HISTORY OF THE CATTLE INDUSTRY IN THE MADISON VALLEY

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INTRODUCTION

Any study of Montana's mountain-valley ranching, as opposed to the state's open-range cattle industry, is hampered by a genuine shortage of original material available. Few of the small highland ranchers maintained any type of complete or permanent records. If he could write at all, the stockman was wont to keep his notes on the backs of odd scraps of paper and to keep figures in his head. Unlike the large operations of the plains and the vast Eastern corporations with numerous shareholders, the early-day mountain cowboy, with small holdings, found little need for elaborate notes or records. On rare occasions, men like the Madison Valley's Myron Jeffers, freightline operator and merchant, or Ethel Maynard, an ex-grocer, maintained proper books and the habit carried over to their new trade of stock raising. Fortunately some of these records and personal journals are available for study. Only after the federal government entered the field of agriculture for tax purposes did the need for accurate records assume any great importance for the small stock producer.

Any researcher of the early mountain livestock trade is additionally confronted with the lack of interest on the part of contemporary newspapers. Mining had drawn the bulk of the new inhabitants to the region and it continued to occupy a position of such preeminence with readers that the
local papers interested themselves with mining news and relegated the growing cow industry to the back pages or classified sections.

The attitude of these early tabloids toward the beef raiser surfaces in an 1872 Virginia City editorial.

"One of our citizens, an owner of several fine cows, complains that some heartless scoundrel has stabbed a pitch fork into one of his best animals. The cow came home in horrible condition having been stabbed in the flanks, udder and neck as many as a dozen times. The villain who perpetrated this brutal outrage ought never have another beef steak & should live on sour milk the rest of his days."

This glaring lack of concern is highlighted by the failure of the papers to mention a herd of some 1500 head of Texas Longhorns which moved through the streets of Virginia City in 1871. These oversights of the local journals and the failure of the papers to show a keen interest in the developing cow business hinder an investigation of the early cow trade. Not until expanding herds reached Montana Territory's plains regions did the newspapers take a more active interest in the growing cattle traffic.

Western historians and writers likewise have chosen to ignore or lightly pass over those cattle operations based in the western highland pastures. In Westward Expansion, Ray Allen Billington lavished the mountain stockman with thirteen lines before he rushed on to the plains of eastern Montana.

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1 *The Montanian*, (Virginia City) November 7, 1872.

Ernest Osgood used three pages of *The Day Of The Cattleman* to establish cattle in the high western valleys; the bulk of his book then covers the open-range.³ Unlike Billington and Osgood, Robert H. Fletcher, in *Free Grass To Fences*, devoted more time and space to the Territory's foundation herds in the western meadows but, like them, he was quickly drawn by the excitement of the wide reaches to the east. Whereas these three authors acknowledged the movement of cattle from west to east, a fourth historian, Robert Athearn, in *High Country Empire*, emphasized the drives from the South into the eastern ranges.⁴

Romantic conceptions of trail drives, horses, rustlers, guns, and stage coaches have become associated with the cowboy and hold the fascination of writer and reader alike. Writers have thus banished the mountain stockproducer to a secondary role, leaving an imposing void in the history of the cattle industry in Montana.

Ultimately a major obstacle to any definitive research in the field of western cattle production is the loss of many early banking records in the small highland communities.


CHAPTER I
Early Establishment

The herd of mottled cattle, with the crisp autumn air settling upon them, needed little additional urging from the Mexican riders to hurry through the sage covered slopes to reach the Valley floor. Thus, November 4, 1871, the vanguard of Myron Jeffers' herd of 1500 head of Mexican and Texas longhorn cattle heralded the first effort to produce beef livestock in the Madison Valley, Montana Territory.

No matter where man has moved on earth, the pasture of domestic animals,—first the cow, followed closely by the horse, sheep, hog, and goat,—has always been the harbinger of civilized agriculture. "The cow has always been the advance agent of civilization."¹ This has proven especially true on the American frontier where the moving settler always took his cow with him. Even with this background, the pasture of domesticated livestock experienced a slow beginning in the Territory of Montana. To a great extent this lapse came as the result of the very nature and character of the first arrivals who sought furs and gold, not homes. In 1823, Baptist Ducharme entered the Madison's high country

seeking beaver and became its first white visitor. Yet the
draw of land held Ducharme in Montana. Forty years after his
arrival in Montana he died as a farmer near Frenchtown,
Montana.\(^2\)

Today's traveler leaving Virginia City and following
Montana Highway 287 east up Day-Light-Gulch, \(\) followed the route of Myron Jeffers' herd by climbing the To­
bbaco Root Mountains to their crest. Upon reaching the sum­
mit, the observer gains a panoramic view of the Madison Valley
and River. To the north, open bench lands run for twenty
miles before starting to rise into low foothills which form
a barrier across the northern end of the Valley. The river
is forced to escape into a narrow gorge on its way to the
Three Forks and the Missouri River. Looking southward, the
Valley extends some fifty miles along the Madison River be­
fore surrendering the water course to Yellowstone Park. The
floor of the entire length of the Valley is broken by terraced
benches reaching down from the mountains on either side of the
river.

A combination of high mountains—the Spanish Peaks and
the Madison Range to the east, the Tobacco Roots and the
Gravely Range to the west—permit only three practical en­
trances into the Valley. To the north, a road crosses Sterl­
ing Pass, enters the small town of Norris and eventually works
a course to the Gallatin Valley. A second route is that which

\(^2\) James Spray, "Early Days In The Madison Valley." No date, p. 32. Copies in the Montana State Historical Library, Helena,
Montana; Montana State University. Rozeman; copies can also be.
Jeffers used from Virginia City to enter the Valley from the west. Because of the harshness of the mountains, the eastern wall offers a near insurmountable barrier. Due to these rigorous heights the Madison's early settlers lived and worked in near isolation with, for many years, few external influences.

Geographic and human barriers confronted the Montana-minded stockman. The "Great American Desert" blocked both the northern and western movements of cattle to Montana. This formidable obstacle extends from approximately the ninety-eighth meridian westward to some point beyond the one hundred sixth meridian. Even the federal government showed some reservations about the western movement of settlers; the Commissioner of the General Land Office stated, in 1868, "this belt of country is an obstacle to the progress of the nation's growth . . . ." For years Southern cattlemen feared any attempt at running cattle on the free ranges in the North because of the distances to established markets, mountainous terrain, and hostile Indian tribes. Overstocked and overgrazed range conditions in the South eventually forced the Southern beef producer to seek some relief for his herds on the Northern pastures.

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The belligerent plains Indians resisted the passage north of the cattleman's herds before they could reach the northern grasslands. These Indians grew more restive with the continued penetration of the white settlers and stockmen of their native lands. They viewed any passage as a direct infringement upon their own nation. In 1867, as a direct result of a Congressional report on Indian conditions, the movement of cattle to Montana slowed to a mere trickle. In 1868, because of the same report, the federal government agreed to abandon the Bozeman Trail through Wyoming. The Powder River country of Wyoming became the hunting grounds of the Sioux. The Crows were confined to the south side of the Yellowstone River in central Montana. Both areas lay astride the direct route to Montana. It was not until after the Custer debacle in 1876 and the danger of Indian attack was removed that the road north became officially reopened.

Despite these hindrances, cattle had still managed to reach Montana. This establishment itself was a major triumph since a great many prospective businessmen and speculators in the Eastern States knew little or nothing of the "desert" west of the Mississippi River. H. L. Hosmer, the first Chief Justice on the Montana Territorial Supreme Court, received a letter from an interested New Yorker inquiring, "In what part of our country is your Territory? How do you get there, and what besides Indians, grizzlies, and gold can be found there?"

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Hosmer's answer to the latter query was agriculture. 7

How and when the first cattle reached the Territory and how the industry got its beginning are still moot points among Montana's writers and historians. Most accounts credit the arrival of the first cattle to Charles Larpenteur. Larpenteur, an employee of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, left Pierre's Hole, Wyoming, on July 24, 1833, with four cows and two bulls "intended for the Yellowstone." 8 The trapper's destination was the point at which the Yellowstone joins the Missouri River near the present site of Buford, North Dakota. On September 3, Larpenteur arrived at the mouth of the Yellowstone with the four cows and a single remaining bull. The trapper had lost his second bull to repeated attacks by rabid wolves. Although this account is noteworthy, it does not place cattle specifically in Montana. It is more than possible, however that the five remaining head of livestock did, in feeding, venture the three miles to Montana.

The first permanent herd of cattle in Montana was the result of the efforts of Catholic missionaries in the Bitter Root Valley in northwestern Montana. Evidence to this effect points to Father Pierre-Jean DeSmet who arrived in the area on September 24, 1841, to establish a mission among the Flathead Indians. With the help of John McLoughlin, a Hudson Bay

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7 Ibid.

representative at Colville, Washington, DeSmet obtained "all the cattle he wanted." Father DeSmet made no record of the number he acquired but, by the Spring of 1846, the mission reported that it had forty head of cattle. There have been some exaggerated claims regarding the growth of this herd: "...the Jesuits at St. Ignatius, for example, in 1858 had over a thousand cattle." Such lavish claims can not be substantiated today by research of the mission's records.

By 1858 a small number of ranches appeared in the mountain valleys of western Montana. Most of the cattle used to stock these operations came from Utah. In 1857 a conflict between the Mormons and the Gentiles broke out in the southwest. Fearing retaliation from the "Saints," many of the non-Mormons fled Utah and took their cattle herds with them. A number of these cowmen moved to Montana's southwestern valleys.

The Montana cattle industry received an immense boost in 1866 when Nelson Story, a part-time freighter and miner from Virginia City, drove six hundred head of longhorns from Fort Worth, Texas to the Madison's eastern neighbor.

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the Gallatin Valley. Before Story's drive north from Texas, only an insignificant number of cattle reached the Montana Territory from the cattle ranges of Kansas, New Mexico, and Texas. Most of the stabilized herds found in Montana could be traced to Utah, Oregon, or Washington.

The gold strikes at Bannack (1862) and Alder Gulch (1863) provided the first strong local markets for Montana beef-steak. The appearance of gold camps was an impetus to the raising of livestock in the vicinity. Ranch operations subsequently became a direct consequence of the gold diggings. Owing to their closeness to the mining camps the Madison, Stinkingwater, Deer Lodge, and Ruby Valleys, [see map page 7] rapidly became popular feeding grounds for the budding cattle-men.

These gold centers in the southwestern part of the Territory held the magnetic attraction which lured the future cow-men to the region. Not all of the swarming fortune hunters entered the camps seeking their bonanzas in the creek beds. Some intended to make their fortunes with the old familiar trades that they had practiced in the States. Once the Eastern ex-farmer and the Southern cowboy in the camps saw the promise of fresh meadows and the demand for food staples, beef production and farming became inescapable for the region. One new arrival to the Madison Valley wrote immediately to his relatives, "worn out oxen sold to the Sunday crowds in Virginia City for $100. I killed a beef the other day that weighed
600 net. It was worth $125.00. The abundant free mountain and valley grasses, combined with such prices, encouraged the ex-farmer and ex-stockman to abandon any plans of working the creek beds and return to their more familiar occupations.

