



SO FAR AND YET SO CLOSE: FRONTIER CATTLE RANCHING IN WESTERN PRAIRIE CANADA AND THE NORTHERN TERRITORY OF AUSTRALIA
By Warren M. Elofson

ISBN 978-1-55238-795-5

THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK. It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at ucpress@ucalgary.ca

Cover Art: The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

COPYRIGHT NOTICE: This open-access work is published under a Creative Commons licence. This means that you are free to copy, distribute, display or perform the work as long as you clearly attribute the work to its authors and publisher, that you do not use this work for any commercial gain in any form, and that you in no way alter, transform, or build on the work outside of its use in normal academic scholarship without our express permission. If you want to reuse or distribute the work, you must inform its new audience of the licence terms of this work. For more information, see details of the Creative Commons licence at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU MAY:

- read and store this document free of charge;
- distribute it for personal use free of charge;
- print sections of the work for personal use;
- read or perform parts of the work in a context where no financial transactions take place.

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU MAY NOT:

- gain financially from the work in any way;
- sell the work or seek monies in relation to the distribution of the work;
- use the work in any commercial activity of any kind;
- profit a third party indirectly via use or distribution of the work;
- distribute in or through a commercial body (with the exception of academic usage within educational institutions such as schools and universities);
- reproduce, distribute, or store the cover image outside of its function as a cover of this work;
- alter or build on the work outside of normal academic scholarship.



DIVERSIFICATION IN WESTERN CANADA: THE TRIUMPH OF THE FAMILY RANCH/FARM

In their main industry, the cattle business, all the corporation operations in western Canada struggled to the end with high death losses, light carcasses, low quality, and the long trek to market. Had they been able to follow the American practice of selling their cattle on their own continent as feeders they might at least have cut down on some of their expenses and improved their cash flows. The one measure some might have considered was to go into large-scale grain and roughage production themselves, so they could put the last pounds of hard durable fat on their animals themselves and, thereby, raise body weights and prevent some of the shrinkage that occurred en route to the European market. But that not only went diametrically against the Texas system and everything they had claimed to believe in, it was also a very daunting and expensive proposition.

We should not forget that low carcass yield at market destination was not the ranchers' only concern with respect to herd quality. Since inadequate nutrition and harsh weather hindered bovine development at all ages, what they really needed to do was secure enough feed to both fatten their bigger steers after they came off the grass in the fall and also keep the rest of their stock alive and prospering when the grass was inadequate. To be sure, the natural environment in the Canadian West was, and is, conducive to the production of enough grain and both hay and greenfeed

to support far more cattle than the ranges were carrying around the turn of the century.¹ The valleys in the high country of southern Alberta and Assiniboia originally produced copious amounts of tall natural grasses that the cattlemen could have cut and stacked. They could also have grown crops of oats and barley on the flatter valley bottoms. The growing season in the hills is short and often the grain is damaged by frost in the early fall, but usually not before it has matured enough for feeding purposes. On the plains to the east and north of the high country the growing season is normally longer and hot enough to ripen both feed grains and wheat (which can be utilized for feeding purposes). A percentage of the land many of the big ranchers leased spilled onto one of those lower, flatter areas. Moreover, before heavy settlement, a lot of that land was still public, vacant, and available.²

However, to the big operations the enormous investment required to go into intensive feeding made it seem virtually impossible. While they put up roughage and some oats for their more at-risk stock, none of the corporations ever got even close to being able to feed all their animals through a complete winter. Nor did they feel they could. To simplify the explanation, it is appropriate to illustrate what would have been required if they had utilized hay alone for this purpose. Gestating and/or nursing cows, the bulls that service them, and growing or fattening steers require about a ton and a half of hay apiece to be more or less assured of coming through a long winter on the northern plains in good condition.³ In the 1880s and early 1890s the Walrond ranch owned on average about 8,500 head in its beef herd, excluding newborn calves. About 5,200 were classified as cows, 300 were bulls, and 3,000 were steers.⁴ These cattle would have needed 12,750 tons of hay to keep them all sufficiently satisfied during the hundred or so most inclement days each winter.⁵ About 1,000 of the ranch's 1,400 or so calves would also have been mature enough to require feed when pastures were covered with snow. To keep them growing and healthy would have taken about a ton of hay per head, or another 1,000 tons. In total, therefore, the ranch would have required at least 13,600 tons of hay. The cost to procure it, whether by putting up their own or through custom hayers, would have been about \$5 a ton, or \$68,000 in total.⁶ This would have multiplied the ranch's entire annual operational expenditures four times over. For companies that had promised their shareholders that the secrets to ranching success in the

