

CHAPTER NINE CATTLE RANCHING

People are still fascinated by the story of the cowboy - riding the range, roping, and branding cattle. We watch rodeos today, where modern-day cowboys show off their skills. Although the era of the big cattle ranches did not last a long time, it was a very important part of Montana history.

Vocabulary

stock

open range

missionaries

horn

stirrup

dally

roundup

saddle

wide-brimmed

chaps

bandana

brand

Locate the following on the map before reading the section:

St. Mary's Mission

Ft. Hall

Bozeman

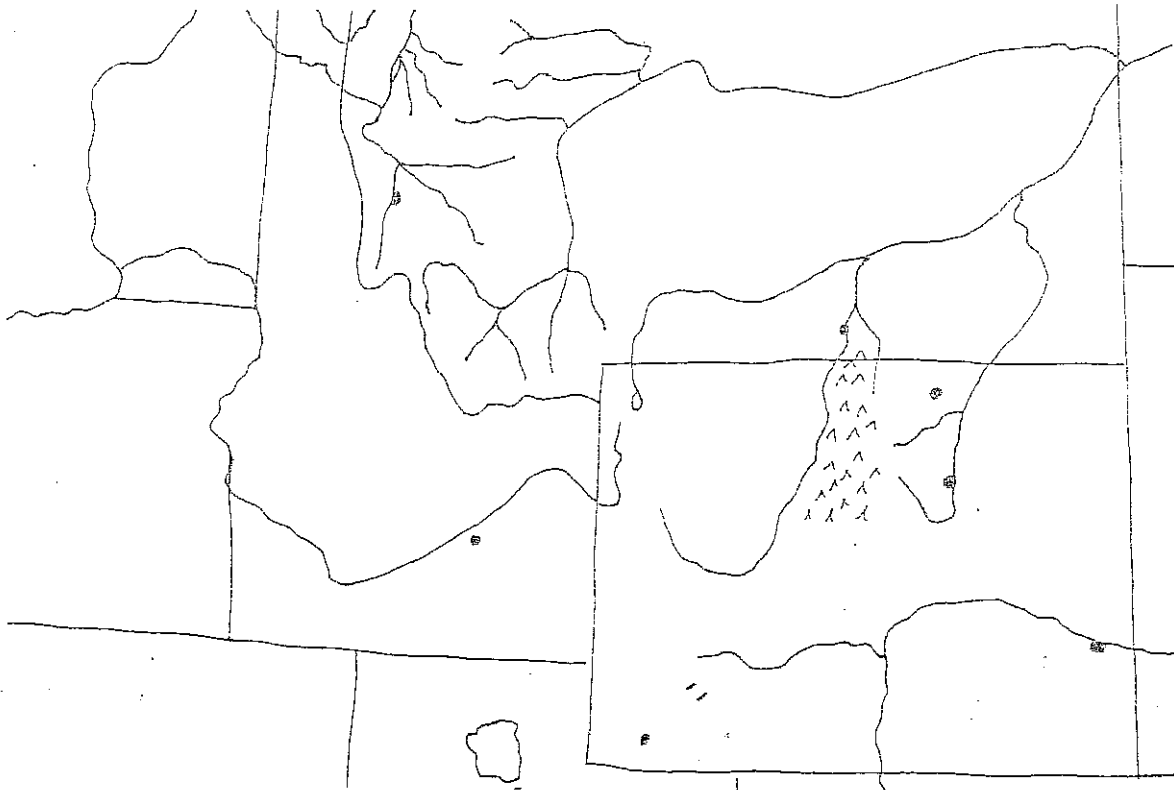
Bitterroot Valley

Beaverhead Valley

Corinne-Virginia City Road

Oregon Trail

Bozeman Road



Cattle Ranching Grows as a Business

The first stock raising operations in Montana started in the western valleys. The missionaries at the St. Mary's Mission in the Bitterroot Valley had cattle and sheep before 1850. By the early 1850's several ranches in the western valleys had good-sized herds of cattle and sheep.

Cattle ranching grew as a business in Montana in the late 1850's as people started moving along the Oregon Trail to settle in the Pacific Northwest. Some men discovered that in the fall they could buy tired, weak oxen from travelers at Fort Hall, an important stopping point on the Oregon Trail. They would drive them to Montana and turn them loose during the winter in the valleys. The natural grasses were excellent feed, and the oxen would regain their strength. The ranchers would then drive them back to Ft. Hall in the spring and sell them back to pioneers to continue on their journey.

The gold strikes of Bannack, Virginia City, and Helena made ranching an even bigger business in Montana. Hundreds of miners were pouring into the territory. They did not have time to hunt wild game for food, and were glad to spend some of their gold dust for beef.

Great Cattle Drives

Soon cattlemen were moving herds of cattle into Montana to sell to the miners. The first great cattle drive into Montana was made in 1866. A man named Nelson Story purchased a herd of seven hundred cattle in Texas and drove them north across Colorado and Wyoming and over the Bozeman Road into Montana.

