

## ROCKING P RANCH AND THE SECOND CATTLE FRONTIER IN WESTERN CANADA

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## The Rocking P Ranch (and Farm)

Macleay and Emerson wasted little time in rebuilding their cattle inventory. They may have made out reasonably well financially after 1909 as the price of cattle on the depleted southern Alberta (and Saskatchewan) pastures rebounded.<sup>1</sup> However, their partnership lasted just six years. This was largely because of Emerson's age (he was born in 1841); but according to local historian Lillian Knupp, it was also because the two men's business philosophies were very different.<sup>2</sup> Macleay was a "hard-nosed" businessman who was willing to pursue any agricultural practices that were likely to make money, while Emerson still embodied in many real ways the transition of the region from a fur trade and open bison range into one characterized by free-roaming herds of cattle and horses. Emerson was informal in his approach, to say the least. He managed largely by an "uncanny sense" and a "keen eye" but either spurned or resisted the more careful business techniques. He "kept no records of his ... dealings." After his partnership with Macleay ended he apparently "took all of Rod's carefully kept accounts for the [past] six years ... opened the lid of the stove and stuffed them in; the deal was closed." The Gordon, Ironside and Fares beef conglomerate out of Winnipeg once made inquiries about a \$5,000 cheque it had issued to Emerson three years previously for cattle the firm had bought and shipped to Chicago. George "searched his belongings [and] found it wadded up in his vest pocket, all worn and tobacco stained."<sup>3</sup>

Knupp's descriptions say as much about Rod Macleay as George Emerson. Macleay was meticulous in all his dealings; and this would

eventually prove instrumental in the development, expansion, and, indeed, the survival, of his entire operation. He was also a fast learner. Working from 1914 on without outside partners for the first time, he never again left unattended cattle on the Red Deer range. He shipped any cattle from his eastern pastures that were ready for the market before winter set in and trailed the younger and more delicate stock back to the home place where it could be watched and nurtured closely.<sup>4</sup> Eventually, he left some cattle, presumably more mature and reasonably hardy two- and three-year-old steers, on the Red Deer, and he hired someone to see to the care of the stock. Also, as farming increased in the area so did the availability of feed in the form of the straw piles the farmers left in the fields after harvest. In those days threshing machines were stationary when in operation and grossly inefficient compared to modern combines. The excess straw the machines cast off as waste always had more kernels of shelled grain left in it than would be considered acceptable today. When a farmer and rancher could work out a realistic agreement to utilize this otherwise worthless residue as a form of winter grazing rather than leave it to rot in the fields, it just made common sense. A foreman and crew would spend the winter moving the cattle from pile to pile. This system had the effect of expanding Macleay's land base without requiring him to invest in the costs of ownership. At the home place he fed his cattle on his own hay, but he also paid local farmers to pasture some of the stock on their straw piles. Farmers, both there and on the eastern ranges, actually even assumed responsibility for cutting water holes in ice-covered sloughs, lakes, or streams for the cattle and for moving them as necessary to the natural shelter of a valley or patch of trees.<sup>5</sup>

Macleay's inclination to work out these arrangements with his neighbours indicates his practical approach to the grazing industry. He helped them market their excess supplies of grain, straw, and hay, and they in turn saw to the welfare of his stock during the most difficult time of the year. He was similarly pragmatic with regard to the forms of agricultural production he was prepared to embrace. When it made business sense, he was willing to diversify beyond cattle, and now the horse business, into any sub-industry he could think of. In other words, he was willing to operate like so many other family outfits that sustained their livelihood through the first half of the twentieth century in western prairie