Precisely whose cow became the first to find feed in the Madison Valley is not known. All evidence, however points to stock owned by an ex-Utahan, Billy Brebaugh. Brebaugh settled in the northeastern corner of the Valley, on St. Joe Creek. Arriving from Utah in 1862, he "brought his start with him." Brebaugh had been in the Madison several months when two employees of the Hudson Bay Company, Joe Bryon and "English George" Thorpe, crossed the mountains to the Madison. By the following year the two partners had "twenty head of beeves" running on Madison Valley pasture and were in business on their own.

The promise of free and easy graze in proximity to the diggings generated a second but, less intense, stampede. This second rush was for good pasture.

July, 1863, marked major gains in the number of Madison Valley residents as disgruntled miners and merchants abandoned

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13 The spelling of Brebaugh's name differs in several of the Madison accounts. The most common usage is "Brebaugh."


the gold creeks and joined previous settlers. William Ennis became one of those businessmen to turn his back on the camps. Ennis, a veteran miner and freighter, had engaged in both in the Denver area during the 1860-61 strikes in Colorado.

Early in April, 1863, Ennis loaded three wagons of freight in Omaha, Nebraska, and with oxen as power, headed for Montana's gold strikes. On June 10, he arrived in Virginia City. There he turned a first-rate profit by selling bacon for 60¢ per pound which he had bought at six cents. Flour purchased at $5.00 per hundred-weight, he sold for $50.00 per hundred. By July 1, he had emptied his wagons of all merchandise. Ennis then heard that hay sold at $100 a ton in the gold camp. Taking his teamsters with him, Ennis moved to the northern end of the Madison Valley's river lands where the bullwhackers set to work cutting and stacking the native grass for hay. During this period he applied for a patent on the land that he had his crew working. By the end of the month William Ennis had sold $2000 worth of this hay in Virginia City.

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16 One of these teamsters, Jack Wiggins, left for Texas a short time after working in the fields. Eight years later, (1871) Myron Jeffers found Wiggins in Abilene, Kansas. Jeffers offered him a job as a cattle drover to help move a herd to the Madison. Wiggins accepted and continued to work for Jeffers for a number of years.

17 To supplement ranch income, Ennis continued in the freighting business. On a trip to Ft. Benton, Montana, for merchandise, he spent the evening of July 1, 1867, with Governor Thomas Meagher. During the course of the day, the Governor complained of feeling ill and Ennis returned Meagher to the boat on which he was staying. "Supposedly while leaning over the rail, the Governor fell over the rail and drowned ... thus, Mr. Ennis was the last person to talk to that notable character." Spray, "Early Madison. p. 51.
In addition to the Ennis haycrew, Jack Slade, an employee of the Overland Stage Company, had put men to work cutting grass in the Madison along the river bottoms. Slade constructed a cabin overlooking the river where he and his wife lived until Virginia City vigilantes hanged him on the evening of March 10, 1864, for "rowdyism."\textsuperscript{18}

During the same month (July, 1863) that Ennis entered the Madison with his men, Andrew H. Odell, another of the disenchanted miners, crossed the Tobacco Roots to "gather grass."\textsuperscript{19} Odell cut hay all summer which he sold to animal owners along Alder Gulch. The following year he had a horse-drawn mowing machine freighted in from Salt Lake City to increase his output. During the Summer and Fall of 1863, hay became the first farm product of the Madison Valley.

Early Madison settlers chose to settle along Meadow, Odell, and Jack Creeks; by the end of Fall (1863) some twenty cabins and dug-outs had been constructed in the northern portion of the Valley. In addition to the availability and abundance of water, the nearness of Virginia City made the upper reaches of the canyon the logical section to settle. Furthermore, the road to Bozeman passed across the northern region of the Madison.


During the Fall and early Spring of 1864, various changes occurred in the Madison operations. Hay sales had been the principle occupation; then the cows began to appear. These cows were not to be eaten, since the cow produced a commodity far more valuable than pot roast — milk. Among the citizens of the new gold camps the demand for milk, cheese, and butter outstripped the need for meat. Early arrivals found that they did not need beef cattle. The surrounding hills and waterways still contained enough wild game to fill the butcher shops and to meet the demands of fresh meat in the gold camps. People already secure in the Territory encouraged friends and relatives in the States to bring milk cows with them as "they were worth from $60 to $125 a head . . . . Butter was $1.50 a lb."20 Jack Slade increased his own holdings in the Madison to "320 acres of good grass land and stocked it with milk cows."21

O. C. Whitney became one of the first Madisonians to profit from the dairy market. Whitney, like William Ennis, had forsaken the Denver diggings to move farther north. Arriving in the Valley during August, 1864, he purchased the holdings of an ex-cohort of Jack Slade.22 In 1865, after driving his cattle to the Valley from Utah, Whitney started a dairy the


22 This man, James "Old Tex" Crowell had been requested to leave the region by Slade's judge advocates, "which he did with a very quick and stylish grace." Spray, "Early Madison," p. 179.
following year and soon was "milking about 35 cows." In addition, Whitney turned to the production of butter and "in one year he made as much as 5,000 pounds . . . ." Selling milk, butter, and cheese brought Whitney, in 1866, "the handsome profit of seven thousand dollars." Instantly the manufacture of butter and cheese became a chief occupation of Ennis and Whitney's other neighbors.

Over the years the dairy business remained an important income to the Madison ranchers. The price of a milk cow and the earnings from her products continued to encourage dairy sales. Augustus Maynard, an early Valley homesteader, wrote that in 1872 he sold a cow and obtained "... $100 for her. The first butter I made sold for $1.50 per pound." Mrs. William Ennis had a hand cart from which she sold butter in


26 By the Fall of 1866, eight additional Valley settlers had entered the dairy business. This work made the milking of cows financially the largest venture in the Madison at that time.

the streets of Virginia City.

Eggs became almost worth their weight in gold dust to the miners. Maynard wrote of the egg business, "I went to this place and bot [sic] 12 pullets for 5¢ each and in [The] later part of Jan. I took some eggs to Virginia City and sold them at $3. per dozen . . . ."28 When William Ennis settled into ranching, his start was not an auspicious one, for he began with "a few chickens and milk cows."29

The dairy business continued to yield larger returns than beef cattle as long as Virginia City remained the Territory's capital, the gold camps maintained large populations, and the sale of dairy goods did not become overburdened with dairymen. The Madison Valley did support six dairies until the turn of the century.30

Once the number of dairy cows in the Madison saturated the demand for dairy goods, the milkman switched to the raising of the beef cow. Many a milk cow ended her days on the butcher's block. The Territory's early mountain ranchers were actually inglorious farmers patterned after those in the Midwest.


29 Pankey, Livestock History, p. 42.

30 One cheese plant continued to operate until 1911.
CHAPTER II
Establishment of The Cowman

In 1845 Texas was annexed by the United States and, as a bonus, the Nation inherited thousands of cattle which have been marked in the history of the livestock industry as the "Texas Longhorns." These leggy, scrawny, six-hundred pound animals with horns which, on occasion, spread to lengths of six to eight feet, were never animals of great beauty. Awkward as they might appear, these gaunt cattle became the foundation stock of the Montana beef industry. In the initiation of the business, it took just such sturdy cattle to survive the rigors of the long drives to Montana's high meadows. It is difficult to picture today's Angus and Hereford cattle attempting the same type of journey.

With the end of the American Civil War, Texas ranges were glutted with a five-year accumulation of unsold cattle. Texas promptly became a ready marketplace for Montana buyers who sought cattle at depreciated prices. The Madison Valley's eastern neighbor, the Gallatin Valley, became the first recipient of such cattle. The Nelson Story drive from Texas proved to reluctant stockmen that the movement of cattle from Texas could be a profitable undertaking. The flood to Montana pastures then got underway in earnest as, "An esti-
mated 10 million \textit{cattle} moved out of Texas in the twenty-three years from 1867 to 1890.\textsuperscript{2} The last large drive from Texas came to Montana in 1897 when an XIT-owned herd of 4,500 head, "its last drive to Montana\textsuperscript{3} made the long trek."

Shortly after the Story trip, the United States Army closed the Bozeman Trail to any further travel because of the danger from angry Indians.\textsuperscript{4} Nevertheless, the movement of longhorn cattle resumed in 1868, when Myron Jeffers, another of Virginia City's enterprising freighters, departed for Texas. To finance his trip, Jeffers sold two wagon loads of Utah salt along Alder Gulch for 42\$ a pound. The Jeffers beef undertaking was a far more ambitious one than any preceding venture. His journey covered more ground with a larger number of cattle than any prior drive. Jeffers purchased a herd of 1200 head of Texas cattle in Bexar County. This herd he drove to Fort Ellsworth, Kansas and then he followed a northwesterly course until the cattle reached the North Platte River in Nebraska. There he turned directly west to Fort Laramie, Wyoming. Leaving the military post, Jeffers followed the old Oregon Trail until he reached Montpelier, Idaho. Then passing through Soda Springs, Idaho, the herd worked north and across the Snake River between Fort Hall and Idaho Falls. Jeffers used Monida Pass to cross the Continental Divide and passed

\textsuperscript{2} Paul Wellman, \textit{The Trampling Herd} (New York: Carrick & Evans, 1939), p. 148. Hereafter cited as: Wellman, \textit{The Herd}.

\textsuperscript{3} (Lusk, Wyoming) \textit{Herald}, June 24, 1897.

\textsuperscript{4} Supra., p. 8.
through the Horse Prairie to Bannack, Montana. In Bannack, offers for his cattle were so high and numerous that Jeffers sold the entire herd in the camp's streets.⁵

In January 1870, Jeffers returned to Texas, bought a second bunch of longhorns, and once again sold the herd before reaching the Madison Valley. Jeffers made a third, and final, trip to Texas in 1871. The difference was that he kept this herd for himself. Jeffers kept a diary of this trip; it reveals that he made a good buy on his cattle.

Jeffers' buying ground was in Mason County, in southern Texas. On February 24, 1871, he made his first purchase when he "Engaged six hundred yearlings of A. I. Holden to be delivered at The town of Burnett April 1st 1871 at $3.56 per head in coin."⁶ The following day he secured a better buy; "Went to Lembergs. Contracted for six or seven hundred yearlings to be delivered at Burnett Town on the 12th 1871 at $3.25 coin."⁷ Jeffers continually met and talked with other prospective Montana buyers who were taking advantage of the low Texas prices.

