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Livestock and the Open Range

1850–1887

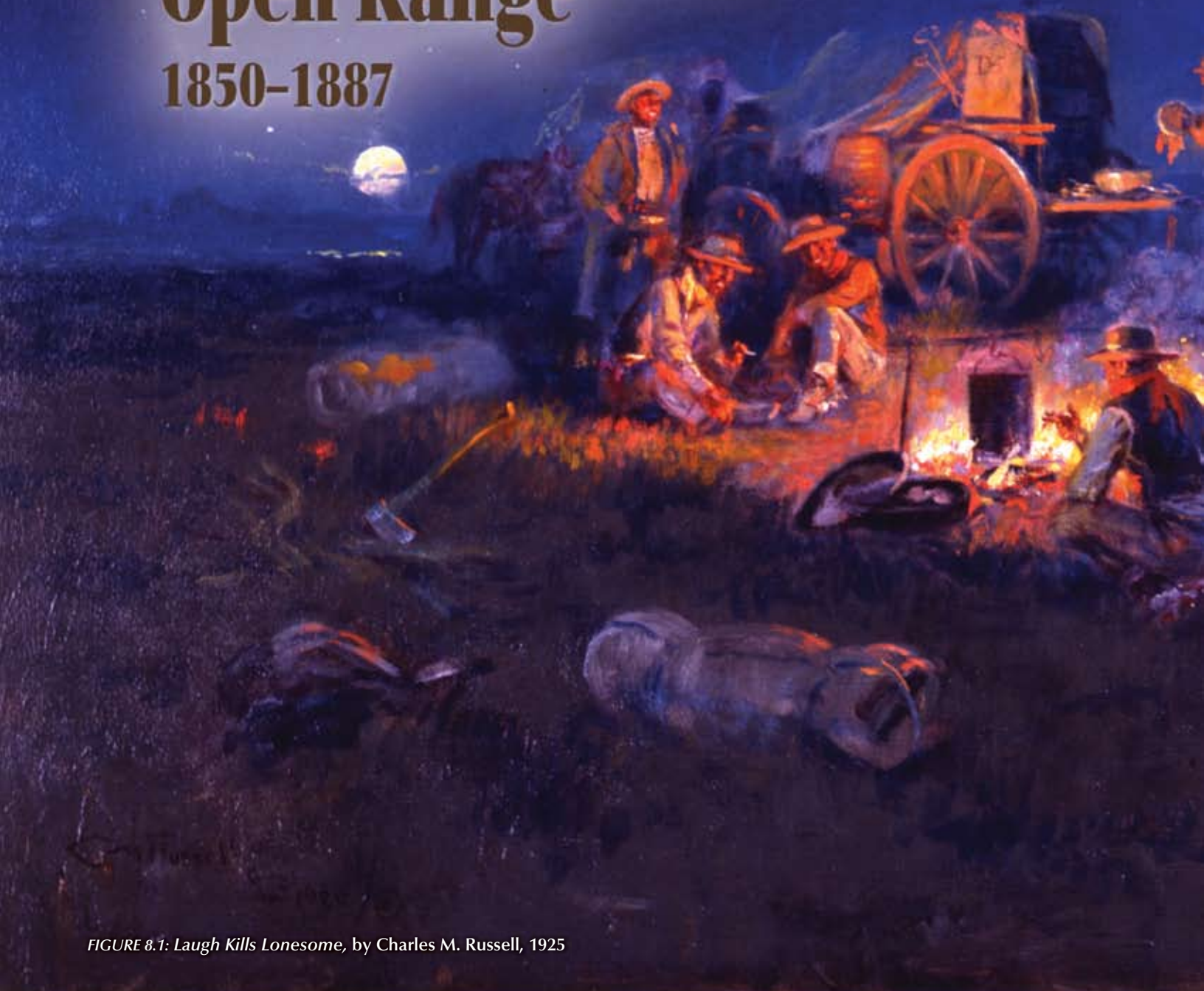
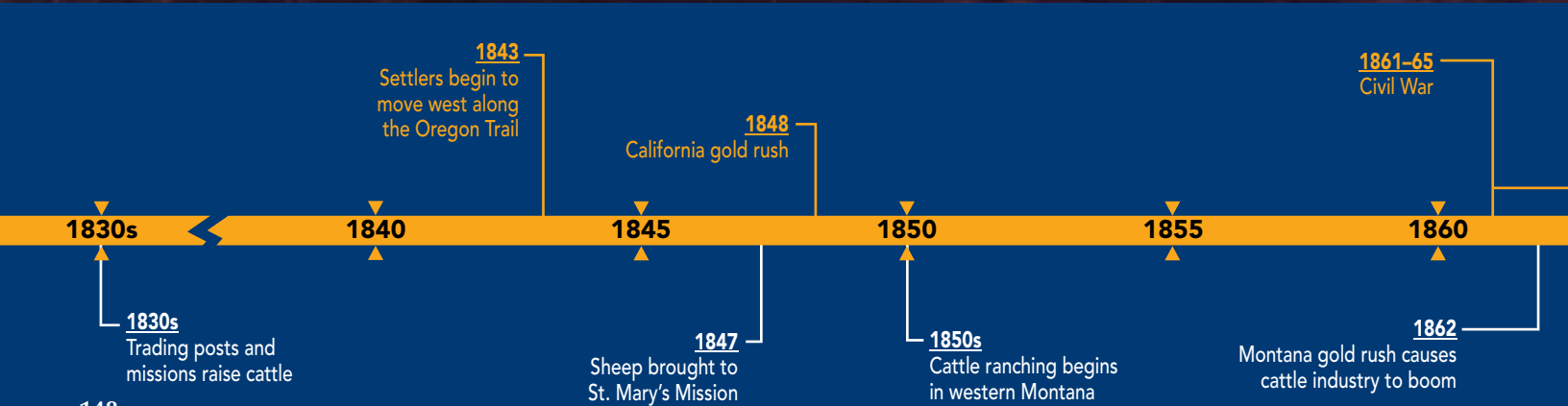


FIGURE 8.1: *Laugh Kills Lonesome*, by Charles M. Russell, 1925





READ TO FIND OUT:

- What drew ranchers to Montana Territory
- What problems plagued the open-range cattle ranches
- How the winter of 1886–87 changed life on the open range
- How the brief open-range ranching days shaped life in Montana today

The Big Picture

The glory days of the open range were created—and quickly brought to an end—by the same forces that drive all life in Montana: water, weather, and the land.

As the bison disappeared from the Northern Plains, a new way of life spread across the Montana grasslands: the life of the cattleman on the open range.

Montana offered 40 million acres of rich grazing land with some of the best grasses in the West. By pushing American Indians onto shrinking reservations, the government opened up vast regions of this public resource. Investors from all over the world came to profit from the open range.

The period of open-range ranching began and ended in less than 50 years. Yet it profoundly influenced life in Montana. The days of the open range left a lasting **legacy** (something handed down from the past) that continues to shape life here today.