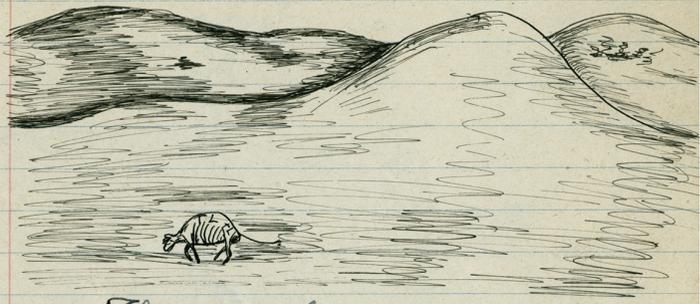
Canada. The *Rocking P Gazette* speaks of chickens and eggs on the ranch as well as milk cows.<sup>6</sup> These were kept to supply the country table. Hogs, also mentioned in the *Gazette*, contributed to the table too but, more importantly, were a means of making use of substandard grain.<sup>7</sup>

Rod also did not balk at tilling the soil and harvesting grain in the search for cash to finance his debts. After purchasing the Bar S ranch in 1919, which had a sizeable farming component, he committed to grain production.<sup>8</sup> He seeded down some of the more arable land around the home place. Two of the regular workers, “Clem and Val, left here Nov. 13th ... to help thresh,” the *Rocking P Gazette* reported in November 1923, and “after a strenuous week of work they returned on Nov. 19th, with two loads of oats, which filled the out-bin, and also the bunk-house.”<sup>9</sup> Later the same month one of the men “celebrated the finish of the threshing, by staying in bed until 9 a.m.,” the *Gazette* jokingly noted. “When he arose he” luxuriated “by taking a bath.” He completed “his toilet by using ‘Florida Water,’ and massaging his face, in some oriental solution, with much admired results.”<sup>10</sup>

The oats were used principally to feed Rocking P horses. However, Macleay also planted and harvested wheat as a cash crop to bolster his beef sales. During the post-World War I depression from 1920 through 1925, beef prices declined dramatically. Wheat fell on the world market too, but it bottomed out at about a dollar a bushel and oscillated upward to as much as a dollar and a half. In that range, it was more or less profitable. Two of the ranch hands, “T[ommy] McKinnon and Jimmy Hendrie, returned two grain-tanks [filled with wheat] to the High River Wheat & Cattle Co. on Oct 5th,” the *Gazette* reported in 1924.<sup>11</sup> Grain tanks carried twice the load of the average wagon. Producers used them to deliver their grain to a shipping point where an elevator company then sent it by rail to the East and overseas by steamer. On 25 October 1924, hired man Ed Orvis “brought two new grain tanks out from Cayley” to be filled and returned.<sup>12</sup>

Macleay and others like him realized what ranchers before them never understood. Ranch sustainability depends in no small way on the preservation of the natural environment. The way to get the best production out of the land was to treat it with respect. However, the concept of sustainability was not applied until the drought of the 1930s forced

*Cartoons.*



*The T L herd*



*Fixing the brakes on the new  
Grain tanks Oct. 26<sup>th</sup>*

FIGURE 4.1. A cartoon sketch by Maxine Macleay, *Rocking P Gazette*, October 1924, 19. Property of the Blades and Chattaway families and their descendants.

the issue. Grassland management and sustainable farming techniques are still an evolving science, but at the time there was a simple recognition that when something was removed it should be put back. In the 1930s, Rod was using phosphate fertilizer on the 4,000 acres of land he was cropping annually. Lately, artificial fertilizers have got a poor press from environmentalists, principally because of the residue they leave particularly in our natural water sources.<sup>13</sup> In the 1930s, however, the latter problem was not understood and fertilizers were rightly considered a way to restore much of the nutritional ingredients field crops were removing. Macleay “carefully studies agriculture (not just cattle),” the *Lethbridge Herald* reported, and in 1931, “after 3 years of study ... he used a carload of phosphate fertilizer on his grain land.” This “increased the yield to 10 bushels to the acre” and ripened the grain “10 days earlier.” By then grain was contributing directly to beef production. Macleay was finding barley more suitable to the short growing season in the hills than wheat, and according to the *Herald*, he was using virtually all of it to grain finish cattle in his “feedlots.”<sup>14</sup> “All of the many corrals ... are supplied with running water,” the paper added. “Each ... is well-staffed; most of the ‘hands’ having been handling [Macleay stock] for years.”

