

Background to Cattle in British Columbia

By GRANT MacEWAN



WESTWARD from Red River, the first agriculture of any account was at the Pacific coast. Separating the two infant communities, one at the centre of a continent and the other at the edge, were 1,500 miles of prairies and mountains, little known to any except Indians. Of communication between the two points, there was none; to the people living at Fort Garry on the Red River, England was more accessible than Victoria and other places on the west coast.

The first whites to see our Pacific coast were Spaniards sailing under an adventurer with the "chain reaction" name of Don Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Quadra. Exploration in unknown seas was an appropriate occupation for anyone determined to retain so much name; had he been required to live with modern institutions like calling cards, bank cheques, hotel registers and short income tax forms, the necessity of pruning would be obvious.

Captain James Cook was the first Englishman on that coast about which the British Columbians now brag. He camped on the west side of the big island and called the place Nootka. That was 1778. But neither the Spaniards nor the Englishmen were thinking about ranching or farming; their thoughts were directed by the lure of furs, the fear of Indians and the threat of scurvy. Captain Cook considered himself to be an authority on the subject of scurvy. His remedy was spruce beer made by brewing spruce bows. It wasn't as tasty as sugared grapefruit but it worked well for the Indians and it proved effective for Cook.

There was a small settlement of whites at Nootka from 1778. It would be the first on the Canadian part of the Pacific coast. Information about cultivation is lacking except that three Indians stole potatoes from a garden at the settlement and were reminded of their sins by punishment from a whiplash; they contributed more to history than they knew. Isolated as Nootka was, it was only sensible to grow something in the way of vegetable foods with which to augment diets made up of wild meat and fish.

Nootka was an international storm centre for a few years. By right of discovery, Spain had a good claim to the coast but men of the bulldog breed refused to relax their grip. England and Spain almost went to war as a result of events but the war clouds began to disperse with the Nootka Convention of 1790. The English settled for the coast

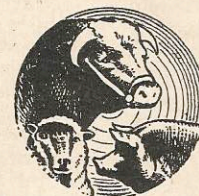
northward to Russian territory, now Alaska.

Captain George Vancouver was preparing for further exploration on the coast and in 1792 he circumnavigated the island which now bears his name. A few more years passed and Alexander MacKenzie looked out upon the Pacific Ocean, the first white man to cross the continent at any point north of Mexico. From that time forward the fur trade grew rapidly and both the Hudson's Bay Company and the North-West Company were engaged in it. For Vancouver on the Columbia River (an area in the state of Washington) was the centre of trade until about 1843 when Victoria on Vancouver Island became the hub.

In the same year that Miles Macdonall led the advance guard to found the settlement of Selkirk people at the confluence of Assiniboine and Red Rivers, Daniel Harmon who was trading at Fort James on Stuart Lake in between the mountains, made a note in his records about the planting of potatoes and barley. He didn't explain how he intended to use the barley but we may assume that it wasn't for fattening steers. Vegetables were grown successfully from 1815 and five quarts of barley planted at Fraser Lake in 1818, yielded five bushels, so the records show.

Following Harmon's example, cultivation was attempted at Fort Fraser and Fort George. And to support Governor Simpson's scheme for provisioning of the western posts, a farm organized along ambitious lines was started at Fort Vancouver about 1825. Supplies of potatoes, horse meat and fish would conserve valuable shipping space on the vessels making the long, 17,000-mile voyage from England around Cape Horn and on to the Columbia River or to Victoria. Other posts in the Oregon District undertook some small scale cultivation.

The Puget Sound Agricultural Company was a sort of subsidiary of the Hudson's Bay Company and was formed in 1837. It was the first attempt at farming on a large scale and a big farm was undertaken in the Oregon area.

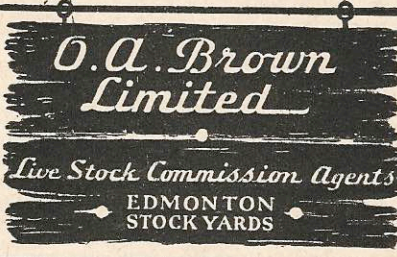


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Cattle and sheep were brought from California and pigs from the Sandwich Islands but still there was no thought of ranching according to modern ideas. By 1841 there were 100 milk cows in addition to cattle of other classifications at and around Fort Vancouver. When Sir George Simpson visited the West that year, he was favorably impressed by farm development and reported a harvest of more than 8,000 bushels of wheat and 4,000 bushels of oats on one of the farms started by the Hudson's Bay Company and turned over to the Puget Sound Company. Nobody seemed very sure that either of these companies wanted more than a few farm settlers, but there were about 120 farms in the Willamette settlement at that time, quite a few settlers having come to occupy land in 1839.