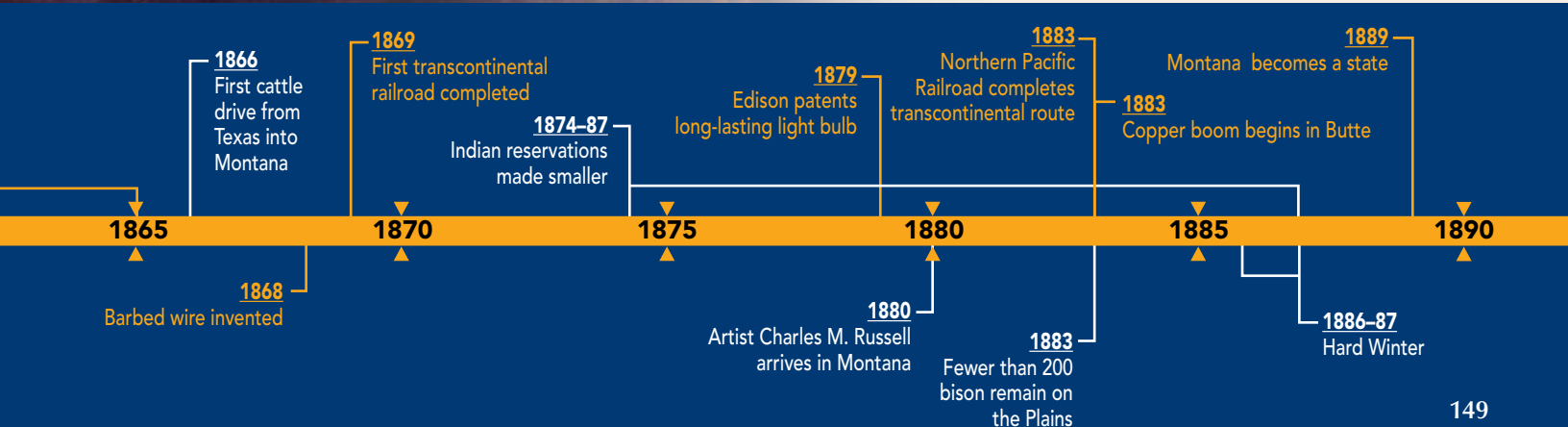




FIGURE 8.2: Indian horsemen found cowboy work a good way to make money. American painter William Gollings (1878–1932) created this image, *Cheyenne Cowboys*, after working briefly on sheep and cattle ranches in Montana, South Dakota, and Nebraska.

Grassland: The Main Character in the Story

Ranchers found Montana's grasslands to be superior to other areas of the West like Colorado or Wyoming. Montana's winter snows are not as deep and do not last as long. Winds frequently blow the snow off the grasses, allowing cattle to feed all winter. And many streambeds thread through Montana, providing both water and shelter for the ranging cattle.

But the heart of it all was the grass itself: blue grama, buffalograss, needle-and-thread grass, western wheatgrass, and other native species. These grasses **cured** (dried) standing up, so the winter snows did not flatten them and cover them up, as they did back east. They provided nutritious **forage** (animal food for grazing) that fattened cattle even with no additional feed.

Best of all, it was free.

The federal government had claimed wide tracts of land from the Indian tribes—by **treaty** (an agreement between governments) and by force (see Chapter 7). The land could not be sold

or homesteaded until it was **surveyed** (measured for mapping). Before the 1880s very little of the central and eastern plains had been surveyed, other than for the railroad lines. So the stockmen simply claimed it for their own. Like beaver to the fur companies and gold to the miners, the grass was free.

The Birth of Open-range Ranching

Cattle first came to Montana in the 1830s to supply trading posts and missions. In the 1850s a fur trader named Richard Grant and his two sons, Johnny and James, started buying lame or exhausted cattle from wagon trains on the Oregon Trail. They drove them north into the Deer Lodge, Beaverhead, and Bitterroot Valleys to fatten. Then they drove the fresh cattle back south to the Oregon Trail, trading one fat animal for two weary ones. By 1858 the Grants and other former fur traders were grazing cattle throughout southwestern Montana.

Then came the Montana gold rushes. Mining camps sprouted up. Timber camps spread into the woods. The population boomed, and the army brought in more soldiers to protect the new settlers. All these people had to eat. People quickly hunted out the wild game around the mining camps and army forts. The demand turned to beef. Ranching expanded quickly to feed the growing demand.

Some gold miners found the beef business more profitable than scratching for gold. In 1862 two businessmen named James and Granville Stuart drove 76 cattle into Bannack and opened a butcher shop. They earned \$300 (equivalent to \$5,400 today) in two weeks.

“When I first reached Montana, the Deer Lodge Valley was one of the most beautiful stretches of bunch grass available. The grass waved like a huge field of grain.”

—CONRAD KOHRS, EARLY CATTLEMAN OF MONTANA

The Government Takes More Indian Land

As ranching and settlements expanded, stockmen pressured the federal government for more land. The government responded to ranchers' demands.