The above newspaper article reported that retailers in Montreal were featuring Macleay’s well-marbled beef in their ads.<sup>15</sup> Over the years, Macleay also attempted to market some cattle internationally. He first exported to the United States in 1907 and then to the United Kingdom in 1910. As the Great Depression set in the late 1920s and early 1930s he expended considerable effort to get the Western Stock Growers’ Association, the Canadian Council of Beef Producers and the department of Agriculture in Ottawa to lend their support to the British trade.<sup>16</sup> He was successful in that endeavor and from 1930 through 1933 he also shipped more of his own cattle to that market. He knew very well what the buyers wanted and, along with other reputable ranchers like the McIntyres and A. E. Cross, who controlled their breeding and had enough cattle to be selective, often impressed British buyers. Evidence from Macleay’s sales provides yet more examples of the advantages the new family ranchers had over the former corporations that had dominated the first cattle frontier. It was a new era with new rules. In the earliest years, the United Kingdom had been the target market for surplus cattle,

and only grass-fattened animals were sent from the Canadian west to the markets there. Grass fat tends to be “soft” and to “shrink” away rather badly when the animals are pulled off the ranges. The corporation cattle had thus tended to lose much of their weight on the long trips by rail and steamer to the United Kingdom. One expert writing in the 1890s put it as follows: “cattle wild, excitable and soft off grass, are driven to the railway, held sometimes for days on poor pasture waiting for cars, and finally, after more or less unavoidably rough handling, are forced on board” an ocean steamer. “After a journey of five thousand miles ... our grass-fed range steers arrive in British lairages [*sic*] gaunt and shrunken, looking more like stockers than beeves,” and the British “think we have no feed.”<sup>17</sup>

The other problem for the company ranches was the impossibility of achieving efficient breed selection at a time when on the open range any bulls could access any cows at any time of the year. Scrub bulls of low quality had roamed widely and constantly competed with any better beef bulls the ranchers introduced. Even after the corporate ranching era, the problem of poor-quality cattle continued. Part of the problem was that the producers who made an effort to raise a better quality were not properly recompensed, in part because of the lack of a modern grading system. Consequently, the quality of progeny, whether properly finished or not, was always relatively low compared to the best British animals. Time and again in the 1880s and 1890s reporters attending the auctions at Liverpool, Manchester, and Glasgow had commented: the Canadian cattle “were of a middling and ordinary quality;”<sup>18</sup> “from abroad the supplies of stock consisted of 700 cattle from Canada which were a moderate lot. Some of these were taken for keep [i.e. feeding], the rougher description meeting the worst trade of the season, entailing heavy losses for the exporters;”<sup>19</sup>

In entering the British markets, Macleay attempted to overcome both these problems. Obviously, he had the means to produce well-finished beef. Moreover, as the photographs below help to demonstrate, by this time he had been able to raise the quality of his stock to the highest possible level, mainly by working year after year to upgrade his breeding program. His grandson offers the following elaborate description of his approach:<sup>20</sup>

Rod had no preference for breed, or colour, but he did recognize hybrid vigor. He was not biased, one way or the other, and never expounded on the merits of any single breed. He practiced cross breeding, whether by design or by accident, before anyone else, and as usual, it was contrary to the popular trend. He generally had a mixed battery of bulls consisting of just about all the beef breeds available. Basically, by 1930, the herd looked Hereford but there were Angus, Galloway, Shorthorn and even two imported Highland bulls. The number per breed varied from year to year. [His] ... breeding plan ... can be best described as mixed breeding, but it was still cross breeding and it was not very fashionable. He maintained this approach throughout his career when the popular consensus was to “straight” breed, with any breed, and the closer you got to purebred the better. Anything showing mixed blood was a mongrel.

