

Rustling big business in Oregon and the nation

While it seems unlikely—and few would like to see the return of lynching, that possible solution to cattle rustling does crop up in conversations where one finds stockmen discussing mutual problems.

"It's hard enough to pay the mortgage and taxes without having some damn rustler picking off a calf or two—or a dozen head of yearlings—or nearly two dozen young cows and calves as is happening these days," one Eastern Oregon cattleman declared recently as he drank his coffee in a local restaurant.

Livestock theft is increasing all over Oregon just as in other cattle producing states. In Eastern and Southern Oregon where population centers are few, distances between ranches is considerable, and roads criss-cross the rangelands, it isn't hard for persons with theft in mind to put a plan into effect—and wind up with a beef in their freezer or, as some apparently are doing, walk off with enough to sell to someone who isn't too concerned about exactly where it comes from.

"Cattle rustling today in Oregon and throughout the nation is a bigger problem financially and in terms of number of cattle stolen, than it ever was in the 'days of the old west,'" according to Ernie Davis, president of the 3400-member Oregon Cattleman's Association. Davis also stated that, "Cattle losses due to thefts, costs Oregon ranchers hundreds of thousands of dollars each year. Today when our industry is losing millions of dollars due to a depressed market and high production costs, the loss of a few cattle can mean the difference between a yearly profit or loss to many Oregon ranchers. Our Association is doing every-

thing possible in cattle theft protection and detection."

Anti-cattle theft programs of the Association include close working cooperation with state, county and local police; a \$1,000 reward program for information leading to the arrest and conviction of cattle thieves; strengthening of brand inspection laws; and working with individual ranchers who's areas have a higher incidence of cattle theft.

Donald Ostensoe, executive-vice-president of the OCA, stated that, "Nationally, more than \$50 million a year in losses can be attributed directly to cattle thefts and stolen beef carcasses at the packing house level." Ostensoe continued, "Congress last year called on government law enforcement agencies to crack down on the racketeering in the meat industry. Some early reports from this investigation indicated that the mafia and other organized crime were directly involved in stealing and re-selling of stolen beef carcasses."

Gene Kunkle, head of the livestock theft division of the Oregon Department of Agriculture, when contacted said, "Rustling is a relative thing." He commented that the total number of animal's stolen is small in comparison to the total in the state, "however, when a person is a small operator, he can ill afford to lose one or two."

Kunkle said there are about 1,600,000 head in the state and 1,406 were reported stolen last year. Of these incidents 475 were cleared up. "We need to keep this in proper perspective," he said.

In Harney County ranchers have formed a vigilante posse in an area where a number of animals have been found

slaughtered. Obviously, the situation is serious. "Any person caught shooting livestock in that area," said Kay Smith, a livestock owner, "can expect to get a close-up look at sagebrush from the end of a rope while being dragged across the landscape." During the past month, about 40 cattle, horses and burros have been found dead from gunshots.

Malheur County Sheriff Bob Ingram said recently he hesitated to estimate the number of cattle which are taken each year on his county "but I'd guess it is considerable."

Sheriff Ingram has had occasion to see several rustling cases come to court just recently he and his department cooperated with other agencies in the apprehension of two men charged with theft of a beef cow. These men were subsequently convicted on first degree theft charges. Sheriff Ingram praised private citizens who cooperated with his department in the incident.

He related the story saying that a local farmer, Raymond Anthony, reported seeing car lights in the early morning hours at the George Russell feedlots near Vale. The next morning Richard Russell reported that a cow had been shot and butchered. A gate had been torn out in the incident.

An immediate investigation ensued and two Russell employees, Ray Sheppard and Lowell Redman reported seeing two cars "fooling around" in the area. This man was able to give an excellent description of the autos, Ingram said.

Sheppard told the law officers he thought he could identify the vehicle which had been seen in the area of the feedlot because he had seen it parked at a Vale restaurant. Checked out by sheriff's officers, the information paid off when a stake-out of the man's house brought the arrest of Richard Noblit. Then a second man was apprehended and Noblit and Charles Seestood trial and were convicted of first degree theft and were subsequently sentenced to 4 years each in the state penitentiary.

Inflation has caused a certain amount of rustling,

both Ingram and Bert Hawkins, OCA vice president, think. And apparently this was what brought Noblit and See to their downfall. Hawkins says few cattlemen are financially prepared to lose cattle this way, after all inflation has hit the cattle producer too.

Some stockmen in Malheur County report losses of as high as 30 head at a time, some even more, while many report one or two disappearing. Apparently some are moved out in one bunch, possibly trucked on back roads completely out of the area and perhaps even out of the state.

There is the possibility that some feedlots aren't picky about brand inspections and then too, papers can be falsified, Sheriff Ingram comments.

Hawkins said one of the best deterrents he has heard of is Lake County where enough ranchers have been deputized and have sheriff's patrol emblems on their vehicles that rustlers with theft in mind, think twice.

Laws nowadays seem to protect a criminal in many instances and law enforcement people have a real job on their hands when they begin to put together a case against someone charged with theft. This has caused officers to delay release of information at times.

Several years ago a plane was spotted in an unlikely place and checking indicated someone had butchered a beef and was preparing to load it on board. The person escaped but the incident isn't closed. Landing strips scattered throughout the rangelands make this easy. The plane was identified but complications failed to apprehend the pilot.

Something new is taking place in Idaho, just across Oregon's state line in Owyhee County. Owyhee County Sheriff Tim Nettleton is using an aircraft to check out the thousands of acres of rangeland. In that county, the cattle out number the people by at least 10 to 1. It's a huge county and taxes from the small population don't allow for a large law enforcement unit. Nettleton is able, in a few hours of flying time, to cover some areas so remote and desolate, where one would never expect to find a law officer. The plane drops down

over a vehicle to check make, license, etc. and Sheriff Nettleton can quickly tell if it is a local truck with business in the area. If there is a question over its presence in the area, a deputy on the ground is alerted to intercept the rig and check it out.

Motor bikes, campers, enclosed vans and the like are suspected of having a hand in some of the thefts. Sheriff Ingram said he supposed that corrals and loading chutes erected by ranchers to facilitate working cattle away from home, are used by rustlers for their clandestine work.

Some ranchers indicate they feel quite a bit of the cattle theft "is to fill the family freezer." But it still hurts the rancher's pocket. "It isn't easy to tell the banker that 30 head of cattle just up and vanished; but it is happening in Oregon," says one farmer-rancher.

Some don't think further legislation will help, but Ingram says Laws aren't as effective as they might be. "We need more men and bigger patrols. We check everything we see moving

but they are still getting away." After a minute's meditation, he noted "It looks like some would turn up somewhere! However, a person can falsify a bill of sale or slap a brand over another and sometimes get away with it."

Kunkle commented, "The laws in Oregon are adequate and he noted that of the cases cleared up last year, 253 were documented with physical evidence of theft such as wires cut, entrails, a head or hide."

bargaining engineering by lawyers often lightens a sentence. Too often a judge and or jury finds sympathy for the rustler while at the same time the rancher or farmer or feedlot operator is expected to pay his bills and taxes, yet keep on producing meat to feed the hungry of the world, while absorbing natural losses and those not so natural.

Yep! A person might almost understand the desperation felt by cattlemen with the

weather, the market and the rustler all teamed up against him. It brings some talk of need for return of vigilantes. Few livestock producers question that laws need teeth, law enforcement agencies need the financing and help to seek out, prosecute and convict those guilty of rustling.

No one wants to see the law taken into the hands of those injured...but it did happen in years past!

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