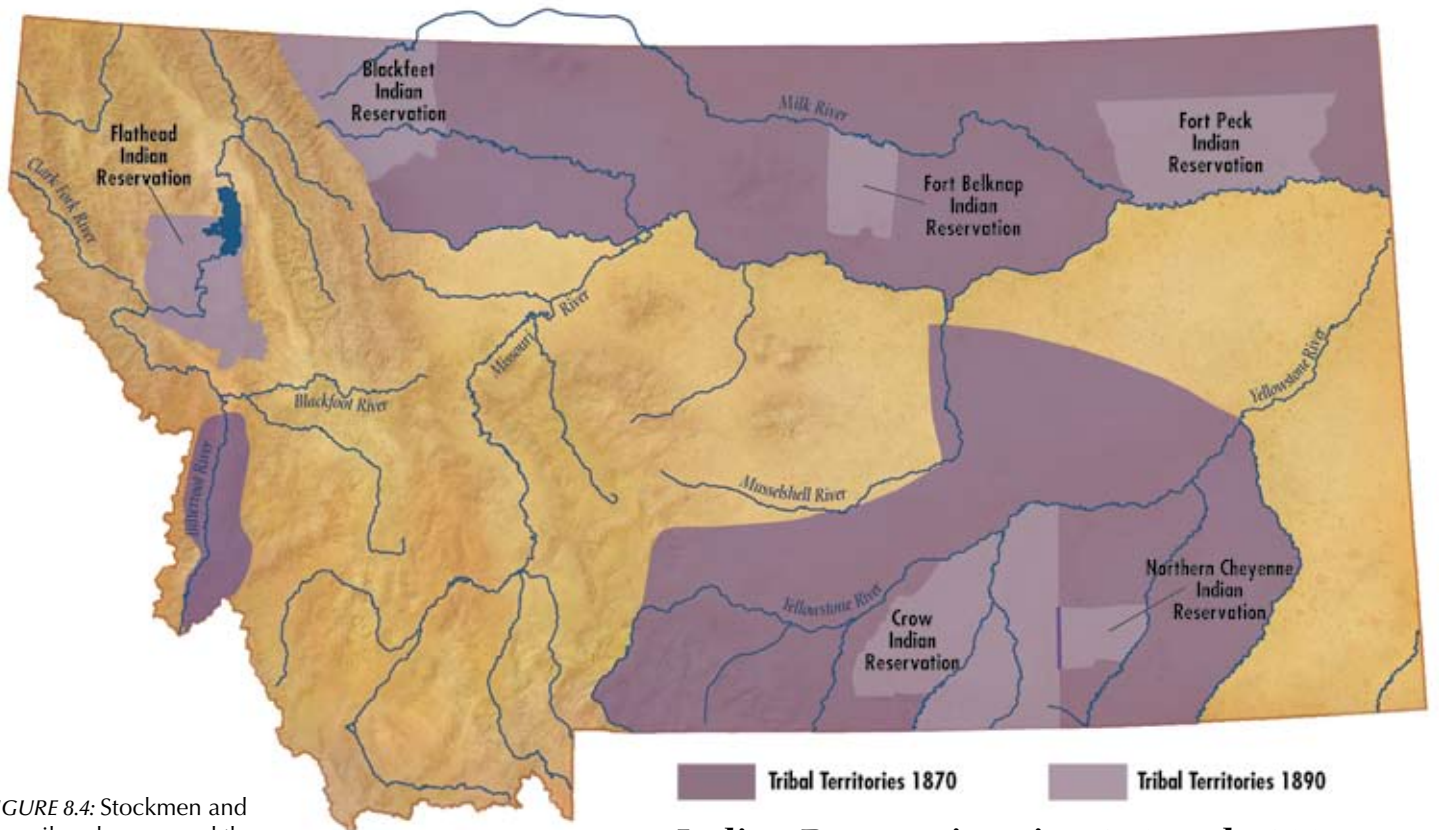
In 1874 President Ulysses S. Grant issued an **executive order** (an order issued by the president of the United States) shrinking the boundaries of the Blackfeet, Gros Ventre, Sioux, and Assiniboine reservation lands. By the early 1880s most of central Montana had become free grazing land for cattle.

In 1882 the government pressured the Crow to **cede** (give up) the western portion of their **reservation** (land the tribe reserved for its own use through treaties). As soon as the government claimed these lands, ranchers rushed to fill them up with cattle.

The Northern Cheyenne were able to protect their reservation. Their reservation agent did allow neighboring ranchers to lease grazing lands—

FIGURE 8.3: In 1866 a German immigrant named Conrad Kohrs bought Johnny Grant's ranch. Over the years Kohrs controlled more than a million acres of land in Montana and sometimes shipped 10,000 cattle to market in a year. The ranch is now a national historic site, preserving the open-range cattle era for all Americans.





Tribal Territories 1870 Tribal Territories 1890

Indian Reservations in 1870 and 1890

FIGURE 8.4: Stockmen and the railroads pressured the government to negotiate for more tribal lands for grazing cattle and sheep. Between 1870 and 1890 Montana’s Indian tribes lost millions of acres of reservation lands.

but he made it clear that the goal was for the Cheyenne ultimately to use the land themselves for their own cattle.

By the early 1880s the railroads were also building through Montana. They, too, pressured Congress to open up Indian lands. Newspapers joined in, too, with editorials reflecting how many non-Indians felt at the time. One editorial from the *Helena Herald* in the early 1880s said, “These ranges are needed for our cattle and they are of no use in the world to the Indians.”

In 1887 the government again reduced the land reserved for the Blackfeet, Gros Ventre, Sioux, and Assiniboine, creating three small reservations (the Blackfeet, Fort Belknap, and Fort Peck Reservations). Eight years later the government once more pressured the Blackfeet, this time to sell 800,000 acres of their remaining reservation—an area that today includes Glacier National Park.

The Longhorns Come North

Most Montana **outfits** (ranching operations) in the 1870s ran breeding stock of shorthorn, Hereford, and Angus cattle. But as these herds spread north and east from the gold camps onto Montana’s plains, they met a rising tide of Texas longhorns driven in from the south.

The first Texas longhorn cattle drive happened in 1866. Nelson Story, a Montana miner, used his gold profits to buy 600 longhorns in Texas. He drove them north through Colorado and Wyoming, then into Montana along the Bozeman Trail.

Not long after, the period of the great Texas cattle drives began in

earnest. Word spread throughout the West that Montana offered vast grazing lands that were free for public use. Cattle operators in Texas, where the grazing lands already were overstocked, began driving their herds north to Montana.

One young cowboy named Teddy Blue Abbott later remembered that while driving cattle north to Montana he was hardly ever out of sight of another herd. One day, he said, "I could see seven herds behind us. I knew there were eight herds ahead of us, and I could see the dust from thirteen more of them on the other side of the river." Since the typical herd included more than 2,000 head of cattle, Abbott counted more than 58,000 head on one section of trail.

Songs along the Trail

At night cowboys often sang to the cattle to calm them, trading tunes and making up their own lyrics as opportunity and imagination allowed. Some of their songs were ancient sea shanties with new words. Some were Mexican or Celtic (Irish, Scottish, or Gaelic) folk tunes. Cowboy Teddy Blue Abbott remembered: "The singing was supposed to soothe the cattle, and it did . . . The two men on guard would circle around with their horses on a walk, if it was a clear night and the cattle was bedded down and quiet. One man would sing a verse of a song, and his partner on the other side of the herd would sing another verse; and you'd go through a whole song that way."

The 1880s: Cattle Boom on the Open Range

The early 1880s were the **heyday** (peak years) of the open range—its time of greatest success and vigor. The populations boomed in the United States and Europe, creating an increasing demand for beef. The Northern Pacific Railroad, completed through Montana in 1883, gave ranchers easy access to markets across the country. And a series of mild winters led many newcomers to think Montana never had harsh weather.

Working the Range

As more outfits arrived in Montana Territory, cattlemen organized systems to manage the land. The territory was divided into grazing districts. Within each district, individual ranches claimed a customary range just by being the first to graze there. Sometimes the ranch owner would homestead near a water source—a river, creek, lake, or stream—and build a rough ranch house there. Then he would publish a notice in the nearest weekly newspaper describing the boundaries of his range and listing his brand. Operators that let their herds graze without establishing a customary range were sometimes called grass pirates.

Water was life on the dry plains, so the ranchers who controlled water sources controlled the land around them. By claiming

FIGURE 8.5: At night cowboys took turns in pairs circling the herd to keep the cattle together. The "night hawk," usually the youngest or most inexperienced cowhand, stayed up all night to guard the trail horses. He was the only cowboy on the cattle drive who got to sleep in.





