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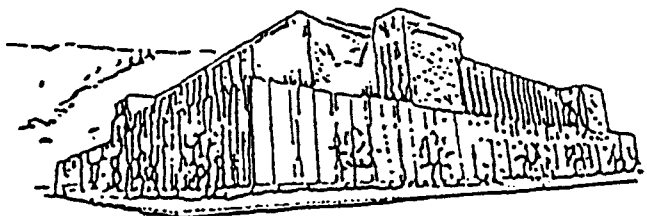
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**Hard Winter Endurance: Conrad Kohrs' Cattle Raising Operation,
1887-1900**

by

Anna Fay Rosenberg

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

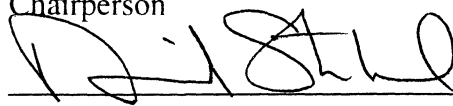
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Hard Winter Endurance: Conrad Kohrs' Cattle Raising Operation, 1887-1900

Director: Dan L. Flores

DLF

Conrad Kohrs, undisputed “Cattle King” of Montana, owned and operated one of the largest cattle raising operations in the West. In 1866, Kohrs purchased his home ranch, situated in the Deer Lodge Valley of Western Montana. Although initially purchased as a “storage facility” for a prospering regional butcher shop, within a decade the home ranch became the headquarters of an open range operation that spanned all of Montana and parts of Utah, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, and the Canadian province of Alberta. Typifying the experience of the 19th-century cattle baron, Kohrs built his empire by relying upon the abundance of free grass crops of the public domain. By the mid-1880s, Kohrs, in partnership with his half-brother, John Bielenberg, had cattle ranging on close to ten million acres. The immensity of Kohrs’ operation reflected the almost limitless possibilities available to an entrepreneur on the developing frontier. His success also reflected the larger national policies of the nineteenth century which effected everything from the dispossession of public lands to changes in the American diet.

This study looks at a particular aspect of Kohrs’ cattle raising career . Specifically, this thesis analyzes Kohrs’ survival of the “Hard Winter of 1886-87.” Generally considered the worst disaster that ever hit the cattlemen of the northern plains, the “Hard Winter” is traditionally described as a demarcation line separating the period of the “open range” from the period of the “ranch farm.” Kohrs presents an interesting case study because he disproves the theory that the “Hard Winter” was the catalyst that forced cattlemen into an accord with their environment. Rather, Kohrs continued to practice the same two distinct methods that he had developed in Montana prior to the “Hard Winter.” In the intermountain valleys, Kohrs continued to use the same “ranch farm” methods, feeding cattle during the winter months and selective breeding, that he developed when he arrived to Montana in the 1860s. In the more open, arid country of the Eastern Plains, Kohrs persisted with the methods associated with the carefree days of the cowboy. Despite threats of another “big die-off,” Kohrs continued to send the majority of his cattle to the open range without supplemental feeding or protection.

Acknowledgments

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Special thanks also goes to the staff at the Grant-Kohrs National Historic Site. Chris Ford and Lyndel Meikle were especially generous with their time, and provided useful tips to ferret out important documentation.

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Introduction

For over a century, the “Hard Winter of 1886-87” has provided a dramatic end to a romantic chapter in the history of Montana. The “Hard Winter”--also called the “Big Die-Up”-- is cited in every major work about the development of the cattle industry on the Northern Plains.¹ Ask a Montana rancher, especially one whose family goes back several generations, and the typical response is, “most savage blizzard in Montana,” followed by, “worst calamity that ever hit the cattleman.” The most recognized piece of Montana artwork dates to this winter; a cowboy’s postcard size sketch, showing a gaunt steer, legs bowed and head lowered, ankle deep in a snowdrift, with a coyote lurking in the background. Below the sketch, cowboy artist, Charlie Russell, inscribed the terse legend, “Last of Five Thousand.” The sketch made Charles M. Russell an overnight star, just as the “Hard Winter” made the “open range” a legend in its own time.

