, 46.

the upper Missouri country came from their experiences in
the region, and they also established a practical route
from the trail to that region. Later, when gold was
discovered in western Montana, the trail over which the
traders fled with their herds became the chief connection
between the mining towns of Montana and the Oregon Trail. 9

In 1857 James and Granville Stuart, returning East from
the California mines, met a man named Jake Meek on the
Oregon Trail. Meek was a former employee of the Hudson's Bay
Company who carried mail and express between Fort Hall and
Fort Boise. Stuart reports:

Meek was engaged in trading ponies, dressed
skins and buckskin clothing to the migrants
for money and tired out horses and
cattle... He told us that the past winter
(1856) he had wintered in the Beaverhead
Valley some three hundred miles north and
that the Indians in that region were
friendly, the winters not severe, that the
game was plentiful, and that he intended to
go there and winter as soon as the cattle and
horses he had traded for had rested up enough
to stand the trip... When we came to Montana
in 1858 the Grants and the Jacobs had herds
of several hundred cattle and horses... on
winter range in Montana, the favorite being
the Beaverhead, Stinkingwater and Deer Lodge
Valleys... 10

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9 Ibid., 16.

10 Brown, Historical Overview, 106.
Stuart's party accompanied Meek to the Beaverhead Valley to winter, and camped on the mouth of Blacktail Creek. At this time there were a few white men in the Valley living with their Indian families and cattle. These included Richard Grant and his sons, who had a house at the mouth of the Stinking Water; others reportedly lived in elk skin lodges. The stock wintered on range without shelter or feed other than the native grass. Stuart's reaction to the Beaverhead was certainly one fit for promotional reports:

As soon as we crossed the divide a wonderful change appeared. Instead of the gray sagebrush covered plains of the Snake river, we saw smooth rounded hills, and sloping bench land covered with yellow bunch that waved in the wind, like a field of grain. A beautiful clear stream ran Northwest on its way to join the Missouri river. The forepart of October gave days of brilliant sunshine, warm and pleasant, with no snow anywhere except on the tops of higher mountains. We discovered as we moved our way down the Valley that there was plenty of game consisting of black tailed deer, bighorn or mountain sheep and many bands of elk... The winter was mild with very little snow, it was our custom to go hunting without a coat.\(^{11}\)

The experience of these early cattlemen along the trail

and in the mountains of western Montana demonstrated the practicability of wintering stock on the northern ranges a full decade before the appearance of the Texas longhorn. Any further expansion in the pioneer industry beyond this point, however, had to await the development of new local markets. The discovery of gold in the Rocky Mountains created just such an opportunity, but by this time early cattlemen had already established the upper Missouri country as the cradle of the stock growing industry in Montana.  

12 Osgood, Day of Cattleman, 17.
II
INTRODUCTION OF THE FAMILIES

Robert H. Fletcher in *Free Grass to Fences* reports that "people of every description kept arriving at the Montana gold camps. All had the spirit of adventure and enterprise that takes men to new lands."¹ Although they came from a variety of backgrounds, the twelve men of the pioneer ranches of the Beaverhead shared this spirit. Charles A. Sonnichsen's conclusion from his report on the American cattlemen is appropriate for the ranchers in the western valleys. "What could the individuals in such an assortment as this have in common?" he asks, "Not much probably, except for the qualities needed for survival on the frontier."² The pioneers' comments when asked why they came to the territory reveal this diversity; their reasons ranged from gold fever to searching for good grazing range. They did share at least


one other prominent characteristic— that of a strong desire to make a success in a frontier economy— demonstrated by Martin Barrett's simple, "I wanted to get rich" response when asked why he came to early Idaho Territory.  

Two of the twelve men who came to the Beaverhead were Irish emigrants to North America, one came from New York, one from the South, one from the Midwest, three from Pennsylvania, and the Selway family came from England. Their birth dates range from 1829–1845, and from first to tenth child in order of birth. Their early occupations included carriage maker, teamster, bookkeeper, tanner, farmer, machinist and shovel maker. Five of the twelve early pioneers had engaged in mining before coming to Montana territory, an occupation that took them to New Mexico.

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3 Sketch of the life of Martin Barrett, Manuscript Collection #64, Box 1, Folder 2, Montana Historical Society Library, Helena, Montana.
Colorado and California. 4

The early pioneers also shared a lack of formal education. Education or lack of it, however, certainly did not seem a matter of much consequence to ambitious young men in the middle of the 19th century. In fact, the term "self made man" assumed an absence of higher learning. Business opinion ran against higher learning until the end of the century, and experts often noted the few college graduates in the ranks of the business elite when expounding on the ease one could prosper in the 19th century. Most advocates of self help maintained that higher learning undermined the rugged personal qualities necessary for success. Success, they felt, demanded a strong will, diligence, persistence, ambition, good health, self discipline; all qualities that colleges allegedly crippled and dwarfed in their concentration on the development of mental faculties.

College men were thought to be awkward, hypersensitive, impatient, conceited, pedantic, confused, bookish and utterly impractical.⁵

It was not until later in the century that the "ideal" of the business community sought out more than a common school training and a business apprenticeship, which most of the settlers coming to Bannack had. By even national standards, the twelve men had the basic prerequisites for success in the business arena, if not in the goldfields and mountains of Montana.

With these seemingly dubious advantages the experts had deemed necessary for success and the advice of Horace Greely to "Go West Young Man," the men began their search for prosperity. John F. Bishop, born the oldest son in 1836 in New York, left home in 1857 with $60.00. He teamed and rafted on the Wisconsin river before buying forty acres of prairie land in Wisconsin and unsuccessfully beginning a corn crop. At the end of six months of farming he built a flat boat and travelled down river to Hannibal, Missouri, then continued on to St. Louis and finally ended up at

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Leavenworth in 1860. He hired out to an overland train bound for Denver, and subsequent journeys took him back to Denver and Nevada City, Colorado where he mined for three years. He came to Bannack by way of Bridger cutoff and Soda Springs, arriving in April of 1863 with $175.00. In the fall he travelled to Salt Lake where he purchased two oxen and a stock of merchandise. He reportedly sold his merchandise at Virginia City, realizing a profit of $1,000.00 and the following spring returned to Salt Lake and purchased an ox team and a stock of flour, which he sold at the rate of $25.00 per hundred on his return. In 1864 he made four trips to Salt Lake and reportedly cleared $5,000.00 as a result. He spent the winter of 1864-65 in Bannack, where he sold eighty fifty pound sacks of flour for $26.00 each. He worked as a freighter during the summer of 1865 travelling to Fort Benton, and the following spring he freighted between Salt Lake and Montana mining camps until the Spring of 1867.

Dave E. Metlen was born in Pennsylvania in 1837 and moved with his family in 1840 to Illinois. After fighting

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6 Sketch of life of J.F. Bishop, Manuscript Collection 64, Box 1, Folder 2, Montana Historical Society Library, Helena, Montana. Sanders, 890.

7 Progressive Men, 50-51.
for the Union in the War, he met Joe Shineberger and Martin Barrett in Utah in 1863. He came to Montana and located at Bannack where he engaged in freighting and stockraising.  

W.C. Orr was born in 1830 in Ireland and came to Ohio in 1836 with his family. At age 11 he worked as a carriagemaker in Wheeling, West Virginia until age 14 when he moved to Vicksburg, Mississippi and worked at his trade, where he remained until 1853. He sold his investment in the business and purchased a band of cattle and horses and started to cross the plains with a train of four or five families, bound for the Shasta Valley of California where he established a ranch. He turned out his stock and remained there until 1854, while he mined on the Klamath river. He met P.H. Poindexter, his future partner, in 1856 at which time Poindexter purchased an equal interest in Orr's ranch and stock. While the newly founded "Poindexter and Orr" company supplied the miners in the Humbug river area with butchered meat, a flood in 1861 drove people out of the Shasta Valley. As a result of the damage, William Orr decided to supply the mines in Idaho with cattle. In 1863 Orr began driving cattle through to Idaho City and other

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8 Leeson, 992.
mining points, while Poindexter remained on the ranch. In the Fall of 1865 Orr came to Bannack with a herd of cattle.  

Craig Cornell was a native of Indiana, born in 1839, the tenth child in his family. He grew up on a farm and received his education in the local district schools. In 1864 at age 25, he crossed the Plains by Lander's cutoff to Montana with a mule team, coming directly to Bannack where he worked at mining and cutting timber for $6.00 a day. In 1865 he prospected in Helena and in other parts of the territory until he located permanently in the Beaverhead in 1866.  

Joe Shineberger was born in 1838 in Philadelphia, and became a shovelmaker, until he felt the beckoning of the West. In 1859 he mined in California and then New Mexico before he met Martin Barrett, with whom he came to Montana in 1863.  

Born in 1840 in the county of Mayo, Ireland, the sixth son of nine boys, Martin Barrett came to Canada with his

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11 Leeson, 1000.
family in 1847. At age 14 he apprenticed in a tannery, working there for five years. At 19 he left for St. Joseph Missouri with a brother and a cousin, and after working at various things, hired out at $25.00 a month as a bullwhacker to cross the plains to Salt Lake, taking six months to make the trip. In the Spring of 1861 when the war broke out, he with others, made the overland journey to Colorado where he first met Joe Shineberger. In the fall of 1862 they each went their separate ways, with an agreement to meet in the spring and go to Idaho. After arriving in the territory they camped eleven miles below Bannack on Horse Prairie.  

James Selway immigrated to the United States with his family in 1849, at the age of nine. After learning the trade of machinist in Iowa, he started for Pike's Peak, but after hearing that the boom there was over, returned home. In 1863 he joined a train as a driver for $15.00 a month, and crossed the plains to Montana by way of Lander's cutoff. He first placer mined at Bannack, and later tried his luck at Virginia City. During the winters he trapped along the Beaverhead, Boulder and Gallatin rivers. Like many settlers, James' family joined him after he initially came West. His

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12 Barrett, sketch of life.
brothers John, Thomas and Robert followed him to his new home, as well as his widowed mother and all but one of his sisters. ¹³

J.C. Brenner was a late arrival, coming to Montana from a wholesale business in Philadelphia, where he was born in 1845. John Brenner came from a more illustrious background compared to his peers already established in the Beaverhead Valley. His father, reports Helen Sanders, was a personal friend of President James Buchanan, and one of the organizers of the Pennsylvania Mutual Life Insurance Company and a member of its Board until his death. He was also a director of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company and of the Girard National Bank in Philadelphia. J.C. worked in his hardware business until his father's death, and in 1883 came to Montana on his way to Oregon to invest in the lumber business. He stopped in Helena to wait for a stage and John Power talked him into delaying the trip and looking at a ranch below Dillon, where Brenner decided to remain. His wife and three sons joined him in 1885. ¹⁴


¹⁴ *Progressive Men*, 63. Sanders,
While miners arrived in Bannack and other Montana mining camps, western Montana increasingly developed into a stock raising center. As early as 1866 Nelson Story travelled over the Bozeman Trail with a herd of 600 Texas longhorns, and the number of cattle in the regions near the mines increased rapidly. The safest passage for cattle, however, continued to be along the line taken by the early cattlemen who drove north from the Mormon danger in 1857-58. Along this line ran the stage road that connected Montana with the Union Pacific and the rest of the world, and which passed directly through the Beaverhead Valley. In 1866 James Ryan and Michael Henneberry received a charter from the legislature to build the "Great Beaverhead Wagon Road," a toll road, through Ryan's Canyon to the Pleasant Valley Summitt (where the present interstate highway runs southwest to Idaho), and the new road further increased accessibility to the Beaverhead.