FIGURE 8.6: Cowboys had to have exceptional horsemanship skills, especially when cows or steers got feisty. But the horses had to know what they were doing, too. These horses are working together while their riders team-rope a steer. Montana artist Charles M. Russell painted this image in 1926.

acres of land to survive—and some outfits ran 40,000 cattle. This was why the open range was so important.

The Roundup: Adventure on Horseback

Free-range cattle drifted for miles and got mixed up with neighboring herds. So every spring and fall, ranch hands in each grazing district joined together for a **roundup** (a cooperative effort to round up all the cattle in a region, sort them out, brand the new calves, and trail each herd to its home range).

A roundup usually lasted weeks and meant hard work for everyone. Cowhands were up at 4:00 A.M. to look for stray cattle and herd them back to the roundup area. There the cowboys sorted all the cattle into individual herds by their **brands** (marks burned into each animal's hide that identified what ranch it belonged to).

The afternoon job was to brand all the calves born since the last roundup. When all the animals were sorted and branded, the hands trailed them to their home range. After the spring roundup, the cattle were turned out again for summer pasture. After the fall roundup, the animals ready for sale were trailed to the nearest railhead for shipping to market.

Faces of the Range: Who They Were

To investors far away, the promise of free access to grass, water, and land made the ranching business look pretty good. All across the West, from Texas to Canada, investors bought up or started ranches. Some of the biggest operations in Montana were owned by companies in Missouri, Nebraska, New Hampshire, and Texas, or by investors in England, Scotland, Norway, and France. Of the many fortunes made in the heyday of the open range, most of the riches went to stockholders who had never been to Montana.

a 360-acre homestead with a water source, a rancher could control thousands of acres of grazing land.

Before barbed wire was invented in 1868, it was impossible to fence off all the grazing land a herd needed to survive. Plus, in the most **arid** (dry) areas, it took 250 acres to feed a cow for a year. A herd of 10,000 cattle needed 2.5 million

There were large Montana-owned operations, too. Granville Stuart, Reese Anderson, and Conrad Kohrs owned a ranch that became the Pioneer Cattle Company. It expanded to 12,000 head by 1883. Frenchman Pierre Wibaux attracted investors from his home country to help him build a large operation in the Beaver Valley along the Montana-Dakota border. Unlike many foreign investors, Wibaux adopted Montana as his home.

But most of the cattle ranches were small operations. Soon there were nearly 50,000 different ranchers grazing cattle on the open plains. They grazed herds large and small, ranging from 50 head to 40,000 head. Some of them failed, some became rich, and some made a life for themselves that their descendants carry on today.

Ranches on the Reservations

As American Indians were forced onto reservations, some became ranchers. Ranching helped Indian tribes expand their economic opportunities, maintain their cultures, and gain independence from government control. It provided a new way to make a living after the bison were gone. Ranching became very important to reservation economies.

In 1882 a journalist visiting the Flathead Reservation reported seeing “thousands of sleek cattle and fine horses” that the Salish, Kootenai, and Pend d’Oreille owned. By 1900 nearly one-quarter of the families on the Blackfeet Reservation owned cattle. Together they registered more than 500 brands and operated 200 mowing machines to cut hay for their stock. They raised cattle for the Chicago market and horses for Montana.

In 1903 the Northern Cheyenne purchased 40 bulls and 1,000 cows. Ten years later the tribe had built a herd of 12,000 head. Their cattle earned some of the highest prices on the Chicago market. Indians on the Fort Peck and Fort Belknap Reservations started ranching later.

Sometimes there were problems. Neighboring ranchers often let their cattle trespass on reservation lands to graze, competing with the tribal herds. In 1904 the Blackfeet tribe built a fence around their entire reservation to stop the trespassing. The Blackfeet wanted to save the grass for their own cattle. But even a fence did no good—ranchers simply cut the wire and let their cattle onto the reservation.

Nevertheless, many Indian ranchers preferred ranching over farming. They liked working outdoors, where they could apply their traditional skills of horsemanship. As one historian wrote, Indians “could be like white men and yet not be white men” through cattle ranching. “They were finding new ways to remain Indians.”

FIGURE 8.7: Cattle ranching fit well with Plains Indians’ experience with animals and the value many Indians placed on horses, movement, and freedom. This photo shows Crow Indian cowboys branding cattle in 1890.



“Old-timers have told all about stampedes and swimming rivers and what a terrible time we had, but they never put in any of the fun, and fun was at least half of it.”

—TEDDY BLUE ABBOTT

Cowboys: Young Adventurers on Horseback

The daily work of the open range was the realm of the cowboy—young, single, physically capable, and at ease on horseback. Many cowboys were American Indian, Métis, Mexican, or African American. There were also plenty of farm boys from eastern states, and even some sons of English gentlemen, who came west for adventure.

Like fur trapping and prospecting, cowboying attracted the young. Many were teenagers. Charlie Russell was 16 when he first signed on as a cowboy. James Mooney became a cowboy at 13 and was trail boss at 19. Few men over age 30 had the strength to do the work required. Cowboys rode in bitter cold and wicked heat, pushed through blizzards and dust storms, and endured snake bites, kicking horses, bugs, and driving wind.

But cowboying beat other low-wage jobs at the time. Cowboys could earn \$20 to \$40 per month plus **grub** (food), which is equal to about \$600 today. With few opportunities to spend money on the open range, some cowboys saved enough to buy their own outfits.

And many of them simply loved life in the outdoors. They liked the adventure, the freedom, the challenge of working with animals, and the beauty of the open spaces. They enjoyed the **camaraderie** (friendship with other cowboys) built by hard work outdoors.

Cowboys often eased their boredom by pulling pranks, like slipping a lizard into another's bedroll or putting a **greenhorn** (beginner) on a horse known for throwing its riders. One outfit loosened the cinch on a cowboy's saddle while he was in town, so when he mounted his

horse and spurred it forward, he and the saddle slid off backward right in front of the townsfolk. Cowboys liked to tell stories on one another, and any man who could not take the teasing was considered too thin-skinned to work with.

Women and Family Life

Like everyone else on a ranch, women worked hard. They washed clothing and household linens by hand in wash-tubs outside and hung them on clotheslines,

FIGURE 8.8: Even the best horsemen had to be prepared for a skittish horse. In his painting *Bronc to Breakfast*, master storyteller Charles M. Russell portrays one of the hazards of an unruly mount.



fences, or bushes to dry. They served as doctor and pharmacist for the cowboys or for sick neighbors. They cooked for family members and the hired help. They often kept the accounts. They grew vegetables and raised chickens, milk cows, pigs, turkeys, and geese to eat and for sale. Many women mended fences and herded cattle right alongside the men. They helped with branding and haying. "I was just like a hired man," remembered ranch wife Katie Adams.

Some ranch women found the life terribly lonely. Grace Bendon, who lived on a ranch near Glendive, remembered that non-Indian women were a real curiosity on the open range. "One winter I was the only white woman on a stream 90 miles long and I did not see a white woman for six months," she recalled.