Eventually Jeffers had bought the number of cattle he wanted. He then marked a notation in his journal, on March

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⁵ Jeffers' ledgers, tally books, and letters. In possession of the Jeffers family, Ennis, Montana.


⁷ Jeffers, "Diary." February 25, 1871.
Jeffers' route to Madison Valley.
14, 1871, that the crew had "Road branded cattle, 1894 head of cattle and 37 horses." The next morning the drive for the Madison got underway. Besides Jeffers, the crew numbered fourteen riders -- twelve of them Mexican -- a cook, and a cook's helper.

The only serious problem which Jeffers encountered on the trip was an abortive robbery planned by his own crew. The cook's young helper alerted him to the crew's plan. The next day the Jeffers diary carried a notation; "June- Thursday 22, payed off Mexicans." In Abilene ten new riders were placed on the pay roll and the cook's helper was told to meet the herd on the trail and he would be returned to his job.

Jeffers spent 204 days on the road traveling the same route which he had used successfully on the two previous drives. He arrived at his home ranch, east of the Madison River, on November 4, 1871. The following morning made his last entry in the diary, "snow fell last night. 7 inches deep." In recognition of his three cattle drives and later contributions to the formation of the stock industry in Montana, Myron Jeffers was elected to the Cowboy Hall of Fame in 1961.

Both Story and Jeffers moved their cattle directly into the mountainous valleys of southern and western Montana. This

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8 Jeffers, "Diary." March 14, 1871.
9 Jeffers, "Diary." June 22, 1871.
10 Supra., see footnote no. 16 page 9
11 Jeffers, "Diary." November 4, 1871.
had been the course of the few stockraisers before them and the path of the many that would follow. In a natural desire to seek the sheltering timber stands and mountainous waterways, the first drovers pushed their cattle through the open plains to the more hospitable mountain valleys. The primary concern of the early beef producers was the closeness of the markets in the gold camps. An additional attraction, however, was the nutritional grass of the mountain meadows that the early settlers had been cutting for hay.

The grasses classified as the tall grasses -- bluebunch wheat, needle and thread, and giant wild rye -- extended from Illinois into the mountain regions of Montana. In the highlands, the tall grass joined the famous short grasses; grama, bluestem buffalo, and winterfat. The real wealth of the cattle business lay not in the beef cattle in Montana, but in the grasses which the herds harvested. This turf has proven its value and strength through the years. The demand for hay made of these grasses promoted the settlement of the Madison and its neighboring valleys.

The habit of storing hay for winter forage in the Madison started in 1864: Augustus Maynard cut twenty acres for his "beeeves." In some cases, a valley rancher might make more money by cutting and selling forage than with his beef herd. In 1866 one Madisonian noted, "I have cut and stacked about 150 tons . . . . I will clear $4000 or $5000." That same

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year this rancher's beef cattle earned him an additional $1800.

The establishment of these high-country ranches grew from the use of federal land laws enacted to encourage and promote farming and ranching on the nation's vast public domain. By the federal government's definition, the public domain is "... the property of the Nation and subject to legislative control and disposition by Congress alone."\(^\text{14}\)

The Madison's ranchers and early immigrants acquired their holdings through the use of a series of governmental acts applying to the public reserves. The first of these statutes applicable to the Valley settlement was the Preemption Law of 1841. This ordinance allowed a person settling upon the public domain, before any survey, to have the first claim upon the same ground once it had been measured and laid out by the government. After the survey was completed, the settler could keep one hundred and sixty acres of the land he had improved by paying a filing fee of twenty-five cents an acre. The Madison settler could then acquire an additional "160 acres without cost" by using the Homestead Act of 1862.\(^\text{15}\) Congress continued to make supplemental land acquisitions available to the homesteader through a series of new land laws. Eventually a settler might obtain a total of

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\(^{15}\) Ibid.
1920 acres from the public reserves.  

Few of the plains cattlemen owned the eastern ranges they used, or made any pretext of ownership or lease. Free utilization of unoccupied federal lands became the foundation of the beef-grazing industry. The actual law of the open range was an unwritten rule of free access to grass and water. This method of range control created vacancies that the ranchers viewed as the open range.

Unlike his eastern counterpart, the mountain rancher had --from the very start--claimed or purchased his important, key tracts: those that contained or controlled timber and water. The desire to fence these major pastures in the highlands was another clue to the mid-western background of the homesteader found in Montana's western valleys.

16 The limit set at 160 acres was a misguided effort to stimulate western settlement. In the expanses of the western territories, 160 acres meant only failure and starvation. In the years following the Civil War, a flurry of land bills were passed that helped homesteaders acquire land. 1841 the Preemption Law allowed 160 acres of improved land after a survey at $1.25 per acre. Homestead Act of 1862 gave free 160 acres except for a filing fee. Timber Culture Act(s) 1873 & 1878 encouraged the plantation of trees; 40 acres for 2½ acres of trees, 80 acres for 5 acres planted, 160 acres for 10 acres planted. Desert Land Act 1877 to encourage irrigation; 640 arid acres for putting under water at $1.25 per acre within three years. Timber & Stone Act 1878 granted 160 acres of unimproved and nonmineral land for $2.50 an acre. The Homestead Grazing Act 1916 gave 640 acres by stating that western lands were "... of such character that 640 acres are reasonably required to support a family."


Burlingame, Montana Frontier, p. 348-350.
The ranches in the mountain valleys of western Montana had their own systems of raising cattle which differed from the open-range practices of eastern Montana. The tall mountains and steep passes formed natural barriers that held cattle within comparatively small areas. Cattle movements were so restricted by the terrain that they could not leave the Madison Valley in winter and seldom in the summer, except when driven. Subsequently the plainsman found, on the open prairies, no such obstacles which could restrain his livestock.

In the mountain highlands, the herds very rarely reached the proportions of those grazed on the vast eastern plains. In the Madison Valley a mountaineer could handle a sizeable number of cattle by himself or with little help. The method followed was to simply allow the cattle to drift at will up and down the river bottoms while grazing. As hill herds were smaller in number and more closely confined they were easily watched and managed. The moment that cattle reached the plains region however, the luxury of these methods ceased, as the cattle scattered in all directions. On the plains, the journey to water and back to fresh grass might involve hours of travel. The absence of water on the Territory's eastern tableland always presented a serious problem to the plains
stockman. It is evident why the budding cattle industry began in the mountainous portions of the Territory: the new stockman sought those areas with the obvious advantages of a market and hospitable mountains.

Nevertheless, many contemporary journalists overemphasized the ease of producing cattle in Montana. One claimed that, "The customary way of managing a herd of cattle in Montana is simply to brand them out upon the range. Some stock owners give no more attention to their herds until the following spring, when a few extra men are employed to round up the animals." Such a wild claim was a gross exaggeration of operations in the Madison and other high pastures.

In the 1870's and 1880's, a significant amount of literature flourished promoting the opportunities found in Montana's growing cattle business. Robert E. Strahorn wrote one of the more popular books, *Resources of Montana Territory and Attractions of Yellowstone National Park*. Strahorn had been employed by both the Montana Territorial Legislature and the Northern Pacific Railroad to write encouraging reports about Montana and the advantages of living there. The railroad felt that any favorable descriptions would stimulate the sale of Northern Pacific lands. Strahorn more than lived up to the expectations of his employers. Aimed directly at people interested in cattle production, Strahorn wrote, "Expense of caring for

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cattle is 60¢ per annum." In a second book, Strahorn, followed up with greater claims. The author maintained that managing livestock on Montana ranges meant merely turning the cattle loose to fend for themselves; the owner need only sit back and wait for his herd to multiply. "Cattle on these vast free ranges are especially self-reliant, and if left to take care of themselves, winter and summer, will, as a rule, grow while their owner sleeps . . . ." This fantastic advice was followed more closely on Montana's eastern plains than in the western mountain regions with drastic results in 1886-87.

In 1881, General James S. Brisbin -- a frontier army officer, opportunist, and greatest of equivocators -- published, The Beef Bonanza; or How to Get Rich on the Plains. A most impressive title. This small book had been written to attract the attention of the Eastern and foreign investor. In his book Brisbin attempted to alleviate the potential investor's fears of Montana's winter weather conditions by asserting, "We have never lost any sheep from severe weather in Montana." A few years later nature would mock the General's assurances.

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The full impact of such writers upon Montana's mountain ranchers and their methods of management is difficult to measure. That they were read at all is more easily confirmed by the presence of copies of both Brisbin and Strahorn's books in the Madison Valley.

Nevertheless, early ranching in the Valley was uncomplicated. The early small ranches were established and worked by families or were simple partnerships based upon local money. Ranches of the western valleys were vastly dissimilar to the grandiose operations on the plains to the east. The plains ranch, in many cases, operated with Eastern or foreign capital backing and absentee owners were numerous.

The small mountain outfits of the Madison largely followed the same routine. Before the cattle were turned out on the grass in the early Spring, all young unmarked livestock were branded with their owner's brand. About the first of May, riders drove the Madison's beef along the eastern side of the river to the southern end of the Valley. There the cattle ranged as far south as Raynolds Pass and the Antelope Basin. This operation was a cooperative venture by the majority of the Valley ranchers. By no means did all local ranchers join or form such associations and some continued to operate alone. However, a common custom of all early cowmen, mountain and plains stockmen alike, was the pooling of labor during the roundups and branding of livestock.

The Valley association would hire a couple of herders to
care for their cattle. The riders' major concern lay in the
danger from poisonous plants during the danger period of
early spring. The cowboys had to pay only cursory attention
to the drifting of the grazing cattle for the mountains to
the east and west restricted movement in those directions.
Riders had only the southern pass to watch with any regular-
ity. Throughout the summer and early fall the cattle roamed
at will in the lower end of the Valley. During the entire
year cattle ranged solely on grass in the highland pastures.
By using the southern end of the Valley during the summer,
the grass on the northern ranches remained fresh for fall and
early winter usage. The first frost signaled the approach of winter; the herd
grew restless and began to drift back down the river toward
the shelter of the home meadows. In late October and early
November, the owners cooperated to gather the wandering stock.
Each owner or his representative would then cut his own cattle
from the herd and return them to the home ranch for the winter.
The mountain stockman had to remove all the cattle from the
mountains and into the valleys where the winter snow would
not be as deep. In the lowlands, the water holes could be
kept open; the owner might see that the cattle did not wander
and he could ration the better grass to them. No cattle in-
tentionally remained out on the summer ranges through the

5 The southern extremes of the Madison became the last to
be settled and offered fresh forage during the summer months.
Heavy winter snows and cold temperatures discouraged usage of
the southern portion of the Valley on a year-a-round basis.
winter.