West included low costs and year-round grazing, this was unthinkable. Moreover, since many of the big outfits were running on low and diminishing cash reserves, where were they going to find the thousands of extra dollars required to intensify their systems this way? It scarcely needs to be added that costs were not the only inhibiting factor. To gather 13,600 tons of hay with horse-drawn equipment from natural grasslands scattered over thousands of acres in rough and hilly country would have taken an army of at least three hundred men and then another one perhaps half that size to haul the roughage and fork it to the cattle in the wintertime.⁷ That kind of manpower would not have been available before the heavy settlement that occurred in the decade or so after the turn of the century.⁸ Regular winter feeding would also have involved hiring extra men to build all the corrals required to enclose the hay and keep the cattle and wild animals from destroying the stacks, and to build the extra fences needed to keep the stock near the feed during bad weather.

The big Canadian ranchers were then left without alternatives other than to continue to send what survived of their under-finished, under-sized stock to distant sales rings at heavily discounted prices. It is usual to blame the ferocious winter of 1906–7 for their demise.⁹ That great catastrophe did mark the end for many of them, but it should be seen merely as the last blow in a process of decline that had been underway for at least two decades. The truth of this statement is evinced not just in the fact that when the great ranches left they never returned but also that the system that replaced them, and which has now endured for more than a hundred years in the Canadian West, was and continues to be its nearly exact opposite, agriculturally speaking.

As the great ranchers filed out of the Canadian West, a host of small-scale producers who were to rely on all the diversified operating techniques the Texas system eschewed, filed in. Some of these small operators had actually been on the western plains even before the companies appeared there. And they had continued to arrive in what might be described early on as a trickle and then much more like a stream as the big operations left. Some came as squatters but most as homesteaders taking advantage of the 1872 Homestead Act, which enabled them to claim and, upon “proving-up,” to own a 160-acre quarter section of land. Most of the settlers acquired a second quarter section soon after they owned the first, and many also leased a few hundred acres of pastureland.¹⁰ Some started with

as few as a dozen cattle and others with as many as several hundred. In the beginning it was mostly young males who came but gender balance slowly improved with the arrival of more and more young women. With that development, the number of families on the homesteads steadily grew.

At first some of the settlers too resisted the process of diversification. George Emerson and Tom Lynch brought some of the first herds north, largely to sell to other settlers, and then started up their own ranch west of High River, Alberta. They had had first-hand experience on western American ranges before heading north and they understood (and presumably shared) the high opinion of ranchers and cowboys that pervaded western culture.¹¹ To them a rancher was someone who worked with “his horse and lasso and branding iron” and stayed away from chickens, hogs, and milk cows and from traditional farming devices such as rakes or pitch forks or “ploughs and binders and threshing machines.”¹² All such things were to be spurned because they required the cowboy to get out of the saddle for extended periods during the working day. Many of the ordinary ranchers “say they have not time,” a government official observed in 1888; they “will not work on foot” and they show no willingness to “cut hay” or even “to garden” or “attend domestic animals.”¹³

However, the cattlemen with smaller operations, like those with big ones, were forced to begin to embrace some farming practices in order to meet major ecological challenges. The changes appeared first as a movement towards the production of feed to secure the herds through winter. In 1884 a lady rancher in the foothills of Alberta wrote the following words to a relative back home in Ontario. A general sense of helplessness during the harshest time of the year is unmistakable.