Other women enjoyed the natural beauty and expansive horizons. British-born Evelyn Cameron, who ranched with her husband on the Yellowstone River, photographed and wrote enthusiastically about the wide-open Montana landscape. "I think the river is the next best thing to the sea," she wrote to her mother. She loved the ranch even though "everything down to the smallest tin tack" had to be hauled in from Terry, 14 miles away.

Most ranch children worked, too. They were an important part of the family business. A five-year-old might split kindling. A nine-year-old might drive a team of horses pulling a hay rake or herd livestock on horseback all day.

Sheep on the Montana Rangeland

Sheep came to Montana at about the same time cattle did. Jesuit priest Father Anthony Ravalli trailed sheep to St. Mary's Mission in the Bitterroot Valley in 1847.

The sheep industry began in earnest after 1869, when two ranchers drove 1,500 sheep from Oregon to the Beaverhead Valley near Dillon. Soon after that, the Poindexter-Orr cattle

Musical Gatherings: The Highlight of Ranch Life

"Parties were held every so often in our countryside by anyone who had a room big enough—and it didn't have to be very big . . . people would drive to them from miles and miles away, all bundled up in a wagon with babies in their arms. At most of the dances the babies were simply laid on the floor under the benches where the spectators sat. They would sprinkle corn meal on the rough floors to make them slippery, and the men tramping in and out would track in snow which would mix with the corn meal to make a kind of slush, so your skirt would be wet way above the hem, but nobody stopped dancing for that. The few women present would be danced half to death. And it lasted until morning, because you couldn't drive home anyway until it was daylight."

—NANNIE T. ALDERSON, WHO RANCHED NEAR MILES CITY IN THE 1880S

Catalogs Were Textbooks and "Books of Wonder"

"We had been getting the Montgomery Ward catalog since 1885. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the part played by this book of wonder in the children's lives. They pored over it endlessly; before they could read, the pictures were there to dazzle them . . . The catalogue is well named the "wish book" by country people . . . In time they learned to spell words out of it. They never went to school until we moved to Miles City . . . All they knew up to that time was reading, as taught by Montgomery Ward, and printing block letters, which I taught them."

—NANNIE T. ALDERSON



FIGURE 8.9: Ranch children played with the materials at hand, like a saddle thrown over a fence or a wagon harnessed to a young goat. These two, Lucille and Paul Burt, were children of a prominent sheep rancher near Terry. They owned the first bicycle in the county.

FIGURE 8.10: Shepherders tended their flocks all winter. They cooked, slept, and stayed warm in sheep wagons with multilayered canvas tops. Inside was a stove, dish cupboard, storage cupboard, bench, and bed. When it was time to move the flock to new grazing ground, the herder hitched the wagon to a team of horses and moved camp.



partnership brought in 2,467 sheep to add to their livestock.

Sheep spread eastward along with the cattle. By early 1879 there were 15,000 sheep in the Smith River region and 60,000 on the Musselshell River.

Many Montana ranchers in western and central Montana raised both sheep and cattle, and in many ways the two industries grew together. Both relied on the free grasses of the open range. During the good years, both industries made good profits. In

bad years, conflicts sometimes arose as cattle and sheep competed for rangeland. In other regions—Wyoming, for example—those conflicts erupted into violence. But in Montana, so many ranchers ran both cattle and sheep that there were far fewer conflicts between cattlemen and sheepmen.

Sheep also attracted many small investors. Sheep weathered Montana winters well, could be raised at lower cost than cattle, and yielded annual profits from the wool. Annual shearings made sheep more affordable than cattle, which had to be fattened two or three years before they could be sold.

The Shepherd: Experienced Immigrants Come to the Plains

Shepherders were a different breed from cowboys but were just as important to Montana's early livestock days. Most of them were experienced sheepmen who came from other countries: Scotland, Portugal, the Basque region between Spain and France, Mexico, and occasionally Norway, Ireland, or England.

The shepherd had to be self-reliant. He often worked alone with his dog for months on end. He had to cook, clean, mend, and provide for himself while out with the flocks. Though he traveled on horseback, he did much of his work on foot among flocks of 1,500 to 3,000 sheep. He protected his flocks from bears, coyotes, and wolves, as well as from pests, parasites, and poisonous plants. Most of a shepherd's work entailed watching—for danger, for weather, for predators, for any kind of mishap.

Shepherders did not become the

romantic legends that cowboys became. But sheepdogs—those loyal, intelligent, often heroic workers of the open range—sometimes did earn legendary status. Sheepdogs were invaluable for keeping the herds together, for warning off predators, and for keeping lambs out of trouble.

“Sometimes it seemed as if a dog could read the herder’s mind,” remembered Henry and John Murray, who grew up on a Judith Basin sheep ranch. “The dogs worked with voice commands as long as they could hear the herders and watched for arm signals which the dogs could see a mile or so away.”

“One time . . . [while I was] visiting a herder while tending camp he turned to his dogs and said in a conversational tone, ‘It is time for your bath now, boys.’ We were well out on the prairie a mile or more from any water, but the dogs took off in the direction of water. In an hour or so they returned, plainly evident that their mission had been fulfilled.”

—HENRY T. MURRAY, WHO GREW UP ON A SHEEP RANCH IN THE JUDITH BASIN

Horse Raising on the Reservation and Off

Horses have been part of life on the Northern Plains since the 1700s. Many ranches bred horses along with cattle and sheep. Montana’s horses soon gained national attention for their quality both as working mounts and as racehorses.

Many Indian ranchers preferred raising horses over cattle. Traditionally, an Indian family’s horses were a measure of its wealth. Many Indians thought there was more dignity in raising horses than cattle. As Crow Indian historian Joseph Medicine Crow wrote, “To be a Crow rancher in those days was to raise horses.”

British ranchers in Montana often raised horses, too. Some tried to make their fortunes raising ponies for **polo** (a British game played on horseback). Others raised war horses to sell to the military.

One wealthy miner named Noah Armstrong began raising and breeding thoroughbred racehorses on his farm near Twin Bridges in 1885. One of his prize horses, named Spokane, won the 1889 Kentucky Derby. In the 1890s Marcus Daly, a copper baron, built the Bitterroot Stock Farm, where he raised thoroughbreds, pacers, and high-quality cavalry horses that he sold to the government.

And, of course, ranchers raised horses to work the land—cow ponies for cowboys to ride and large, heavy draft horses to pull farm equipment. Montana ranches relied on horses until the 1920s, when automobiles and tractors began to take over.

FIGURE 8.11: Shearing time was a period of sweaty, backbreaking work for the shearers. Rancher George Burt (in the black vest) was one of the first to try mechanical shearing. Note the power shears hanging from wheels at each shearer’s stall.





FIGURE 8.12: Photographer Evelyn Cameron climbed into her neighbors' horse corral to photograph them working with new horses. The neighbors, Myrtle, May, and Mabel Buckley, were widely admired horsewomen.

