

ROCKING P RANCH AND THE SECOND CATTLE FRONTIER IN WESTERN CANADA

By Clay Chattaway and Warren Elofson

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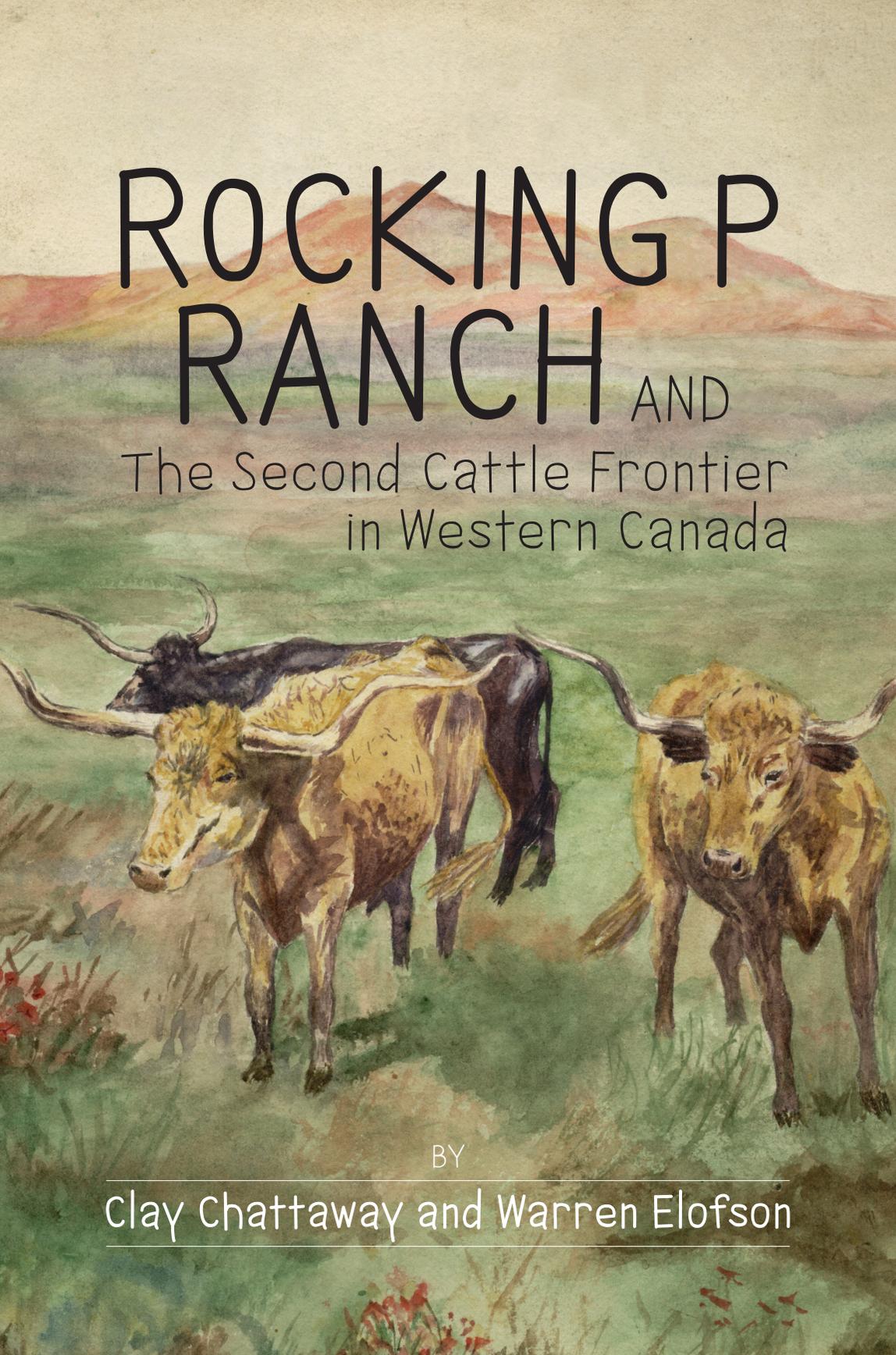
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AND
The Second Cattle Frontier
in Western Canada

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ROCKING P
RANCH

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PREFACE

This book is the product of collaboration between a well-known cattle rancher in the Porcupine Hills some ninety kilometres south of Calgary, Alberta, and an academic from the University of Calgary who has also had long experience farming and ranching in the province. The academic is Professor Warren Elofson. The rancher is Clay Chattaway, grandson of Roderick Riddle and Laura Marguerite Macleay, whose story is told here. Mr. Chattaway has donated his own vast knowledge of his family's history and the long-term development of the beef industry in western Canada, and he has granted access to the very valuable Macleay family papers. This collection provides opportunity for a deep analytical assessment of a single ranching operation. It also facilitates our central thesis: that during the twentieth century, the family unit has ultimately been more capable than any other business structure in achieving agricultural sustainability in the northern foothills region of the Great Plains.