Traditionally, historians have described the “Hard Winter of 1886-87” as a demarcation line, separating the period of the “open range” from the period of the “ranch farm.” Ernest Staples Osgood, the classic historian of the ranching frontier stated that, “It was felt that the catastrophe [of the Hard Winter] marked the end of an era in the history of the Northwest.”² According to this interpretation, the “Hard Winter” taught cattlemen that it was no longer enough to rely upon the free grass crops of the public domain, and

¹See, for example, Ernest Staples Osgood, The Day of the Cattleman (Chicago: Pheonix Press, 1960: First edition, 1929); Robert Fletcher, Free Grass to Fences: The Montana Cattle Range Story (New York: University Publishers Incorporated, 1960); Michael Malone, Richard Roeder and William L. Lang, Montana: A History of Two Centuries, Revised edition (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993).

² Osgood, The Day of the Cattleman, p. 221.

convinced those who planned to stay in the livestock business that they would have to produce hay sufficient to carry their herds through the winter. Never again, the story follows, would cattlemen take the chances that had been regarded as part of the business in the earlier days.³ In short, the “Hard Winter” is said to have compelled cattlemen into an accord with their environment.

What follows is an analysis of the influence of the “Hard Winter of 1886-87” on the ranching practices of Conrad Kohrs, considered by most, “Montana’s greatest cattleman.”⁴ Kohrs provides a fascinating case study not only because of the magnitude of his immense operation, but also because he typified the development of the cattle ranching frontier in Montana. His expansion from the western valleys to the open ranges paralleled the evolution of Montana’s cattle industry. More broadly, Kohrs’ enterprise reflected the larger national trends that shaped the American economy of the late nineteenth-century.

In the decades between the Civil War and 1900, Montana progressed from Territorial to Statehood status, and became integrated into the national economy. Conrad Kohrs was at the forefront of this integration. A model of the period’s popular Horatio Alger stories, Kohrs, an uneducated German immigrant, went West as a young man and successfully built himself a cattle empire that spanned four states, the Canadian province of Alberta, and included over 10 million acres of grazing land. Industry, hard work and entrepreneurship merged with “modern” industrial society, and placed Kohrs at the hub of a new system that brought America’s agricultural West to the dinner plates of Eastern

³Ibid, p. 224.

⁴Herbert P White, “Conrad Kohrs, Cattleman.” The Brand Book of the Denver Posse of the Westerners (Denver: Westerners, 1960), p. 333.

urbanites. Within this national frame of reference, Kohrs' continued prosperity after the "Hard Winter" reveals how one cattle operator, in partnership with his half-brother, John Bielenberg, made the adjustments necessary to meet the demands of an industrial society, and did so in spite of the restrictions imposed by a climate that impaired reliability.

This study is based primarily on the enormous Conrad Kohrs Collection, seven reels of microfilm donated to the National Park Service in 1972 and microfilmed by the University of Montana archivist, Dale Johnson. This work also relies on Kohrs' autobiography, dictated to his daughter, Anna Kohrs, in 1913, and published by his grandson, Conrad Warren, in 1977. John Albright's Historic Resource Study, written for the National Park Service (1979), allowed for the more detailed research of this study by providing the large brush strokes and outlining the history of this large Montana Ranch.

The chapters, arranged chronologically, include: a brief overview of the introduction of cattle ranching to Montana's southwestern valleys; Conrad Kohrs' development from butcher boy to cattle baron; an assessment of Kohrs' ranching practices immediately prior to the "Hard Winter of 1886-87"; Kohrs' recovery and growth in the period between 1887 and 1900; and finally, an analysis of Kohrs' success in the "post-Hard Winter" era. The coherent theme running throughout this study is that the shift in Conrad Kohrs' cattle ranching operation was motivated less by the "Hard Winter" than by the broader economic trends shaping the American beef industry of the late nineteenth-century.

Chapter 1: Cattle Ranching Comes to Montana

Contrary to popular legend, ranching didn't just "appear" on the Montana plains in the two decades after the Civil War. The great herds of cattle driven north from Texas were not the first to utilize the "open" ranges of the semiarid West. At least two decades before the historical cattle drives of the 1870s and 1880s, a mass migration of people moving to Oregon Territory established a market for cattle in the Northern Rockies.¹

Work cattle, horses and even some sheep accompanied the thousands of emigrants making the 2,000 mile trek from Missouri to Oregon between the 1840s and the 1870s. Most of the emigrants moving from the settled lands of the Eastern United States to the unsettled lands of the West could not afford to carry extra grain for their livestock, and instead relied on the forage along the route. Within a few years, grass was at a premium. By the time the caravan of emigrants reached southern Idaho, many of the cattle were footsore, gaunt, and unable to continue the journey. Since there was no time to wait for the animals to recuperate, it became common for emigrants to abandon their livestock en route to their final destination further West.