After arriving in either Bannack or the Beaverhead Valley, the twelve men eventually settled down on the places where they would spend the remainder of their lives.

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15 Osgood, 16.
16 The Dillon Tribune Examiner, 3 September 1980, p. F-1.
although at the time, many "expected to make his fortune and go home". The eventual change in mining methods from the relatively simple process of placering, to more complicated methods of underground mining that employed wage earners living in large settlements also came to the mines in the Beaverhead. As Osgood points out, the older crowd of miners scattered, not being the type to settle down as employees of a mining company:

Some drifted off to new mining fields, others turned to stock growing and settled down in some likely spot that they had noted in the old prospecting days. Here a cabin and corrals were built and a small band of cattle turned loose on the nearby hillsides. This change from miners to a stockmen's frontier created a demand for stock cattle that coincided at some point of time with the early Texas drives.

Mrs. Alice Barrett reported that her husband and the other settlers "bought a few horses and cows as they had means and so got a start, as anyone could at the time if they saved their money and didn't put too much of it in mining claims."  

The gold camps at Bannack, Alder Gulch and the other

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17 Barrett, sketch of life.
18 Osgood, Day of Cattleman, 53.
19 Barrett, sketch of life.
Montana mining camps had provided the local market needed to sustain a profitable cattle trade. All the men who would become stockgrowers in the Valley came to realize what had occurred to a number of early Montana stockgrowers: it was more profitable and more certain to take gold dust from the miners in exchange for beef than it was getting it from the placers. It was not uncommon in the camps for worn down oxen to bring $100.00 in gold when auctioned off to a crowd of miners, and beef often sold at 25c a pound. 20 Such prices as these and the free pastures in the mountain valleys induced many of the new arrivals to engage in stock raising. These included Granville Stuart and Con Kohrs, both of whom once operated butcher shops in Bannack. 21 By 1868 the assessors of the nine counties of Montana listed 10,714 oxen and 18,801 cows and calves. Four years later, the number of stock cattle had risen to over 75,000. 22 Their owners, including the men in the Beaverhead, made good profits in supplying the local market of mining camp, and later section crews and military posts.

20 Osgood, Day of Cattleman, 21.


22 Osgood, Day of Cattleman, 21.
With all these considerations and by such methods, the men began making their transition into ranching from the initial occupations they followed when they arrived in the Beaverhead. Land surveys began in the southwestern mountain valleys in 1867 and at this time the ranchers had irrigated hay lands. Many had homesteaded the mountain meadow and valley areas before the Texas Trail drives came to Montana in 1881. Most settlers had by this time realized the limitations of the land, the length of the growing season, moisture, altitude factors, and weather.²³

In the Fall of 1865 William Orr brought steers from the Shasta Valley to Bannack, selling them for $100.00 a head. When he found he could not winter them there, he moved them into the lower Beaverhead, on Blacktail Creek. The cattle wintered there so favorably, that the partners trailed their cattle into the Beaverhead for the next two years until they had located their entire stock business along Blacktail Creek. In 1866 Orr returned to California to his home ranch and drove another herd into the Beaverhead, and in 1867 his

partner Phillip Poindexter purchased 400 cattle in Oregon and drove them into the Beaverhead range. In 1870 Orr returned to California and drove a 2,700 head of sheep and 375 horses to Montana, which provided a solid base on which to build their livestock operation. By the late 1860's Poindexter and Orr had established their operation in Beaverhead County. In fact, brand number 1 in the official records of the Territory is the Square and Compass brand of the Poindexter and Orr operation.

Many of the early ranchers in the southwestern valleys diversified their crops early on. A number ran cattle combined with sheep, draft horses, saddle horses and perhaps raised alfalfa, oats or wheat. Poindexter and Orr raised Durham cattle, Clydesdale, Norman and Percheron horses and Cotswold and Merino sheep.

Dave Metlen sluiced out enough dust and nuggets on his placer claim near Bannack to purchase 100 head of Texas cattle in Salt Lake. He began his operation in the lower end of Horse Prairie Creek, approximately 50 miles southwest of

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24 Progressive Men, 346. Leeson, 993.
25 Leeson, 994.
26 Leeson, 994.
what is now Dillon and 12 miles southwest of Bannack, where Lewis and Clark first met up with the Shoshone in 1805. Here he settled next to the partners of Martin Barrett and Joe Shineberger, with whom he had originally set out for Bannack.

Also settling on Horse Prairie, Barrett began a dairy business to provide Bannack with butter at $1.25 a pound and sold wild hay to freighters at $40.00 a load. Many people arriving in Bannack with thin and tired oxen would sell or trade them to Barrett, who would fatten them on his meadows and sell them to other travelers later, along with freight cattle and horses. Barrett managed the operation while his partner Joe Shineberger mined at Bannack and Alder Gulch and spent his winters on the ranch.

In 1866 Craig Cornell located his ranch on the south side of what is now Dillon and began raising sheep and Norman horses. He eventually included crops of wheat, oats, timothy and alfalfa, as well as raising Holstein and Shorthorns, and Shropshire and Merino sheep. Many of the

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27 Fletcher, Free Grass to Fences, 30-31.

28 Barrett, sketch of life. Barrett and Shineberger ended their partnership in 1871. Shineberger then settled on his own ranch on the Red Rock river, south of what is now Dillon. They later partnered together to form the State Bank.
ranchers in the western valleys combined dairying with their beef cattle operations; these included the Poindexter and Orr operation, whose dairy products were well known. Joe Shineberger became known as "Butterball," after he began to furnish local residents with butter at $1.25 a pound.

J.F. Bishop settled on his ranch in 1866, nine miles north of the present town of Dillon. In 1868 he travelled to Salt Lake to buy cattle for his ranch, but found the prices so high he returned to Montana and bought the stock. In the spring of 1869 he and a friend, R.A. Reynolds, made the journey to Oregon and brought the first range sheep introduced in Montana. They originally went to buy horses, but the price was so high they decided to buy sheep instead. They purchased 1,500 head at $2.50 each and started back to Montana. When they camped at night they made a corral for the sheep by nailing strips of unbleached muslin to timber, and after a three month journey they arrived in the Beaverhead on November 17, 1869, drove the sheep to John Selway's ranch and wintered them on Birch Creek. The wool from this flock was the first wool sold in Montana.

29 Miller, 357. Fletcher, *Free Grass to Fences*, 30.

purchased by Colonel C.A. Broadwater for 19c a pound. 31

The first white settlers in the Beaverhead Valley, however, were James Selway and his family. The pioneers' first product was potatoes which they sold in Bannack in 1863 for 18c a pound. 32 James' brothers Robert, John and Thomas followed James to Montana in 1864 and 1865, taking all summer to make the journey. They came direct to the Beaverhead Valley, where James himself had homesteaded and had begun to raise cattle. His brother Robert arrived in 1865 and began farming, but after the loss of his third crop, decided against farming and also began raising cattle. Robert reported that when they came to the Valley, there were only three or four other settlers and the Bannack and "Spoke" Indians were numerous but friendly. In 1865 he raised his first crop of potatoes and wheat.

John Selway settled on Blacktail Creek, thirty miles southeast of Dillon, and raised horses and sheep. Tom also settled on the lower Blacktail and raised horses and cattle, and Robert settled north of the what is now Dillon, across


from the original Selway homestead, and raised cattle, horses and crops. The Selway JS brand, recorded in 1872, is one of the first on record in the Territory. The original Selway house was the first shingle-roofed house in the County, built in 1865.  

Friction between cattle and sheep men in the region never developed to a considerable degree. Granville Stuart reported "In the days of the big ranges there was never any serious trouble between the cattlemen and sheepmen and there was never a range war between them in Montana. Many of the cattlemen also had bands of sheep..." The Poindexter and Orr operation ran an estimated 2,500 sheep by 1872. Bishop had little trouble introducing sheep into the Beaverhead, although he reported, "there was one settler on Birch Creek who wrote a letter telling him that unless he took the sheep away he would scatter the sheep and kill the herder. This was the beginning of the range war between cattle and sheep men. It never amounted to much in our part of Montana."

Craig Cornell reported that sheep outfits tried to move on

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34 Brown, Historical Overview, 119, 115.
the range in 1900, but after a rifle battle, cattlemen chased them back to Spencer, Idaho. He agrees with Bishop, however, that on the whole there was little trouble between the cattlemen and the "woolies." 35

As Osgood reports, by the close of the 1860's there were cattle herds of considerable size in the northern section of the High Plains and mountain valleys, recruited from stock of the emigrant and gold seeker. By the time of the gold discovery at Alder Gulch, ranches were well established and ready to profit from that additional market. 36 D.E. Metlen sold cattle to mining camps or drovers; a four year old steer brought $18.00 to $25.00. 37 By 1864-65, the Territorial Legislature found it advisable to pass a law regulating marks and brands. 38

The pioneer ranchers in southwestern Montana typified many ranchers in the early stockgrowing families who worked their own ranch with their men, and also involved sons or

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36 Osgood, Day of the Cattlemen, 23.

37 WPA Report, p.2.

38 Atherton, Cattle Kings, 9.
other family members. They established their home ranch near water and timber resources and they often relied on outside areas for grazing.\(^3^9\) The center of the stock raising industry remained the Beaverhead and Deer Lodge Valleys, where owners found plenty of open land on which to graze their herds. In these regions the early ranchers operated in a manner far different from that of the range system that developed in Wyoming, and which Montana stock growers utilized later in the central and eastern parts of the state. Using whatever natural barriers there were that would prevent their stock from ranging too far, they fenced in vast tracts of country not yet in great demand. Eastern Montana ranchers would follow such methods of operation after the disastrous years of the late 1880's.\(^4^0\)

Colorful incidents periodically occurred in the lives of the early pioneers, for although the men themselves had decided to settle down somewhat from their vagabond lifestyles, the land around them remained relatively wild and unsettled. Their performance during these early trials provides some insight into how the men persevered, enabling

\(^{3^9}\) Brown, *Historical Overview*, 115.