His initial herd was Shorthorn, like everyone else’s, because there was little choice if you needed numbers. After ... WWI, he used a lot of Hereford bulls, which by that time were the most common breed available. He was partial to roan cattle and in 1928 he decided to swing back to Shorthorn, in a big way of course, but it would come at an enormous ... cost for one year. He bought one Hereford from Walter Davis and one Her[e]ford from Charlie Lehr but the vast majority were Shorthorns. A whopping 28 came from the Calgary bull sale at a cost of \$280 a head and then 19 more came from Mr. Dryden of Brooklyn, Ontario for \$175 a head. This was a huge replacement rate nearly 50 head, all the same age and amounting to nearly 50 per cent of the bull battery. He did a similar thing back in 1917–18, when he went to Her[e]ford buying 54 head within a year. A normal annual replacement rate would be about 20 per cent annually. The 1928 purchases would all have to be replaced about the same time and he would have to do it all over again. He must have regretted not doing it two years earlier because it could have been done at half the cost.<sup>21</sup>

# Alberta Varsity Shows World A Few Things About Cattle

**Department of Animal Husbandry is Developing Shorthorn, Hereford and Aberdeen-Angus Breeds Which Take First Place in the Markets of North America**

FIGURE 4.2. Recognizing that Shorthorn, Hereford and Angus were numerically by far the dominant breeds, not just in Albertan but North American beef cattle operations generally, the Husbandry Department at the University of Alberta saw fit in 1928 to specialize in the scientific development of those three breeds alone. *The Gateway*, 8 November, 1928, 1. See “Peel’s Prairie Provinces,” University of Alberta Libraries, Page 1, Item Ar00103.

The *Rocking P Gazette* reported in April 1925 that “R Macleay bought eleven head of bulls at the Calgary Bull Sale, and they arrived home on the 12<sup>th</sup> the cowpunchers being Val Blake and Ted Nelson.”<sup>22</sup> By mixing top bulls with his best cows Macleay was able to produce better offspring and improve his herd overall. As noted above, to ensure that poorer heifer calves did not hurt herd quality he subjected them to the spaying “hook” before fattening them out.<sup>23</sup>

The Old-World dealers and auctioneers were most impressed with the Macleay cattle. “Better by a long way,” than many others being offered, one of the latter noted on 29 November 1930. “Some sold this a.m. for 20 pounds a head, some 19 pounds, 8 shillings and 5 pence” which was pretty much the top of the price range at that point.<sup>24</sup> The British buyers were used to well-bred Hereford, Angus, and Shorthorn stock in their sales rings—the type that most consistently provided highly finished beef—and they would not have been impressed with anything less.<sup>25</sup> The commentator was clearly lecturing Canadian producers when he noted that evidently all they had to do was “send a good beast and he will get a market.” His animals will compete favourably “with Irish & English cattle.”



FIGURE 4.3. Spaying heifer on scaffold, Maple Creek area, Saskatchewan, 1897. Glenbow Archives, NA-3811-96.

The Canadian government and, presumably, a lot of the other western beef producers, were thankful to those who diverted trade to Britain because it took some of the pressure off the North American market and for a while at least seemed to support prices. Following is a transcription in the Macleay family papers of a letter from the Department of Agriculture to Rod Macleay.

On the whole, Dept is of the opinion that exporting of these cattle has beneficially affected the Western Market situation. ... Stiffening of prices on market actually materialized when

shipments were in progress. Those who consigned cattle in connection with these shipments will have contributed greatly to betterment of market situation. We appreciate the part you have played in this effort to help the industry and hope it may be as much advantage to you personally as it apparently has been to the average beef producer in this country.<sup>26</sup>

However, Macleay's characteristically meticulous records of costs and returns told him that this lot of cattle lost between \$.61 and \$1.41 a head in comparison to what he felt he could have got for them in Canada. There can be little doubt that part of the difference was the excess shrinkage to which grass-fattened cattle were subject. Following is a set of Macleay's records for this trip.