There are times when a snow storm has come and spread a cruel depth of snow over the long grass and the cowboys ride late and early driving starving cattle to the nearest hay stack or at any rate driving them from the thickets near a stream where they go for shelter but remain to die . . . This . . . throws a shadow over our days for as long as it lasts – 10 days – even two weeks sometimes but not often – and every ear is listening for the happy sound of the first murmurings of [a warm moist wind known as] a Chinook. One night we were sitting just as I have told you and suddenly someone said,

“the Chinook!” We were all outside in a second, and there was the low roar in the mountains and in twenty minutes the wind had reached the house. We went in and made coffee and were a much more joyful party than an hour before.¹⁴

Plainly, even at this early date all the cattle people feared massive starvation among the herds. A year or so later the editor of the *Macleod Gazette* implored “every cowman in the country” to “put up enough hay on his range to feed weak stock through any bad storm” in order to “sleep better during the cold and stormy nights of winter.”¹⁵

After the 1886–87 blizzards it was the smaller-scale rancher who not only responded to that advice but also managed to take it to a more logical conclusion. The man who had, say, a hundred cattle would have needed $1.5 \times 100 = 150$ tons of hay to get all his cattle through an entire winter season. This he could obtain by putting up approximately fifty acres of grassland in an average year. To do so during the summer months would not have been difficult for him, particularly if he had a wife to help out. Many of the cattlemen had less than a hundred head. The small minority who had several times that many might have needed to hire a man or two for a short period. Even so this was doable, and by the 1906–7 winter, when as many as 50 percent of the cattle on the range were lost, almost all of the family ranchers had secured enough roughage to protect their stock properly. The following autumn the commanding North-West Mounted Police officer at Macleod reported: “Last winter was an exceptionally long and cold one. It was said to be the coldest in twenty years. Cattle in consequence suffered a great deal, and large losses” were incurred, “especially by the owners of large herds who could not feed and look after their stock in the way small owners could. These latter suffered very insignificant losses.”¹⁶

This improved the settler rancher’s chances of success, but it also initiated the end of the day when he worked only from the saddle. Harvesting hay is labour intensive. In those days it required mowing and raking the grasses with horse-drawn implements and then many hours of work in the hot sun with pitchforks and wagons to stack and store the forage for the winter. Roderick Macleay put up as much hay as he could from the beginning. He both hired men and cooperated with neighbours. Reading

through his diary, his grandson, Clay Chattaway (now on one of the two main Macleay ranches west of Nanton), noted:¹⁷

The crop was some distance from the buildings so [they] set up a hay camp near a creek . . . With two mowers, a dump rake, a sweep and an overshot stacker, a five-man crew was needed to run a minimal haying operation. . . . The women would have kept them supplied with baked goods such as bread and pies. There may have also been a camp cook and possibly a flunky to catch up fresh horses for the mid day change and sharpen mower sickles. With a minimum of five teams in the field there would be at least twenty horses in camp and more in reserve at the buildings. They started 27 July and after a short rain delay, hayed . . . for the whole month of August . . . They finished 7 September. By measuring the length, breadth and over throw of the haystacks, and applying a standard formula, the tonnage was calculated at 400 T.¹⁸

Not satisfied with the indigenous grasses, many of the family cattlemen planted fields of mixed domestic varieties such as timothy, brome grass, and clover. To do this they had to break up and cultivate the virgin soils and then work them again every four or five years to replant. Some also began planting, stooking, and stacking oats or oats and barley mixed for greenfeed.¹⁹ This required annual soil cultivation and considerably more fieldwork.

To protect their crops from the cattle and their cattle from cold and hunger, these cattlemen also fenced their holdings. For them this was achievable too. If the average settler owned about 320 acres he had, to be sure, a lot of work to do to fence his property completely. By the Homestead Act the land put aside for settlement was divided into 160-acre parcels with sides a half mile long. Therefore, the average settler had to construct two miles of fences to divide off his home quarter. By working at it consistently when he was not haying or hunting down his livestock, he could expect to do this in one or two years. Then he was able to use the open range for summer pasture and keep all his cattle near home in the wintertime to feed and care for them when necessary. If he continued



POTENTIAL HAY LANDS, SOUTHERN ALBERTA, 1912. GLENBOW ARCHIVES, NA-234-8.



HAY AND GRAIN LANDS, SOUTHERN ALBERTA, 1942. GLENBOW ARCHIVES, NA-4450-17.



HAYING, WALROND RANCH, CA. 1893. GLENBOW ARCHIVES, NA-237-14.

to work at it he might, within the space of another five or six years, enclose the rest of his property including any leased land and do a significant amount of cross fencing. Then he had his entire herd fenced and protected from the open range year round.