\(^{4^0}\) Osgood, *Day of the Cattleman*, 56.
them to become successful later on in their careers. One such incident in 1864 involved Martin Barrett when neighbor Dave Metlen lived on the ranch with Barrett and Shineberger. The young men got word that the notorious outlaw Dutch John was expected at their ranch to steal a big grey horse, and the men sat up all night with their arms at hand watching their horse corral from the window. John failed to appear. In the morning they tracked him to some willows on their meadow and when they found him, they bought his bedding and at the same time sold him an old mule. When the trade was finished, Dutch John owed Barrett $25.00, a turn of events that was apparently not at all difficult for anyone acquainted with Martin Barrett to believe. From the ranch Dutch John travelled to Snake River where the vigilantes arrested him. On the return trip they stopped with their prisoner at the Barrett ranch, and Dutch John told Barrett that if he would travel to Bannack the next day he would pay him the $25.00 he owed. Apparently quite in character, Barrett rode in 40 degrees below zero weather the 11 miles to Bannack to collect his $25.00, but when he got there he "found Dutch John hanging by his neck to the ridge pole of a carpenter shop, his body frozen stiff." Barrett reported that everyone who went into see John would give him a twirl
on the rope. "Then and there," he proclaimed, "I called the deal off."

It was also characteristic of Barrett to endure bitter weather to carry out his business obligations. In the winter of 1865 he contracted to a stage company to deliver 100 tons of hay at Pine Buttes, 50 miles from his ranch, at $100.00 a ton. His partner Shineberger, driving oxen, started with the first load. He failed to return as soon as expected, and Barrett started out to see if anything had gone wrong. Several miles up the trail he found him with his hands, feet, and face frozen. He was not enthusiastic, to say the least, over the hay business, telling Barrett "if you want any more hay hauled, you'll do it yourself." Barrett hauled the next load. He reached Pine Buttes by midnight at 50 degrees below zero, and too cold to measure the hay. The stage people were willing to guess at the weight, and after that Barrett decided that even he had had enough hay hauling, and threw in his contract.

Yet another incident that helps shed some light on the character of the early settlers occurred after the partners had painted a sign that read "Stock bought and sold here," which hung on their cabin. A prankster came along and changed the lettering so that it read "Stock bought and
stole here." Barrett was also known to let immigrants sleep in his house for "$1.00 a flop" and let them grind axes on his grindstone for 50c. Evidently these strident business practices in the beginnings of their careers helped move the early settlers along the road to prosperity.

In 1877 the Indian troubles of the Nez Perce disrupted the settlers' lives in the Horse Prairie region as the Indians moved through the valley. Mrs. Martin Barrett recalled when: "they came through Horse Prairie killing all they could as they passed... (in actuality, the Indians only killed 3 men)...and they stole horses as well as anything else they wanted and tore up and destroyed what they didn't take with them." The ranchmen took their families to Bannack, where "a shout from some drunken cowboys would send all the women and children to the Court House where the windows were barricaded with feather beds." The Indians did not come near Mr. Barrett's place, however. Some people attributed Barrett's luck to his religious belief; they reasoned that the Indians spared him because he too was a Catholic.  

\footnote{Barrett, sketch of life. Montana Power Broadcasts, 20-22. WPA report.}

\footnote{Barrett, sketch of life.}
As the cult of the "Self Made Man" propagated, most successful moneymakers were married men. As the pioneers settled down on their ranches in the Beaverhead and vicinity, they undoubtedly began to realize the lack of the essential ingredients of a wife and children for building their "empires." So, throughout the late 1860's and early 1870's the men married and began families. In 1866 Martin Barrett made the journey East to visit his mother, returning to Montana the next spring (bringing a wooden tumbling rake for haying, probably the first ever brought to the territory.) On the train from Omaha, he met a girl who was coming to Montana with her brother. When he arrived at the ranch, he found his partner Joe Shineberger sitting in the doorway of the cabin, mending his clothes. He had not heard from Barrett for six or seven months and had assumed he was dead. When Barrett did walk up, Shineberger jumped up in such great excitement he lost his needle. The first thing he asked: "Have you brought back a wife?" No, said Barrett, but he had met a mighty fine girl. "Go and get her," said Shineberger "I have lost the only needle on the ranch." 43

With the exception of the Selway brothers who married before

coming to Montana, Martin Barrett was the first of the newly arrived settlers to marry, in 1867.

Most of the men married women from outside of the region, due most, of course, to the lack of women in the Territory at the time. Dave Metlen did marry a Bannack school teacher in 1870, who had come to Montana in 1863. Most of the men, however, either returned to their homes and married, or met their wives in other areas. J.F. Bishop returned to his home in New York state and married in 1874; W.C. Orr married in 1869 in Ohio; and his partner, Philip Poindexter, married the same year. Craig Cornell married in 1871. Only one of the men, Joseph Shineberger, did not marry, although his mother and sisters came to Montana to live with him. While there, one of his sisters married an acquaintance of Shineberger's, William Roe. Their marriage would later provide Shineberger the opportunity to pass on his ranch to members of his family.

Throughout the 1870's the men continued to build their ranches and took an active part in the organization and settlement of the Territory.) In 1872 Phillip Poindexter served as a Democratic member of the legislature in Virginia

City, and J.F. Bishop served as the first justice of the peace in Beaverhead County. In 1879 Martin Barrett was one of the members of the executive committee of the fledgling Stockgrowers Association.  

The men also took part in events of statewide significance. In 1879 Martin Barrett was a member of the Territorial Legislature when it struggled with the question of subsidizing the Utah and Northern Railroad. Nearly all the members wanted the road to come, but a great many did not want to subsidize it. The anti railroad members did not have enough votes to stand off the other party, and, as Mrs. Barrett recalls,

..they were so sure of getting their bill passed they had a party to celebrate it and got very jolly over it, but the Anti Railroaders left the theater and started out afoot on the Benton road and walked ten miles and then waited for the stage drivers who expected to meet them there as they were on their way to get Mr. W.P. Conrad of Fort Benton. The newspapers had many a joke at their expense; one paper said the ranchmen had gone home to put up their hay; another that they had gone strawberrying; they got their man and returned to defeat the Subsidy bill; although each one was approached to see if money would make any difference in their votes, and to the honor of Montana and the

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45 Fletcher, Free Grass to Fences, 58.
men, it would not! 46

During the late 1860's and early 1870's the men of the Beaverhead had built up their herds for the local markets, as had other area pioneer cattlemen. But as the markets decreased due to the dwindling mining camps, the local stockgrowers found themselves with a surplus of beef. A local newspaper in 1874 placed the surplus over and above the local needs of the community by some 17,000 head. Although there is little available information to indicate how the Beaverhead pioneers themselves fared during the period, they presumably faced the same conditions and setbacks as did the other stockgrowers in the region. Osgood in Day of the Cattlemen points out that:

The Montana stockman, with no railroad at hand, soon found his herd increasing far beyond the local demands. In addition, the decline of the mining population, the decrease in the use of oxen for freighting, and the substitution of mules and horses shut off another source of profit. Prices slipped to $10.00 a head for full grown steers and cattle roamed at will. Their owners, indifferent as to their condition or increase, simply held onto them with the hope that the building of a railroad into Montana might justify this expansion of their herds.

46 Barrett, sketch of life.
far beyond the demand of the local market. 47

In 1874 cattle buyers did appear in Virginia City and Deer Lodge, and paid reasonably good prices, especially considering the price drops caused by the Panic of 1873. Apparently drives to Salt Lake still proved profitable. In 1873 a Helena weekly newspaper reported that a four-year-old Montana steer cost about $9.00 to raise. Trail driving to a shipping point cost an estimated $1.00 per head with the sale price running as high as $45.00 per head in 1873. 48 In 1876 Poindexter and Orr drove a herd of 8,000 cattle to summer in the high Centennial Valley on the Idaho border (Mrs. Orr named the valley to commemorate the Centennial exposition then being held in Philadelphia.) But as Osgood reports, "Prosperity was assured the pioneer stockman as soon as a reasonably accessible market could be obtained," 49 and such a market could only become available by a viable means of transportation.

47 Osgood, Day of Cattleman, 54.
48 Ibid., 54, 55. Brown, Historical Overview, 115.
49 WPA report, p 9.. Osgood, Day of Cattleman, 73.
The ranchers in the Beaverhead did not have too long to wait until the railroad came through the Valley, providing them with the instant access to the far off markets they needed. In 1880 the Union Pacific railroad came into the Beaverhead, following the old wagon road from the south into the Valley. It then connected to Bannack, Virginia City, Butte and Deer Lodge. The railroad also brought indirect service to outlying areas, including Red Rock and Horse Prairie.

Terminus businessmen began making plans to establish a town as the railroad came into the Valley, for they knew they had limited options from that point on to make a profit servicing the railroad crews. A number of local farmers and ranchers joined with the Terminus group (who included B.F. White, future Territorial Governor) in promoting the idea of establishing a townsite in the Valley. Rex Meyers points out: "Although one might expect a rivalry to develop between established residents and newcomers, each group seemed to realize the potential benefits of having Dillon flourish and their members seem to genuinely appreciate and like one another."

Nowhere, points out Meyers, was that cooperation more apparent than in the campaign to win the county seat. In
1881 local business men donated $2,580.00 to the successful campaign to move the County seat to Dillon from Bannack, and twenty two of the Dillon area's leading residents, including the Selway brothers, Craig Cornell and P.H. Poindexter, pledged $20,000 to pay the cost of moving County records to the railroad town and to provide "good Court house accommodations for five years, free of cost to county taxpayers." Meyers concludes

the town's success lies in the opportune location geographically and economically and in the constructive approach of a small, congenial group of men. In fewer than nine months newcomer merchants from the Terminus and ranchers had combined to build a viable community, complete with permanent structures, a newspaper and the County seat.

Robert Fletcher reports that the queen cities of cowland that reigned briefly included Dillon. 51

Many histories have concentrated on the friction that developed between established cattlemen and infringing newcomers, but most of the settlers in the Beaverhead Valley


51 Fletcher, Free Grass to Fences, 108.
evidently felt quite differently about the situation in their region. They actively participated in the forming of their community, realizing that they benefitted as the town and area grew, even though that sometimes meant a decrease in available rangeland. They, like many of their peers, helped to build and stabilize a community, and in so doing contributed to the developing stability of the state.