The ranching workyear had two roundups and three drives. Ranchers held a spring gather to brand all unmarked stock and to move the cattle to summer grazing grounds. In the fall a roundup, on the range, returned the cattle to the ranches for the winter. Before releasing the stock on the home pastures, the marketable cattle were cut from the herd and driven either to a local market or a cattle buying center. John Owens of the Bitter Root Valley, made the first cattle drive to a distant market from Montana. Owens maintained a journal of his operations and trip. In 1851, he recorded the start of his drive to Idaho; "Wednesday 16 [April] Raised Camp and Entd H. G. [Hell Gate] defile crossing Big Black foot fork of H. C. Fork the road tolerable . . . .".

Most of the early Madison cattle, to reach eastern slaughter houses, moved south from the Valley. Herds crossed Monida Pass [see map page 77] into Idaho and then to the rail-centers at Ogden or Corrine, Utah. By 1880 some Madison beef had undertaken a more distant journey, "down the Yellowstone [River] to Fort Custer, then to Forts Mckinney, Reno & Fetterman then to Pine Bluffs . . . . on Union Pacific Railroad 50

6 Pankey, Livestock History, p. 58.

7 Calves seldom sold; females [Heifers] were held over as herd replacements and steers sold as three or four year old cattle.

miles east of Cheyenne." This long route to market proved a
difficult one for the cattle. The trip exacted its toll and
most herds arrived underweight. Prices had to be exception­
ally high to hazard such an arduous trek. A herd starting in
the Madison took three months to reach the rail yards at Pine
Bluffs.

A new outlet for Madison beef appeared at the Valley's
very doorstep with the booming copper industry of Butte,
Montana. This market expanded rapidly and the largest amount
of beefsteak raised in the mountains continued to remain in
the territory to supply local demands. A trade paper, the
Montana Livestock Journal, commented that the local meat pro­
ducer should ". . . cater to this market, and for at least
nine months of the year sell his animals to his home market
at a good price." The mines of Virginia City continued to
demand a sizeable amount of beef through the 1880's. One
Madison rancher wrote, "I also butcher for the miners every
eight of ten days." These native markets presented the Madi­
son stockman with a profitable outlet when, "two year old hei­
fers get $60 . . . . cows from $50 to $75." For some years
this local requirement for beef continued to provide an outlet

9 Strahorn, Montana and Yellowstone, p. 102.
10 (Helena) Montana Livestock Journal, April 6, 1889.
11 Letter from George Watkins to his brother John Watkins
of Excelsior Springs, Missouri; June 1, 1873. Letters in the
possession of Watkins family.
12 Letter from George Watkins to his brother John Watkins;
October 16, 1870.
for the mountain meat. The sale of native cattle rapidly grew into a major territorial industry; one contemporary newspaper observed the sale of "sixtyseven head of cows and calves sold at prices varying from twenty dollars to seventy-six dollars per head."\(^{13}\)

Although there continued to be a lack of large, endemic marketing places and the extended drives exacted their charge in both cattle and weight, the industry in the mountain regions continued to grow in the Madison and its neighboring valleys. While there is no direct mention of the numbers involved, a Madison county report of 1872 states that, "cattle of all kinds, including work oxen, beeves, cows and calves, are valued at $427,959.00."\(^{14}\) Regardless of the head count, the value of these cattle, at 1872 prices, would indicate a sizeable quantity of livestock. The mention of oxen on the assessment records is interesting, for William Ennis had used oxen to move his freight-wagons and had later used bovine power to stack his hay in the Madison Valley. Ennis brought fifteen head of work oxen with him from Virginia City and he continued to raise and sell work teams "for about forty years."\(^{15}\)

In the 1870's and early 1880's the average size of the Madison herds was only four to five hundred head. With the growth of partnerships among stockmen, the size of the herds

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\(^{13}\) (Virginia City) The Montanian, October 10, 1872.

\(^{14}\) Assessment Records of Madison County 1872, County Court House Virginia City, Montana.

increased. In 1880 two Virginia City merchants, Simeon Buford and Henry Elling, purchased 6000 acres in the Madison Valley. Their herds grew to number some 3500 head before the turn of the century. In 1881 Myron Jeffers and William McKimmens became partners in a cattle operation. Five years later over 5000 head of livestock carried their brands. In 1913 the partnership which ran the largest number of cattle in the Valley moved the nucleus of their herd from the Gallatin Valley. Hans Biering and Marshall Cunningham had grazed cattle west of Bozeman for several years before they moved into the Madison. By 1916 there were more than 16,000 head of cattle carrying the Biering-Cunningham Rising Sun brand in the southern section of the Valley.

By 1881 beef prices once again climbed after the depression of 1873 and a general boom hit the Western cattle industry. The demand for beef flourished, far outstripping the supply. A sudden, widespread expansion of the industry swept all of Montana; the cattle population in Montana exploded from 117,000 in 1870 to 1,050,000 in 1885.17

This extraordinary development in the cattle industry coincided with the movement and shift of the cattle population

16 McKimmens and Jeffers had become acquainted in Denver in 1858. McKimmens had been one of the founders of Denver, but had moved to the Madison in 1864. The partnership lasted until McKimmens' death in 1893.

from Montana's western mountains to the more spacious and empty eastern ranges. With what seemed an almost unlimited world before them, ranchers turned to those prairies that they had heretofore ignored on their trips to the western mountain valleys. The newly critical eye of the cowman saw a wide grassland spread before him as a "land without enough rainfall to support farming... he saw it as a natural range-land and he used it as such." The pressure of increasing numbers of cattle in the mountains pushed the ranchers farther and farther away from the hospitable highland meadows. Bob Ford and Thomas Dunn, two Prickly Pear Valley ranchers, set the example when, in 1871, they moved one thousand head of cattle into the Sun River Valley of central Montana. The areas closest to the mountains quickly filled with cattle, forcing the subsequent herds to leapfrog farther to the east. The Montana stockman was a restless individual who saw the range with the attitude of plenty. He saw the new range as "more [grass] just over the hill." The rush was on.

Although Nelson Story had grazed his first cattle in the reaches of the upper Yellowstone Valley as early as 1866, not until 1878 did any really serious attempt take place to pasture permanent cattle in the valley. In 1878 a number of ranchers in the Madison and Ruby Valleys banded together to

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use the fresh eastern feed, "with a move of some 10,000 head to the Yellowstone." The custom of combining small herds became more and more the fashion among northern stockmen. In as much as the largest number of the hill ranches operated on a small scale and were family run, by consolidating cowherds the mountaineers shared the expense of herds and roundup costs.

In June, 1880, several Madison cattlemen organized another stock pool. This group trailed its herd to the Yellowstone Valley and on the last day of August, established its headquarters on Valley Creek near Park City. The responsibility for the herd fell to Rolland Potter, an employee of the herd's largest investor, Myron Jeffers.

These cattle grazed in the Valley Creek and Lake Basin areas until the late Fall of 1886. An extended drought and a plague of grasshoppers forced a change in location for the herd. Potter gathered his charges and moved to the south side of the Yellowstone River where they joined Nelson Story's cattle. During the Winter of 1886-87 livestock north of the river experienced extensive losses whereas, to the south of the Yellowstone cattle suffered fewer losses and the winter less severe. The cattle from the Madison grazed between the Stillwater and Clarks Fork on Story's Crow Reservation lease. Eventually, in 1889, the federal government opened this portion of the reservation to settlement and the stockmen moved

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20 Pankey, Livestock History, p. 78. "The first three calves were named by the drovers "Hail Columbia," "Andrew Johnson," and "Elizabeth Fowler." Hiss Fowler must have been quite a lady with the cowboys to deserve such a namesake.
the cattle to the Big Horn River. The Madison share of the herd remained to pasture in this region until 1893 when, the partners sold the herd.

The migration to the plains by the established hill stockmen did not denote a complete withdrawal from the mountain operations. Jeffers and his neighbors continued to maintain their headquarters and homes at the original homesites in the Madison during the period they pastured a herd in the Yellowstone country. These men only sold or vacated grazing land they used in the eastern parts of the territory. Any final judgment to sell rested upon the considerations of protecting a herd from weather, better summers, grass, water, and ultimately -- hay. With these conditions in mind, it is a small wonder that the mountain rancher choose to return to valley ranching.

The successful mountain stockman could not follow the same procedures year after year and remain in business. Pressures forced him to alter his methods of operation to meet the needs and demands of the business, for, "... the west was a new world peopled with new men, and those who clung to the ways of the past were lost ...."21 It required a great deal of time, planning and hard work to succeed. Blind luck, notwithstanding the claims of General Brisbin, were not sufficient to succeed or even to survive. Contemporary promoters lightly discounted the daily risks by continuously underscoring the opportunities.

Later, when well established, stockmen undertook to improve ranch production through the betterment of its cattle. In 1871, to encourage the upgrading of Montana herds, the Territorial Legislature passed a statute exempting from taxes any imported blooded stock for one year after its arrival. Montana's smaller western ranches set the pace in the refinement of the Territory's beef cattle. What the mountain rancher lacked in numbers he sought to overcome in producing larger offspring in his herd.

In the same year (1871) that the tax allowances passed, Granville Stuart observed a herd in the Deer Lodge vicinity which, "contained five pureblood Durham bulls . . . ." The Poindexter and Orr ranch operating in the Stinkingwater Valley, west of the Madison, placed five Shorthorn bulls and eight heifers in their herd the first year of the exemption law. Madison rancher James McAllister brought the first pureblood stock to the Valley in 1872 when, "he bought his first white face calf from Alex Metzel . . . . and paid $50.00 for it." In as much as these ranches tended to operate with few mother cows, the introduction of new blood into a herd spread rapidly. Consequently, the rancher did not need to invest in a great number of blooded animals. Whereas the destruction or loss of a five dollar longhorn could be accepted, the forfei-


23 Spray, "Early Madison," p. 87. Fifty dollars for a calf was an unheard of price for an untested animal.
ture of an expensive pureblooded animal caused a serious set-back. The care and protection of cattle became the prime interest of the stock producer. To safeguard his new investment, the mountain rancher realized that he must provide better feed and shelter for his livestock. The ownership of land became an all important factor to the rancher. The heavy grazing of the public domain so depleted the range in the summer months that only private ownership of forage could protect the cowman's investment. Inherently, the hill rancher sought to own property from his first entry to the Territory.

Curiously, the contemporary local newspapers chose to ignore the growing cattle industry. Mining still held the interest of the readers. In the three years of 1872 to 1875, the Montanian, printed in Virginia City, made only several references of any type to cattle. The timbre of the paper's attitude is reflected in one editorial that reported, "A valuable cow belonging to Mr. Hargrave, while eating raw potatoes on Friday, got one fast in her throat and choked to death. Don't feed raw potatoes on Friday."

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24 (Virginia City) The Montanian, November 7, 1872.
CHAPTER IV

The Transition

The Spring of 1887 demonstrated the brittleness of open range practices and the honest strength of the mountain-valley ranching. The collapse of Montana's eastern cattle industry exposed the real differences of the plains versus the highland operations.