FIGURE 8.13: Stockmen's associations not only helped solve common problems but also promoted their industries. This silk ribbon commemorates the Fifth Annual Meeting of the Pacific Northwest Woolgrowers' Association, held in Helena in 1902.



Problems of the Open Range

The open range was free and wide open, but it also presented some problems for ranchers. Prairie fires swept across the range. Wolves, coyotes, and other predators sometimes killed significant numbers of animals. Winter blizzards, spring floods, lightning, insects, and hail could be devastating. And none of the ranchers could entirely control land they did not own.

Sometimes unbranded calves became **mavericks** (unidentified calves that wandered off from their mothers). Ranchers generally agreed that a maverick became the property of the ranch onto which it strayed. This agreement caused problems when some ranchers began “maverick-ing”—indiscriminately branding any stray calf they saw.

Cattle **rustling** (rounding up horses or cattle for thievery) was far too easy on the open range. Rustlers rounded up branded cattle, altered the brands, and quickly led them across the border into Dakota Territory or Canada for sale. Law enforcement was difficult over such vast, open distances. Some cattlemen illegally took the law into their own hands. Most notorious was a group of ranchers called “Stuart’s Stranglers” (because they were organized by Granville Stuart). The Stranglers killed at least 15 suspected cattle rustlers in Montana in 1884, then proceeded across the border into Dakota and killed even more.

But the worst problem was overgrazing. Each rancher wanted to expand his or her own herd. There was no authority to determine when there were more cows and sheep feeding in a region than the grassland could sustain.

Ranchers Organize to Solve Problems

It did not take long for ranchers to realize that there were some problems they could not deal with on their own. To handle common difficulties, stockmen and sheep ranchers organized into associations. Cattle ranchers formed the Montana Stockgrowers Association, and the sheepmen organized to form the Montana Wool Growers Association. Together these groups wielded enough economic and political power to get attention from the territorial **legislature** (the branch of government that passes laws).

These associations worked with the legislature to pass laws regulating grazing on public land. They hired detectives to check brands on cattle and pressured the state to register brands. They persuaded the legislature to hire a veterinarian to help solve disease problems and to

create a Board of Stock Commissioners to enforce branding and other laws of the open range.

The Hard Winter of 1886–87

Even the ranching organizations could not prevent overgrazing. And because the open range was a common resource, no individual company was motivated to conserve or protect the water, grasses, or soils.

Spring of 1885 found 500,000 head of cattle on the Montana range. The grasses became seriously depleted. That autumn was unusually dry. Water holes shrank and disappeared. Range fires burned up large sections of cured grass. The open range was headed for disaster.

In the spring of 1886, 100,000 more cattle and large herds of sheep arrived on the Montana plains. After a hot, dry summer, winter came early, with heavy snows and fierce winds that made the snow as hard as cement. Little had been done to put up hay for winter feeding.

A thaw came in December. When it froze again, ice caked the exposed clumps of grasses. The weakened cattle could not paw through the ice to get at the grass. In February a deep freeze returned. Some ranchers reported temperatures of 63°F below zero. Despite some heroic efforts by cowhands across the region, tens of thousands of cattle froze or starved to death.

“Starving cattle staggered through village streets, collapsed and died in dooryards,” wrote historian Joseph Kinsey Howard about the winter of 1886–87. “Five thousand head invaded the outskirts of the newborn city of Great Falls, bawling for food. They snatched up the **saplings** [young trees] the proud city had just planted, gorged themselves upon garbage.”

Some experts estimated that Montana lost 362,000 head of cattle that winter—60 percent of the Montana herds. Losses were greatest in the eastern part of the state, where some cattle companies lost 90 percent of their herds. Smaller, more experienced ranchers in central Montana lost

FIGURE 8.14: Cattle died by the thousands during the winter of 1886–87. Toward the end of that winter, Charles M. Russell painted this watercolor, *Waiting for a Chinook*. (A **chinook** is a warm winter wind.) The powerful image was published widely, launching Russell’s career as an artist.



far fewer—about 40 percent of their cattle. There were also dishonest ranch managers who reported huge losses to their owners to cover up for their own mismanagement of records. So it was impossible to count how many animals actually died that winter.

The winter of 1886–87 was a turning point for Montana’s cattle industry. Never again would ranchers operate so recklessly on the Northern Plains.

Recovery Came Quickly—with Tough Lessons Learned

The disastrous winter of 1886–87 changed the cattle industry on the Northern Plains. Losses from that terrible winter drove hundreds of outfits out of business. Many of them were big ranches that focused on short-term profits.

The outfits that survived ran things differently from then on. They began putting up hay and planting barley for feed to see the animals through the winter. They reduced the size of their herds and worked instead to improve the quality of their stock through careful breeding.

Ranchers realized they had to start caring for water, soil, and grasses to remain prosperous. Many ranchers fenced grazing ranges to keep their cattle from wandering. Fences also helped prevent overgrazing by keeping other people’s cattle out.

Some ranchers even profited from the Hard Winter. When bankrupt operations sold off their remaining cattle, the more carefully managed ranches bought up their livestock at low prices. With less beef on the market, their profits increased. With fewer cattle on the range, Montana’s grasses recovered quickly.

Technology helped, too. Improved **syringes** (injection needles) helped stockmen inoculate cattle against diseases. Windmills to pump water, barbed wire for fencing, and new equipment like fence-post hole diggers, mowing machines, and hay rakes made ranch management easier. Some large operators, like the Frenchman Pierre Wibaux, found new investors and continued to grow. But after 1887 Montana’s cattle ranches were mostly in the hands of smaller, locally owned outfits.

Sheep had weathered the Hard Winter much better than cattle had, so sheep ranching increased dramatically. Besides, ranchers learned that it paid to run two kinds of livestock. If cattle prices were depressed, they could still make money from wool and **mutton** (sheep meat). Montanans expanded their sheep herds, and new investors appeared on the scene. By 1900 Montana was the nation’s top sheep-growing state, with 6 million sheep. And by 1904 it became the nation’s largest wool producer, shipping out 37,773,000 pounds of wool.

The open-range system that began with such optimism in the 1870s lasted barely until 1900. A stockman either sold out or adapted to his new circumstances, becoming a combination of farmer/rancher. He (and sometimes she) continued to graze cattle and sheep in fenced

pasturage but also planted and harvested hay, barley, wheat, and other crops. Some ranches in northeast Montana continued the open-range system. But increasingly, roads, railroads, miles and miles of barbed wire fences, and homesteads hemmed in the wide-open grasslands.

The Legacy of the Open Range

As short-lived as the open-range era was, it left a lasting legacy. Hollywood made hundreds of movies about the cowboy—the expert, capable loner on horseback with his cowboy boots, his hat tipped low over his brow, and his reputation for honesty and straightforwardness. He is celebrated in country-and-western music, in cowboy poetry, and in clothing stores all across the country. Politicians wear cowboy boots to indicate that they are “down home” Montanans. Country singers wear Stetson hats to identify themselves with a certain audience of people.