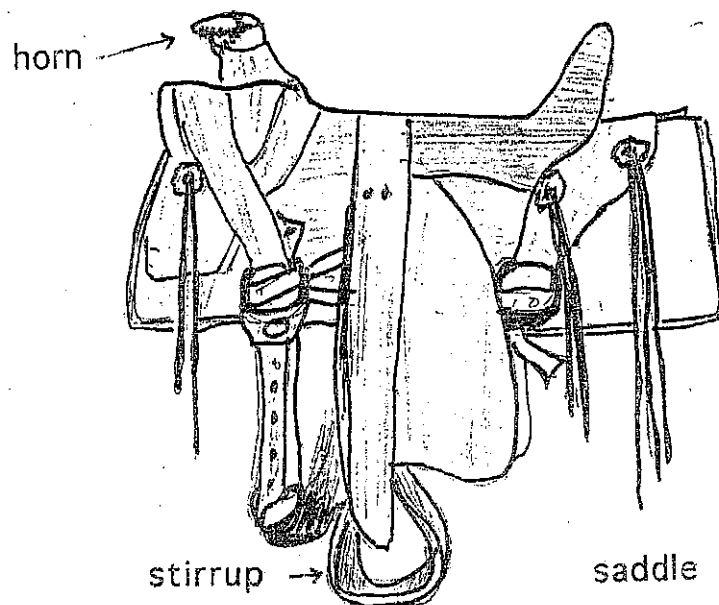
The Open Range

Cattle ranching spread east of the mountains to the Great Plains as the western valleys became too crowded for the huge herds of cattle. As the Indians were forced onto reservations making more land available, large cattle ranches grew rapidly.

Cattle ranchers in the east used the "open range" policy. Since there was really no way to buy and own land yet, the ranchers would just settle along a stream and turn the cattle loose in the surrounding area to feed. There were no fences, and the cattle were free to move to grass and water as they wanted.

Twice a year, in the spring and again in the fall, the ranchers would have a roundup. The cowboys rounded up all the loose cattle from the range. They separated the herds according to their brands, and then branded and castrated the new calves. Cattle that were ready to be sent to sold were separated and driven to the nearest railroad, where they were put on trains and shipped to markets in the East. The rest of the cattle were then turned loose.

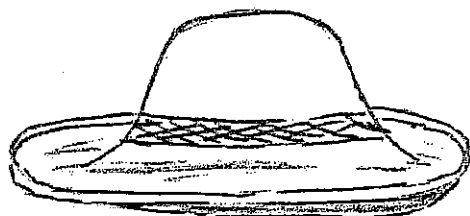
Cowboys needed special equipment for the hard work they did at the roundup and on the open range. The saddles used by the cowboys were specially developed for their work. They were very heavy, and had a horn in the front to be used for roping cattle. When a cow was roped, the rope would be dallied, or looped, around the horn several times so that the strength of the horse could be used to hold the cow.



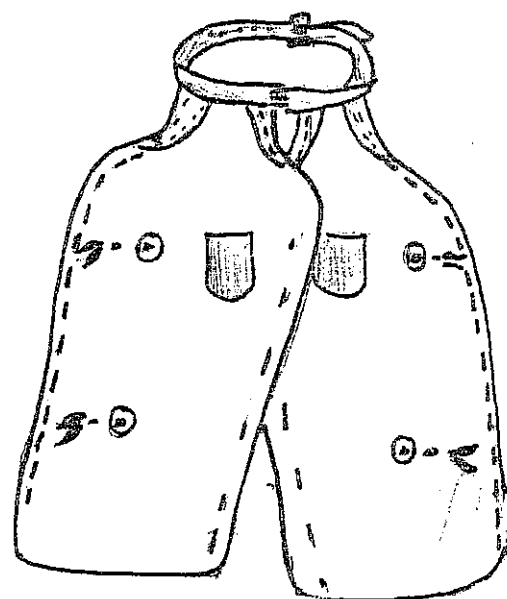
Boots were developed that had high heels so that the cowboy's foot would not slip through the stirrup of the saddle. These boots were often beautifully decorated.

The cowboy also wore a pair of chaps (pronounced "shaps") They were made of leather and protected the cowboy's legs from the sagebrush and the cold when he was on horseback.

The wide-brimmed cowboy hat provided shade on hot days and shelter from the rain. The cowboy would also have a bandana around his neck which could be pulled up over his mouth to protect him from the dust stirred up by moving cattle.



wide-brimmed hat



chaps

Hard Winter of 1886-1887

The open-range policy continued in Montana until gradually the ranges became overcrowded. There was no control over the numbers of cattle entering Montana, and at the beginning of the year 1886, there were more than 1,500,000 cattle on the open range.

The summer of 1886 was especially dry, and many of the streams and water holes dried up. The grass, which was becoming harder to find because there were so many cattle on the range, dried up early in the summer. The cattle had to move many miles to find feed and water and when winter began, they were already very weak.

The winter of 1886-1887 is known as the "Hard Winter." First there was an above average amount of snowfall. Small periods of warm weather would melt the snow and

then it would freeze, forming a hard crust. The cattle were used to pushing aside loose snow to find feed, but they could not break through the layers of icy crust that formed on the snow. Many cattle died because they could not get food or water. When the snow melted in the spring, ranchers found that sixty out of every one-hundred cows had died during the winter. Many ranchers never recovered from their losses. Charlie Russell's famous painting, "Last of the 5000," was painted to show the owners of the ranch where he was working the condition of their cattle after the Hard Winter.



The ranchers who stayed in Montana after this winter had to change their methods so that this would not happen again. The days of the "open range" had ended. Ranchers began to fence their land, run smaller herds of cattle, and cut hay in the summer to feed to the herds in the winter when necessary.

The colorful ranching life of Montana is still part of our state today. Great herds of cattle still feed on Montana ranches, but even as large as the ranches now are, they are small operations compared to the ranches of the open range before the Hard Winter of 1886-1887.