The extraordinary growth in the numbers of cattle run on native grasses carried with it builtin weaknesses that, in the end would prove fatal to many eastern cowmen. The entire foundation of the industry based on Montana's eastern plains rested upon the use of the indigenous grasses. Unmanaged use of the grass led to the trade's downfall. This natural resource, which the stockgrower obtained at little or no cost to himself, acted as a magnet. The overemployment of current plant growth and the sapped strength and vigor of future development of the grass resulted. The constant drain of the range, without an opportunity for the grasses to replace themselves, led quickly to the end of much of the choicest forage. "In many cases /eastern/ ranges that should have been carrying a cow to every 40 acres had a cow to every 10 acres."

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This continual depletion of the grass, combined with the lack of any type of supplementary feed for winters, fostered the crash of eastern Montana's range cattle industry. Cattle owners, even those transplanted mountaineers who should have recognized the risks, preferred to gamble on small losses rather than to face the certain expense and labor of additional winter feeding. The native forage gradually disappeared from beneath the feet of the cattle. As fast as a blade of new grass appeared some hungry animal chewed it off at ground level. To compound the problems existent during the Summer of 1885, an additional "100,000 head of cattle and large numbers of sheep" moved into Montana to devastate the already overburdened range.² Heavy losses to newly arrived herds resulted as the gaunt cattle sought feed on the overgrazed ranges and could find only the poisonous plants to curb their hunger.

During the following year (1886), the plains regions received expanded traffic of new stock. A hard winter had engulfed Kansas and the southern cattle states the previous winter. Southern stockmen, seeking to escape their own exhausted ranges deluged Montana's prostrate prairies with new stock. Losses had been high for the southern cowman but, the drives to Montana could only magnify his problems.³ When the bubble broke, it was due to the problems brought upon the in-

dustry by itself and circumstances that the stockmen were powerless to govern -- the weather.

Drought -- "Streams as large as the Rosebud ceased to flow and the face of the country looked like a desert." -- followed by a relentless winter. In 1885 cattle prices fell sharply and the stockman's first inclination was to hold over all surplus stock until the declining prices stabilized. To a cattleman interested in a safe margin of profit, the natural instinct to increase the size of his herd to the maximum number prevailed. What a rancher might lose in lower prices, he hoped to recoup in numbers. Montana's ranges could not have been in a more unfavorable condition to enter a grinding winter -- or for that matter even a mild one -- and the Winter of 1886-87 was not to be a mild one.

Even the translocated mountain rancher was not immune to the plainsman's overweening confidence in the open range's staying power. Once the mountaineer moved a portion of his operation to the plains, he found himself a greenhorn. To meet the new conditions and environment that he faced, the plains neophyte changed his timetested methods, just as quickly as his livestock changed their behavior. The new, huge operations had no guideposts by which the rancher might judge range usage. While the highland rancher continued to

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furnish additional winter feed to his "home" stock, his total disregard of applying acknowledged safeguards to the open range would prove fatal. In the Spring of 1887 only good fortune saved the mountain rancher. By continuing to supplement winter forage and manage the summer usage of meadows to the hill herds, the rancher from the valleys remained in business while many of his eastern associate foundered.

While the rapid process of depleting the grasses through overgrazing and too early employment swept the range, only the Territory's mountain ranchers had been making any provision for helping their cattle through the winter.

By the Fall of 1886, the cow trade had all the ingredients for a calamity. The range had reached the saturation point and was in such a state of depletion that either a drought or a hard winter could spell disaster. In 1886-1887 nature and declining prices struck the range industry simultaneously a crushing blow. No matter where the northern cowman operated, plains or mountains, the snow and ice from November to April, touched all of Montana; as a result of the winter cataclysm the cattle trade so changed that little remained to recognize of the old ranching methods the next season.

In early October, 1886, George Watkins, a Madison Valley rancher, encountered one of the Valley's few Indian residents. The Indian was hastily leaving his valley home with his family and goods. The Indian, when questioned, made a forecast of ill winds for the country, "Very, very bad winter, in spring
Eastern range used by Jeffers and McKimmens.
two Indians ride one horse."⁵ This prediction bore bitter fruit for Montana's stock industry: the following spring there were many white men who had no horse at all to ride!

During the same month of October, Myron Jeffers received a letter from his Park City foreman, Rolland Potter. In his letter Potter sounds the first portent notes of apprehension: "I was up Valley Creek. The grass is eat off. Ground dry but hopers /grasshoppers/ are gone."⁶ The situation was sufficiently bad without the presence of grasshoppers contesting livestock for the grass. To heighten problems, the shortage of rain had turned the country into a potential tinderbox. Potter's first letter had just reached the Madison when a second followed. The country around the Jeffers and McKimmens herd had exploded. "... it has been terrible smokey on account of fires ..."⁷ Montana's haggard cattle found no relief from the drought and fires as they awaited the cooling winter weather. By fall it was far too late for the stockman to change their ways and to make any preparations for winter, so they had to steel themselves for the worst.

The very worst came. The snow began to fall in November and gave the land no rest until all the stock locked on the

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⁵ Letter from George Watkins to James Spray. No date. Montana State University. (microfilm).

⁶ Letter from Rolland Potter to Myron Jeffers, October 2, 1886. Letter possessed by the Jeffers family of Ennis, Montana.

⁷ Letter from Rolland Potter to Myron Jeffers, October 5, 1886. Letter possessed by the Jeffers family of Ennis, Montana.
ranges could find no avenue of escape. Blizzard followed blizzard and the continual snow quickly cancelled any advan­tage gained by the chinook winds of January. The ranges most ill-equipped and least prepared were the hardest hit of Montana's industry.

Granville Stuart, operating in central Montana, described the coming of winter: "Everything was white. Not a point of bare ground was visible in any direction." At the same time that Stuart's range disappeared under the winter snow and ice, the western mountain valleys underwent a fairly normal winter. A contemporary journal devoted to agriculture, the Montana Livestock Journal, carried an article confirming the security of mountain ranching. "Recent reports of morality among cattle in the panhandle of Gallatin county seem to be unfounded. Late arrivals from there inform us that there is but little snow ...." When asked about the depth of snow in the Madison Valley during the Territory's winter debacle, Augustus Maynard said that the Valley never had more "than six inches" at any one time. There was no such luck for Stuart and his prairie neighbors.

A vivid description of the effect of the range industry's collapse is included in a striking report written by Stuart's son-in-law. E. C. Abbott recorded that spring only revealed

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8 Fletcher, Hard Winter, p. 3.
9 Montana Livestock Journal (Helena), January 22, 1887.
10 Letter from Augustus Maynard to James Spray. No date. Montana State University. (microfilm)
what most ranchers feared.

"Spring came at last. The coulees in some places were piled deep with cattle where they had sought shelter and died . . . ." Just to show the loss, we had branded by actual count 10,000 DHS calves on the Flatwillow and Maginnis roundup in the spring and fall of 86; this meant as we estimated, 40,000 cattle. On the spring roundup of 87 not 100 yearlings showed up, and on a rough count there were only 7,000 cattle all told . . . ."11

With enormous losses such as these suffered on Montana's eastern plains, only very widely scattered and broken herds remained. Confidence in Montana's cattle industry was very nearly dead. Only the courage and resilience, or stubbornness, of Montana stockmen saved the Territory's cow business from complete extermination. A wave of forced sales to settle debts squeezed the already depressed beef prices.12 Those plains operations under caretaker management, without the personal care of an interested owner, suffered the most from the winter. On the other hand, those stockmen to whom cattle raising was more than a speculative investment fared better. A great many of Montana's central and eastern cattle companies had reached the point at which cattle was their only means of collateral. The stakes wagered by the prairie cattlemen stag-


12 "Cattle which were worth $9.35 per hundredweight in 1882 at Chicago brought only $1.00 in 1887."

ger the imagination when these companies risked everything upon the fast fading grass and starving cattle; the danger of loss and total ruination was breath-taking.

The full impact of just how much their herds had suffered on the eastern pastures reached Myron Jeffers in a letter from Rolland Potter. Far from encouraging, Potter wrote,

"I find that we have one \( \frac{\text{cow}}{\text{Reservation}} \) every now and then. 75 per cent are dead there. \( \frac{\text{Crow}}{\text{Reservation}} \) But our cattle were not so plentiful as Miller's letter would lead one to believe. Martin told me in thirty head we had 3. Another bunch of 100 or more we had 4 \( \frac{\text{That}}{\text{came out and the other 18.}} \) This will give you an idea how they fared."\(^{13}\)

The massive losses incurred by the Madison herd east of the mountains left a bitter taste for the plains with the disgusted owners. For many of the incorporated herd's owners the winter proved too difficult. One disgusted plainsman recalled the experience; "The water wasn't squeezed out of the cattle business, it was froze out."\(^{14}\) John Clay, an early plains cowman remembered the winter as the "worst season ever experienced."\(^{15}\)

In the Summer of 1887, Jeffers and McKimmens, a discouraged pair, found themselves the sole owners of the remnants of the winter disaster. The other owners of the Madison herd had been forced to sell their herds or let them die. The loss was devastating.

\(^{13}\) Letter from Rolland Potter to Myron Jeffers, March 27, 1887. Letter in possession of Jeffers family, Ennis, Montana.

\(^{14}\) Wellman, *The Herd*, p. 311.

son herd surrendered to the plains losses and returned to the Valley. The partners maintained the residue of the Madison herd south of Park City and on the Crow Reservation until 1893. Following their withdrawal from the area, the partners operated only in the Madison Valley with a reduced herd.

The storms of 1886-87 wrought massive changes in Montana's cow business. Many of the larger owners and corporations operating on a marginal basis or on borrowed funds vanished from the ranges with their cattle. Virtually all stockmen had viewed the range forage as something to grab and use before a neighbor had an opportunity to take it. Cattle owners gave little or no thought to tomorrow. "First come, first serve, and the devil take the hindmost" ruled the range.\(^\text{16}\) No man could claim legal ownership to the land he used and he dared not save acreage for future use; the cowman was well aware that what he did not use now would be grabbed by others -- "It's as much mine as yours."\(^\text{17}\)

From the first days of stock raising in Montana, the Valley cowman had seen the desirability of land ownership. With the possession of a title of ownership, the mountain rancher had set about early to cultivate the ground. Nearly all of the Madison's first settlers had supplemented their incomes with the sale of hay in the gold camps. For years many interested


\(^{17}\) USDA, Range Management, p. 21.
persons had encouraged the expanded production of hay as a buffer against a winter such as 1886-87. Concerned individuals attempted to rally support for hay production within the entire beef industry. Myron Jeffers warned his friends that they must "feed now during the winter or not at all" or there would be nothing left to feed.  