Nov 1, 1930

Steers weight 1220 lbs per head when loaded at Brooks  
Value at Brooks @ 5 cents per pound was \$61.00/head  
Net returns of Manchester was \$60.39/head  
Loss per head 0.61/head

CPR freight to Montreal \$900.88  
Stock Yards Montreal 138.17  
Ocean feed and bedding 145.72  
Ocean freight @15.00 each 870.00  
Misc etc – total 2190.28  
Comm etc Manchester 194.96  
Total Charges \$2385.2.<sup>27</sup>

From 1931 through to 1933, therefore, Macleay diversified his approach. He sold some grass-fattened cattle domestically and shipped two other types overseas. The first were "store" (or feeder) steers off the grass that were young—mostly two-year-olds—and still lean or (as the cattlemen would say) "green" enough that they did not have a lot of flesh on their



FIGURE 4.4. Preparing to load cattle on rail cars at Cayley stockyards. The white faces reflect Hereford and possibly Hereford/Angus crosses, which British buyers desired. These cattle were definitely not well finished and would, therefore, be offered for sale as feeders. Photograph property of the Blades and Chattaway families and their descendants.

carcasses to lose during the long journey. They targeted the feeder market. British farmers liked these cattle too, because once settled in they fattened up rapidly on their lush grasses, abundant supplies of corn, and turnips. The other type Macleay shipped were three-year-old steers that he had fattened on his own barley and feed wheat. He sent 307 head on 13 May 1932 and another 40 on 5 July 1932. These cattle were all cut out of a set of 585 he “had fed through” the previous winter. They were “a good lot” and “well finished” by the standards of the day. They weighed out very well considering the stresses. The one set we know of netted 1228 pounds, which was excellent, and brought \$.05 per pound, or \$61.40 a head.



FIGURE 4.5. Loading Macleay cattle at Cayley, Alberta, 1945. Charlie Glass (left foreground), George Chattaway (right foreground). Photograph property of the Blades and Chattaway families and their descendants.

The next year Macleay sold a similar set of three-year-olds in Great Britain. Though they hit a particularly soft market, he was by then convinced that a long-term reciprocal trade agreement with the Mother Country was worth pursuing. As the chairman of the Council of Western Beef Producers in 1934, he advocated a national cattle marketing plan to the Stevens Commission in the House of Commons, which included lowered freight rates on export shipments and, if necessary, government-imposed minimum prices.<sup>28</sup> He noted that the United Kingdom was the one market that might help the industry. He suggested that Canada increase the preference on British imports in exchange for “an outlet for our cattle.” Soon thereafter, however, the United States entered a more liberal period with respect to international trade, and as prices in North America began an extended period of gradual improvement, Macleay and Canadian cattlemen generally were again able to market their product more profitably on their own side of the Atlantic.<sup>29</sup> Evidence suggests that from that time on Rod continued to finish a percentage of his slaughter cattle on grain. Thus, for instance, in her compiled history

notes, daughter Dorothy wrote that in 1938 “steers were put in the feed-lots at the Bar S, about 350 hd of three year olds.”