An unfortunate situation for the emigrant created opportunity for the "retired" fur trapper wishing to remain out West. These mountain men were the

¹Robert Fletcher. "The Day of the Cattleman Dawned Early in Montana." Montana, The Magazine of Western History, Volume XI, Number 4 (Autumn, 1961), pp. 22-24.

first Anglo-Americans to discover that the rapid flowing rocky mountain streams that coursed through the lush rolling benchland, lined with cottonwoods and willows, supplied all the necessary amenities-- shade, shelter and forage-- for wintering livestock. After a season of feeding on the lush grasses of the Beaverhead and Deer Lodge valleys of southwestern Montana, the cattle were "fat and shiny" and ready for market. The ex-fur traders drove the cattle back to the Oregon Trail where emigrants eagerly exchanged two gaunt steers for one healthy animal. Within a few years, the ex-fur trappers built up sizable herds. These "road ranches," located close to the emigrant trails, were the first commercial stock-raising centers in Montana.²

The other initial source of cattle migration into the western valleys of Montana may be attributed to the presence of missions. Father Pierre Jean De Smet, a young Jesuit priest of Belgian birth, came to the Bitterroot Valley in 1841, upon request of the Salish people who had been "remarkably persistent in their quest for Christianity."³ Within five years after DeSmet's arrival, he and his supporters constructed the St. Mary's Mission (near present day Stevensville, Montana). They built fences, planted wheat and potatoes, and raised milk cows. The dissolution of the mission, however, was as rapid as its success. A combination of factors, the worst of which was DeSmet's efforts to take religion to

²Ernest Osgood, The Day of the Cattleman, (Chicago: Pheonix Press, 1960: First edition, 1929) pp. 16-17; Robert Fletcher, Free Grass to Fences: The Montana Cattle Range Story, (New York: University Publishers Incorporated, 1960), pp. 13-17

³Michael P. Malone, Richard R. Roeder and William L. Lang, Montana: A History of Two Centuries, Revised edition (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993), p. 61
The Flatheads had learned about the "mysteries and powers" of Christianity from the Iroquois Indians who were brought to Montana with the Canadian fur men.

the Flatheads' arch enemy, the Blackfeet, resulted in the closing of the mission in 1850.⁴

Although the missionaries did not remain, the farm and the exotic species introduced to the area by DeSmet and his associates, remained with the second owner, Major John Owen.⁵ Major Owen, a successful trader on the Oregon Trail, purchased the remains of the Jesuit mission and quickly began “improving” the lands surrounding the mission. He fixed the saw and grist mill, and constructed the adobe stronghold known as Fort Owen. More relevant to this story, Major Owen expanded the herd of cattle left by the departed fathers.⁶ Within two decades after Major Owens arrival, European domesticated animals filled western Montana’s inter-mountain valleys.⁷

The cattle that initially grazed in these valleys were not descendants of Spanish longhorns about which so much “cow history” has focused, but rather, descendants of cattle shipped from Northern Europe and England to the Atlantic seaboard colonies. In general, the “personality” of the English-American shorthorn breeds, the best that

⁴Jacqueline Peterson and Laura Peers, Sacred Encounters: Father DeSmet and the Indians of the Rocky Mountain West (DeSmet Project, WA., in association with the University of Oklahoma Press, Norman and London, 1993), p. 24.

⁵The missionary setback was only temporary. A few years later, Father Adrian Hoeken located the St. Ignatius Mission in the Mission Valley, south of Flathead Lake. Michael Malone, Richard B. Roeder and William L. Lang, Montana: A History of Two Centuries, p. 62.