A bit tardy, but nevertheless ahead of many ranchers, is an article in the *Montana Livestock Journal*; in which the paper urged its readers to take heed of the difficulties the industry was undergoing. The tabloid suggested that one remedy to the problems might be the production of hay by ranchers so they could use it "... to save thousands of cattle that have been lost."  

The custom of feeding hay and grains through the winter months had already proven its worth and had helped to reduce the losses in the Madison. A contemporary survey taken in the Madison by a paper reports that the loss to the winter weather conditions of 1886-87 reached only six per cent. This figure may be abnormally low when the acceptable losses on an average year ran as high as ten per cent. Still, when compared with the destruction of eastern cattle, the figures demonstrate just how mild the mountain winter had been and

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19 *Montana Livestock Journal* (Helena) January 1, 1887.
21 *Montana Livestock Journal* (Helena) April 6, 1887.
how prudent it was to furnish supplemental feed.

The Montana cowman found that if he wished to continue in the industry he must purchase or lease land -- or move on. The end of an era had come and the stockman faced an uncertain future. Those cowmen who held fast to the habits of the past were doomed. The feudalistic ways of the open range were gone much to the despair of some stockmen: "... if I knew a country where it [The open range] would [continue], I'd go there if I had to go in a canoe."22

CHAPTER V

Changes In Organization

"My barbed and twisted strands have marked the change
That comes when Nature pays the debt she owes.
I whisper to each heedless wind that blows
The last low dirges of the open range."¹

In spite of those serious setbacks the winter storms of 1886-87 wrought on Montana's cattle industry, recovery was quick. The spring's melting snows produced a profusion of new forage. The appearance of green spring grasses helped to restore lost faith in the prostrate industry. In addition to the refreshed pastures, the largest sums of money lost in the winter "fell on the shoulders of investors from the East," rather than local capitalist.² Montana's eastern plains had been largely stocked with herds whose "owners, or cowmen, are in Wall Street and the south of France."³ However, the blanket of winter snows almost eliminated the presence of these absentee owners from Montana.

Prior to the winter tempest, the range industry operated

² Fletcher, Hard Winter, p. 9.
³ Julian Ralph, "Montana: the Treasure State," Harper's Magazine (June, 1892), p. 100. Hereafter cited as: Ralph,
on the concept of the "open range." This practice was that unwritten law which allowed free admittance to water and grass on the public domain; this procedure was moderated by first come, first serve. Failure to adhere to the unwritten code could result in chaos. This openended agreement among stockmen, forewarned all comers "not to block his [cowmen] way . . . with of all things -- fences." However, the snow drifts of the tragic winter spelled the end of free grass and the openrange customs. Some of the more farsighted leaders of the industry saw that the grasslands could never bear up under the pressures of incessant usage and "... the need for an orderly process for administering range use was evident." The fleeced ranges, buried under crushing snows, had forced the stockraiser to take a new look at his management habits and attitudes. The outright ownership of land became paramount to the rancher who wished to protect his livestock from future disasters and to furnish them a margin of secure winter feed. The pressures of 1886-87 proved once and for all that "... free grass was no longer safe."

The desire to prove ownership of the land that an individual inhabits and works is a strong, natural drive; and as

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4 McCallum, The Wire, p. 11.


opposed to the plains cowman, the mountain stockproducer had purchased or laid claim to his land as a first step toward settlement. The intense desire to establish and prove proprietorship ran strong among early Madison Valley settlers.

One of the original Valley residents proved the case for quick firm possession and even expanded upon it. George Watkins rapidly secured his position in the Madison when, "Aside from the original 160 acres he bought from Billy Brebeau and the 160 acres he homesteaded, he took a desert claim, and in company with Erastus Paugh, he preempted 875 acres; he bought sections 5, 7, and 31 from the railroad."^7

In 1863, with his crews still busy harvesting their first hay crop, William Ennis applied for patents to the valley bottom lands.\(^8\) Augustus Maynard and his brother-in-law, James Bower, located their "spot" in the Madison in July, 1864.\(^9\) While Bower constructed their cabin, Maynard traveled to Virginia City to "enter our Claim."\(^10\) As the two men had entered the Madison Valley on June 28, 1864, the partners had wasted little time in finding and recording their homesite. Not all claims however, were as easy to stake and register.

Like the miner, the valley settler occasionally found

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8 An extensive list of early Madison claims and title transfers can be found in: Spray, "Early Madison," p. 111-114.


himself in land disputes over his claims. As Augustus Maynard noted, John Evans, a neighbor, had such difficulties; "In about two weeks we built a cabin and Evans was ready to move on the place when another man came from Virginia City and said that we were on his claim. . . ."\(^{11}\) A meeting of valley residents convened to decide who, in fact, had the prior claim. "Evans lost his right but was paid $75 for his cabin."\(^{12}\) Not overly discouraged by this setback, Evans promptly moved several miles to the south and laid out a second claim.

To the east of the mountains, the plains cowman made few attempts at overall ownership of his pastures. The eastern stockman sought only to control his range by governing the water accesses and, thereby dominating the key tracts of grassland. However, the experiences of 1886-87 tempered this lax attitude regarding the legal possession of feed grounds. Once the cowman secured proprietorship, protection of his newly gained holdings came next. To these ends, the detested barbed-wire fence became the tool of the cowman, as well as that of the farmer. Where the granger erected his fence to keep cattle from his fields, the rancher built his to keep cattle in.

Various types of fences were tried on Montana's cattle ranges, but models used in New England and the Midwest found

\(^{11}\) Maynard, "Reminiscences," p. 17.

very limited application. Settlers expected and planned to use native materials to construct their barriers; none, however, was available to the plainsman. Only the mountain regions presented settlers with any sort of fencing material. It remained for a Midwestern farmer's invention to change the Western fencing habits.

An Illinois cattle feeder, Henry M. Rose, obtained a patent on "May 13, 1873, for an armoured fencing." Rose's invention was actually a rail fence fitted with metal barbs; therefore, it had no practical use on the frontier. Yet within a short time the fence was refined by placing the barbs on a single strand of wire. Thus this fence reached the point at which it could be effective for mass usage.

In 1883, Harry Daems was the first to use barbed wire in the Madison Valley. Daems, the son of a Virginia City mayor and physician (L. C. Daems), purchased his wire in Virginia City "at 11¢ per 100 rods. The barbs were 4 inches apart and were 1 inch long." Whereas the first "armoured" fence belonged to Daems, it was by no means the first Valley cattle enclosure. George Watkins told his sister, "We spent the better part of the day, Tuesday, fencing off the mouth of a canyon beyond my cabin. I have plenty of pole cut...."

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13 Early Madison Valley fences included rail, stone, and notched pole. Pankey, Livestock History, p. 57.
14 McCallum, The Wire, p. 64.
An observer in the Madison described another barrier that he saw, "This man checked his milk cows by a pole fence on three sides and the fourth was against a rock slide." Madison stockmen were also concerned with guarding crops from both wild and domestic animals: "We bilt fences around hay ground and wheat ground."

An increase in hay production also marked the years following the Hard Winter. The rancher no longer used his horse solely to chase cattle. The stockman's horse was introduced to the mowing machine.

Farsighted cowmen recognized the new needs and rapidly the ground along streams, where cattle could be watered and wild grass cut for hay, was placed under ownership.

Not only did the acreage in hay production increase but, new types of forage were developed and improved. Alfalfa, a legume, and the oldest forage crop, swiftly became Montana's most popular forage plant. Alfalfa supplied the stockman five to ten times the amount of hay that the native grasses provided. This type of yield suited the stockman's demands for a heavy forage. The Madison had its first crop of the new hay when "Alfalfa was introduced in the early eighties by Mr. A.W.

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17 Handly, Madison Resources, p. 18.

18 Letter from Robert Lyon to James Spray; January, 1929. Montana State University Library. (microfilm)

19 Hay production jumped in Montana after 1886-87. In 1880 there were 56,800 acres of hay in production. In 1900 there were 712,000 acres of hay in production. Fletcher, Free Grass, p. 92; also see; Osgood, The Cattleman, p. 228.
Switzer who sowed a plot of ground 100 feet by 200 feet with alfalfa seed. It proved a very successful crop. . . ."\(^{20}\)

To meet the requirements of the industry, Montana publications encouraged cowmen to plant and use alfalfa. "Experiments have proved that alfalfa is not only a superior quality hay, but that it can be produced with much less water than was generally supposed. . . ."\(^{21}\)

Rapidly the demand for hay far outstripped the supplies. "Instead of selling 500 tons of hay that will be cut and cured on his premises, a rancher propose to winter stock for his neighbors at a stipulated price per head. It will seem rather strange for range cattle to board around like an old-time school teacher."\(^{22}\) To help to meet the shortage of winter feed in 1890, the Northern Pacific Railroad hauled three dollar a-ton hay from Minnesota and sold it in Montana at ten dollars a-ton.\(^{23}\)

The increase in alfalfa acreage in the Territory led to an expanded network of irrigation ditches and channels.\(^{24}\) In 1870 Robert Strahorn calculated that the cost of irrigation in Montana ran fifty cents an acre. He also was con-

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\(^{21}\) *Montana Livestock Journal* (Helena) January 1, 1887.

\(^{22}\) *Montana Livestock Journal* (Helena) July 18, 1889.

\(^{23}\) Letter from Sam Shingleton to James Spray; no date. Montana State University. (microfilm)

Irrigational development was urged upon the early settler by local newspapers: "One warning we feel it our duty to give, irrigation should be provided for in the time to come." The shift in interest from mining to agriculture is illustrated by additional articles, one of which stated, "its future as an agricultural State will be dependent upon the extent and number of irrigation ditches that shall be cut in it." The same confident writer foresaw agriculture as Montana's longrun industry: "irrigation schemes are expected to pay even better than mining." These acknowledgements are

25 Strahorn, Montana Resources, p. 78.
27 Osgood, The Cattleman, p. 195. Also see; Burlingame, Montana Frontier, p. 348-349. Settler paid twentyfive cents upon entry and a balance of one dollar an acre when completed.
28 Montana Post (Virginia City, Montana) October 14, 1865.
far different views from earlier attitudes taken by papers which, in general, had previously ignored husbandry.

Irrigation projects in the Madison Valley started early when in "the latter sixties [1869], Mr. William Ennis hired some men and put them to work constructing his ditch known as Ennis Ditch." This ditch was an ambitious undertaking; its course carried Madison River water over eight miles up the valley. Whereas the Ennis canal carried water to hay fields, most early water projects were constructed for gardens. Dug in 1864, the first Valley ditch carried water to potatoes. In 1867 professional ditch diggers, employed in the Madison, were hardpressed to keep up with the demands for ditch construction. The building of ditches was slow and hard work when done by hand or even with horses. Eventually, "in 1918 Elgin Keller imported the first steam shovel" to speed the work.