Although amicable for the most part, the pioneer settlers were not apparently uniformly enthusiastic about interlopers on the range that they had been using so profitably for free. Big Hole pioneer Al Noyes remembers a visit from Martin Barrett and Dave Metlen in 1883. Noyes recalls, "Mart said 'You can't live in a place like this, you will starve.'" Noyes realized and understood that the men had been making money by summering their cattle in the Big Hole, and were trying to discourage him from taking up their range.²²

The railroad and higher cattle prices brought increasing prosperity to Montana ranchers. Between 1878 and 1899 the price for western range cattle never fell below

²²Noyes, Story of Ajax, 59.
$3.10 per hundred weight, and rose as high as $4.75. In Cattle Raising on the Plains, Schlebecker reports that even the lower price brought cattlemen a considerable profit margin. In 1882 the cattle industry hit its peak with the price of $4.75 per hundred weight. 53 The roundups in the Beaverhead were picturesque during these peak years of open range. In Horse Prairie the spring roundup was quite an event, utilizing up to forty riders and the traditional chuck wagon and remuda. 54

In the mid 1880's the Beaverhead also boomed as a sheep raising region. It produced some 40,000 sheep worth $1,375,745 in 1884, and Dillon was reportedly the largest wool shipping point in Montana at one time. The Dillon Tribune of January 1, 1886 reported: "The last year's shipment of wool greatly exceeded that of any former year, and from the Dillon depot about 500,000 pounds of wool was shipped." 55


54 WPA report, p 25.

55 Brown, Historical Overview, 131, 119.
Available tax assessments indicate that between 1888 and 1894 the twelve Beaverhead County ranchers were consistently in the top fifteen taxpayers in the County, with Poindexter and Orr coming in second only to the Utah and Northern Railroad. Tax assessment records serve only as indicators of the true worth and possession of early ranchers, as they naturally attempted to underplay their worth to avoid paying more tax. A.J. Noyes commented on the resistance he met with in the Beaverhead when he attempted some reform while serving as the county assessor. With this awareness, however, the tax assessments do provide definite information on the prosperity of the nine families.

The total assessed worth of the twelve ranchers came to $420,000 by 1893. Until the Panic in 1893, the assessed value of their property increased steadily. In 1888 the total assessed value of property for Poindexter and Orr came to $73,616; they listed 2,020 cattle, 10,000 sheep, and 724 horses. Their assessed value rose to $83,198 in 1892, but this accompanied a decrease in the livestock they ran, to total 1,716 cattle, 1,878 sheep and 385 horses. Their

56 Noyes, Story of Ajax. 73.
property again rose to aggregate $97,668 in 1893 running 1,838 cattle, 5,466 sheep and 388 horses. Although their assessed property value increased, the stock they ran steadily decreased, indicating the general trend that occurred in the 1880s and after, when property concentrated itself more in land, and fenced acreage became a mark of ownership. Throughout the 1880's the land acquisitions by the pioneer ranchers remained high, and by 1894 the twelve men had accumulated some 31,948 acres in deed. The Poindexter and Orr operations deed of 10,300 acres represented 32% of the total.

Land and stock figures are also available in "mug books," or publications on the prominent men in the state, such as Michael Leeson's and Joaquin Miller's history of Montana. Leeson, published in 1885, provides the earliest available land acreages for a number of the ranchers. He indicates Martin Barrett's acreage at 1,160 acres of hayland and his stock at somewhere between 1,000 and 1,500 head, and

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57 Beaverhead County, Assessor's Books, 1888-1894. All records cited hereafter are in the Beaverhead County Court house, Dillon, Montana.

58 Atherton, Cattle Kings, 181.

59 Tax Assessment lists, 1888-1894.
estimates D.E. Metlen's acreage at 320 acres under fence, and running 500 cattle and 50 horses. Leeson estimated that the Poindexter and Orr operation was the largest dealers of stock in the territory, with 25 miles of fence, 5,000 acres, 100 horses, 800 cattle and 10,000 sheep. By 1893, before the ranchers felt the repercussions of the Panic, the acreages had risen to 3,120 acres for Martin Barrett, running 1,515 head of cattle, 1,486 acres for D.E. Metlen running 451 cattle and 105 horses, and 12,324 acres for Poindexter and Orr, running 1,838 cattle, 5,466 sheep, and 385 horses. Between 1888 and 1894, the deeded acreage of the twelve ranchers rose 51%, or 15,633 acres.  

Peter Simpson in *Community of Cattlemen* points out several of the pressures that led the large cattle owners of Oregon in the 1880s to consolidate their holdings through land purchases of one kind or another, including increasing numbers of settlers contending for the range, higher cattle prices, and the development of better transportation. Simpson cites "the plethora of confused and contradictory land laws, together with a corrupt land office" as factors

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60 Leeson, 993. Assessment books, 1888-1894.
in the ability of the ranchers to accumulated large acreages, although the ranchers in the Beaverhead accumulated most of their acreages by buying out their neighbors' homestead acreages instead of accumulation through patents taken up directly. Among the land laws the ranchers did utilize, however, were the Preemption Act, Desert Land Act of 1877, Homestead Act, and Timber Culture Act.

Even before the Panic of 1893 ranchers in the Beaverhead shifted from making investments mainly in livestock to investment in land and livestock. This was part of a general trend, which included an increased effort to produce forage crops such as hay and alfalfa on privately owned or leased land, and an emphasis on upgrading stock and improving methods of animal husbandry. The result was a reduction in the operating size of most cattle spreads and an increase in the amount of their privately owned land in relation to open range.

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62 Osgood, Day of Cattleman, 53.
Assessment records are not available for Beaverhead County until 1888, so it is difficult to estimate precisely the impact of the winter of 1887 had on the Valley's ranchers, although the western valleys fared significantly better than the eastern and central portions of the state. The Big Hole Herding Association worked the Red Rock/Horse Prairie ranges on the Spring roundup of 1886 and handled about 12,000 head of cattle, and were reportedly pleased with the calf crop. Almost from the beginning of the cattle business in the western part of the Territory, ranchers had made provisions for winter feeding. Most ranchers in the Beaverhead irrigated by running ditches and flumes along the sides of the narrow valley meadows, occasionally forming a ditch company with other ranchers. Robert Selway and J.F. Bishop were among the investors in the Union Ditch Company in the late 1880's, and William Roe, Craig Cornell and T.M. Selway invested in the Canyon Ditch Company organized in 1890. As a result of provisions such as these, the losses in the southern valleys came to only 8%

63 Fletcher, Free Grass to Fences, 89.
64 Deed books, 14, 17.
compared to 50% to 70% in other areas of the state. Heavy losses did occur in the Centennial Valley, and Dale Metlen commented for the WPA report in 1940 that his father's operation had taken substantial losses also. Replacements were more expensive due to the coming of the railroad, which Metlen estimates increased the cost of moving cattle three times over that from the drive from Texas. J.C. Brenner wrote T.C. Power in the Spring of 1887, and commented, "Losses minimal owing to being supplied with hay. Fed whole band... losses not over 11%. No possible chance for feed in the hills from December 15 to March 1."  

Another reason why the losses in the Beaverhead may have been less devastating and more survivable was the paring down of the herds by local ranchers. In 1880 John Holt drove a large herd of cattle to eastern Montana that he had purchased from Poindexter and Orr and in 1882 Poindexter and Orr sold 4,000 head of cattle to the Cochrane

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65 Fletcher, Free Grass to Fences. 89-92.  
66 WPA report, p.2.  
67 J.C. Brenner to T.C. Power, 4 July 1887, Manuscript Collection 55, Box 18, Folder 4, Historical Society Library, Helena, Montana.  
68 Hamilton, History of Montana, 390.
ranch of Canada and trailed them to just south of Calgary; a
drive in which a young C.M. Russell participated. Orr
commented that they cut down on their herd because they felt
the Dillon area was becoming overstocked. 69

Economic panics and depressions such as those of 1873
and 1893 stunned ranchers on the farthest reaches of the
frontier, and the assessment lists indicate that the
ranchers in Beaverhead County suffered equally heavy blows.
Although the statistics after the Panic of 1873 are
unavailable, the evidence from the Panic of 1893 indicates
dramatic drops in assessed values by all twelve ranchers.
Poindexter and Orr, for instance, dropped from an assessed
value of $97,668 in 1893 to $62,838 in 1894. Their number of
cattle and sheep also declined, from 1,838 to 1,516, and
5,466 to 4,664 respectively.

The average loss of the total assessed value of
property of the nine families from 1893 to 1894 was $11,541
or a total of $103,871. The average assessed value of cattle
in the Beaverhead dropped from $16.00 per head in 1893 to
$10.00 in 1894. Sheep dropped an assessed average of $2.60
in 1893 to $1.50 a head in 1894, and horses dropped from an

69 Fletcher, Free Grass to Fences, 49.
average $26.00 a head in 1893 to $16.00 in 1894.  

70 Assessment lists, 1888-1894.
By 1890 the ranchers had acquired the main allotments for their operations by combining homestead land with direct purchase. Even though greater accumulation of deeded land became a necessity as the century wore on, Schlebecker maintains that the 19th century cattle industry remained a range enterprise even if the range was no longer fully open and the grass no longer completely free. He speculates that in 1880 over 96% of all livestock feed came from the range, in 1890 95% and in 1900 92%. The land/cattle ratio indicates that the ranchers continued to rely on leased or Federal grazing land/open range in the Beaverhead as well. Although Martin Barrett had acquired 3,000 acres by 1892, the assessment lists for that year show that he ran some 1,313 cattle, and 188 horses. Likewise, Joseph Shineberger ran some 1,500 cattle and 203 horses with only 2,400 acres. Fletcher estimates Dave Metlen's ranch at its peak at 15,000 acres, running 7,500 head of cattle, and approximates that

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1 Schlebecker, *Cattle Raising*, 15.

2 Assessment lists, 1888-1894.
the Poindexter and Orr operation ran on some 36,000 acres. ³
Both figures are substantially more than either operator had
in deed, even by 1900. Progressive Men of Montana, published
in 1901, cites Craig Cornell's lease at 3,120 acres, and the
Poindexter and Orr's operation as running on 10,000
additional acres of leased school land. ⁴

Unstable markets and rising costs in the 1890s
increasingly plagued Montana ranchers. The Beaverhead
ranchers purchased land totalling only some 2,000 acres from
1893 to 1900, only 1/8th of the 16,000 acres purchased in
the previous decade. By 1893 the money the twelve ranchers
were able to loan also diminished dramatically. They had
loaned some $121,440 from 1882-1891, and this fell to only
$13,000 from 1891-1900. Lending resumed somewhat at the turn
of the century, although it was then offset somewhat by
borrowing. ⁵

The money the first generation had available from their

³ Fletcher, Free Grass to Fences, 108, 110.
⁴ Progressive Men, 107, 497.
⁵ Deed books, 1888-1900. Mortgage books, 1888-1900. Because
of the large number of deed and mortgage books used, more
specific reference will be reserved for the bibliography. Lists
of each transaction for each rancher are indexed in the grantor,
grantee books in the Clerk of Courts office, Beaverhead County
courthouse.
own funds to lend is one indicator of their financial prosperity. Simpson reports that mortgage borrowing and lending was a respectable, as well as exclusive, way of obtaining capital. He found in his study of cattlemen in Southeastern Oregon that older families were able to develop reserves of capital that they could lend out in turn. Simpson found most often the borrowers were members of other old families, and that they exchanged roles as borrowers in one decade became lenders in the next and vice versa.  

