

THE PASSING OF THE GREAT WEST

Early Reminiscences of the Stock Industry in Central and Eastern Oregon

(By Ben Amls)

There was once a time in this great livestock region when grazing land was nobody's land, yet everybody's land and that was not more than thirty years ago. Then the greater portion of Central Oregon, the livestock center, was all Wasco County, extending east from the crest of the Cascade Mountains to the Grant County line; south from the Columbia River to Lake County. It was then a vast sea of bunch grass, sage brush and covered everywhere with cattle, horses and sheep. It was very sparsely settled and every settler owned either sheep, horses or cattle.

There was no end to bunch grass or limit to the range one controlled. It belonged to anybody and everybody. It was first come first served.

The summer range belonged to the first stockman who could get to it. The forest ranges were then in a virgin state. All kinds of vegetation grew in tangled masses. Peavine grew like alfalfa. There were sunflowers so thick sheep were driven through them with difficulty. Wild roses grew in jungles that no man could penetrate. Squirrel corn, or skunk cabbage, grew so high and thick that stock avoided going through it generally. All kinds of grasses grew so luxuriantly that it could have been easily cut with a mower.

In the years 1884-5 sheep, horses and cattle were ranging by the hundreds of thousands in the Ochoco forest east of Prineville. Summit Prairie was then a big meadow and was a paradise for the stockmen. Only a few homesteaders lived there. Sheep from Grass Valley, Bake Oven, The Dalles, Gilliam County, Condon and many other points were ranged around Summit Prairie. So many sheep were taken to this summer range that in 1888 the ranges were practically devastated. The rose jungles disappeared for all time, and the other vegetation was

soon cleaned out early in the season until it became quite a serious matter.

In those days fences were few and far between. The sheepmen traveled as the crow flies. If they steered from a certain course, it was for water. There were no such things as dusty lanes in those days, nor a time schedule made by Uncle Sam to follow closely. Mutton buyers rode out to the ranches, bought their mutton and then drove them overland in droves of five, ten or fifteen thousand to the nearest shipping point, Ontario being a favorite place.

Little hay was raised in a great many places, alfalfa was not generally cultivated and in some localities not even heard of. Cattle and horses lived on the high bunch grass, but some of the hard winters killed them off like flies. In a mild winter they wintered through in good condition.

Every spring the stockmen and their cowboys assembled to take an inventory of their possessions. This was called the spring rodeo, and was for the purpose mainly of marking and branding calves and looking after the general condition of the old stock. Such an outfit consisted of a camp wagon and cook, a cavango, or horse boy, who kept the saddle horses together, and the cow punchers, in number from seven to twelve or more. These were genuine cowboys, not your screen imitation, but men who lived on horseback and in the saddle from year to year. No outlaw horse was too snorty for their mount, in fact their saddle horses were trained to be wild and glassy-eyed. If they did not buck on a frosty morning something was radically wrong. Usually if one outlaw bucked, they all bucked. It was a general invitation for a rough house. It was common to see a dozen or more mustangs plunging madly and the bucarroos yelping like Piute Indians as they left camp for the day's ride. A cowboy would cover anywhere from 50 to 90 miles in one of these daily rides but seldom would such a day's chore fatigue or subdue the wily broncho. The boys had to be careful in unsaddling lest the outlaws should deal them a blow with their hind feet. The outlaw horse never could be broken. Usually they become old and stiff from constant hard bucking which put them on the pension list for saddle horses. A pension consisted of life on the ranges without molestation.

At The Round-Up



The Roundup

The roundup was a great event for the cattlemen and especially the cowboys. From a certain point the cattle were collected for a few days until a large herd was gathered together. Each outfit had a foreman and each cattleman had his cowboys there to see that he got his iron on the right brute. The calf seen to nurse a certain cow was roped and branded and marked with the same iron as its mother. Corrals were seldom used and could hardly be used if had. The saddle horn was the snubbing post in use in those days. The roping was marvelous. To catch a cow or calf, the noose was thrown in front of the animal which jumped through it like a circus dog jumping through a hoop, but as the animal's hind feet were SPECIAL EDITION—GALLEY 12 about to pass through the loop there was a quick jerk and at the same time another loop was tossed over the animal's head. In five minutes the beast would be on the ground ready for the ironing process. The iron was a simple straight rod with a slightly bent end. With this instrument the cowboy could make any letter or other mark in vogue as a brand. It was light and could be carried on the saddle. A few days on a roundup sufficed to brand and mark all cattle within a radius of ten or fifteen miles, then the operations were repeated in an adjoining

vicinity.