⁶Robert Fletcher, “The Day of the Cattlemen Dawned Early in Montana.” p. 24

⁷It is interesting to note that buffalo were never found in abundance in the Southwestern part of Montana. A Plains animal, the buffalo remained primarily East of the Divide. Flatheads, Nez Perces, Pend Oreilles, Spokanes and Kootenais made an arduous annual trek across the divide to hunt buffalo. There is still conflicting opinion as to whether the decision to go east to hunt was done of preference or out of necessity. The debate is premised on the unresolved question of how much wild game was available year-round in the southwestern valleys. Frank Gilbert Roe, The North American Buffalo: A Critical Study of the Species in its Wild State (University of Toronto Press, 1951), pp. 257-179. For two different interpretations of the eastward bison expedition-- “comfort” vs. “luxury standard of living”-- see John Fahey The Flathead Indians (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974) and Harry Holbert Turney-High, Flathead Indians of Montana (Menasha, Wisconsin: American Anthropological Association, 1927).

emigrants could attain, was far more docile than that of the Spanish longhorns, reflecting centuries of British ranching influence. In his book, Cattle Ranching Frontiers of North America, Terry Jordan has termed the British-dominated method, “the midwestern herding system.” More labor and capital intensive than that of the open range “Texas ranching system,” the key traits of the midwestern system included winter feeding, upgrading bloodlines through selective breeding, and later, the use of pasture fences.⁸

The Jesuit Mission, and later Major Owen's success in the Bitterroot Valley, as well as the traders' profitable business along the Oregon Trail, demonstrated the practicability of wintering livestock in the inter-mountain valleys of Montana. But it took the gold rush of the 1860s for the market to develop. Between 1862 and 1863, the discovery of gold at three separate sites in Southwestern Montana drew people from all parts of the country. These mining camps brought with them a mixed bag of merchants, freighters, saloon-keepers, and gamblers. As one historian has written, “often the road to riches was to ‘mine the miners.’”⁹ Others came with the intention of mining, but quickly deduced that there was more gold to be made selling meat to the miners than digging in the rivers. Among this latter group was a man by the name of Conrad Carston Kohrs.

⁸Terry Jordan, North American Cattle Ranching Frontiers: Origins, Diffusion and Differentiation (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), see especially Chapter Nine, “The Midwest Triumphant.” As will be shown, it was this system that dominated the Northern Rocky from its inception in the foothills.

⁹Malone, Roeder and Lang, Montana: A History of Two Centuries, p. 86.

Chapter 2:

The Makings of a Cattle King

The great strides in the line of improvement began in the seventies. Any number of ranchmen contributed to this end, but the leading lights were Mr. Charles Goodnight in the panhandle of Texas, Mr. A. H. Swan in Wyoming and Mr. Conrad Kohrs in Montana. Goodnight and Kohrs were natural born cattlemen.

--John Clay, 1924¹

In 1866, Conrad Kohrs purchased his home ranch, situated in the Deer Lodge Valley of western Montana. Within a decade, the home ranch, which began as a “storage facility” for a prospering regional butcher shop, became the headquarters of an open range operation that spanned all of Montana, parts of Utah, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, and the Canadian province of Alberta. Kohrs’ achievements were not merely the product of luck. A study of his rapid rise to success reveals that Kohrs had an entrepreneurial gift for variously shaping his environment and adapting to its limits, always with the goal of meeting the demands of the market.

Conrad Kohrs had already lived a life full of adventure before laying eyes on Montana. Born August 5, 1835, in the small fishing town of Wewlsfleth, located in the province of Holstein, now Germany (but at that time in the possession of Denmark), Kohrs was the second son of Carston Kohrs and Gesche Krause Kohrs. Writing his life

¹John Clay, *My Life on the Range*, 2nd edition (New York, Antiquarian Press, 1961, First edition, 1924), p. 328. Clay, a Scot by birth, managed and invested in both Scot and British ranching enterprises in the America West. He later became chairman of the Stock Growers National Bank of Cheyenne and president of the John Clay Commission Company in Chicago.

story, at the age of 73, Kohrs described his home life as “not a happy one.”² When just seven weeks old, Kohrs’ father passed away. Nine years later his mother remarried Claus Bielenberg, a “life changing” event for Kohrs.³ In his autobiography, Kohrs explained that he was on his way to securing a “good common school education” when he was forced to quit to keep up with the farm work on his stepfather’s 120 acre farm.⁴