Montana's Governor Joseph K. Toole expounded, possibly, one of the more grandiose plans for Montana irrigation. The Governor favored federal government involvement in the state's irrigation projects to, "control and manage the water supply to the advantage of all." The notion of federal regulation of state water did not rest well with Montanans and the Gov-

error's proposal did not go beyond the suggestion stage.

The contest among stockmen for Montana's plundered ranges intensified during the 1880's when the cowmen found their herds in contention with sheep for the grass. In 1870 the entire Montana Territory held only 2024 head of sheep. At this same time the Madison County had a sheep population of twelve. Montana's sheep population reached 260,400 in 1881 and it jumped to 2,827,700 by 1891.

John Harrison introduced the first mutton to the Madison Valley in 1874. Not a very auspicious beginning for the Valley was this band of forty-eight head of sheep. Sheep raising found little interest among the majority of the Madison settlers. Sheep bands met a great deal of hostility for most cowmen viewed the sheepman as an interloper in cow country.

In the Fall of 1886 a band of sheep belonging to a Madison sheep owner, L. S. Briggs, was destroyed by dynamite. The herder had placed his animals in a small corral for the night; during the dark hours, a rider tossed a dynamite charge among the sheep. When the county sheriff quizzed a prime sus-

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35 Burlingame, Montana Frontier, p. 286.
36 Madison County Auditor's Report 1869, County Court House Virginia City.
37 USDA, The Use Book, 1907, p. 88.
39 Letter from J. D. Wiles to James Spray, no date. Montana State University. (microfilm)
pect, the only answer he received was, "Oh, that was just thunder and lightening.""\(^{40}\) Opposition to sheep continued through the years: "in 1896 a band of sheep was seen on the range Madison Valley. Apparantly they had been trailed in from Dillon. The following day about one fourth of the number was dead and the remainder was hurriedly \(sic\) trailed out of the valley."\(^{41}\)

There were however, some successful sheep operations in the Madison Valley. After suffering through the difficult winter in 1886-87 on the Yellowstone, Myron Jeffers purchased a band of sheep which he grazed in the Madison with the band of the Buford and Elling Sheep Company.\(^{42}\) Jeffers and his neighbors accepted the sheep trade because of its annual wool income. The wool could produce at least a small income each year. This was not true with a cow, if she had no calf.

The lean years of the mid-1880's took their toll of the cattle industry, but by the 1890's, the outlook was again good.\(^{43}\)

\(^{40}\) Letter to Mae Pankey from J.D.H. \(\text{[?]}\) No date. Montana State University. (microfilm)

\(^{41}\) Pankey, Livestock History, p. 2.


\(^{43}\) Fletcher, Hard Winter, p. 1. Beef slaughtered or shipped from Montana.

\begin{array}{ll}
1885 & 70,089 \\
1886 & 119,620 \\
1887 & 82,134 \\
1888 & 167,662 \\
1889 & 115,469 \\
1890 & 174,033 \\
\end{array}
The nature of Madison Valley industry had turned from gold to wool in a short span of some twenty years; over the long haul however, it would be cows that ruled the Madison meadows.
CHAPTER VI
"The Hog Is A Rustler"¹

In describing Montana's agricultural prospects, one national magazine made some extravagant claims by reporting that the state's "eastern plateau ... soil is of extraordinary fertility ... at least three-fifths of it can be laid under the ditch."² Left unstated was the fact that there would be no water for these canals, but Eastern readers were unaware of such shortcomings. The result of absurd assertions was a wave of prospective farmers, homeyockers, which flooded Montana's central and eastern tableland seeking these prolific acres.³ The state's western valleys escaped this frantic scramble for farm land. The better tillable mountain valley lands had long since been occupied and the public domain had vanished from the valleys. The very nature of the Madison --especially its high, surrounding mountains -- further reduced the farm land available and did not lend itself to promising crop forecasts. Nevertheless, the Madison Valley had been from its first

¹ Montana Livestock Journal (Helena) June 4, 1895.


settlement, an area of diverse operations.

The plow had preceded the beef cow to the Valley. Farming the hillside country was not an easy chore, as Augustus Maynard recalled, "I thought that I had never seen such dry land. It was very hard to keep the plow in the ground...."\(^4\) Even with the difficulties, the Madison highland was tilled by the earliest of its settlers. In 1865 Robert Jordan "raised corn and hauled it to Virginia City."\(^5\) In the same year (1865) "T. B. Switzer, E. A. Maynard, Ray Woodworth, and Mr. Clinton sowed wheat, oats, and barley."\(^6\) Only the year before, Switzer had "raised about 120 bushels of potatoes and 100 bushels of rutabagas."\(^7\) The uncertainty of early beef prices drove the Madison rancher to seek an additional source of income through small acreage farming.

To the majority of Madison Valley residents, farming was a familiar labor. One regional reporter wrote of what he had seen of Madison crops; "Oh ye gods and goodness! Cucumbers, green corn, water and musk mellons till you couldn't rest."\(^8\) The effort to produce wheat in the Valley peaked during the war years of 1915-18. For these few years crops were abundant as weather conditions contributed to exceptional

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\(^4\) Maynard, "Reminiscences," p. 98.


\(^7\) Jeffers, "Madison History," p. 13.

\(^8\) The (Bozeman) Avant Courier, September 20, 1871.
yields. However, the cultivation of grain was destined for failure. The high altitudes meant cool nights and a short growing season.

The drive to make money in the Madison Valley continued and veered into some strange tangents. Speaking of the Madison, James Handly reported, "... this is a good place to raise all kinds of fowl, especially turkeys."

Once more the prohibitive winters could not have been taken into mind when he drew his conclusion. Nevertheless, Augustus Maynard had a brief encounter with the turkey trade. "In the spring of 1872 I got a pair of Turkeys of Mr. Rodgers who had a hotel in Virginia City and paid $25 for the pair and accidently killed the hen when the little Turks were about 2 week old. This stopped my trying to grow Turkeys for many years."

Hoping to arouse interest in all phases of agriculture, the Montana Livestock Journal, in 1895, published an editorial entitled, "The Hog Is a Rustler." The article praised the opportunities available to the pig farmer. Again it was Maynard who was susceptible to suggestion. "I started in the Hog business about the time we got the first chicks. I was in Virginia City and heard that some one down at Nevada City had pigs for sale. Went down there and paid $25 for..."

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9 Handly, Madison Resources, p. 9.
11 Montana Livestock Journal (Helena) June 4, 1895.
a little one and carried it home in a nail keg. They laughed at me some."\textsuperscript{12} For Maynard the hogs were, like the turkeys, a short-term enterprise; he lost his "little one" to a bear.\textsuperscript{13} Ultimately the only business venture that earnestly competed with cattle for range dominance in the Madison Valley was horses.

The expansion of Montana's irrigated hay meadows and the growth of the cow business necessitated enlarged horse herds.\textsuperscript{14} The demand for horses provided the Madison rancher an extra market for a number of years. One of the first Madison stockmen to recognize the wide opportunity in the horse traffic was George Watkins. In a letter to his father, Watkins wrote, "... good, large stage horses, \textsuperscript{[will bring]} from $400 to $600 a span when they sell at all. "They are not selling many now for they are scarce."\textsuperscript{15} Watkins went on to say that the more common type of horses were "selling from $50 to $150."\textsuperscript{16} In 1887, in a move aimed at bettering his stock, Watkins shipped to the Madison Valley several carloads of broodmares from Kentucky for his ranch.\textsuperscript{17} By 1893 two hundred

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Maynard, "Reminiscences," p. 58.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Maynard, "Reminiscences," p. 59.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Mules used for work teams sold at a premium, "a span of mules, thirteen hands high sold for $200 and $250, and sixteen hands high sold for $500 and more." Anon., "Watkins," p. 15.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Letter from George Watkins to Waltus Watkins. June 1, 1873. In possession of Watkins family of Ennis, Montana.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Anon., "George Watkins," p. 15.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Anon., "George Watkins," p. 21.
\end{itemize}
head of horses grazing in the Madison carried the Watkins brand. For many years the Yellowstone Transportation Company purchased horses from George Watkins for service in the park; his horses even were found pulling hansom cabs in New York City. This demand for the Watkins horses speaks well of their quality.

The number of horse raisers in the Madison Valley saw a marked increase in the years succeeding the tragic winter of 1886-87. In addition to farm and ranch animals, military needs helped to support the horse market. Purchasers for foreign governments visited the Madison to procure horses; the continual threat of European wars in the last two decades of the 1800's required the replacement of "10,000 head of horses a month." To profit from the swelling markets, several partnerships entered the Valley's horse business. In 1885 Simeon Buford and Henry Elling, two Virginia City merchants, grazed as many as "900 head of horses in the Madison." Two years later (1887), Osmond Varney and Tom Farrell altered their horse operations with an "insured horse" ranch which they named "Sodom." Under their agreement, the VF ranch boarded horses for their owners and paid two-thirds of the animal's value if the animal was lost.

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20 Montana Livestock Journal (Helena) March 12, 1887.
22 Pankey, "Livestock History," p. 87.
while under their care. Varney and Farrell continued to raise horses until 1916, when the Italian government bought the ranch's stock of four hundred horses for sixty-five dollars a head. After the First World War, the demand for horses dropped and "the horse business went to hell!" Madison ranches became their own best customer and started to breed only enough horses for their own use.

One of the more curious schemes planned for the Madison Valley was a herd of domesticated buffalo. This project was the brain child of Marshall Cunningham who advanced the idea to President Herbert Hoover. Cunningham had been running cattle in the Madison for a number of years with his partner Hans Biering. Unlike Texan Charles Goodnight, Cunningham had no thought of crossing buffalo with cattle to produce a different animal strain. The project proposed to turn the Madison area into a wilderness region and to raise the buffalo as both an attraction for tourists and a source of commercial meat. Hoover became an enthusiastic supporter of the suggestion and arranged for thirty head of buffalo cows and three bulls from Yellowstone Park to be sold to Cunningham. In 1928 the animals arrived at Cunningham's Rising

24 Letter from Tom Farrell to James Spray, March, 1921. Montana State University. (microfilm)
27 Rising Sun Ranch records, in possession of Robert Cunningham Ennis, Montana.
Sun Ranch. For ten years Cunningham kept the operation alive and increased the buffalo herd to 130 head. In 1938 the venture was abandoned and the herd split up when the ranch itself changed hands.28

Regardless of the number of earnest farming proposals advocated and attempted in the Madison and neighboring valleys, ranchers returned to the beef cow for a livelihood -- for grass dominated the Madison's mountainous ranges. By the turn of the century however, the choicest of Madison ground had been pre-empted and grass was again becoming a scarce commodity.29 Some Madison ranchers felt that the pressures from diminishing forage were too great and, "many of us could see that our Madison Valley range was becoming overstocked."30

In 1904, to ease the range stresses, a herd of fifteen hundred head of cattle and one hundred horses from the Madison moved to Maple Creek, Alberta, by train.31 For those ranchers who remained in the Valley, the establishment of the forest land controls became a stabilizing condition which saved many local ranchers from oblivion in the Winter and Spring of 1919-20.