The "Slick Ear"

The "slick ear" belonged to the first man who could get his iron on it. Anything was a "slick ear" after it was weaned from its mother. It happened to be a calf that was overlooked in the roundup or else was not gathered in at all. So it was an animal without a mark or an owner and was public property. A hunter in quest of other game often bagged one of these. Sometimes they grew to be two or three years old before being detected. They were quite common in the early cattle days in this country and every winter many of the settlers went gunning for "slick ears" and in this way obtained meat for the winter. Beef was dirt cheap those days. A good big four-year-old steer could be bought for twenty-five dollars and for less if prospects for a bad winter were in sight. But at that it was the golden days in Central Oregon for the stockmen. Many accumulated fortunes, retired and moved away and the cowboys have grown old now and many of them like their outlaw ponies are resting on the ranges of eternal peace.

Range Respected

As a general rule each stockman in those days respected all others' ranges which they "claimed" as "theirs" because they were first on it, but it was respected just as much

as though it were deeded. The sheepmen made and agreed upon certain lines and they ranged their stock accordingly. Occasionally a lazy sheep herder would "fall" asleep and allow his flock to cross the dead line. Of course the sleeping process would be only feigned. At any rate whenever the flocks trespassed over the line it was some such excuse offered. The cattlemen allowed their cattle to roam at will, having no herder. They would naturally drift to the forests in spring time and back again in the fall when they would be rounded up and some placed in enclosed pastures. Thousands of acres of public land were fenced in many places and here bunch grass would grow three feet high, and made excellent winter-pasture.

Wild Horses and Cattle

Horses were not only wild, but as wild as elk or any other wild animal. Horses were not worth much thirty years ago, a good saddle pony could be bought from five dollars up. But they ran like wild year after year, some dying of old age without a brand or even ever being roped. They ran in herds and when they sighted a human being they snorted and were out of sight as quick as their fleet feet could carry them, and they were fleet and tough as iron. It was a wiry saddle horse that could keep in sight of them. It was a stren-

ous job to corral them as they would plunge headlong into any obstruction to evade being turned from a certain course. Many were caught and conquered and they were worth the effort for a good hardy driver or riding horse then was to his master what the auto today is to its owner. When once on one of their backs and started for a certain place you were sure to arrive there without fail. There were no blow-outs, punctures or broken axles, or other grief.

Business Was Big

Dollars almost grew on trees in the early days of the stock industry. They grew on the hills if not on trees, on the sheep's backs and on the cattle herds. It was big business for the country merchant. The patronage of a big cattle or sheep man was almost like a gold mine for the country store keeper. He did not buy in fifty cent packages or pound lots but bought by wholesale and retail, bringing along six or eight-horse freight outfits to haul back his purchases.

The farmer who cultivated the soil for a livelihood sold his hay to the stockman every year at good prices. Consequently they also prospered as they only had to stack the hay and the sheepmen bought it and drove their flocks to it and fed it.

The patronage of the stockmen was heavy and was good in all lines. There were no railroads and all their products were freighted or driven on hoof to The Dalles. Much hay was in demand both in the country and in the towns which stimulated farm operations and good prices. The tight-wad was conspicuous for his absence it seemed. At any rate money was easy and plentiful and flowed in streams in the different channels.

The cowpunchers never had use for money and it burned their fingers so they fung it to the breeze as soon as they struck town. They believed in free circulation of change and they did it freely. Sheep herders also scattered their dollars like wheat when they blew in. There was always plenty of work with stock, everybody had money or could get it easily, were happy, and business was good.

That was the last of the Great West, absolutely. As the sun went down along in the late nineties, so did the great west and the real big free range stock business pass on.

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