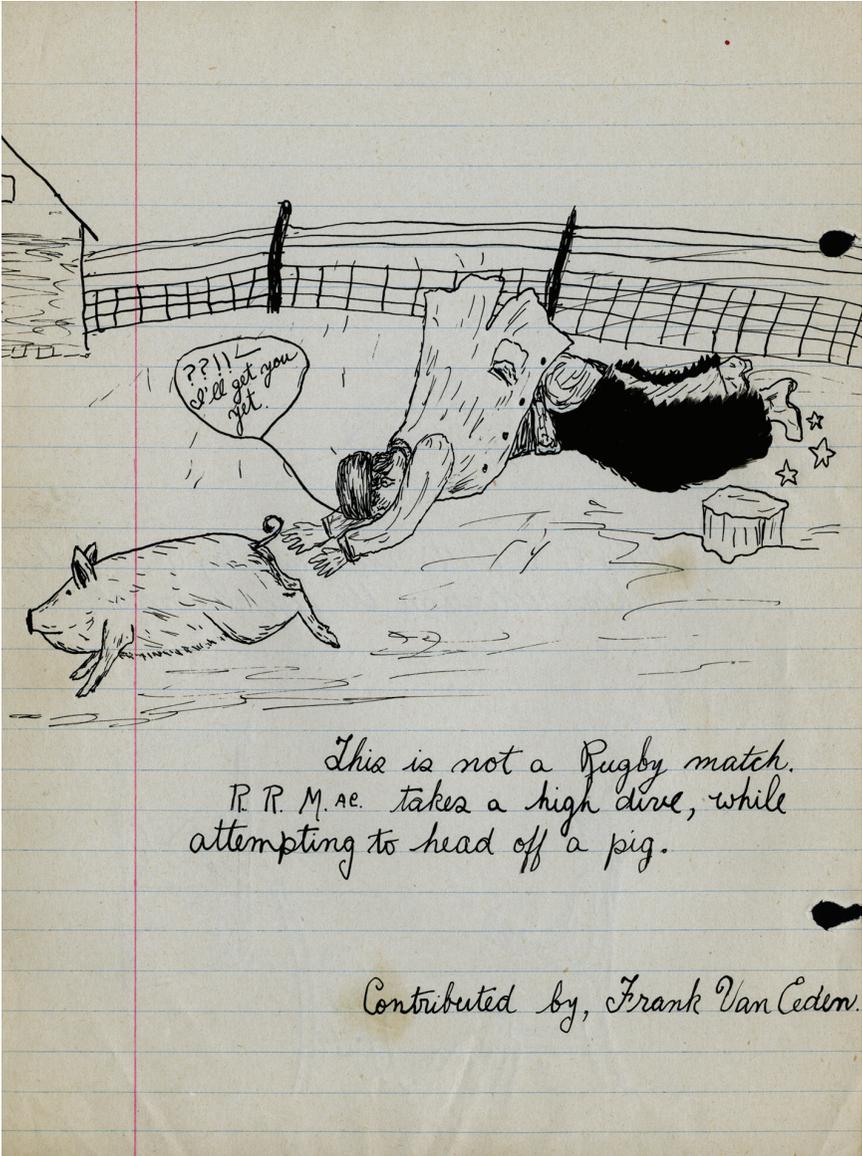
Evidently, then, Rod Macleay was flexible in his management style and basically prepared to attempt any forms of production and marketing that he felt might help him profit financially. He also understood the importance of hands-on control on his ranch/farms. This was something few other big operators grasped. The great ranches had found it impossible to mould their workforces into a model of efficiency, mainly because the men who actually owned the ranch, or even had a significant financial investment in it, lived offsite—in a number of cases, far away in Montreal or New York or even across the Atlantic in Britain. The Walrond outfit in the Porcupine Hills to the south of the Macleays had an onsite manager who was in charge of daily operations, and it also normally had a couple of foremen, but none of the members of the board of directors or even the general manager or any of the investors ever dwelt on, or even visited, the ranch for any extended periods of time.<sup>30</sup> A similar situation existed on the first Canadian version of the 76 ranch, the original Circle Three, and even the Bar U after 1897 when the owner, George Lane, moved his home to Calgary.<sup>31</sup> Any rancher or farmer today will verify that this is far from ideal, as wage workers on their own will seldom if ever channel their energies toward the success or survival of the business with the same dedication they are able to muster when someone whose personal wealth is at stake is onsite, visible, and firmly holding the reins in his hands.