A taskmaster step-father, or perhaps just the wanderlust of youth, led Kohrs to Hamburg, at fifteen, where he signed on as a cabin-boy for a schooner loaded with merchandise to be delivered to different points in Brazil. This was the beginning of a five year career that took him to South America, the West coast of Africa, Havana and New York. Perhaps he would have continued with this line of work had he not been standing in the trajectory of a loose anchor chain, which upon hitting him, splintered his shinbone. During that same luckless trip, provisions ran low and the sailors plotted to mutiny. When Kohrs refused, they “kicked and abused” him in “every conceivable manner.”⁵ When the ship finally docked at the New York harbor, in 1853, Kohrs contacted his cousin, Michael Hilpert, a foreman in a meat packing house at Second Avenue and 22nd Street. Immediately his cousin found him a position working for Fritz & Hammond, a grocery store. This did not last long, however, on account of his leg on which he had trouble standing.

Kohrs returned to Germany, where his grandfather, a physician and surgeon, could give him proper medical attention. Within a few months, Kohrs healed and returned to

²Conrad Kohrs and Patricia Nell Warren, eds., Conrad Kohrs: An Autobiography, (Deer Lodge, Montana: Platen Press, 1977), p. 1 Hereafter cited as Conrad Kohrs: An Autobiography.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid, p. 4

America. He accepted a job with his cousin carrying dressed hogs to hang on racks in the packing house, for which he was paid \$1 per day. The job only lasted a month, by the end of which “his back and shoulders were ...raw from blisters.”⁶ Conveniently, that same year, 1853, Kohrs’ older brother, Henry, and his sister and brother-in-law moved to Davenport, Iowa, and opened a dry-goods store. Following in tow were his mother and step-father, along with his younger half-brothers, John, Charles and Nicholas Bielenberg.

What Kohrs described as his “restless disposition” made it difficult for him to endure the “indoor work” of tending shop in Davenport. After a number of odd jobs, Kohrs headed west to the California and Canadian gold strikes. He did not return to Iowa until 1860, and he did so only because he had received news of his brother-in-law’s death. That year, he worked for his sister, using his butchering skills to make sausages for the grocery store business. When the Civil War broke out, Kohrs was ready to enlist for the North, but his mother was “greatly opposed” and “begged” him not to go.⁷ If he could not fight in the war, he would head to the West again.

Early in 1862, Kohrs and two other “German boys” offered to assist an Ohio man, Sickler in delivering some “fine horses” to California.⁸ Disagreements with Sickler, followed by the gold stampede in Idaho, led Kohrs to the Deer Lodge Valley in the late spring of 1862. He was twenty seven years old. Recalling his first glimpse of the area, Kohrs wrote:

⁶Ibid. p. 5.

⁷Ibid. p. 16.

⁸Conrad Kohrs, “A Veteran’s Experience in the Western Cattle Trade,” Breeder’s Gazette, December 18, 1912, p. 1328.

The valley was full of antelope and many herds of fat cattle belonging to the mountaineers who lived there.⁹

Not that this was any help to Kohrs and the crew he was traveling with, who at that point were without money or provisions. Although “game was plentiful,” there were no “guns or pistols.” Thus, they “were obliged to live on fish, not even having grease to fry them in. It was a case of boiled fish varied by an occasional baking in the ashes.”¹⁰

The next week, traveling from Deer Lodge to Gold Creek (about 30 miles west), Kohrs met Bannack’s temporary sheriff, Hank Crawford. Crawford had decided to supplement his sheriff duties by providing meat for the miners, and was in search of a helper who knew something about butchering. Kohrs’ early experience in the packing house, and later working for his sister, proved sufficient qualifications. Crawford hired him at \$25 a month, and Kohrs set to work with a skinning knife, a borrowed set of scales and a ground down bowie knife, which he used for cutting steaks.¹¹

Shortly after accepting the position, Crawford asked Kohrs to manage the books, “Crawford being a man who caroused a good deal and disliked attending to that kind of business.”¹² Kohrs’ handling of the business so impressed Crawford that he raised his salary to \$100.00 per month. It was a short lived partnership, however, as later that year Crawford found himself in trouble with the infamous Henry Plummer, leader of the worst outlaw gang in Montana. Crawford fled for his life, leaving Kohrs the entire business.