But the Oregon Treaty of 1846 which fixed the boundary between British and United States territory changed many things. The Oregon Territory which had been a sort of "No Man's Land", was now in the United States. The Imperial Government was more anxious than ever

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to colonize the coastal areas to the north of the boundary. The Puget Sound Agricultural Company branch farms on the south end of Vancouver Island became the centre of new interest and new hope. These would now constitute the main source of agricultural supplies along the coast. Fortunately, they had some cattle, sheep and horses and numbers were augmented by animals brought from the Nisqually and Cowlitz farms in the Columbian Territory.

On the mainland north of the new international boundary, Fort Langley was taking the lead in food production. Main items were cereal grains and butter, with any surplus of the latter being sold to the Russians in Alaska. Elsewhere along the Fraser River, agriculture seemed so far in the future that nobody considered it.

In 1849, the Imperial Government turned Vancouver Island over to the Hudson's Bay Company, it being understood that a vigorous policy of settlement would be followed. But expansion in the agricultural community was slow. By 1856 there were only 300 bona fide homesteads on Vancouver Island and none on the mainland. Agriculture in that part of British North America was suffering from the same malady that affected its opposite number at Red River, namely lack of markets for anything beyond the limited requirements of the fur trade.

It was gold up the Fraser and in the Cariboo that provided the needed stimulus. The rush to the Fraser began in 1858 and as many as 25,000 people flocked to the Interior in a single season. Most of the miners went via Victoria and every one of them had to eat. As is often the case in the course of a gold rush, however, those who remained behind and grew the food fared better than those who hunted for the metal. Victoria boomed; food prices soared; flour jumped to \$30 a barrel.

Apart from operations at Fort Langley, farming on the mainland may be considered as having its beginning in that first year of the gold rush. Reported to be the first individual to make application for a farm away from the coast was W. K. Squires who secured a grant of 100 acres on the island in the Fraser, opposite Hope, in 1858. New Westminster became a thriving settlement and the good Fraser land about that pioneer metropolis came into the limelight.

Agriculture was still far from being a dominant industry. As it had been overshadowed by the fur trade, it was now dominated by gold. Panning gold was more exciting than farming but the large, floating population which was attracted by the mines and the gravel bars gave farming its best support.

At first, supplies for the mining centers were freighted through Yale by mule-trains of 20 to 50 animals. The trails were rough and treacherous and the journey occupied about a month. But the reward was attractive because flour which sold at \$15 per hundred-weight at Victoria or New Westminster was priced at \$100 to \$200 at Barkerville.

British Columbia at no time boasted big wheat fields but in those pre-rail years, enough wheat was grown to meet local needs and grist mills were in operation at various points between and beyond the mountains. Absence of buffalo meat and the pemmican tradition of



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the prairies made flour more of an essential. The earliest mills were on Vancouver Island but with the gold rush there were flour problems as well as meat problems up the Fraser in 1862.

According to F. W. Laing (British Columbia Historical Quarterly, Vol. V., No. 3) the first flour mill in the Interior, known as the Pioneer Mill, was constructed at Dog Creek. The French burr millstones were secured in California and freighted from New Westminster in the spring of 1862. At that same time, the mill owners Brown and Versepuche, brought seed wheat to that inter-mountain district and its planting was said to be a success.

A mill was erected by the Cornwall brothers at Ashcroft Manor. That was in 1864 and the weighty stones were from the Hudson's Bay Company's Millstream Mill on Vancouver Island. The Cornwall mill was driven by a water-wheel and had a capacity of 200 pounds per hour. The next mill was in the

Lillooet district where some 10,000 bushels of wheat were grown in 1865 and it was flour from this mill that, reaching Barkerville in 1866, had the effect of bringing the price down to about 25 cents per pound. A mill at Soda Creek, about which Clement Cornwall told in his diary, was in operation in 1867 and in the next year, Jerome Harper of ranching fame was associated with J. H. Scott in the construction of the Clinton mill.

The Cariboo Trail was the lifeline over which all traffic moved, cattle and all. That famous trail witnessed many kinds of animal life in those early years. Probably the most unusual livestock of all made their appearance in 1862; they were camels, legs, humps and aroma and they were used on the Harrison-Lillooet part of the trail. It was Frank Lau-meister, merchant and freighter, who had the idea and imported 21 head. They

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CATTLE IN B.C.

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handled big loads and subsisted on meagre diets but the variations in the roads, sometimes dry and rocky, sometimes wet and soft, made their feet sore. But worse than sore feet was the effect that camels had upon the horses and mules on the trail. The last thing that a horse or mule expected and wanted to see or smell on the trail was a grizzly bear or camel. Several accidents followed by litigation resulted in the removal of the camels.

When on one occasion, a mule team took fright and a load of whiskey was lost, public resentment against those "ships of the desert" mounted. The fate of the camel was now sealed. After being used for just over a year, they were taken off the road. Some of them were sent to the coast and others released in the Thompson River country where, according to Angus C. Laut (Cariboo Trail, 1916), a few head survived the rigors of the foreign environment until 1905.