Rod Macleay could not be everywhere all the time on his vast land-holdings, but he developed a management system to make up for that fact. In today’s language, he used a management team. First on the team was wife Laura, who looked after the payroll, books, and domestic matters, which included struggling with a never-ending rotation of cooks and, at times, filling in herself. Stewart Riddle (Rod’s cousin and brother-in-law) became his assistant manager of operations starting in 1919. He looked after the farming end and the general goings-on at the Bar S. There were also foremen on the Red Deer River ranch and the TL.<sup>32</sup> Rod had various ways of helping such people feel they had a vested interest in his ranches by allowing them the privilege of running cattle, or in Stewart’s case, race horses, on his grass. His daughters were also drawn

into the inner circle at a very early age. He gave them a cattle brand when they were seven and nine years old.

Macleays relied on a lot of people and a lot of people relied on Macleays. And yet, nobody ever doubted that the old man was the boss to the day he died. This, no doubt, was to some extent a result of the fact that he was prepared to get his own hands dirty. When possible, he helped with the big bi-annual roundups on the wider and more distant ranges himself (and, as we will see, in so doing, sometimes put his life and limbs at risk).<sup>33</sup> He also worked closely with his men attending to a multiplicity of rather manual tasks whenever he could. Following are reports in the *Rocking P Gazette* newspaper of the varied multitude of jobs he attended to, working head and shoulder with men on his payroll over the course of a year and a half in the 1920s.

“All the calves were dehorned ... in the latter part of the month. The job was done at the Bar S, the main cowboys were R. Macleay, S. Riddle, V. Blake, R. Raynor, C. Walters and F. Sharpe;”<sup>34</sup> “The home field was worked by R. Macleay, S. Riddle, C. Walters and Val Blake on May 3<sup>rd</sup>,”<sup>35</sup> “R. Macleay and C. Walters pulled a cow of[f] the bog at the Calf Camp on the 25<sup>th</sup>,”<sup>36</sup> “Robert Raynor ... assisted by R. Macleay and S. Riddle have been very busy lately, building a new hay rack, with which they are going to feed the bulls,”<sup>37</sup> “The first bunch of beef cows were shipped from Cayley on the first. The punchers were R. Macleay, S. Riddle, Bill Kreps, and Bill Livingstone;”<sup>38</sup> “The second bunch of beef was shipped on February 10<sup>th</sup>. The punchers R. Macleay, S. Riddle and Bill Kreps started them from the Bar S on Feb. 8<sup>th</sup>. Going as far as the Henry place that night. The next day they made it to Drumhellar’s and on the 10<sup>th</sup> Cayley,”<sup>39</sup> “The calves from Section thirteen were weaned on October 26<sup>th</sup> by Roderick Macleay, Val Blake, Tex Smith, George Peddie, Max and her “pard;”<sup>40</sup> “On Sunday Oct. 26<sup>th</sup>, S. Riddle, R. Macleay, R. Raynor, V. Blake, R. Smith, E. Orvis and T. McKinnon figured and figured, pulled, moved and adjusted the brakes on the new grain tanks. They worked all morning and finally



This is not a Rugby match.  
R. R. M. A. E. takes a high dive, while  
attempting to head off a pig.

Contributed by, Frank Van Ceden.

came to the conclusion that the rod should be shortened;<sup>241</sup>  
“Stewart Riddle and Rod Macleay stooked about twenty  
acres apiece on Sept 10<sup>th</sup> (so they say).”<sup>242</sup>

First under Emerson’s mentorship, and then on his own, Macleay obviously learned and then mastered all the tools of the trade he needed to run an efficient operation. By the 1930s he was experimenting with some cutting-edge methods for growing wheat as well as barley, he was using selective breeding to improve his cattle, he was feeding grain to some of his steers in a so-called feedlot system, and he was also in the hog and horse businesses. After freeing themselves from various partnerships, the Macleays were still far from alone. They relied on a vast number of people, as he and Laura built a business of their own consisting of the two of them and certain key people, which, later on, they were to expand to include daughters Dorothy and Maxine. That story is critical to our apprehension of the relative efficiencies of the family approach. Accordingly, it is to it that we will now turn.