By early in the twentieth century the small ranchers who had not yet sufficiently divided up their lands were buying up wire – apparently by the “car load.” “Things in the foothills are looking well this year,” a small-town paper reported in 1904; “fences are going up in all directions.”²⁰ At Pincher Creek in the southern foothills the following words, written a few months later about fighting the mange, indicate both that the range in that area was now closed and that it was the small-scale cattleman who had completed the job:

In a range country it is possible for ranchers to take prompt and effectual methods for prevention and cure [of this disease]. Where the range is not intersected with fences it

is easy to handle large herds of cattle, run them through dips, and hold them until every head in that particular district has been dipped. But in [the foothills] . . . the building of public dips . . . would be almost useless. For one thing there . . . [is] not a large enough vacant space of land . . . which could be used for herding any large bunch of cattle; and for another thing, the cattle . . . [are] now held by so many people in small bunches, that it would be almost impossible to see to the treatment of all infected animals.²¹

As they fenced in their pastures, individual cattlemen could treat their own herds and, more importantly, prevent re-infestations by keeping them away from outside stock.

Enclosures also allowed the small ranchers to improve pasture management programs. As they built ever more complex networks of fences they were able to confine their herds to summer pastures, which were usually now in the hills and, in many cases, on relatively distant leased land. In the wintertime they would bring their herds home and confine them to a wind-protected, forested area close to their roughage supplies. This, of course, gave their pastures long seasonal rest periods such as had happened during the buffalo days – though in reverse order. Few if any of the cattlemen practised the sophisticated rest rotational programs being utilized and refined today, but they did keep their cattle numbers in more realistic proportions to the amount of pasture land they controlled; and when necessary they could prevent their stock from accessing overgrazed areas long enough to allow those areas to recoup their pristine health.²²

Fencing also enabled the cattlemen to drastically improve their breeding patterns. When smaller-scale ranchers began to arrive in large numbers they too brought in their initial cattle from the American West, and this was a setback for overall quality. “It is a great pity that so much inferior stock has been brought in from the United States during the past season by settlers taking their residence here,” an employee in the Department of the Interior observed in 1895.²³ A few years later an officer in the mounted police force claimed that “the class of cattle in the country is not generally as good as formerly. The steers offered show less breeding and are smaller . . . Many of the small ranches have too few bulls, and rely on the enterprise of their neighbours to provide new blood, and there are still

many wretched looking bulls on the ranges; . . . indeed some of the young bulls imported are not likely to improve matters.”²⁴ Nonetheless, many of the smaller operators were quick to begin upgrading their herds once they were able to stop outside stock from mingling with their animals. They kept undesirable bulls out, and controlled which of their own bulls were able to mix with which cows. As a result of this, and the fact that they both bought up better bulls and culled their cows, they gradually replaced the motley range varieties with heavier-set, more uniform, pure and cross breeds of the Angus, Hereford, and Shorthorn type. “There is no doubt,” the above report continued, that the best steers come from areas where “the ranches are small, and stockmen feed hay all winter, and can attend to the breeding of their cows.”

Complete networks of fences gave the settler the ability not only to prevent outside bulls from getting to his cows but also to regulate breeding by his own bulls more precisely. He was able first to mix his genders thoroughly in smaller enclosed areas so that, whenever any female cycled into heat, there was a male nearby to ensure that germination could proceed on schedule. The ordinary rancher could also move bulls in and out of his cowherds with more precision so that they would produce calves at the right time of the year. Most of the ranchers wanted to induce calving in March to early April, and so they put bulls with the cows in early July and removed them about six weeks later. This prevented highly risky fall and winter births. It also avoided summer births, which produced calves that were too young at the end of the grazing season to be weaned and put on dry feed.²⁵

The man with low livestock numbers and small, well-fenced grazing lands could also see to the proper sorting of his cattle. He could keep some pastures for his older steers, some for his yearlings, and some for his cows. This simplified oversight, enabling him to keep better track of which cows were producing small offspring or none at all, and to do a better job of marketing. This put him in a position to cull his brood stock more scrupulously. He could also weed out poor-quality heifers by spaying them to ensure they did not reproduce. Spaying is somewhat more complicated than castrating; it is normally not done until the young females are at least a year old and, therefore, are bigger and more difficult to handle than the baby bull calves. The heifers had to be thrown to the ground and held there for some time while a veterinarian or well-tutored



SPAYING A HEIFER, MAPLE CREEK AREA, ASSINIBOIA, 1895. GLENBOW ARCHIVES, NA-3811-98.

cattlemen cut through their flank with a scalpel to remove the ovaries. The man who had relatively few cattle confined in fenced pastures could sort out any young female stock he did not like and see to the job reasonably efficiently. The neutered heifers were normally fattened like the steers and sold on the slaughter market.