⁹Conrad Kohrs: An Autobiography, p. 19

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid, p. 22.

¹²Ibid, p. 23.

Under Kohrs' direction, the business continued to flourish, and by 1864 he formed a new successful partnership with Ben Peel. Together they operated a business, known as "Con and Peel," located at the foot of Main Street in the booming town of Virginia City.¹³ From the start, "beef brought good prices and as the miners were making money," they "received money on every payday, which was on Sunday." What was not sold as steaks to the miners was used for other purposes. Tallow not used for frying meat was made into candles. Scraps, head, liver, etc. were made into sausage. And the hides, which couldn't be sold, were given to miners to use as throw rugs on their dirt floors.¹⁴

Discoveries at Last Chance Gulch, in Helena, provided more opportunity for "Con and Peel" to continue expanding the business. Kohrs assigned himself the role of trailing cattle from different parts of the state, leaving Peel to "tend shop."¹⁵ This worked fine until Ben Peel decided to pursue a love interest who lived in the East. Peel's sudden departure might have been a problem had Kohrs not formed separate partnerships with his younger half-brothers, all three of whom had migrated during the busy gold rush years. The brothers, John, Nick and Charles, ran butcher shops in Helena, Blackfoot and Silver Bow, respectively.

The summer of 1864 Kohrs purchased 400 "poor work cattle" and "a few work horses," which he wintered in Deer Lodge Valley at Race Track Ranch (about eight miles south of today's Deer Lodge).¹⁶ These cattle were used to supply his butcher shops

¹³Ibid, p. 26. Virginia City was the site of the greatest placer rush in Montana's history. At least 10,000 people crowded into this mining town, and within the first five years of its discovery, the gulch produced an estimated 30 to 40 million dollars in gold. See Malone, Roeder and Lang, Montana: A History of Two Centuries, pp. 66-67

¹⁴ Conrad Kohrs: An Autobiography, p. 27

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 26.

¹⁶ Conrad Kohrs: An Autobiography, p. 38.

located throughout western Montana, and formed the basis of his cattle raising operation. Later that year, Kohrs' business instinct led him in the right direction again. In Kohrs' own words:

I saw in the spring of '65 that cattle were going to be scarce, and I borrowed \$12,000 of George Forbes in Virginia City and with it I bought \$85,000 worth of cattle, buying from different parties and paying enough down on each lot to make the trade good. In the spring of '65 I had all the beef in the country in my hands.¹⁷

In his autobiography, Kohrs referred to these years, 1864-66, as his "heavy riding years." because he spent most of his time on the road selling and collecting cattle throughout the region. In pre-automobile years, this meant owning a string of 12 horses which he stationed along the road in relays. On one such buying trip, Kohrs told of riding 480 miles in March, snow still on the ground, with the hope of securing a herd of mixed breeds from the manager of the American Fur Company, only to discover upon arrival that the herd had already been purchased.¹⁸ Frustrating, and costly, incidents like these were not uncommon, and most likely served to strengthen Kohrs' desire to learn more about how to control "the source" of his beef supply.¹⁹

In 1866, Kohrs purchased the John Grant Ranch for \$19,200, paying \$5,000 down. The Grant ranch, situated on the outskirts of Deer Lodge City, became Kohrs' base of operations.²⁰ In addition to the ranch house, the purchase included all of the equipment

¹⁷Conrad Kohrs, "Autobiographical Sketch, 1885" handwritten photocopy from the H.H.Bancroft Collection, University of California at Berkeley, Box P-I 25.

¹⁸Conrad Kohrs: An Autobiography, p. 37

¹⁹In his dissertation, "Men and Cattle on the Northern Plains: 1860-1887" (Ph.D., University of Oregon, 1971), Leland Everett Stuart gives a brief overview of Kohrs' early years in which he comes to the same conclusion: that Kohrs' interest in the raising of his own beef was the logical outcome of his beef butchering business, pp. 71-79.