INTRODUCTION

The Macleay Family and the *Rocking P Gazette*

Following is the story of the Rocking P ranch, owned and operated by the family of Roderick and Laura Macleay in the foothills of southern Alberta in the early 1920s. The story is based primarily on the *Rocking P Gazette* newspaper, which was produced and edited by the Macleays' two young daughters, Dorothy and Maxine. In conjunction with the rest of the Macleays' personal and business papers, the newspaper provides a great array of insights into the practical, financial, and cultural attributes of this particular type of agricultural unit at a specific time and place in western Canadian history. This is all the more significant because scholars generally have very few really bountiful primary materials with which to chart rural family history. A number of huge company ranches that opened the first cattle frontier in the Canadian and American Wests in the 1880s had a hired manager who was required to report on a regular basis to a head office in the East or overseas and, most importantly, to preserve onion skin copies of his letters and other documents in prescribed letter books. Families did not have the same personnel or requirements, and they tended to be haphazard about what, if any, records they kept. Moreover, they seldom had a way to duplicate any written communications. When a primary source such as this is uncovered, it is a precious find.

It was, moreover, the family ranching operation, not the company outfit, that was destined to establish a sustainable form of agriculture on the northern Great Plains. Major company producers such as the Cochrane ranch, the Bar U, the Walrond, and the Oxley are credited with forming the first cattle frontier in the Canadian West because, starting

in 1881, they brought in the initial great herds to graze the natural grasslands in Alberta and Assiniboia (now southern Saskatchewan). However, by the end of the killing winter of 1906/7 they, like their counterparts on the other side of the American border, all failed, largely because they used an open range system that left thousands of their cattle to fend for themselves year round on open range leases of up to 300,000 acres. This approach, known as the “Texas system,” had seemed to prove itself for a time in the more moderate environment of the southern United States, but it was patently inappropriate on the northern Great Plains, where it subjected the herds not only to the winter blizzards that regularly strike that region but also to bands of hungry wolves and cattle rustlers and diseases that spread among the animals as they mixed and mingled over countless acres.

We are referring here to the period running approximately from the turn of the twentieth century to World War II during which family ranching became established in the Canadian West as the second frontier, because the word “frontier” speaks of a new beginning, a new way of living, and a new way of doing. Historians have devoted considerable print over the years to agriculturalists’ endless search for systems of production suitable to the climate and terrain on the Great Plains. James Gray, Paul Voisey, André Magnan, Donald Worster, Max Foran, Terry Jordan, Courtney White, David Breen, and the present authors have all in one way or another attempted to show how ranchers and farmers adjusted their practices to find methodologies that would enable them to extract a profit (or a living) out of the land. In overly simple terms, the present study contributes to this work by arguing that the family operations were far more successful in the effective transition from a grazing culture, the most elementary agricultural form, to a more complex approach. They employed practices the grazing companies were reluctant to use, such as fencing their pastures to manage their land and livestock; putting up enough feed to see their cattle safely through the longest cold spells; protecting their stock from both two- and four-legged predators, and, ultimately, solving the problem of overgrazing of which the companies had been guilty. A mixed farm evolved by 1910 because grazing by itself had shown its limitations. Family farms were better suited to the environment than companies whose short-term goal was satisfying

shareholders. The mixed farming methods they embraced included horse breeding, dairying, pork, poultry and egg production, and even harvesting field crops such as oats, barley, and wheat. The family also provided an onsite labour pool and, as we will see, this enabled the regular blurring of traditional gender roles.

While the Macleay operation was to become in many ways typical of family ranches in the foothills of Alberta, it was in one important respect far from average. As we will see, Roderick Macleay, who started it all, was a very ambitious man. He set out to build a cattle empire, and he had the unqualified support of his wife, Laura. Between the two of them, they managed to accumulate, and eventually to sustain, uncommonly large land and livestock holdings. Theirs was one of a select few family ranches that, though small compared to a number of the earlier company outfits, exceeded the average mark by a considerable amount. By 1914 the average family unit on the prairie had over 300 acres of freehold and about 1,000 acres of rented land on which it grazed two or three hundred head of cattle. The Macleays and others, including the Crosses on the A7 ranch a few miles to the east, the Cartwrights on the D ranch southwest of Longview, the McIntyres on the Milk River Ridge in southeastern Alberta, the McKinnons on the LK ranch near Brooks, and the Copithornes on the CL west of Calgary, all eventually evolved into multi-generational enterprises with much larger land and livestock inventories.