The settler ranchers could maintain a younger, healthier, and higher-quality herd than the great ranchers and, therefore, were almost certainly more productive in almost every sense. In time they brought a degree of specialization to the beef industry. Those in the high country who had some fairly fertile, potentially arable, lower lying lands began to harvest wheat and coarse grains – specifically oats and barley. They found that the calves they were corralling over the winter prospered when given a few pounds of one or more of these grains, suitably processed through a grinder, with their hay and greenfeed. Some ranchers also found that their older steers fattened up quickly when they gave them increasingly greater

percentages of grain. Thus many of them got into the feedlot business, finishing their cattle properly before selling them for beef.²⁶

The cattle people whose land was exclusively (or nearly so) in the high country tended more to stay away from grain-feeding, sticking mainly to grazing and providing roughage for their stock when necessary. They concentrated on breeding and producing as many calves as they could every year. These they either sold as calves in the early fall or wintered them on hay and marketed them the following spring, summer, or fall as yearlings. It is impossible to give precise dates for all the stages that ranching as a whole went through in the southern prairie livestock regions. However, it can be said with confidence that the modest operations had ended the practice of open range grazing before 1914, had gone into using roughage and grain to finish beef, and were undertaking closely managed selective breeding programs and a measure of rotational grazing.

Many family operations also moved into forms of production that were not associated directly with the beef trade – although that continued to be their primary or staple industry – because they needed to utilize any traditional farming activity that would provide cash to pay the bills between seasonal cattle marketings. They took up sidelines such as raising poultry and producing eggs, dairying, raising hogs, and breeding workhorses. One suspects they had more success breeding workhorses than the great operations did because, after they had closed the open ranges and ended the use of the Texas system, they were able to give this more hands-on attention. On the Rocking P ranch west of Nanton, Alberta, Roderick Macleay normally ran horses along with his cattle herds from the time he started operations in 1901.²⁷ His idea was to meet local demand for working stock.²⁸ Macleay was a first-rate businessman and for him this was more than a hobby.²⁹ By about 1913 the market softened somewhat as the farmlands filled and settlement slowed, and as steam and then gasoline tractors became more common.³⁰ However, most farmers continued to utilize the horse along with a growing list of machinery until the post-World War II era. Some smaller ranchers were even able to devote enough time, energy, and facilities to the business to breed and nurture a few elite horses such as those pictured below.

The family-controlled ranches were able to get a much better rate of reproduction out of their stock.³¹ The men and women who owned a hundred head of cattle and who nurtured them with care and attention



GRACE, ELEGANCE, AND POWER. THESE ARE THE KINDS OF ANIMALS THE BIG RANCHERS COULD NOT PRODUCE EFFICIENTLY ON THE OPEN RANGE. SOME FAMILY OPERATORS WERE ABLE TO DO SO BY KEEPING A FEW OF THEM AT A TIME IN A CONTROLLED SETTING, FEEDING THEM DURING INCLEMENT WEATHER, AND GENERALLY PAMPERING THEM. CLYDESDALES, RIDDELL RANCH, SHEEP CREEK AREA, ALBERTA, CA. 1902–3. GLENBOW ARCHIVES, NA-1526-1.

throughout the year – staying up day and night during calving season to act as midwife whenever a cow had difficulty delivering, and to make sure that each calf born during inclement weather was dried off and sheltered – could expect to get offspring from around 90 percent of their cows. Then, after grazing, feeding, and closely attending the animals for three to five years, they actually *could* keep the death loss down to about 5 percent.³² Thus they were able eventually to market one animal for some 80 percent of their cows. At an average price of, say, \$42 per head for 40 cows this would give them \$1,680.³³ Mary Neth has demonstrated that in the American Midwest in the 1920s the farmer and his wife learned to exist on very little money.³⁴ By seldom or never giving themselves proper recompense in terms of wages for all their work, by growing a large vegetable garden, keeping a few chickens and pigs for their own consumption,