One of the most sensational legacies of the open range is the rodeo. The word *rodeo* is Spanish, meaning “gather together.” Rodeos originated in Mexico with the **vaqueros** (Spanish for “cowboys”) and moved north with the cowboy culture.

The first rodeos were simple competitions at roundup time. Cowboys competed against one another to showcase their everyday skills on horseback—bucking horse contests, roping and cutting competitions, and horse races. Spectators bet on the winners, and cowboys often went home from roundup with their winnings in their pockets. When the years of open-range cowboying ended, cowboys began joining

FIGURE 8.15: Cattle will drift for miles looking for shelter in a blizzard. Cowboys sometimes risked their lives trying to keep their animals from freezing to death. American painter Robert Lindneaux (1871–1970) painted this image, titled *Drifting in a Blizzard, Montana*, in 1926.



professional rodeos. These rodeos appealed to Americans fascinated by cowboys and the Wild West.

Dude ranches also profited from Americans' fascination with the open range. Across Montana, ranches opened their doors to vacationers who wanted to experience the West. These vacationers were known as **dudes**, so the ranches that hosted them became known as dude ranches.

Montana's first dude ranch probably opened in the 1890s. The industry grew, especially when low prices for beef made it hard to make a living raising cattle. By the 1930s there were over 150 dude ranches in Montana. Today dude ranching is an important part of Montana's tourism industry.

The Open Range Shaped Our Montana

If you live in ranching country, you have a lot in common with people living during the era of the open range. Ranchers today drive pickup trucks, work computers, and implant computer chips in their cattle for identification. Yet they face many of the same challenges as their ancestors did: isolation, unpredictable weather, unending hard work, changing market prices, even cattle rustling. Like their **forebearers** (ancestors), their lives are shaped by land, weather, and outside market conditions. And they are continually learning to be better **stewards** (caretakers) of the land, plants, and animals.

Craig and Tonya Martin raise cattle, sheep, and four children on a Wheatland County ranch that has been in Craig's family since 1889. They say they like living "25 miles from a grocery store, and 100 miles from people."

Even working constantly, their biggest challenge is figuring out how to make a living. "You have to be **ingenious** [imaginative] and **industrious** [hard-working], or your place is on the farm auction sale," Craig says. They started an excavation business to earn more income.

High costs of land and fuel, the need for a lot of land, and low market prices keep most of today's ranches from expanding. "The older ranchers say there's no way they could get where they are today if they had to buy their land now," Craig said. "The returns on our work are so low, probably most of us could make more money if we sold our places and put the money in a savings account.

"You do it for the love of it."

This love—of the land and the work—is one of the most important legacies of Montana's ranching heritage.

FIGURE 8.16: Fanny Sperry Steele was one of Montana's most famous women rodeo stars. She grew up on a ranch near Helena, where her mother taught her to ride as a toddler by plunking her on a horse and telling her, "DON'T fall off." She twice won the title "Ladies Bucking Horse Champion of the World." Here she rides a bronc named Dismal Dick at the Windham Roundup in 1920.



Expressions of the People

The Art of Charles M. Russell

In 1880 Charles Marion Russell came to the Montana range. The son of a wealthy St. Louis businessman, he was 16 and eager for adventure. Two years later he signed on as a horse wrangler on a cattle drive.

He was not a particularly good roper or rider, but the other cowboys liked him because he could draw and tell good stories. He was such a good storyteller that when he started talking all the other cowboys gathered around. A fellow cowboy named I. D. O'Donnell said, "In the evenings in the bunk house the crowd usually got to spinning yarns and telling stories or singing songs. Charlie would be **mum** [silent] until everyone was finished and then he would tell his story that out classed them all, and then he was mum."

During the Hard Winter of 1886–87, Russell was working at the O-H Ranch. When a cattlemen wrote the O-H asking about the condition of its herds that winter, Russell answered with a picture of a starved and near-frozen steer, circled by wolves. His watercolor, *Waiting for a Chinook*, started Russell on his career in art.

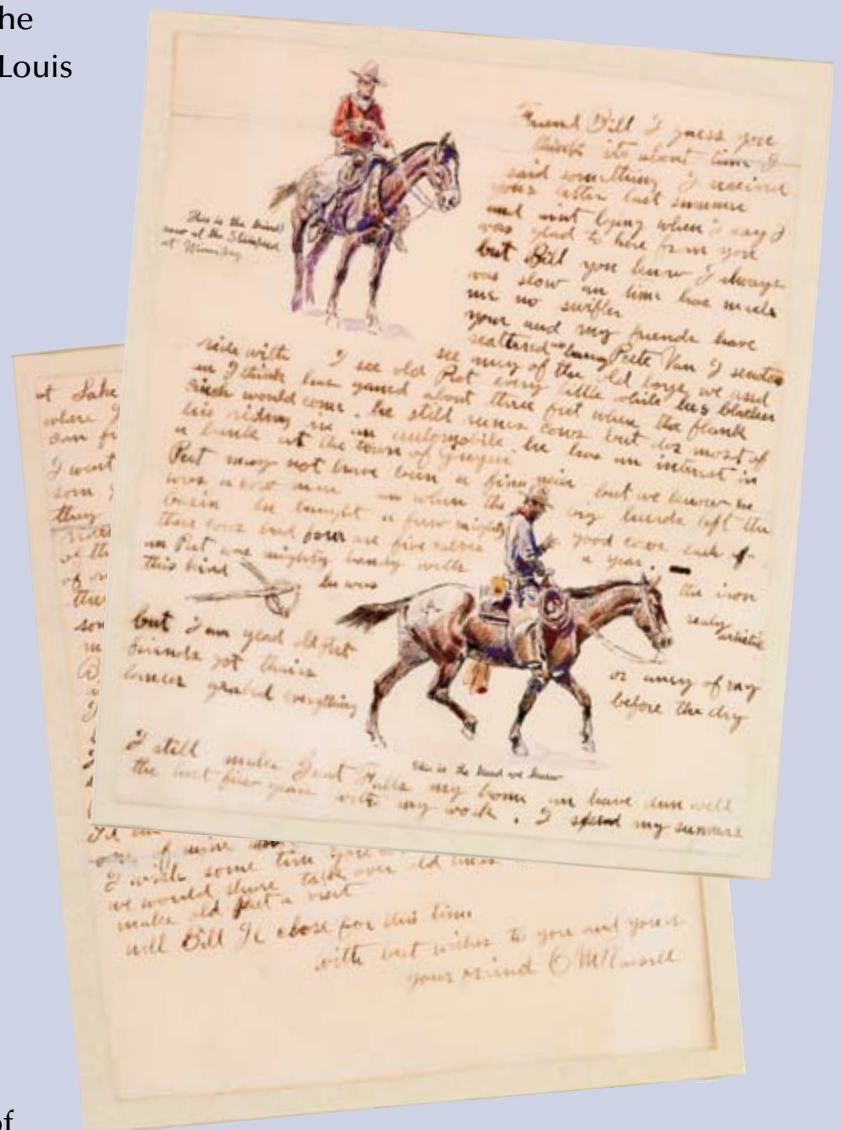


FIGURE 8.17: Charles M. Russell wrote and illustrated this letter to a friend in about 1914.