28 Rising Sun Ranch records, in possession of Robert Cunningham Ennis, Montana.


30 T. B. Long, 70 Years A Cowboy (Regina, Saskatchewan: Western Printers, 1959), p. 3. Hereafter cited as: Long, 70 Years.

31 Long, 70 Years, p. 8.
The dwindling valley grass meant that only one tract of pasture remained open to the upland rancher, the meadows in the mountains themselves. Grazing cattle on federally owned forest lands had become by this time, a tradition. In 1897 the government gave tacit concession to forest usage when Secretary of the Interior Frank Hitchcock advised his western agents that, "The pasturing of livestock [cattle] on public lands in forest reserves will not be interfered with. . . ." 32 This grant did not extend the same utilization to all stockmen for the memo continued, "The pasturing of sheep is, however prohibited in all forest reserves except those in the states of Oregon and Washington. . . ." 33

The crowding and overuse of the land, however, forced a culmination of this laissez faire attitude. In 1891 Congress set aside land to establish forest reserves, but it made no provision for their use or protection. 34 This error on the government's part was remedied six years later (1897). The statute amending the first bill restricted cattle capacity and limited the forest to seasonal usage. The Department of Interior furnished its agents with handbooks which spelled out the new range policies. "Permits will be issued to graze a certain number of livestock . . . . so long as marked damage


33 Roberts, Hoof Prints, p. 25.

is not done by such stock." 35 Agents allowed "permittee" cattle on federal land only during the growing season and "the season of usage averages five and one half months, and an average 12 acres is required to graze one cow." 36 This time restriction and the amount of land required to support a unit -- a cow and calf -- varied with the range conditions and the region of the country the permit was located.

Cowmen grudgingly accepted the limits on the number of cattle they might run on government land, but the subject of fees became the bitterest of pills to swallow. Many cowman balked at the idea that they had "to pay grazing fees for grass heretofore grazed for free." 37 The first proposal to charge a fee was initiated in 1900, by the Department of Interior. However, opposition to any type of grazing fee was so stiff that the first bill concerning payments did not pass until 1906. When first published, the fee regulations stated that "A reasonable fee will be charged for grazing all classes of live stock . . . ." 38 Stockraisers were leery, far from satisfied with the term, "reasonable fee." Most cattlemen favored a more specific definition of grazing dues. For ten years, from 1906 to 1916, there was no change in the government's reasonable-fee posture. Eventually, in

35 USDA, The Use Book 1907, p. 94.
36 USDA, The Use Book 1907, p. 95.
37 Roberts, Hoof Prints, p. 80.
38 USDA, The Use Book 1907, p. 104.
1916, a flat rate of fees became the policy of the government; "60¢ \[\text{minimum}\] and maximums \[\$1.50\] per head."\(^39\) dependent upon the condition of the range. In a weak, tongue in cheek attempt to sugarcoat the fee bill, the Department of the Interior proclaimed that, "The Men who use the range are not the kind who think they ought to get something for nothing."\(^40\)

Montana mountain stockmen realized that the industry was changing and that they had no choice but to accept the changes. Ranchers of the American National Live Stock Association passed a resolution to "heartily indorse and approve the plan of the national administration . . . . to control the system of lease of grazing permits."\(^41\) After 1910 the increase in forest usage by stockmen rose so that revenue from grazing fees charged on the national forests exceeded timber receipts.\(^42\) The growth in forest usage has been phenomenal so that by 1960 the 270,-000,000 acres administered by the Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service were used by, "4.4 million head of cattle and 9.9 million head of sheep . . . ."\(^43\) Such imposed range con-


\(^{41}\) American National Live Stock Association (mimeographed resolution), Denver; January 23, 1907.

\(^{42}\) Roberts, Hoof Prints, p. 38.

\(^{43}\) USDA, Federal and State Lands, No. 909, p. 1.
trol measures were sound steps -- as clearly demonstrated in the Madison during the Winter and Spring of 1919-20.

The demands placed upon the meat industry during the First World War promoted the second major overstocking of Western ranges in thirty years. Wedded to beef surpluses were the post war declining prices which fell from "$21 a hundred-weight in 1919 to just more than $9 in 1920 ... ." To compound the rancher's problems in 1919 snow and ice reminiscent of 1886-87 smothered the mountain valleys during that winter.45

In 1886-87 stockmen had watched their herds dwindle for the lack of feed. By 1919 Montana ranchers were better equipped to face a second harsh winter. "A stack of hay is an insurance against loss that has never failed to justify its cost."46 The December and January snows spurred Madison ranchers to maintain a close watch over their herds and increase the hay rations; this effort kept cowmen occupied most of the winter. "I was so hell fired busy I didn't have the time to smoke."47

Yet hay did not hold the total answer to the reduction of cattle losses. Stockmen holding grazing permits on the surrounding national forest ranges proved to be better prepared

44 USDA, The Range, p. 131.
45 Personal interviews with Mr. Fay Jeffers, Lawerence Jeffers, George Carkeek, and Robert Cunningham. Ennis, Montana
46 USDA, The Range, p. 10.
to face winter's pinch. Permittee cattle entered the winter in better shape than other stock. Specific government requirements covering the use of the forest had forced the leasee to own pasturage and to harvest forage in ratio to the number of cattle they grazed in the forest. As a result, permittee stockmen had feed on hand for the winter. The summer employment of forest grass and the governmental rules about supplemental feed allowed the mountain cowman to enter winter with their own meadows ungrazed.

It was this combination of forest meadows and hay that pulled Madison ranchers through a winter that could have been more difficult than the one which choked the range in the 1880's. One Valley rancher described the situation as one in which, "We sweat all summer putting it hay up and sweat all winter putting it out but, it saved our bacon." Montana's stockraisers had benefited by the experiences of the previous catastrophic winter. In January, 1887, a local journal had warned its readers that, "Many changes have come to the range cattle business, and the wise cattle owner will trim his sails to take advantage of them."  

Diversity had long been the byword of Madison ranchers. Yet try as some might, attempts to turn the Valley into a granary or turkey farm failed in the face of the more com-

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48 Letter from Hutchins to James Spray; March [?]. (microfilm) Montana State University.

49 Montana Livestock Journal (Helena), January 1, 1887.
patible cow business. Practices acceptable in the east found precious few applications in the mountains and hogs never proved to be good rustlers in the Madison.

When compared to other agricultural enterprises, Montana's valley livestock industry has shown a great deal of durability. The law of supply and demand has not functioned with any degree of success in the industry. A continual series of price fluctuations has led to overstocking which only accents the stockraiser's inability to control his markets. No other regional industry has shown greater resilience.
CHAPTER VII  
The New Order

An indication of Montana's cattle business in the late 1890's and early 1900's was the deterioration of the state's range-cattle industry and a retreat to the mountains. To survive, the stockman required grass and little or no forage remained upon the eastern ranges: "Next in importance to the divine profusion of water, light, and air, those three physical facts which render existence possible, may be reckoned the universal beneficence of grass."¹ Droughts, overstocking, and the depletation of forage forced numerous cowmen to evacuate the eastern plains. Coupled with this range deterioration was the recognition of what the future held for the public domain. Disgusted, the older stockmen returned to the western valleys seeking a sanctuary.

The wave of farmers (honyockers) who flooded the eastern grasslands and ripped them open with their plows, compounded the shortage of prairie grass. The numbers of sheep and honyocker rapidly assumed a predominate position in the plains regions. At the annual meeting of the Montana Stock Grower's Association in 1902, a proposal was offered suggesting that future meetings be conducted in Helena rather than in Miles

¹ John J. Ingalls, United States Senator from Kansas in: Introduction to; USDA, The Range, p. 1.
City. Members in favor of such a move pointed out that, "The bulk of Montana cattle . . . . was being raised in the central and western sections of the state, in Jefferson, Madison, and Beaverhead counties." The mountain rancher had not been squeezed into an untenable position by a crowd of homeseekers hunting tillable land in the high valleys. Any farmable land had disappeared to the early arrivals.

The flood tide which swept eastward from the valleys in the late 1870's and early 1880's, had receded. Any study of Montana's stock business must, however, inevitably return to the Winter of 1886-87 as the pivotal point in the state's agricultural formation. The drastic winter months had shown, as an English visitor wrote, "Those cattle which are right back in the hills where the grass is good do well enough." That winter exposed ranching as a business that was not all ease and glamour, milk and honey, as General Brisbin and Robert Strahorn had alleged. Snow, ice, and wind had dramatically changed the rules of the game.

After the Spring of 1887, cattle were no longer held over by the cowman in hope of a price rise. Greater emphasis on younger stock and quicker sales became the formula for success. The plains long had been recognized as the "Steer

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2 Osgood, The Cattlemen, p. 255.

3 Athearn, High Country Empire, p. 148. These assertions are buttressed by a survey taken in the Madison valley which showed winter losses in 1886-87 as low as two percent. Montana Livestock Journal, April 6, 1887.

4 Supra., p. 28.
range," whereas the western valleys remained the mother-cow country. The range industry's steer operations vanished quickly from the scene. The failure to secure adequate winter feed had eliminated them. In the mountain regions, however, a ranch was more than a business venture to its owner, it was also his home and he had taken steps to safeguard it. The lack of absentee owners in the Madison attest to the stronger base of the valley industry. Since he toiled on a more familiar ground, the upland cowman recognized the need to provide winter feed for his cattle. Whereas the range industry relied upon the grazing of steers, the highlands carried mixed herds, with mother-cows as the backbone of the ranch. These cattle were more closely watched, protected, and fed. These more sheltered animals survived.

The withdrawal to the valleys, with their hay and the general retrenchment were gestures of the stockraisers' confidence in finding stability and security among the mountains. A livestock trade built predominantly upon a mountain operation proved to be a strong one; the numbers of cattle shipped from Montana jumped from 82,134 in 1887 to 174,033 in 1890. The end of an era had come, and the future rested upon the recouperative powers of Montana's valleys.


The impact of highland ranching on the state's cattle trade has never been fully explored. No writer has intensively researched the state's western regions in connection with the cattle industry. Montana and western writers have concerned themselves primarily with the plains and open ranges. It has been the cattle outfits operating on the plains which generated and fired imagination the world over. The high grazing meadows held no lingering danger of belligerent Indians; because of the lack of natural exits from the area, cattle thieves never plagued the upland ranges. The mountain rancher does not fit the legendary pattern of the lusty cowboy. Consequently the hill country does not hold the thrill and fantasy of the open range for western authors. To the majority of western writers, the range cowman hold a universal appeal and is still "the epitome of the American ideal;" he is the American West! This lack of objective interest and passing over of the state's first cowmen, has created a vaccuum in the history of Montana.

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