This did not happen in the Beaverhead, however, until the 20th century.

The men of the pioneer generation evidently found it unnecessary to borrow from either each other or anyone else. No borrowing is on record for any of the twelve ranchers during the 19th century. The total money the first generation was able to loan from their personal reserves between 1882 to 1924 totaled $193,419. J.F. Bishop loaned the most, in excess of $29,000 from 1883-1924. Martin Barrett loaned some $25,000, Craig Cornell lent out $26,000 and James and Thomas Selway some $29,000 and $24,000

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6 Simpson, Community of Cattlemen, 111.
respectively, over a span of some forty years. 7

Simpson reports that by the end of the first decade of the 20th century, something of a financial elite had emerged from among the persistent early settlers in Southeastern Oregon. 8 Correspondingly, by the onset of the 1900's, the men of the Beaverhead had established the foundation for their ranches, built up their cattle and/or sheep herds, and become prominent local and state citizens. Because of the small size of the community, interaction was of course inevitable. The twelve ranchers and their families did business together, socialized together, and often attended the same church services. In addition, nephews, nieces, brothers and sisters joined the established relatives in the Beaverhead, and it was commonplace for much of the community to be related by marriage.

Simpson identifies a rough outline of social groupings based primarily upon wealth and influence in his Oregon community: cattle barons and military leaders at the top, successful first owners and ranch foreman next, then

7 Mortgage records, 1882-1924.
8 Simpson, Community of Cattlemen, 111.
laborers, cowboys and drifters. The elite and socially prominent in the Beaverhead consisted of a more diverse group, with prominent ranchers being only one element in the social elite, which included businessmen, merchants, and stockmen. In late 1887 a group of citizens organized the Beaverhead County Pioneer's Society, which included all the people who came to Montana before May 24, 1864. Its membership read like a Who's Who of Beaverhead County, and listed many of the social and financial elite of the area, including ranchers Dave Metlen, Joe Shineberger, J.F. Bishop, William Roe and Martin Barrett. 

Self-made men sometimes identified themselves with the ideal of self culture by using their money to endow institutions that encouraged self improvement. The men of the Beaverhead were typical in contributing money and time to benefit their community. Martin Barrett donated some $100,000 for the establishment of a hospital in 1920, and the Orr family donated the land for the State Normal College in 1894. 

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9 Ibid., 28.

10 *Dillon Tribune Examiner*, 3 September 1980, p.5.

Except for J.C. Brenner, all the of ranchers were members of the Montana Society of Pioneers, including Martin Barrett J.F. Bishop, Craig Cornell, Dave Metlen, W.C. Orr, William Roe, James, John, Robert and Thomas Selway, and Joe Shineberger. Among the offices and positions the twelve men held were: state legislator, Stock Commissioner, member of the school board, members of the Board of Managers and Trustees of the Normal College, President of the Society of Montana Pioneers, Postmaster, Secretary of the Stockgrower's Association of Southwestern Montana, and many were active members in local clubs, especially the Masonry.

As the pioneers entered their last years, their influence dominated their community. Perhaps nothing represents the status of a family or individual in their community as much as the cost and stature of their homes, and by the turn of the century most of the pioneer ranchers had large Victorian mansions either on their ranches or in town, and often one in both locales. Martin Barrett and his wife Alice constructed their home in 1883, and Mrs. Barrett

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13 For general biographical information see Leeson, Sanders, as provided in reference 16.
recalls a passerby once remarked of it that "the owner of that house is either a millionaire or a darn fool." In addition to their ranch home, the Barretts built a stately red brick home in Dillon. J.F. Bishop erected his 14 room Dillon home in 1886, and Craig Cornell built his brick mansion on his ranch just south of Dillon in 1896.

In 1883 W.C. Orr bought forty acres of land near Dillon and began work on his mansion, which was completed in 1885. The bricks were made in kilns near Argenta and the sandstone for the window sills came from Sheep Canyon, south of Dillon. The mansion's many impressive features included twelve foot ceilings with medallions of fruit and flowers from which imported chandeliers hung, door hinges made of bronze shaped like butterfly wings, and door transoms of ruby glass. A barn the size of a city block where the Orr's kept their thoroughbred horses occupied the space behind the mansion. The Orr's also utilized a twenty foot water wheel to irrigate the gardens and the estate's fountains. Five of the six Orr brothers later built their own stately homes.

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14 Barrett, sketch of life.
16 Dillon Tribune Examiner, 8 November 1966, p. 12.
around their father's original mansion. Son Matthew Orr's wife fell in love with the governor's mansion on a trip to Florida, and they ordered a home exactly the same, including ballroom cut to measure and shipped around the Horn. The Phillip Poindexter home, "The Cottonwoods," was located three miles south of Dillon and contained twenty rooms and eight fireplaces. Built in the mid 1880's, the home was the scene of much of the Valley's social activity.

Other ranchers such as J.C. Brenner, chose to build their homes on their ranches. Brenner's large Horse Prairie log home maintained many of the amenities of prominent men nationwide, including a Chinese cook. Robert Selway's home just north of Dillon contained such conveniences as hot and cold running water and a water tank in the attic, which provided pumped water for the kitchen.

Many of the pioneer ranchers could afford to travel in their later years. The Barretts came to spend their winters in California, and could afford to travel to Cuba and

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18 Dillon Examiner, 22 February 1956, p.9.
20 Robert Selway family history, courtesy Emerson Selway, grandson.
Washington D.C., the Bahamas, Hawaii and Mexico. The place names of the community also reveal the social prominence of the pioneers. Such landmarks as Cornell, Orr and Poindexter streets, the Metlen building, Selway Drive, and Barrett hospital remain today. Eight of the nine original families appeared in the publication *The Progressive Men of Montana*, and all appeared at least once in such publications as Sanders, Leeson and Miller. It is true that the men were entrepreneurs of sorts, fitting the image of the "Self Made Man" of the 19th century, and they often benefitted financially from the success and growth of their communities. Poindexter and Orr, among others, sold town lot sites totalling over $20,000 by 1900. In addition, many of the men went on to develop businesses dependent on community growth. It is unfair, however, to make broad, critical assumptions about their motives for community influence and participation. Historians have focused on the biases of the publications such as the *Progressive Men*, maintaining that such publications did not reflect reality:

The pioneer capitalists who engaged directly in business and finance asserted that the capital one generated, not one's respectable

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21 Barrett, sketch of life.

22 Deed books, 1888-1900.
occupation, demonstrated one's position in the community. Because their profits greased the wheel of prosperity for everyone in the capitalistic system, these men believed that their private endeavor for greater wealth was a significant public service. Aware that their work did not often receive public recognition, the lack of adulation did not lead them to any self-doubt about their significance in Montana.  

Dave Walter provides another analysis that applies more accurately to the men of the Beaverhead. He points out that these men were responsible for creating the economic base that made it possible for their communities to prosper, and then returned much of their success in the form of public service. Walter has dubbed such men "Quiet Capitalists" or "Second echelon entrepreneurs" who maintained their loyalty to their communities in both prosperous and difficult times. The early ranchers were interested in the permanent growth of their area and a stable livelihood. Walter asserts that:

There exists an unrecognized group of Montana entrepreneurs working in the 1880-1920 period that is more important to the survival of Montana communities than were Daly, Clark Heinze or Power. These men directed smaller but similarly multifaceted commercial empires and they significantly affected local and even area-wide economic fortunes. Because of

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their endeavors, such diverse Montanian communities as Roundup, Libby, Plentywood, Baker, Malta and Dillon exist today.... Perhaps the most important element on which Montana commercial development has relied is this relatively unsung, area oriented businessman who began conservatively, worked hard, diversified his operations and thereby became the financial mainstay of his community. The survival of Montana communities is the result of more than just economic circumstances. It also is the result of these unsung entrepreneurs.  

Walter also points out that these men commonly created "spheres of influence" by combining transportation, mercantile, lumber, mining, livestock, banking and real estate enterprises. The ranchers in the Beaverhead also took advantage of the growing prosperity of their own ranches and their community by investing or beginning local businesses. In 1899 with six other pioneers, Martin Barrett and Joe Shineberger, with his brother-in-law William Roe, organized the State Bank, and Craig Cornell, J.F. Bishop and J.C. Brenner sat on other bank boards. Atherton reports that it

was commonplace for ranchers to become involved in the operation or ownership of banks. Early in their careers, they had learned the heavy extent that one paid for borrowed capital, and how much power the local or out-of-state banker had in shaping the welfare of the borrowers, and the dependency of their operations on banking. Motives, prestige and profit, Atherton points out, also persuaded them to take a direct part in banking in their own communities.  

By the 1890's, the early ranchers had come a long way from their origins in dugouts or log cabins, with meals of beans, bacon, and baking powder biscuits. Mrs. Martin Barrett remembered when there was not a woman within eleven miles of her on Horse Prairie and when she had but six books to entertain her. At the time of her recollection she had a library of over 800 volumes. Her life had indeed changed from the days when she had had to cook for eleven men, when they cut hay at random, and had no fields or fences.  

The pioneer ranch families took advantage of an era that provided free access to the open range, choice and inexpensive government land, and a growing and prosperous

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25 Atherton, Cattle Kings, 186.
26 Barrett, sketch of life.
livestock market. In the 19th century the self made men paid no taxes on personal incomes, and for the most part operated unhampered by public regulation.

Investments in ranching equipment were also small in comparison with the outlays for cattle. Labor costs were low, and the extension of the railroads into Montana and the invention of the refrigerator car made it easy to move their beef and wool to far off markets. The major operating expenses consisted of labor, board, and use of horses. There was some loss of livestock to poisonous plants, theft, predators, hard winters and disease, but these losses in comparison to investment and return were relatively slim when a steer could be raised for 75c to $1.25 a year. 27

At the turn of the century the era of "the cattle barons" was essentially over. It was possible for the "self-made man" to make money until the eve of the first World War, but only under increasing handicaps. 28 Beginning in 1897 the cattle market expanded once again, and Simpson asserts that from this time until just after World War I was


28 Wyllie, Self Made Man, 3.
an era of prosperity unprecedented in its duration for the cattleman. The worldwide depression of the early 1890s came to an end late in that decade, as did the long dry spell on the Great Plains. The early cattlemen would live out their final days in these years. The end of the lives of the pioneers in the Beaverhead began in 1901, with the death of W.C. Orr and lasted until J.F. Bishop and Craig Cornell died in 1928. Only three of the twelve original ranchers lived to see the trying and disastrous decade of the 1920's, a decade that would create a set of overwhelming circumstances for their sons.