ELITE WORKHORSE: THOMAS RAWLINSON'S "HAROLD," A SHIRE STALLION, OLDS, ALBERTA, CA. 1907-8. GLENBOW ARCHIVES, NA-3003-1.

and selling milk and eggs for extra "pin money," they could glean enough to sustain their family. More study needs to be done with respect to the northern Great Plains ranch/farm; however, it would seem reasonable to argue that, with a similar approach, its owner-operators could get by on no more than \$400 or \$500 out of their yearly beef sales.³⁵ This left them more than \$1,100 to cover their costs of operation. By continually doing their own repair work on sowing, haying, and harvesting equipment and by improving their containment and living facilities with logs cut out of the bush, they could keep their business viable under normal circumstances. Moreover, in years of crop failure and extremely low market prices, one or even both of the farming couple could "work out." He might gain income by working at a larger neighbouring ranch that needed extra labour at haying, calving, or roundup time; or by doing custom farm work with his machinery; or by entering the lumber, mining, or freighting business. "Desperate for cash flow," one group of small southern Alberta ranchers "diversified their business by acquiring a timber

berth near St. Leon's south of Revelstoke on Arrow Lake" in the winter of 1907–8. Under contract they cut down the big trees and made ties for railway construction.³⁶

Women also worked off the ranch, sometimes as a cook for a neighbouring outfit or as a teacher in a nearby country school or as a clerk in town.³⁷ Wives and mothers were instrumental in keeping the ranch/farm operative in the Canadian West, and yet their contribution is seldom recognized. There are literally endless examples to make the point that many became true and, in a number of cases, equal partners to their husbands. Home on the ranch, they tackled a whole range of duties simply because there was no one else to do them.³⁸ Many did not even have the luxury of running water. Laura Macleay's water was "hailed in barrels from a spring three quarters of a mile away. The barrels were loaded on a democrat in the warmer months and on a stone boat in the winter."³⁹ Vegetables raised on the ranches, eaten fresh in season and canned or stored for the winter months, were an important part of every family diet.⁴⁰ The work of establishing and maintaining a garden was arduous, and women usually took responsibility for it. The Macleay's garden, with a variety of green vegetables "and the all important potato crop," was located on the top of a hill about a mile east from the house.⁴¹ One of Evelyn Cameron's immediate tasks, when she arrived from England at their CC ranch on Mosquito Creek near Nanton, was to prepare the gardens for planting. In her diary she recorded the routine of planting, weeding, and harvesting while assisting with outside work and caring for her children.⁴² Women also attended to barnyard chores and the care of livestock. In the 1890s, Fred Austin managed to acquire a homestead in the Crowsnest Pass area stocked with a few horses and cattle. His bride, Katherine, joined him in 1901. During that winter he worked for a lumber company in the Pass while she cared for the new baby, looked after their modest home, and fed and nurtured livestock – even donning her husband's clothing so that the milk cow would accept her. It was the farm's output of milk, butter, and eggs, managed by Katherine, that paid the taxes and much of the regular living expenses. In the same area, Johanne Pedersen was frequently left alone to care for the family ranch and her seven children while her husband worked as a freighter. Along with her many domestic chores, she was known to "stack hay, stook grain, clear land, saw wood by hand and brand calves."⁴³ Jessie Louise Bateman of the Jumping Pound district



BREALLY RANCH HOUSE, BIG HILL SPRING, ALBERTA, CA. 1900–1907: NOTE THE BABY IN HER ARMS, THE CHICKENS SCRATCHING IN THE YARD, AND THE HOG AT THE DOORSTEP. GLENBOW ARCHIVES, NA-963-13.

west of Calgary milked cows in an open corral in fair weather and foul. Apparently she “could milk two cows to anyone else’s one.”⁷⁴⁴ Her neighbour, Susan Copithorne, came to Canada from Ireland as a child’s maid and then married a rancher. She learned to milk cows, churn butter, and raise chickens.