What can be said, however, is that it was employing the conventions of the family unit with more than average energy and determination that eventually made such operations what they were to become. Consequently, the Macleays' story casts valuable light on the emergence and development of the second frontier and on the factors that gave it sustenance. As we will show, this statement refers not just to a system of agricultural production but to culture in the broader sense as a lifestyle. We hope as well that our study will help to fill a gap in the historiography of the West. In part because documentable evidence is short, historians have never been able to provide an in-depth elucidation of family ranching operations in the foothills region to complement, for instance, Paul Voisey's thorough examination of the wheat belt community in and

around the town of Vulcan, Alberta, to the east. What follows should make a valuable contribution to that end.

Once we have described the history of the Macleay family, we will turn to our second major objective—an intricate examination of the *Rocking P Gazette* newspaper itself. This will prove a considerably more complex, and potentially rewarding, undertaking than one might on the surface expect. Dorothy Margaret Macleay, aged fourteen, and her younger sister, Gertrude Maxine, aged twelve, started the *Rocking P Gazette* in 1923, edited it, acted as its principal reporters, wrote many of its articles and stories, and sketched and painted nearly all its art. At first glance, therefore, one might expect the paper to be a rather ornate and charming artifact—something out of the past, reflecting a life of school and games and play. On closer examination, however, we see a lot more than that. Over the course of a year and a half, the Macleay sisters directed the seventeen monthly editions of their publication at an audience consisting of their father and mother and all the relatives, cowpunchers, teachers, and cooks who lived and worked on any of the family's extensive holdings. The two girls attempted to make each of their editions as much as possible like regular prairie newspapers. Therefore, though in somewhat different order than in those publications, they included within their pages a "Local News" section featuring the people and events in their community (in their case Macleay ranches), numerous ads for consumer articles that local people relished, humorous tales to which they could relate, jokes and poetry, fiction, and real life stories that reflected and resonated in their cattle ranching world. The result is a multi-faceted representation of daily life in the foothills of western Canada in the 1920s such as we have not been able to find elsewhere.

It needs to be said as well that the paper's standards of scholarship are very high considering the age of its two editors. There are three reasons for this. The first is that Dorothy and Maxine's very capable and motivated teacher, Miss Ethel Watts, lived on the ranch with them and was thus able constantly to oversee their work. She set up each edition of the paper by providing the "index" (or table of contents) at the beginning, and she regularly wrote a short story or poem (or both) for each issue. Evidently, she also vetted all the monthly editions of the paper before they came out. The second factor is the girls' relatively high educational

standards, which we will explain in full below. The third is their innate artistic talent, which, as we will also demonstrate, is unmistakable in their written and visual art.

One ingredient the editors of the *Rocking P Gazette* were able to incorporate into their monthly offerings, and that also merits mention at this stage, consisted of regular contributions from numerous of the Macleay ranch hands. A number of the young men who worked on one or more of the family holdings in these years wrote stories or news items for the paper that enable the reader to participate with them in daily activities from working the cattle herds to putting up hay to feeding pigs to engaging in sports such as baseball and rodeo to even less complicated activities, including getting drunk. Most importantly, the men's offerings also enable the reader to follow the long-standing cowboy traditions of composing poetry, compiling country and western songs, and generally participating in the world of rural entertainment. In this we see the second iteration of a tradition that looked back to the first cattle frontier and that would, rather incredibly, continue to grow and to flourish in and well beyond rural communities in both Canada and the United States through to the present.

Ultimately, then, what we expect to achieve overall by first illustrating the history of the Macleay ranchers and, secondly, examining the *Rocking P Gazette* in its many intricacies, is to construct a pathway to a better understanding of family agriculture, and of ranching culture in the broadest sense, during the second cattle frontier on the eastern slopes of the Canadian Rockies. However, what we are saying is we want to do more than that, too. The *Rocking P Gazette* comes from the hearts of people who actually lived their life on the second frontier, experienced its circumstances and conditions first-hand virtually every day, and wrote down their thoughts, not just to entertain but also to inform and enlighten each other about the things that mattered to them in the life they shared. It is an expression of their collective mentality, a compendium of their disparate views on whatever happened to strike them as worthy of attention on a particular occasion. It is raw, genuine, and unabridged, and once the Macleays' western history is firmly in our minds, it enables us to see the second cattle frontier through the eyes of the whole spectrum of individuals and types who played a significant role in making it happen.

Note

We hope that readers will be encouraged to consult the various versions of the newspaper as they work their way through our pages. Because the paper is so large—some 1700 pages of handwriting, paintings, and sketches—it cannot be reproduced in full here. However, the entire collection can be found online at <http://contentdm.ucalgary.ca/digital/collection/rpg>.