

ROCKING P RANCH AND THE SECOND CATTLE FRONTIER IN WESTERN CANADA

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Nature's Fury and the Tattered Dream

Riddle and Macleay brothers were not to last much longer as a ranching partnership, but until the infamous winter of 1906/7, they seem to have maintained their enthusiasm. This they needed in the search for creative means to improve their cash position.¹ Like many of the settler ranchers, the first means they undertook was to diversify their forms of production. That endeavour soon brought them into the horse business. Horses were usually worth more per head than cattle, and they wintered more easily, in part because, unlike the latter, they had the good sense to “paw” through the layers of snow to get at the pickings below.² Ranchers in the Canadian West had access to good working ponies from the beginning that came north from Montana with the first cattle drives. Many of these horses had descended from Texan stock. They were the ones often referred to as “cayuses”—a mixed breed that was more a product of function than design, had survived on the open range since the eighteenth century, and away from which the weaker specimens had been pruned by Mother Nature. As the first cattle frontier had moved north along the eastern edge of the Rocky Mountains, ranchers had bred these relatively small (and fast) steeds with larger varieties, notably Thoroughbreds, Irish Hunters, and draft breeds that had been brought in from the East and overseas via the transcontinental railways. The progeny were relatively large and could carry a cowboy loaded with heavy winter clothing and camping gear through deep coverings of snow. They were sturdier than the cayuses. Though they would not have shown very well against prized animals in eastern auction or show rings, they were exactly what

was needed to open the West. The heavier set of these animals were also good for draft as well as riding purposes, and when mixed and grain farmers began settling the northern extremities of the Great Plains they relied on them to plough up the virgin prairie soils.³

It was the wheat boom in the early years of the new century that really augmented this demand. Prior to 1905, wheat averaged around 80 cents a bushel on the Winnipeg Grain Exchange; then from 1905 to 1914 it spiralled upward to over \$1.30, and through the Great War to \$2.24.⁴ To numerous cash-strapped settlers responding to the federal government's aggressive western settlement campaign, grain farming was a means of exacting a quick return without investing in fences or barns or haying equipment or waiting three to four years for newborn calves or even one to three years for eastern doggies to grow and fatten. Grain yields on the flatter plains around High River to the north of the Porcupine Hills grew from zero bushels in 1904 to 99,800 in 1905 and then to a massive 600,000 bushels in 1906.⁵ In a short time, High River, just twenty miles from Riddle and Macleay brothers' home place, changed from the centre of cattle ranching in southern Alberta to the largest individual grain shipment point in western Canada.⁶ Seeing the tide of migrating farmers and resisting the dubious complaint of many cattlemen about being crowded off the range, Rod, his brother, and cousin decided to sell horsepower whenever they could. To get established in the business, Rod made his first trip south in the fall of 1902 to the more mature and established ranching country in Oregon, primarily to purchase brood mares.⁷

Riddle and Macleay brothers pastured the mares in the summertime with well-bred stallions and raised the foals in fenced pastures summer and winter, where they could protect them and even occasionally supply them with feed when the weather was severe and snow particularly deep. The best fillies they kept as replacements for the mares, and the rest, along with the geldings, they sold. They also gave the animals the individual attention needed to prepare them for the market. Each year they spent much of the latter part of June acquainting the horses with the finer points of riding and hauling. The men treated every outing as a means to this end. Even for a fishing trip to the south fork of the Highwood River (Pekisko Creek) to the north, or Willow Creek to the south, or a

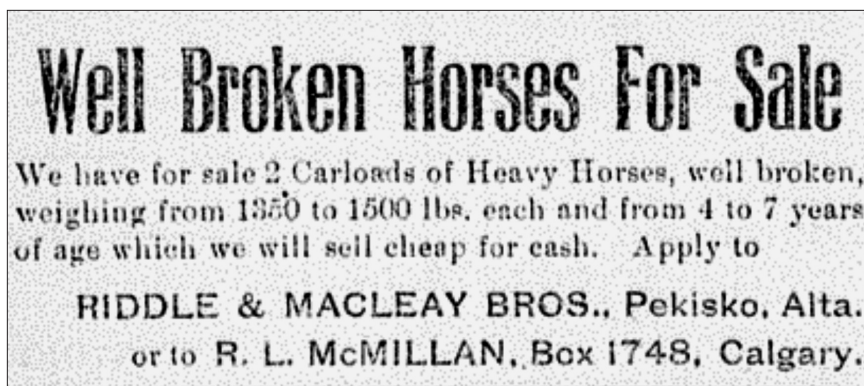


FIGURE 3.1. Advertising the horses. *Gleichen Call*, 29 August 1907. See “Peel’s Prairie Provinces,” University of Alberta Libraries, Page 3, Item Ad00302_1.