When domestically raised meat was unavailable, many women turned to hunting and fishing. They were comfortable with guns and accurate marksmen. Evelyn Cameron was a practised shot and rarely rode out without packing a gun. She shot prairie chickens and ducks during the day and stood guard over the poultry house at night to protect her chickens from coyotes and wolves. Mary Alice Halton, who arrived with her large family in the Crowsnest Pass area in 1902, quickly “became a crack shot. She kept the larder stocked with prairie chickens, Hungarian partridge and ducks.”⁷⁴⁵ Fishing was her specialty; “she often rode down on horseback to



EDITH INGS RECEIVES A SHOOTING LESSON FROM HUSBAND FRED. MIDWAY RANCH, NANTON, CA. 1911-12. GLENBOW ARCHIVES, NA-2368-3.

fill a sack with fish – occasionally even casting from astride her horse.”⁴⁶ Near Priddis, Monica Hopkins wrote of the “welcome change” the fresh trout she caught while ice fishing made to her and her husband’s diet, even though their pantry was well stocked with frozen meat:⁴⁷

We have hanging in the storehouse a side of beef and one pork, a number of partridge and prairie chickens, and about a dozen roosters. My heart sinks every time I go into the storehouse because whatever I choose has to be thawed out before I can cook it and the meat has to be sawed up into joints. It is all frozen solid and takes at least two days to thaw out and I’m always forgetting to get something in until we are down to the very tag end. It’s at times like that that the fish come in handy.⁴⁸

Once children came along they were incorporated into the production process as soon as they were old enough.⁴⁹ Elliott West’s description of early western American agricultural society could be applied word-for-word to that of western Canada:

The pioneer household was an economic mechanism of mutually-dependent parts . . . a productive unit, often a remarkably effective and self-sustaining one. Fathers did the heaviest labor – sod busting, construction, and fence-building on a homestead and took off in search of other wage work when necessary. Mothers handled the multitude of domestic duties, cared for barnyard animals, gardened, and earned cash by washing, cooking, and sewing for others. Children filled in wherever they were needed . . . the frontier’s popular image is one of individualism and self-reliance . . . but the transformation of the . . . West could be more accurately pictured as a familial conquest, an occupation by tens of thousands of intra-dependent households.⁵⁰

Near Wood Mountain in Assiniboia, the Chamberlain family worked closely together; and after Mr. Chamberlain died his wife and daughter, who “was scarcely out of her teens,” were able to take over their operation

and keep it going despite heavy debts. They donned men's clothing and proceeded to milk cows; market butter; cut, mow, and rake hay; brand calves; and haul manure. The two were said to have learned to be able to "rope a steer and ride a horse with any rancher in the country."⁵¹ The family approach was instrumental in building and maintaining some of the most productive operations in the Canadian West. Though they paled in size in comparison to the biggest of the great ranches, some of these family operations were much bigger than the average-sized family outfits. The McIntyre ranch on the Milk River Ridge, established in 1894 to the west of what was then the Alberta/Assiniboia border, is an excellent example. It was the co-operative effort by William McIntyre and his sons William Junior and Robert that enabled the ranch to grow and develop during the difficult formative period from the late 1890s to the Depression. Its 55,000 deeded acres stayed in the family until 1947.⁵² The McIntyres stuck mainly to the cattle business, but at the same time they saw to the production not just of hay and greenfeed but also of grain to ensure the survival of their stock. Other family operations such as E.A. (Aubrey) Cartwright's D ranch, Tom Lynch's TL, the Rocking P, and the Bar S ran a thousand or more head of cattle over a few tens of thousands of acres in the foothills southwest of Calgary from an early date. The latter two spreads became part of the operation founded by Rod Macleay, who eventually cropped some 4,000 acres and kept hogs and poultry as well as cattle and horses.⁵³ The degree of family co-operation is illustrated by the contributions of his two daughters, Dorothy and Maxine. Countless entries in the *Rocking P Gazette*, a family newspaper the girls founded when they were respectively only fourteen and twelve years of age, document that they commonly worked alongside the ranch hands and their father, whom they referred to as "Boss":

Jan 30th was a very hard day for Clem, Max[ine], and her 'pard' [Dorothy]. . . . They worked swift and fast at the Calf Camp separating the fat calves from the beef calves.⁵⁴

Bert Beacock helped by Max and her 'pard' moved 215 head of steers from Section 33 to the Mountain field Sept. 23. . . . Home field worked by the Boss, Max and her 'pard'

on Feb 19th. Fifty-six head were cut [out] and then taken over to the Bar S feed ground.⁵⁵

Undaunted, the girls, at times, rode out on their own to supplement the work done by the hired cowboys: “Max and her pard rode the west field and found 24 more calves that were missed when the field was rounded up earlier in the month.”⁵⁶