²⁰John Grant, one of the early fur traders-gone-rancher had a house that was recognized as "one of the finest in Montana." It was described in the *Montana Post*, Virginia City, "as a house that

(threshing machines, outbuildings, etc.), corrals and haystacks, as well as about 350 high grade Shorthorn cattle.²¹ Within a month, Kohrs added to his holdings, and purchased an additional 160 acres near Dempsey Creek, on the west side of the Clark Fork River, known as Louis Demers Ranch.²² Thus, four years after Kohrs entered the Deer Lodge Valley, he owned most of the cattle in the valley, as well as the Race Track, Demers, and Grant ranches. His dominance of the regional beef market demonstrated the possibilities available to an entrepreneur on the developing frontier.

Kohrs' early success in the cattle business also reflected broader trends occurring in the United States during the latter half of the 19th-century. Before the Civil War, it was more common to find pork, rather than beef, on the plates of Eastern city-dwellers.²³ It is still not entirely clear why, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Americans switched to beef. Whatever the reason, Americans desired beef, and not just any beef would do. Well-marbled, fatty, tender, meat was what the American public craved.²⁴ Kohrs and his half-brother, John Bielenberg, were able to satisfy this desire as only those who had butchered meat for a living could do. Familiar with the product, literally from

appeared to be "lifted by the chimneys from the bank of the St. Lawrence, and dropped down in the Deer Lodge Valley " John Albright, Historic Resource Study and Historic Structure Report for the Kohrs and Bielenberg Home Ranch, Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site, Montana (Denver: Denver Service Center, National Park Service, 1979), p. 11. Hereafter, cited as John Albright, Historic Resource Study.

²¹In the original handwritten copy of the interview with Conrad Kohrs, 1885, Kohrs wrote that there were 3,200 head in the herd. The copy of this interview is at the Bancroft Library, Box P-I 25. Oddly, the same interview (transcribed) at the Montana Historical Society, Small Collection # 222, has it recorded as 365 head of cattle. In his autobiography, p.43, Kohrs wrote that he purchased the remainder of the Grant herd, "amounting to about 350 head." Fergus Mitchell, "History of Shorthorn and Hereford in Montana" (M.A. Thesis, Montana State College, 1923) credits John Grant as the owner of the first herd of high-grade Shorthorn animals, p. 9.

²²Albright, Historic Resource Study, p. 12.

²³Richard White, "Animals and Enterprise," in the Oxford History of the American West, edited by Clyde A. Milner, Carol A. Connor and Martha A. Sandweiss (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 252.

²⁴Ibid.

the inside out. Kohrs and his brothers maintained their Northern European blooded stock, even as they began to trail herds up from Texas.

Beginning in 1871, John Bielenberg trailed 1,000 head of cattle from Texas to Montana. It is quite probable that these cattle were crossed with high grade Durham bred cattle, as during that same trip, Bielenberg made stops in Davenport, Iowa and California to collect "high grade" cattle.²⁵ In addition to providing better quality beef, the "native" cattle wintered more successfully than newly arrived "immigrant" cattle, thus providing another incentive to maintain the Northern European livestock breeds.²⁶ Ensuring a steady supply of quality meat meant that Kohrs had to maintain high quality breeding bulls. These were kept at the home ranch and bred with heifers to furnish top quality beef for the regional butcher shops.

Throughout these early years, Kohrs also maintained an active interest in mining for gold. In the late 1860s, miners in the Deer Lodge-Flint Creek Area introduced the hydraulic process of mining. "Hydraulicking" required the use of great volumes of water and high pressure hoses to blast away whole stream banks and beds. As one of the early settlers in the Deer Lodge Valley, Kohrs acquired senior water rights to the coveted water supply on the west side of Deer Lodge.²⁷ In 1867, Conrad Kohrs, and partners-- Colonel

²⁵Stuart, "Men and Cattle on the Northern Plains." p.73.

²⁶Ernest Staples Osgood, The Day of the Cattleman, (Chicago, Pheonix Press, 1960, First edition, 1929) p. 217

²⁷Kohrs' earliest recorded water right dates to 1869. Microfilm, Reel 3, Conrad Kohrs Papers, M73. Mansfield Library, University of Montana. Hereafter cited as CK Papers, M73. Initially established to suit the needs of the mining districts, Montana's water law adhered to the doctrine of prior appropriation. "first in time, first in right." The concept was incorporated into Montana's Territorial law in the Bannack Statutes of 1865, and later amended to suit agricultural purposes as well. Donald J. Pisani, To Reclaim A Divided West: Water, Law and Public Policy, 1848-1902 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992), pp. 46-52.