quick jaunt to pick up mail at the Bar U, they saddled up or harnessed green broke horses.

In 1907, Rod Macleay flipped ninety head of Bar N horses he bought from an American commission firm, Parslow & Hamilton, for a profit of over \$11,000. At this point, all across the United States, cities were moving away from horse-drawn public conveyance and there was a glut of draft horses. Rod’s growing familiarity with markets, commission firms, and railway shipping enabled them to take advantage of the situation by purchasing broke, heavy horses to sell to the growing farm population desperate for horsepower. For six weeks, 22 August to 26 September 1907, Riddle & Macleay advertised the stock in the local newspapers.

While marketing the American horses, Rod also went out to Arrowwood, Alberta, south of the town of Gleichen, and bought thirty-seven colts from Chris Bartch for \$4,275. In April, he bought a team from Billy Henry for \$250. However, to acquire enough supply he had to continue to do some of his dealing across the line. A buying expedition he made back to Oregon in March 1910 shows the complexities of shipping stock by rail in those early days. In the family files are inspection certificates dated 8 March 1910 signed by veterinary surgeon J. A. Donaghue, the local state stock inspector at Baker City. He examined ninety-one horses for “Roderick Macleay of Cayley, Alberta” and

certified them “free from contagious and infectious diseases.” Even then bureaucratic procedures had to be followed. Transportation costs were high, both monetarily and in terms of wear and tear on the animals. The horses rode the Sumpter Valley Railway Company train from Baker City, Oregon, to Spokane, where they were transferred to the Oregon Railroad and Navigation Company Railway. From Spokane they rode to Shelby, Montana, and then via the Great Northern to Sweet Grass, where they were transferred to the Alberta Railway and Irrigation Line to Lethbridge and finally the Canadian Pacific Railway to Cayley. The duty was \$837.50 and the total cost for purchasing and shipping 101 horses was \$9,117.75, or \$90.27 per head.⁸

Macleay’s notes show that this was a very hard trip for the stock: “Left Baker City, 3 cars went off track at Telocaset, Oregon; delayed 4 hours. Thirty-five miles further on 3 more cars in the ditch at Meacham. They were Armour refrigerator cars loaded with Armour’s very best canned ham, tongue, Irish stew and pigs feet; we all had a good lunch.⁹ Delayed 4½ hours. Walla Walla is a hell of a hole.” Later, Rod brought a suit against the Oregon Railroad and Navigation Company and the Northern Pacific Railroad for failing to feed and water the horses between Baker City and Sweet Grass. In the end the horses recovered with no lasting effects, but Rod was determined to make a point. Had the trip been made in the heat of the summer months there could have been severe losses.

Despite competition starting as early as the first decade of the twentieth century from steam and then gasoline tractors, draft or work horses were to be important in western grain and mixed farming until after World War II; and, of course, even today, good equine stock is utilized by ranchers and any rancher/farmers who incorporate a significant grazing component into their program. Rod Macleay would thus continue in the business well into the 1940s. The draft horse eventually became obsolete, but it is interesting that many farmers were still making at least limited use of them in the decade or so after the war.