The ownership of thousands of acres of land and herds of cattle would certainly influence a man to think of passing on his legacy to future generations. The cult of the self made man, of which the ranchers were so representative, held the view that if a man's fortune could only be justified in terms of his service to mankind, then it followed logically that it was not right for him to transmit it to his children. That any man should acquire wealth through the accident of birth was, from a social point of view, indefensible.¹

In his early account of the cattle trade, Joseph McCoy remarked of having often heard people say that in 99 cases out of 100, inherited wealth was only a curse. Although admitting this was slightly an exaggeration, McCoy did observe that 999 out of every 1000 successful men in the West began life extremely poor in cash assets, rich only in

¹ Wyllie, Self Made Man, 89.
energy and determination. The cult of the self made man considered the best inheritance "a clear, well developed and educated mind, good fixed moral principles, energy and honorable ambition." One did not inherit business principles, it was said, one must learn them, and the best time for that was in one's youth.  

In addition, "success philosophers" believed that heirs of substantial estates lacked those qualities of character necessary for a responsible "stewardship." Many pictured the children of the rich as soft, lazy, incompetent and immoral. A spokesman of the doctrine of self help commented for many of the cult of the self help when he asserted that:

It is no help to a young man or woman to inherit money. It is no help to your children to leave them money, but if you leave them education, if you leave them Christian character, if you leave them a wide circle of friends, if you leave them an honorable name, it is far better than that you should leave them money. It would be worse for them, worse for the nation, that they should have any money at all. Oh, young man, if you have inherited money, don't regard it as a help. It will curse you through your years, and deprive you of the very best things of human life. There is no class of people to be pitied so much as the inexperienced sons and daughters of the rich of our generation.

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2 Atherton, *Cattle Kings*, 104.
3 Wyllie, *Self Made Man*, 89.
A popular 19th century theory also held that the ends of society would best be served if the incompetent sons of the rich were allowed to lose their wealth to the aggressive sons of the poor. "If rich men's sons will not endure the drudgery by which nearly all their fathers secured money and position, they must take a secondary place in the next generation," said a typical handbook. "and oftener they drop out of sight amid the idle worthless herd, if indeed they escape an association with loafers and criminals."  

Despite the harsh forewarnings, statistics indicate that men who built great fortunes after the Civil War were extremely successful in transmitting their wealth to later generations, and this included most of the ranchers of the Beaverhead who had established their ranches in the 19th century. Although they could often pass vast acreages of land to their sons, along with thousands of herds of cattle and little debt, they could not control other forces that would prove insurmountable to many of the second generation.

4 Ibid., 90-91.
5 Ibid.
Joseph Shineberger counted among those who successfully passed on their ranches to a second generation. When he died a bachelor in 1908, Shineberger solved the problem of being without children by leaving his acreage and cattle herds to his nephew, E.B. Roe. As previously mentioned, Shineberger's sister had married a fellow pioneer, William Roe, who served with Shineberger and Barrett as a shareholder in the State Bank. In addition to his 4,000 acre ranch, Shineberger had some $110,000 which he left to his sister and niece.

William Orr also proved successful in passing on his legacy. Orr's acreage had amounted to over 10,000 acres at the time of his death, but the estate had to be divided between his six sons. His estate value of $73,860 consisted mostly of fifty shares of Poindexter and Orr stock, worth $50,000, which he left to his wife and six children.

When Craig Cornell died in 1928 the market value of his estate totaled over $100,000. Even though offset by a $6,029 mortgage, his children inherited considerable wealth. 6

The second generation had substantially different

6 Probates, numbers 935, 1000, 961, 628, 168, 132, 182, 223, 279. Probates provide only one account of the rancher's estate at the time of his death. Often they sold off or transferred land and personal property prior to their deaths.
upbringings from those of the pioneer ranchers, and they shared more in common with each other than they did with their fathers. They came from similar backgrounds and often attended the same local schools, church services, and social events. Students of the Poindexter school, for instance, taught by Kate Poindexter and built by Tom Selway and Philip Poindexter, included seven Poindexter children and nine Selway children through 1895. The second generation grew up in affluence, with their families being the community "elite." They often had access to much greater sums of money than their fathers had dreamt of at such young ages, and most also benefitted from some type of formal education.

Although the pioneers had earned their money without benefit of any formal education, they did not feel their sons should also be without such an advantage. The "self made man's" passion for educating his children and for endowing colleges indicated some contradiction to his opposition to higher learning. As the 19th century ended, the prejudices the older generation may have once had for higher education diminished. It was evidently important to them that their sons attend some sort of secondary school, and perhaps gain training in something other than ranching. Prestige of a college education overrode any perceived
limitations of business training.

At least 28 of the 34 sons of the second generation had some type of formal education. In fact, those without sons, such as J.F. Bishop, took care to educate their daughters as well. Mildred Bishop graduated from Mills College near Oakland, California, and Jennie attended the University of Wisconsin. Of J.C. Brenner's three sons, Henry, born 1879, was educated at St. Paul's school at Concord, New Hampshire. William Potts, born 1882, and Charles Potts, born 1884, attended Stanford Prep and Stanford University. Ernest Selway attended Albion College in Michigan, George Poindexter attended the Western Military Academy in Illinois, and his brother Henry graduated from Stanford.

Some of the sons involved themselves in vocations quite independent of ranching. Roscoe Cornell graduated from the Michigan School of Mines and worked as a mining engineer, as did Henry Poindexter. Similarly George Metlen became a civil engineer and County surveyor, and William Orr attended veterinary school in Toronto and later became deputy state veterinarian. Herbert Selway earned a business degree at an
Iowa college. 7

Even though most of the second generation had prosperous ranches to which they could come home, most of the sons trained in some other capacity, and their interests often took them away from the Beaverhead, at least for a time. At the time of their father's death in 1901, the Orr brothers were involved in a number of diverse activities. Matt owned the electric light plant of Dillon; Ernest was one of the first stampeders to get to the Klondike; William Orr of Butte, worked as the veterinarian in charge of the horses on Marcus Daly's Bitteroot farm for three years, and only Bert Orr was involved in the Poindexter and Orr operation. 8

The sons of P.H. Poindexter also left the area and became involved in businesses or occupations outside of ranching. Henry Poindexter left the Beaverhead to become a mining engineer in Nevada. Some of the sons continued in ranching, but on operations separate from their fathers. Delos Selway along with three of his brothers, settled in


8 Dillon Examiner, 15 May 1901, p 2.
eastern Montana and ran a large sheep operation. Although Herbert Selway took charge of his father James' business interests, in 1899 he went into the stock and general farming business for himself, buying land on Horse Prairie, where his brother Hawley also took up ranching.  

In all, 22 of the 34 sons chose to remain in or eventually return to the Beaverhead, either taking up their own ranches, or staying on their fathers'. By 1912, when Helen Sanders published her history of the state, she cited the Orr brothers as all being involved with the ranching operation in one capacity or another. Roscoe Cornell also returned to run the ranch with his father, as did the Brenner sons. Perhaps J.C. Brenner's grandson Jack's sentiments best explain the reason many returned to the family ranches: "I was always homesick when I was away someplace. But it wasn't for people, it was for the ranch."  

Most sons also imitated their fathers in their state, service, social, and political activities and community involvement. Ernest Selway became a Republican State

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9 Sanders, 1054.

Representative in 1904, later serving as Senator for Beaverhead county, and was an active member of the local Masonry and the Beaverhead Social Club. William Orr served on the school board and as city councilman and county commissioner, and also participated in the Masonry. Hawley Selway was a director and stockholder in the Beaverhead Social Club.  

Except for 1904 and 1909, the first two decades of the 20th century the Beaverhead shared exceptional rainfall with the rest of the state, exceeding twelve inches above the average annual rainfall in 1915. Between 1906 and 1910 the average price of range cattle also rose continually. Range cattle in 1906 sold for an average of $4.40 a hundredweight, rising in 1910 to an average of $5.40. The ever rising increase in costs, however, accompanied this rise in prices, but cattlemen prospered if they did not depend entirely on the range and if they kept their other costs low. In 1911 Plains cattle brought an average of $5.65 a hundredweight, rising in 1912 to $7.60, and in 1914 $7.65 a

\[\text{Sanders, 1014, 1042, 1147.}\]
hundredweight. 12

Tax lists from 1906-1910 indicate the general prosperity of the nine families. In 1909, for instance, the aggregate tax paid by the nine families amounted to over $163,500, or 14% of the total county taxes paid. 13 Land ownership by the second generation in the Beaverhead rose 29% or 14,289 acres from 1900 to 1912, while the mortgages amounted to only some $4,785, although this was offset somewhat by the last of the first generation's loans. One exception to this was the Poindexter and Orr operation, which borrowed $250,000 in 1912 to buy some 4,000 acres between 1912 and 1925. 14 Such purchases became a necessity if the ranchers of the second generation were to maintain even a portion of the range of operation in the previous decade. The P and O operation alone ran livestock over some 66,000 acres of free range in the late 1880's.

Assessment lists between 1900 and 1912 also indicate a steady rise in prosperity. The P and O operation, for instance, rose in value from $78,000 in 1909 to $171,663 in

12 Schlebecker, Cattle Raising, 42, 52.
14 Mortgage, deed records, 1882-1925.
1917, although this was offset by the quarter of a million it borrowed in 1912. Ernest Selway partnered with two other ranchers on the Blacktail to form the Selway Sheep Company in 1911. They eventually expanded to run 12,000 sheep. The Brenner operation also increased some $20,000 in value in the eight years, as did the Roe operation. Such increases enabled E.B. Roe to build his mansion on the Red Rock ranch in 1912. The eighteen room, 7,000 square foot, eight bedroom home contained living quarters for twelve servants above the kitchen. Only the Metlen family's acreage and net worth dropped considerably, and this was due to son George's selling off a large portion of the original ranch land between 1900 and 1917.  

Schlebecker points out that even with such outward signs of prosperity, from every aspect except prices, cattlemen were in trouble just before the First World War began. Perhaps realizing the days had ended when ranchers from Horse Prairie could simply turn their cattle out to summer on Big Hole range, Martin Barrett sold his 5,000 acre Horse Prairie and Big Hole acreage in 1911 for $100,000.  