Russell later moved to Great Falls and set up a studio. He gained an international reputation as a cowboy artist, preserving in his paintings, sculptures, and stories the spirit, activities, and details of a way of life in the West that already was quickly disappearing. A few of his paintings illustrate this chapter.

Russell once said, "Any man that can make a living doing what he likes is lucky, and I'm that." He created more than 4,000 works of art in his lifetime. When he died in Great Falls in 1926, all of Montana mourned his passing.



FIGURE 8.18: Many western artists could only imagine life in the Old West, but Charlie Russell often painted from his own experiences. He also created paintings of stories he heard from his Indian friends. This photo shows Russell working on his painting *The Lewis and Clark Expedition*, now in the collection of the Gilcrease Museum of Art in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

CHAPTER 8 REVIEW

► CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Define: (a) forage; (b) cede; (c) greenhorn; (d) mavericks; (e) outfit; (f) vaquero
2. Identify: (a) Conrad Kohrs; (b) Granville Stuart; (c) Evelyn Cameron; (d) Charles M. Russell
3. Why did ranchers value Montana grasslands?
4. How did the open-range policy affect Indians?
5. What were the main reasons for the increase in the cattle industry?
6. What are some of the differences between cattle and sheep ranching?
7. What other animal industry developed with the growth of the cattle and sheep industries?
8. What were some of the problems ranchers faced with the open range?
9. What was the primary change in the cattle industry as a result of the Hard Winter of 1886–87?
10. What are some of the legacies of the open range?

► CRITICAL THINKING

1. Analyze the advantages and disadvantages of the open range for ranchers, the environment, and Indian tribes.
2. Would you have wanted to live on a Montana ranch during the 1880s? Why or why not?
3. An 1880s *Helena Herald* editorial said, “These ranges are needed for our cattle and they are of no use in the world to the Indians.” How would you respond to this if you were an Indian leader at the time?
4. Compare the lives of cowboys to the lives of sheepherders. Why might someone choose one life over the other? Why do you think sheepherding has never captured the imagination of people the way cowboying has?
5. Look back at the Charles M. Russell paintings that illustrate this chapter. Do you think they offer a realistic picture of life on the open range? Why or why not?

► PAST TO PRESENT

1. Compare cattle ranching today with cattle ranching 100 years ago. What has remained the same and what has changed? For example, think about feeding, vaccinations, processing, and marketing as well as procedures for roundups, calving, and branding.

► MAKE IT LOCAL

1. Look for things in your town that reflect Montana’s ranching heritage, such as advertisements, business names, school mascots, street names, and so forth. List as many as you can.
2. Visit a local rancher and learn about ranching in your area today

► EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Write a poem about the cowboy life using cowboy slang.
2. Working in groups, create a cattle ranch. Choose a name, a brand, the area in which you are located, the number of acres and cattle you have, and so forth. Write a paragraph explaining some of the situations you face.
3. Research and write a report or create a presentation on the Montana Stockgrowers Association or the Montana Wool Growers Association.
4. Research the lives of Montana ranch women involved in the early ranching days. Write a report, give an oral presentation, or make a poster about your findings.
5. Investigate the controversies surrounding modern rodeos. For a class debate, research what animal rights groups say about cruelty to animals in the rodeo circuit and how rodeo associations respond to these criticisms.

Credits

The following abbreviations are used in the credits:

BBHC Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming
GNPA Glacier National Park Archives
LOC Library of Congress
MAC Montana Arts Council, Helena
MDEQ Montana Department of Environmental Quality, Helena
MDT Montana Department of Transportation, Helena
MFWP Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Helena
MHS Montana Historical Society, Helena
MHSA Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena
MHSL Montana Historical Society Library, Helena
MHS Mus. Montana Historical Society Museum, Helena
MHS PA Montana Historical Society Photograph Archives, Helena
MSU COT Montana State University College of Technology, Billings
NMAI National Museum American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
MSU Billings Special Collections, Montana State University Billings Library
NARA National Archives and Records Administration
NPS National Park Service
NRIS Natural Resource Information System, Montana State Library, Helena
SHPO State Historic Preservation Office, Montana Historical Society, Helena
TM Travel Montana, Helena
UM Missoula Archives & Special Collections, The University of Montana-Missoula
USDA United States Department of Agriculture
USFS United States Forest Service
WMM World Museum of Mining, Butte

Chapter 8

- FIG. 8.1** *Laugh Kills Lonesome*, 1925, C. M. Russell, MHS Mus.
- FIG. 8.2** *Cheyenne Cowboys*, William Gollings, MHS Mus.
- FIG. 8.3** Grant-Kohrs Ranch, National Park Service, Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site, Deer Lodge, MT
- FIG. 8.4** Indian Reservations in 1870 and 1890, map by MHS
- FIG. 8.5** The nighthawk in his nest, photo by L. A. Huffman, MHS PA 981-568
- FIG. 8.6** *When Cows Were Wild*, C. M. Russell, MHS Mus.
- FIG. 8.7** Detail of photo of Crow Indian cowboys branding cattle, ca. 1890, MHS PA 955-786
- FIG. 8.8** *Bronc to Breakfast*, C. M. Russell, MHS Mus.
- FIG. 8.9** Lucille and Paul Burt with goat cart and bike, 1904, photo by Evelyn Cameron, MHS PA PAC 90-87. 34-6
- FIG. 8.10** Detail of photo of sheep wagon and winter camp, 1907, photo by L. A. Huffman, MHS PA 981-675
- FIG. 8.11** Burt & Fluss shearing plant near Terry, MT, 1904, photo by Evelyn Cameron, MHS PA PAC 90-87
- FIG. 8.12** The Buckley sisters roping, ca. 1909, photo by Evelyn Cameron, MHS PA PAC 90-87. 34-9
- FIG. 8.13** *Ribbon*, 1902, MHS Mus. X2008.01.32

FIG. 8.14 *Waiting for a Chinook*, C. M. Russell, 1886, used with permission from the Montana Stockgrowers Association, Helena, MT

FIG. 8.15 *Drifting in a Blizzard, Montana*, Robert Lindneaux, MHS Mus.

FIG. 8.16 Fanny Sperry Steele on Dismal Dick at Windham Roundup, 1920, MHS PA 952-169

FIG. 8.17 Illustrated letter, 1914, to Bill McDonough from C. M. Russell, MHS Mus. 80.46.05

FIG. 8.18 Charles M. Russell in studio painting *The Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 1918, MHS PA 944-706