Like many other frontier ranchers and farmers, Rod Macleay instinctively recognized the need to work closely with his neighbours. He apparently had accepted an obligation to supply a rider to the Bar U roundup on what must have been some still unclaimed communal range. On 26 October 1904, he took his bedroll and his horses Stub, Noah,

Brownie, and Dick, and he borrowed three more from Herb Miller, the foreman of the big ranch. The Bar U normally hired about fifteen riders to help round up its stock, with 7U Brown as “wagon boss.”¹⁰ Between 28 October and 17 November, the cowboys gathered some 7,000 head. They would move to a new area of the rangeland each day and then ride out some twelve miles before sunup and sweep back, gathering all the cattle along the way. When Rod was finally turned loose from the job, he was very glad to get back to the home place. It was cold and the cowboys’ tents had been blown down quite regularly by the high winds.¹¹

One year, after settling their own cattle for the oncoming cold season, all three partners headed out to the interior of British Columbia with fellow rancher R. L. McMillan, who “took on the job of secretary and bookkeeper,” to do some logging for the Canadian Pacific Railway. Rod’s younger daughter, Maxine, born in 1911, explains: “to obtain some income the boys moved workhorses out to the Cranbrook area, obtained a contract, and spent the winter getting out railroad ties.” They acquired “a timber berth” of their own “near St. Leon’s south of Revelstoke on Arrow Lake,¹² Logging was a familiar undertaking to the three men, as they had all been exposed to the timber industry back in Quebec. Rod and Alex’s father had run the St. Remi Lumber Company in the Eastern Townships, and Rod himself had worked at the mill as a bookkeeper.

Unfortunately, the logging undertaking turned out to be a bust and they barely broke even. In the summer of 1906, however, the future looked promising. Riddle and Macleay brothers could take some satisfaction in the knowledge that they had made a substantial investment in both land and cattle, and, as Rod’s diary demonstrates, he had a vision of land prices greatly increasing and of a strong horse market as the settlement process continued. Unfortunately, Mother Nature was about to make that possibility seem much less certain. The fortunes of cattle grazing depend to a significant degree on the vicissitudes of weather. The two major climatic problems one has to face from time to time in southern Alberta are drought and vicious winter storms. The home place was in a part of the foothills region where moisture is more abundant and drought is less severe than in other areas. Out on the Red Deer River it can be more severe, but cattlemen are able to adjust their numbers there to offset any pasture depletion resulting from it—usually by bringing

some or all of their stock home earlier than usual in the fall. Winter weather, on the other hand, can be devastating in both regions. In the fall of 1906 through to the spring of 1907 it turned viciously against everyone grazing stock in the Canadian West and the American Northwest. Canadian historians have downplayed the impact of this celebrated winter, but virtually every eyewitness report one reads emphasizes both the devastation it inflicted and its breadth.¹³

It all started on 15 November when rain that had been falling for two weeks suddenly turned to snow and the temperature plummeted to 15 degrees below zero Fahrenheit. Some three feet of snow fell in a few hours. Then the temperature climbed above freezing for a few hours and quickly dropped again, forming a layer of hard crust under the fresh snow that made it even more difficult for the cattle to graze. One blizzard followed another until late spring. A number of the big cattle owners were still grazing stock year-round on the open range. This winter proved the end for many. Their animals soon began to die from starvation and cold. Many cattle in the foothills pushed south and east in a futile attempt to escape the northern winds and to search for food. This left them on the open plains without the wind protection they could have got from the cutbacks and forests in the high country. Some ranchers rode out into the storms to attempt to hold the cattle back, but in vain as the animals flowed around and past them like a mighty river. Other ranchers tried gathering them in bunches out on the plains to drive them back up into the hills. One such rancher recalled, "Think of riding all day in a blinding snowstorm, the temperature fifty and sixty below zero, and no dinner. You'd get one bunch of cattle up the hill, and another one would be coming down behind you, and it was all so slow, plunging after them through the deep snow that way; you'd have to fight every step of the road." The horses' lower legs "were cut and bleeding from the heavy crust, and the cattle had the hair and hide wore off their legs to the knees and hocks. It was surely hell to see big four-year-old steers just able to stagger along."¹⁴

Finally, the exhausted riders and horses had to just let the cattle go. That sealed their fate. "Fence corners, railway tracks, coulees, river bottoms" filled up with the bodies of dead cattle. "One day in January the citizens of Macleod saw what appeared to be a low, black cloud above the



FIGURE 3.2. Dead cattle, Shaddock Boys Ranch, Langdon, Alberta, Spring 1907. Glenbow Archives, NA-1636-1.