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15 Deed, mortgage records.  
16 Deed book, #48.
The War caused a dramatic increase in all agricultural production, including a demand for beef, as the rise in prices reflects. In 1915, cattle averaged $7.75 a hundredweight, rising to $14.50 a hundredweight by 1918. Roscoe Cornell reported that their operation reached its peak during the years of World War I, when sheep sold for $32.00 a head. The agricultural and economic "boom" that ended with the winter of 1919 had consumed Montana for almost two decades, and the Beaverhead had certainly not been immune.

Even though the sons inherited ranching operations that had provided their fathers with substantial and profitable enterprises, the circumstances that made those successes possible changed dramatically in the 20th century. Even before the War, costs had increasingly risen for the cattlemen for a number of reasons. The most important factor was their deprivation of the free grass of the open range. As cattlemen and farmers increasingly competed for land and new methods of farming attracted a new rush of settlers, cattlemen had to buy or lease expensive land to maintain the

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17 Schlebecker, *Cattle Raising*, 60.
18 WPA report, p 2.
operations their fathers had run. The incoming farmers demanded more governmental services, which in turn required heavier taxes that produced another rise in costs, and the cutting up of the open range generally restricted stockmen to the less productive land. Dale Metlen complained of the "nesters" in Horse Prairie who "moved in with the railroad and fenced range and water holes." Isabelle Brenner recalled that many people came and homesteaded in the Horse Prairie Valley, most taking up 640 acre plots that were off the bottom land, on the sagebrush foothills. She remembers "Most of them plowed the land and attempted to raise crops but this was not successful and there was not enough land on which to raise cattle so eventually the larger and earlier rancher bought them out." 

When the dryfarmers who had moved into Montana at the beginning of the century gave up and left the country, they saddled the land with an inflated value and an inflated tax assessment, which in turn left cattlemen with high and unrealistic costs. From 1900 to 1920 Beaverhead County

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19 Schlebecker, *Cattle Raising*, 19.

20 WPA report, p 2. Horse Prairie History by Isabelle James, unpublished history/remembrances of the valley.
experienced a 30% growth in population. The population in the Beaverhead had more than doubled from 1890 to 1920, and increased by 1920 to over ten times that of its population in 1870. This corresponded with an escalation in land farmed, which rose 40% or 200,000 acres between 1900 and 1920.  

The disaster that hit agriculture with the end of the War and summer of drought that followed the hard winter of 1919 caught ranchers unprepared. Most had borrowed money to buy the range their fathers had used for free, and they now faced declining land values at the same time cattle prices dropped dramatically. The steady and painful decrease in price suggested that the war demand had left them with a surplus of cattle. In 1919 cattle sold for $11.25 a hundredweight. The price dropped to $8.80 in 1920, $6.15 in 1921, and $6.00 by 1922. George Metlen commented that the World War I boom and post War deflation "hogtied the cattlemen and snubbed him up good." The Selway Sheep Company could never recover from the events of 1919, even though it

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22 Schlebecker, Cattle Raising, 72-74.
had experienced its two peak years before the disaster.  

The value of agricultural land also declined, bringing further injury to those in agriculture. The value of agricultural land more than doubled from 1900 to 1910, and again doubled from 1910 to 1920. The decline of values plummeted after 1920, however, dropping from 78 billion in 1920 to 47 billion in 1930. Mortgage indebtedness on owner operated farms accompanied the rise in values, rising from 1.7 billion to 4 billion between 1900 and 1920, and increasing to 4.5 billion in 1925.

Mother nature punished agriculture yet more in 1919 through 1922 when Montana cattlemen struggled against drought, blizzards and grasshoppers. The President's report for the State Bank in 1920 perhaps best indicates the devastation the Beaverhead suffered in the early 20's:

Only a change of seasons can save a majority of our dry farmers. Most of them are now worse than broke and another unfavorable season will result in the abandonment of the bench. We hope that 1921 will bring us relief, we never needed it more.

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23 WPA report.

Later in 1923 he continues, "During the past two years all have done business at a loss besides taking the immense decrease in value of their property."  

In 1924 over 79% of the ranchers in Montana were in debt, and new credit became increasingly difficult to find, while old debts grew oppressive. Between 1915 and 1925 in the Beaverhead, the second generation borrowed over $210,000, an increase of $205,000 from the preceding 15 years. The general decline of the horse population also affected ranchers who had not only relied on the horse's low cost and efficiency, but also upon the income from the hay they produced and sold as feed for the local horse population. Between 1923 and 1925 the number of horses on the plains fell at a rate of 750,000 head a year. The Directors of the State Bank complained in 1922:

The automobile and tractor have had much to do with bringing about the present condition. When we were all using horses, we raised them here, the feed was a local product, the upkeep and replacement of the power was unnoticeable. Today these items are a grievous burden and every dollar of many goes

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26 Schlebecker, Cattle Raising, 91.
27 Ibid., 93.
out of the country. Had we in circulation in Dillon today the money which has been put into the automobiles in Beaverhead County, we would be in pretty easy shape.  

The Beaverhead ranchers purchased 1,000 fewer acres between 1912 and 1925 than in the previous decade, buying some 48,000 acres. At the same time, mortgages rose from only $5,000 from 1900 to 1915 ($255,000 with the Orr mortgage) to over $200,000 from 1915-1925. During this period, sons such as Dale Metlen, half brother to George, bought up cheap land, enabling them to rebuild their ranchers. Metlen bought some 2,000 acres between 1917 and 1925.  

By the summer of 1925 cattlemen prospered more than at any time since the war, but although prices rose, per capita beef consumption dropped. Cattle prices rose an average of $3.00 per hundredweight, reaching a high of $10.59 in  

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28 President's Report, State Bank and Trust Company, 1922.
29 Deeds, Mortgage records, 1900-1925.
1928. Recovery from the economic depression of the early 1920's would be a slow and difficult process. The rancher also suffered between 1920 and 1925 when most of them had had to pay taxes, interest, and other costs out of their hypothetical wages. Between 1926 and 1928, however, income from land and stock rose impressively, and Schlebecker reports that no other large group of agricultural producers fared as well. 31

The bankers in the Beaverhead reported that 1925 was better than 1924, and that they had had a light winter. Stock cattle sold from $45.00-40.00 a head, and wool brought 46c to 48c a pound. At the same time they remarked that only 60% of the people were left in the Big Hole and the Centennial, and they commented that the east bench of Dillon was practically abandoned. Their 1928 report concludes that the price of cattle advanced 30-50%, with stock cattle bringing $55.00 a head. They report that "the cowman for the first time in six years can make money, and the outlook for the sale of beef next spring is excellent. Wool sold for 34c a pound, and lambs brought 10-12c a pound." They also

30 Schlebecker, Cattle Raising, 104.
31 Ibid., 106.
commented on the general exodus of dry farmers from the state, having only a dozen left in the county, with...

most figuring on ceasing operation after utilizing the land which they have prepared for next year's crop... This land is going back to pasture or range. A few pieces of it are being picked up by sheepmen at from $1.50 to $2.50 an acre. A lot of our irrigated land is growing up to Canada thistle and other weeds. The return of price on cattle which makes an industry profitable will more than double the number of people in our community who can continue business and pay their bills. For several years past the sheepman has been the only one who has been able to make expenses. The coming years should be proportionately better than those in the immediate past.

They had more reason for optimism in 1928, when they reported, "the price of cattle continued to rise up to October of this year, stock cattle bringing $70.00 a head, and sheep remaining at a good price. Wool sold for 37c to 42c a pound. Many people on a small scale starting to raise them. Prices extremely low for grazing land." 32

Just as some recovery seemed possible, cattle prices again dropped and the recovery of the late 1920's gave way to the Great Depression of the 1930's. Between 1929 and 1932 beef prices fell 53%, starting at an average of $10.59 a

32 President's Report, State Bank, 1924, 1928.
hundredweight and ending at $4.94 a hundredweight. In 1932 cattle prices fell to their lowest point in 22 years, although few costs fell, and taxes, interest and other charges remained stable. 33

Many cattlemen who had just managed to weather the postwar depression lost their ranches between 1929 and 1932 as cattle prices continued to decline. Tariffs remained high and beef production declined, but prices fell another 50% between 1930 and 1932. From 1928 to 1933 the average ranch value of beef cattle dropped by 61%. In 1933, cattle prices continued to fall as much as 25% below the low levels of 1932. 34

In South Dakota, Montana and Colorado, at least 63% of the families got by on less than $1000.00 a year in 1936. Studies for New Mexico and Montana for 1938 showed about the same levels of income for cattle raisers. In 15 years the total number of beef cattle on the Plains declined from 43 million head in 1920 to only 31 million head in 1935. 35

33 Schlebecker, Cattle Raising, 119-122.
34 Ibid., 119-122, 135. Fletcher, Free Grass to Fences, 168.
35 Schlebecker, Cattle Raising, 151, 153.
repercussions of the agricultural and economic depression prompted Dale Metlen to proclaim in 1940 that his CL livestock company was "just hanging on".  

Schlebecker reports that ranchers attempted to deal with disaster in three ways; they increased the size of their ranches, reduced the number of cattle and made heavier use of supplemental feeds. Evidently this held true for the ranchers in the Dillon areas as well. From 1925 to 1935 in the Beaverhead, the second generation bought some 53,934 acres. Without taking into account the 14,275 acres purchased by the P and O operation, purchases were down 18% from the previous decade, although even at that the ranchers bought almost 40,000 acres. Accompanying the land, however, mortgages remained above $200,000, matching the borrowing of the previous decade, as the ranchers apparently took advantage of the cheap deserted land to supplement their own acreages.

The New Deal initiated the Farm Credit Administration, which undertook several major efforts to

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36 WPA report. p2.

37 Schlebecker, Cattle Raising, 130.

38 Deed and Mortgage records, 1900-1935.
assist agriculture, including the Federal Land Banks. Such programs provided farmers and ranchers with long term loans at low rates of interest. The ranchers in the Beaverhead took advantage of the various provisions of the government assistance, borrowing almost $160,000 between 1924 and 1940 from such government relief efforts as the Federal Land Bank, The Federal Farm Amortization loans and the Emergency Farm Mortgage Act. 39

The government cattle buying program of 1934 depleted herds enough to make replacement slow, and when the thirties ended, what was left of the Montana beef industry proved in good condition. The average price of cattle rose slightly in 1934 to $4.55 a hundredweight. Cattlemen received $6.26 a hundredweight in 1936 and $7.76 a hundred in 1939, and by 1939 cattlemen were edging toward prosperity, although a more general recovery came as more and more people could afford beef after 1945. In 1948 prices reached $23.29, the highest prices thus far reached, and ranch indebtedness was reduced almost to the vanishing point. From 1946-1949 Schlebecker reports that most cattleman saved more than they might ordinarily have accumulated in a lifetime. Although

39 Mortgage records, 1900-1945.
costs rose, beef prices rose faster and more. Between 1940 and 1948 gross income for Montana cattlemen rose 144% while total costs rose only 96%, making net cash income for Montana cattlemen $1,885 higher between 1940 and 1948. Most cattlemen paid off their debts while they had the money and most took care not to contract any new debts. 1953 saw the greatest production of beef in the history of the U.S.  