The two girls and their mother were equally comfortable in the barnyard, where they plucked chickens, milked unruly cows, and planted potatoes. However, there is no question that they were more than just hard workers. They were also trusted and true business partners. This was illustrated at times when Rod Macleay needed their support to keep the family holdings out of the hands of creditors. In the 1920s, when he was under constant and heavy pressure from the Bank of Montreal over loans totalling hundreds of thousands of dollars, Macleay branded thousands of cattle with his wife Laura’s brand to ensure that the bank could not legally claim them in a foreclosure.⁵⁷ When he bought into a small shopping centre in Calgary in 1929 he did so in Laura’s name, unquestionably for the same reason.⁵⁸ In the 1930s Maxine and Dorothy leased grazing land in their own name and they purchased, branded, and sold their own cattle.⁵⁹ Because the two young ladies got involved in all facets of ranch management they were fully prepared to take over when they inherited the Rocking P and Bar S from their father after his death in 1953. They kept alive the tradition of family co-operation, which continues to the present.⁶⁰

The overall movement to more diversified ranching/farming as the twentieth century unfolded is reflected by the variety of livestock recorded in the Canadian census reports. In all of Alberta and western Assiniboia in 1891 there were 15,511 milk cows, 7,792 hogs, 86,785 chickens, and about 40,000 horses, with more than 200,000 beef cattle. One decade later there were 50,741 milk cows, 48,984 hogs, 265,632 chickens, and nearly 100,000 horses, with just over 355,000 beef cattle. While the number of beef cattle had less than doubled in a decade, all the other livestock had increased by two and a half to six fold. To take a smaller area, virtually all of which was part of the ranching frontier in earlier days, one can concentrate on the figures for western Assiniboia alone: in 1891 there were just under 10,000 horses, some 5,500 milk cows, 2,627 hogs, and 32,114

chickens, with 67,810 beef cattle. Ten years later there were more than 25,000 horses, just fewer than 9,500 milk cows, 4,820 hogs, and 52,672 chickens, with 72,720 beef cattle. While beef production had expanded only slightly, the other livestock numbers had, on average, increased by close to 100 percent.

The typical rancher/farmer had begun working the 160-acre homestead and possibly a small lease, and then, perhaps after starting a family, doubled or tripled his deeded holdings. He ran thirty to fifty cows from which he raised calves, a dairy herd of about six to ten head, and ten to twenty hogs. He also kept around a hundred chickens and perhaps fifteen to twenty horses, some of which he used to work his own land and others that were bred and raised for the market. He also practised a full spectrum of plant husbandry to attain self-sufficiency in feed. Before the Great War, the era not just of the great ranches but also of what might be termed "pure ranching" in general had thus come and gone. This does not mean that all the skills of the cowboy were obsolete on the high-country spreads of southern Alberta and southern Saskatchewan. Summer pasturing continued to be important on a majority of the operations. Therefore, while the district roundups on the open range had disappeared, it remained necessary for each outfit to have riders who knew how to gather and attend livestock from the saddle. However, cattle grazing was now only one (though, in many cases, the predominant one) of several agricultural techniques being utilized in these regions. By 1909, J.G. Rutherford noted the improvement in herd management techniques that had come with the reduction in size. The "settler farmer," he said, "produces an abundance of feed of all kinds." With his pastures properly fenced "he can keep his cattle under constant observation and control with the result that loss is reduced to a minimum. At the same time the cattle, being at least partly domesticated, and generally to some extent grain fed, handle and ship infinitely better than do the grass-finished range steers which, often, on the long journey from their native prairie to Liverpool or London shrink the profit from their bones."⁶¹ His description would have been more precise if he had prefixed the word "farmer" with "rancher," and he should by rights have acknowledged that one of the secrets to the settler's success was that he did not work alone.⁶² When the market seemed to dictate it after World War I, feeders would gather together and try to access buyers in Britain the way they and the big men had done earlier.⁶³ However, as the

West filled, its cities grew and more packing plants with names like Swifts and Canada Packers entered the picture. The domestic market would take more of their supply and, eventually, restrictions to the American market were to be reduced as well. Furthermore, subsidized freight rates to transport grain east by rail would, at times, make it economically advantageous for farmers in Ontario and Quebec to finish western cattle as the farmers in the corn states of America did.⁶⁴