snow to the north, which drew slowly, draggingly [*sic*] nearer until it was seen that a herd of thousands of suffering range cattle were coming from the north, staggering blindly along the road allowances in search of open places in which to feed.” Painfully “into the town this horde of perishing brutes slowly crawled, travelling six and eight abreast, bellowing and lowing weak, awful appeals which no one was able to satisfy.” Those that made it through the town surged “out into the blackness of the prairie beyond, where they were swallowed up and never heard of again, every head being doubtless dead before the [next] week had passed.”¹⁵ Before they died the poor brutes ate everything in their path—small sapling trees sticking through the snow, the hair off the backs of one another.¹⁶ In the Milk River area near the United States border, “there were so many dead cattle” dotting the landscape the next spring that one young lady who was still relatively unfamiliar with the countryside “found them very useful” as landmarks for making her “way about the prairies.”¹⁷

Something like 50 percent of the cattle on the ranges froze or starved to death during the endless march of blizzards.¹⁸

The cattle people who survived this dreadful winter were the settlers who had fenced off their ranges and could keep their cattle close to forests and other natural protection and to sufficient amounts of the precious feed they had stockpiled the previous summer. In 1907, the commanding officer of the Royal North West Mounted Police 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 had to be recorded, especially by owners of large herds who could not feed and look after their stock the way the small owners could. These latter suffered very insignificant losses."¹⁹

Rod Macleay and partners were now "small owners" only in comparison to the company outfits. Like other family operations, however, they had, as we have seen, fenced a good deal of their pasture land and put up substantial quantities of hay. Consequently, they were able to nurture most of the cattle they had grazing at and around the home place. Their losses in that region were not large. On the other hand, having not yet experienced a really severe winter, they took a chance on the open range in the Red Deer River area. There they lost heavily. We do have detailed information directly relative to cattle A. E. Cross had running in that area that is contained in the correspondence that he kept up from Calgary during the course of the winter with his hired man, Charlie Douglass. It probably provides a very close approximation of the fate the Riddle and Macleay brothers' stock suffered.

Once the storms began, Douglass and Cross's other hired man, Billy Maclean, spent much of their time in temperatures of 30 and 40 below zero Fahrenheit. They first fed up their supplies of hay, and then they hauled hay, chopped oats, and greenfeed to the cattle that they were able to purchase from neighbours. On a particular morning in November they were both almost killed when they were caught in a sudden storm. That morning Maclean went out alone to do some feeding. About midway through the morning it started to snow, and the temperature, which for a short time had been relatively mild, suddenly plunged. He was probably unprepared and poorly dressed and, suffering from hypothermia, he left his horses and wagon at the stacks and started out across the prairie on

foot. At noon, when he failed to make it back to the house, Douglass went looking for him. He soon came across Maclean, pulled him up on his horse and headed for home. The blizzard was fierce and Douglass found that he could not head into the mind-numbing wind. He made his way instead to the Red Deer River and then followed it under the protection of the steep valley side until he reached the house. They were two lucky men. Within three hours one side of the house was completely covered by a gigantic snow drift.²⁰

When this storm let up a bit, the men realized they were fighting an enormous battle.²¹ On 20 January Douglass wrote that the losses were bound to be heavy as there were no fences and the cattle had drifted off their respective pastures into the river valley and were all mixed up. Those ranchers who “have hay can’t get their cattle to it.”²² Douglass had two teams hauling feed to about 300 head at this time, and he thought he had enough to last until the end of January. A letter of 27 January demonstrates that this situation quickly deteriorated. The cold weather and blowing snow made it increasingly difficult to haul feed. The cattle along the river were starving and eating brush. Douglass now had about 100 head of Cross’s cattle in the field and “this is all I can possibly manage so it’s no use looking for the poorest any more.”²³ He reported on 16 March that they were skinning the hides off the dead animals and selling them for six cents a pound. He realized that this was not very profitable, but he offered the commiserating comment that at least it would help to defray the cost of some of the chop they had been using for feed.²⁴