Schlebecker reports that during 1940 and 1945 the number of farms decreased on the Plains while increasing in size. In the Beaverhead, however, the remaining ranchers did little purchasing from 1935-45, with a general overall loss of 474 acres. This does not account for the sale of the Poindexter and Orr operation in 1943. In debt since 1912 and unable to recover, the Orr's sold in that year to a wealthy family from California for $300,000. By 1943 they had accumulated some 33,000 acres. The Poindexter and Orr operation typified many of the larger outfits that Schlebecker feels hung on to the 1940's mostly due to the will power of their owners and little else. Terms of the sale included the Mace family's taking over the Orr's

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40 Schlebecker, Cattle Raising, 152. Fletcher, Free Grass to Fences, 203, 189.
$218,000 debt. ④¹

④¹ Deed book, 87.
By 1945 E.B. Roe, Jack and Charlie Brenner, Dale Metlen, Craig Cornell, and J.E. Selway, son of Herbert, remained in ranching; three of the six remaining ranchers belonged to the third generation. Naturally, death contributed to some of loss of men left in ranching, as many of the second generation had died by 1945. Untimely deaths were suffered by Herbert Selway, who died in the 1919 influenza epidemic, and Charlie Orr who committed suicide in 1916. From the original twelve ranchers and 34 sons of the second generation, twelve went on to pursue other interests, either ranching outside of the community or engaged in local interests outside of ranching. Instead of taking up the legacy his father might have left him in ranching, Bob Barrett took over the State Bank, which his father had begun

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1 Death lists, 1900-1945.
with other local ranchers and businessmen. E.B. Roe and other sons of the original founders were fellow stockholders, until 1930 when Bob Barrett bought them out. The profits from their fathers' and grandfathers' ranches enabled Barrett and a number of his peers to pursue other business interests. Ironically, it was his lack of total dependence on the ranching business that enabled Barrett to buy out the rest of the second generation, most of whom were dependent on ranching; he then saved many of them by loaning them money during the rest of the 1930's. J.E. Selway commented that Bob Barrett knew the way of life and took great risks to help save area ranchers during the depression. Six of the twenty two sons who stayed and ranched in the Beaverhead died before 1945, or were unable to keep ranching due to illness.

Those sons and grandsons who remained in ranching generally had the smaller operations that relied more on pasture than great amounts of rangeland. The size of the ranches and division among the children, however, often made

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3 James Selway, Oral History #578, Montana Historical Society Library, Helena, Montana.
it difficult for the second generation to hold onto their father's property. If the ranch was not of considerable size, it was often too small to support more than one family, and was unprofitable to sell other than as a single unit. The Selway family encountered this and opted to sell after their father's death in 1907.  

It is difficult, however, to level many broad judgments on failure or successes considering the magnitude of the devastation to agriculture in general in the 1920's and 1930's. Poor management plagued the Poindexter and Orr operation, and perhaps contributed to its demise. After the drought of 1919, the Orr's operation leveled off at running 6,000 sheep and 100 cattle. This was down from the peak of its operation when they reportedly ran some 12,000 cattle, 10,000 sheep and 700 horses over some 73,000 acres.  

Too rapid and too costly expansion in the "boom" years hurt many in agriculture, and few were exempt. Jack Brenner commented that his family survived the 20's and 30's due to a good ranch with good management.

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4 Probate of John Selway, #182.

5 WPA report, p. 10.
As ranching became more complicated and incorporated advances such as breeding, science and range management, the rancher had to become more of a specialist. By the late 1950's, cattlemen produced more beef on each acre than ever before. The second and third generations could no longer successfully maintain the role of businessmen in which their fathers and grandfathers had been able to thrive. Running a successful ranching operation required them to take up the roles of cowboy, veterinarian, breeder and businessmen. If one was not willing or able to take on such a role, leaving the family operation to a outside manager or foreman could prove a risky and often fatal decision, and one that certainly contributed to the loss of many family outfits.

For the second and third generations, debt became a way of life. Ranch property and cattle were really valuable only as collateral for borrowed money. Agriculture has always been a gamble, and the challenge for the second and third generations was the same as for their fathers -- knowing when to buy, when to expand, without increasing costs to the point of being in dire straits during the bad years. The second and third generations, however, had more to gamble with, and consequently, more to lose.

Living beyond their means may have also been a factor
in a number of the second generation’s problems. Perhaps the success philosophers of the nineteenth century were at least partly correct in their assessment of the sons of the well-to-do. Many of the sons and grandsons certainly did lack the grit, determination and hunger that may have made their fathers successful in any era. For many years they needed only to devote half their attention to a self-sustaining operation, until environmental and economic circumstances caught them unaware.

Certainly the overwhelming economic changes, however, played the most significant role in the losses of many operations. Due to inflation and a variety of different conditions, it is next to impossible to compare cost figures that are separated by over 100 years; the composition of livestock management costs have changed a great deal.

The price of cattle at $21.00 a hundredweight by 1960 was quite a change from the $4.00 of the 1870’s and 1930’s. But fluctuating markets and increased costs are still the rule in the beef industry. Annual operating costs, such as feed, veterinary services and labor costs, on most ranches today range from $250.00 to $350.00 per mother cow.  

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6 Rimbey, "Cost Comparisons,"
all the costs incurred even fifty years ago were for labor, horses, and lost animals. A number of new items have found their way into the management pattern, including maintenance of range improvements such as fencing, pipeline, springs, troughs, and seedings. With the open range system of the late 19th century, there were few fences to maintain and no pipeline and pumping systems to worry about. Machinery also contributed to a tremendous rise in costs. A mowing machine may have cost $100.00 in 1920; the gas to run it alone was an expense running up to $500.00 in the 1970's.  

The shift to fenced allotments grazing systems and other management patterns has not come without real cost to livestock operators. Grazing fees do not represent a substantial amount of the rancher's yearly expenses, but are nonetheless another expense with which his grandfather did not have to contend. Other new items on the ledger include meetings, association fees, salt and the grazing fee itself; the structure of costs has changed considerably over the last century. Jack Brenner commented that his first tax bill

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7 Jack Brenner, oral history.

8 For a more in depth look at the history of grazing on Federal lands, see Marion Clawson, chapter eighteen, "Grazing Land Values and Grazing fees." Page 254.
came to $350.00, with the last one paid in the 1970's coming to over $10,000. Thus, it is difficult to measure success and failure comparing ranching in two very different worlds.

If the ranchers could survive the two depressions of the 1920's and 1930's, the profitable years after the war generally saved them. Of the survivors in the Beaverhead, the Metlen ranch, consisting of some 5,000 acres, sold in 1950. Dale Metlen had neither children, nor nieces nor nephews. By 1960, the date when this study formally concludes, the offspring of only four of the original ranch families: Charlie and Jack Brenner, Craig and Roy Cornell, J.E. Selway, and Joe Roe remained totally dependent on ranching for their livelihood. The size of their ranches changed little from 1945-1960, while their debtload decreased from that of the 20's and 30's.

J.C. Brenner's grandson Jack spoke as President of the Stockgrower's Association in 1957, and expressed the feelings many of his generation of cattlemen shared:

I recently read what a big job associations such as ours had to do in their pioneer days.

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9 Jack Brenner, oral history.

10 Deed book, #125.
Our forefathers moved into a new and different land and founded a new and different business. They not only had to learn how to survive and prosper, but they also had to make their own laws and enforce them. They had to protect themselves and their communities from all conceivable hazards, natural, governmental and self made. Unfortunately not all of their wisdom and advice was heeded in the formation of our government, the use of our lands and water, and the laws we must live by. This is our heritage and we are still at it. It often seems to me that our basic problem is still the same. We are more in the minority than ever. Our laws are written, land prescribed, our credit furnished and or product used in main by people who do not understand our business or our country. It all calls for more thought, cooperation, and a stronger organization.

The myth of the West helped create the legend of the "Marlboro Man:" independent, strong, and unwavering in his beliefs. It is disillusioning to have a legend revealed as less than what we have perceived it, and perhaps hardest of all for those who personify the image and have grown to believe in the myth themselves. Their fathers' lives understandably perpetuated the glamorous image of the "cattleman." The pioneers had the benefit of a young, open and colorful country in which to carve out their own

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11 Fletcher, Free Grass to Fences, 211-212.
identities and "empires." Their sons and grandsons, however, struggled to maintain their heritage and image in a time when they were actually anything but independent and strong. The nation and the ranchers themselves have yet to reconcile the images of the past to the realities of the present when the rancher finds himself dependent upon public lands, financing and interest rates as well as the traditional cattle prices and weather. Both the public and the ranchers themselves seem content to ignore the realities to hang onto the sacred image of Americana at its best. The danger, however, arises when the "strong" and "independent" need assistance from a society that perceives them as self-sufficient. Times and conditions have changed enough so that neither the ranchers themselves nor the public should expect them to embody their legendary grandfathers.
The agricultural depression during the 1980's decimated agriculture, and as in the past, the Beaverhead contributed its share of losses to the statistics. At present, only one ranch remains in the original twelve families. Jack Brenner's wife runs his operation, but the other half of the Brenner family's ranch was sold in the late 80's, as was the Cornell and Roe operations. Of the original twelve ranches, much of the Selway and Bishop property is now part of the outskirts of the city of Dillon; the Poindexter and Orr operation was sold by the Mace family in 1950 to Rock Island Oil company, a corporation out of Kansas City. They are still the owners, and the operation has been known as the Matador ranch for some time now. Martin Barrett's Cross and Hairpin ranches have had a number of owners since he sold but are now owned by Metropolitan Insurance since the early 1980's.
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LAND SALES/PURCHASES
IN ACRES

Fig. 52. Gross income, operating expenses, and income from land from cattle and sheep ranching in Montana, 1910-1947. A major characteristic of ranching is its tendency to several high- or low-income years in succession. Although both cattle and sheep ranches exhibit this tendency, the variations in income do not exactly coincide in timing.

Fig. 55. Income to land from a ranch averaging 250 cattle, 1875-1938. Under the simplifying assumptions made for this chart, net ranch income is high or low for extended periods of time.
Record of Annual Precipitation for the Dillon Station since 1895

Average (13.47 in.)

(93 Year Summary)
Mrs. D. E. Metlen  D. E. Metlen

Res. of D. E. Metlen, Horse Prairie, Beaverhead Co.
RESIDENCE OF JOHN R. SELWAY, BEAVERHEAD CO, MONT.