And while millwheels, flour and a thousand other articles of freight were being hauled up the Cariboo Trail, cattle were being conducted over the same route but under their own power. Their purpose was not breeding; their purpose was meat and meat only. It was merely that there was a surplus or residue from the slaughter herds turned out to shift for themselves, that the first range herds occurred. It became increasingly evident, therefore, that the first farming and ranching in the British Columbia Interior were byproducts of fur trade and gold rush.

The Okanagan Mission turned a few cattle out to graze in the Okanagan Valley in 1859, but it was in the early '60s when cattle were being driven to the mines for slaughter that the possibility of ranching on the inter-mountain grass was even considered. Then the Harpers and others who drove herds from Oregon to the mines took to branding cattle and running them in the districts of Kamloops, Lillooet and Cariboo. The way the cattle multiplied was proof of the country's suitability and before many years, cattle were so numerous in relation to small local markets that their value was little more than nothing at all.

Plotting the course of an inter-mountain cattle economy were men like the Harpers, Joe Greaves, Clement Cornwall, Gypsy Johnny Wilson, Thomas Ellis and others. Regardless of who may have preceded them in driving cattle into the inter-mountain country, the Harper Brothers, Jerome and Thaddeus, must be regarded as the real founders of cattle ranching in that part. The Harpers had travelled from their home in Virginia to Oregon where they sensed opportunity in the trailing of cattle to the Canadian mines. They brought their first herd in 1861 to 1862, bringing it by Okanagan and Kamloops and on the Barkerville. When the demand at the mines failed, Harper cattle were released and the Harpers may have been the first to see sufficient future in ranching to warrant the trouble of branding.

Joe Greaves who, with his associates, was a founder of the Douglas Lake Cattle Company, was another who first saw Canadian territory when driving a herd to the mines. When he made his third drive in 1863, he found the market to have failed and turned some of the cattle loose on the Thompson River and



Trained Coyotes

By Mrs. HAROLD ALMBERG, Czar, Alta.

If you can believe what you see the snapshot shows how tame and loving coyotes have become in the Sather district south of Czar.

In the winter Julian and Morris Sather, accompanied by various enthusiastic friends, hunted coyotes the modern way in complete comfort. From their kitchen window overlooking the frozen expanse of Houcher Lake, the Sathers used binoculars to spot coyotes going to the bait, a dead horse. Then the Sathers (known popularly as Josh and Duke) with whoever of their friends were fortunate

enough to be on hand would jump into the car and take off. The lake was so smooth it became part of the main road to town. The coyotes' speed was no match for a new car and before long it was "Bang, you're dead!"

Spotlights at night added further thrills and extended the hours of hunting. Often the hunting parties lasted most of the night with frequent detours back home for coffee and some of Mrs. Sather's widely known good cakes and pies. Before the snow became too deep, 25 coyotes were killed. An ironic twist is that when sold the pelts were worth only \$28. The coyotes in the snap are frozen stiff.

had the good sense to return a year or two later to brand the increase.

Cornwall was among those who set out to search for gold "up country" in 1862 but became so impressed by opportunities round about the present Ashcroft that he halted and plowed a furrow around the property that was to become Ashcroft ranch. He was the first settler in that part and before he was there many weeks, he and his brother had a garden started and succeeded in diverting water from a nearby stream to irrigate it. The Cornwalls were determined men and colorful; they bought cattle for breeding; they started a roadhouse to accommodate the miners who were coming and going; they introduced new varieties of grains and fruits and garden crops and all the while, they found time to play cricket, train race horses and ride to hounds.

Gypsy Johnny Wilson was one of the few of his race to graduate from the gypsy caravans to big scale ranching. From England where his people sharpened scissors, told fortunes and traded horses, he migrated to the United States and in 1859 he was trekking to the Fraser River to dig for gold. At Barkerville, in 1862, he evidently did well

enough but turned shortly to cattle and did even better, ultimately becoming one of the British Columbia Cattle Kings.

Thomas Ellis was pioneering in another district, the fame of which was to come shortly, the Okanagan Valley. Thither he went in 1866 to trade with the Indians but he settled at the south end of Okanagan Lake, 50 miles north of the International boundary. It was there, ten years later, that Ellis planted apple trees; it seemed a ridiculous thing to do, at least people said it was, but strange to tell, the apples grew and thrived and Ellis' orchard was the first in that valley which now produces over half of the commercial apples of Canada. But he was interested in cattle also and gradually his herds increased until he too counted his cattle in thousands.

There was Joseph Guichon, also among the gold seekers on Williams Creek in 1864 and whose name has been prominent in British Columbia ranchland through the years, and many others who might be mentioned. Many of them came for gold but they remained to produce cattle and saw the interior acclaimed one of the good cattle ranges on the continent.



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