Cross’s herd along the Red Deer River was decimated. He had started the winter with eight hundred cattle on his lease and by spring he had “two hundred and fifty head left.”²⁵ For Riddle and Macleay brothers the losses were larger in that they had almost double the number, just under 1,500 head—all dry stock from the home place and 100 purchased, totalling 500-odd head, 300 Manitoba doggies of Uncle John’s, and 627 of mixed-age cattle from Manitoba for the partnership. The largest percentage were yearlings. In later years Rod was to hire a neighbour named Sam Howe to foreman a crew to watch over the cattle year-round.²⁶ At this time, however, the partners thought they could run that part of their operation with the model the great corporations used. Months after the

storms abated, Pete Muirhead, who ranched near their home place in the Porcupine Hills, wrote:

We had a very bad spring here. The worst we have had yet after a hard winter. The loss in Cattle was large. The Round-up wagons have returned after gathering cattle on the range. They were as far south as the Montana line and the loss was larger than they expected. Riddle & Macleay Bros. who live three and one half miles north of me had a lease on the Red Deer River and had 1500 cattle on the lease. Two hundred and fifty were all they had left. And out of eight hundred calves that they had, they are all gone.²⁷

Over the next few years, beef prices plummeted in the West as ranchers throughout the northern Great Plains threw what remained of their stock on the market and quit. Rod's partners too were discouraged. Things had changed a great deal in these first eight years. The greatest change, over and above their financial setbacks, was Rod's marriage. He had met and married Laura Sturtevant while on a short visit to Burlington, Vermont, in late 1905 to celebrate the engagement of his older brother, Dr. Kenneth Macleay, to Laura's sister Gertrude. He brought Laura out west in January 1906 to live in the house he and the others had built, and about the time his partners decided to quit, the couple were expecting the first of their two children.²⁸ This would make the house even more crowded and, quite naturally, Alex and Douglas wanted, and were actively pursuing, wives of their own. For them, the writing was on the wall: they had outgrown the partnership and they soon let Rod know they wanted to get out. Fortunately for them, Macleay decided, no doubt after considerable soul searching, that he wanted to keep going.

Rod knew he was not in a position financially to buy his partners out. He needed a backer and, inevitably, he turned to his mentor, George Emerson. Years later daughter number two, Maxine, described what happened. "When Dad wanted to buy out Douglas and Alex, he rode from the 'Nigger John'²⁹ as the ranch was called, to Emerson's ranch [now on the Bow River near Redcliff], and asked to borrow money ... George said: 'No, I won't lend you the money Rod, but I'll buy them out



FIGURE 3.3. 1948, L-R: George Chattaway, Roderick Macleay, Stewart Riddle, Charlie Glass. Last bunch of Rocking P beef steers trailed in to Cayley. After this date, steers were taken by trucks to the Calgary stockyards. Glass “was employed by Macleay in the early 1920s ... and stayed for many years” eventually becoming foreman of the Rocking P (Henry C. Klassen, “A Century of Ranching at the Rocking P and Bar S.,” *Cowboys, Ranchers and the Cattle Business: Cross-Border Perspectives on Ranching History*, ed. Simon Evans, Sarah Carter, and Bill Yeo. [Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2000], 112). He does not seem to have been working at the Rocking P during the months when the Gazette was produced. Glenbow Archives, NA-3535-191.

myself and we’ll be partners.’ So Dad hitched up the team and leading his horse [behind the wagon,] the two drove to High River and made a deal.” Macleay’s diary entry for that day reads: “Bought out Riddle & Macleay Bros. lock, stock and barrel.” Macleay was named working manager, and partnership cattle were to be branded with Emerson’s Rocking P brand.³⁰ It was from this point on that the ranch at the home place increasingly assumed the appellation the “Rocking P.”

The Riddle and Macleay brothers extended family period thus came to a relatively abrupt end. Considering the fact that it ended on a sour note financially speaking, it could be seen as a period of abject failure. To judge it as such, however, would be somewhat misleading. Rod's share of an expanded partnership had grown to 50 percent, and he and Laura were the sole proprietors of the home place. But perhaps most importantly, it was out of this early stage that Rod himself carried with him some important lessons that would help him survive in the ranching business, at times against rather formidable odds. The most important of these lessons were respect for Mother Nature and the need to be flexible, that is, to adapt to both market and financial circumstances as they presented themselves.