William Irvine, Thomas H. Irvine, Christopher Heart, John C. Thorton, and Lieg Newman-- formed the Rock Creek Ditch Company.²⁸

One year later, the Rock Creek Ditch Company completed the hand-dug 13 mile artery, three feet deep and seven feet wide at the top, transporting water from Rock Creek Lake to Pioneer, Willow and Pikes Peak.²⁹ Within a few months after completion of the ditch, Pioneer's population swelled to nearly one thousand.³⁰ The construction of the ditch cost about \$165,000, but it paid for itself within the first two years. The Rock Creek Ditch Company sold "scrip," or water rights to other miners, sometimes as much as four times over. That meant the miners who used it the first time paid 25 cents, the next to use it paid 15 cents, the third user 10 cents and the fourth, 5 cents per inch. The sale of water the first year alone amounted to \$72,000.³¹ With the profits from water sales, Kohrs bought 2400 acres of patented mining claims.³²

Thus, by 1870, Kohrs had established the entrepreneurial approach that characterized his business activities throughout his life. Historian John Albright explained Kohrs' approach to business, using modern economics jargon, as "vertical integration" and "horizontal diversification."³³ The first term, "vertical integration," refers to Kohrs' cattle and meat business. By overseeing the processing and marketing of the meat, Kohrs controlled all facets of the business, everything from supply, to processing, to

²⁸Conrad Kohrs: *An Autobiography*, p. 46.

²⁹Murielle Wolle, *Montana Pay Dirt*, (Chicago, Sage Books, 1963) p. 220. The construction of the ditch also meant building a dam for Rock Creek Lake (still in use today); the lake and ditch are included on the map of the Kohrs and Bielenberg home ranch. See appendix.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Conrad Kohrs: *An Autobiography*, p.47

³²Rex Myers, "Interview with Conrad Warren," July 10, 1980, Deer Lodge, Montana. Transcription of the interview for *Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site Oral History Project*. p. 88.

³³John Albright, *Historic Resource Study*, p. 22.

transportation and sale. The second term, “horizontal diversification,” refers to Kohrs’ involvement in separate fields, which by 1870 included mining, butcher shops, and the buying, raising, and selling of cattle. This dynamism, Albright has succinctly argued, permitted Kohrs the flexibility to balance his weakness in one business sector with strength in another, and allowed for overall stability. His investment risks “remained compartmentalized,” and his “potential losses minimized.”³⁴ In other words, Kohrs established a pattern that allowed the closest guarantee of success achievable within the speculative business of nineteenth-century cattle ranching.

As the largest cattle owner in the Deer Lodge Valley, Kohrs was one of the first to become acutely aware of the disappearing bunchgrasses. The very same year that Kohrs purchased the Grant Ranch, the Montana Territorial Legislature passed a law defining summer and winter grazing in the Deer Lodge Valley, with the stipulation that winter grass could not be used without proper title. Although the law was repealed the following year, its establishment verified the growing concern, at this early date, regarding overcrowding (and consequently overgrazing) in the Deer Lodge Valley.³⁵ In 1869, following the advice of his trusted foreman, Tom Hooban, Kohrs trailed his first herd of about 1,000 head of cattle to graze along the Sun River bank, east of the Continental Divide.³⁶ A “trail blazer” in many arenas, Kohrs was the first cattleman to risk the threat of Indian raids and venture onto Montana’s open country. A portent of the radical

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Laws of Montana Territory, 1866, Session 2, p. 35.

³⁶Conrad Kohrs, An Autobiography, p. 52. Tom Hooban worked for Kohrs for 20 years, during which time they developed a rare friendship, not commonly found between cattleman and cowboy. Kohrs entrusted a large share of responsibility to his foremen, something made even more apparent by the heavy losses accrued from less faithful foreman (See Letterpress Book A, 94-100, dated May 6, 1892, CK Papers, M73, Reel 1). The loyalty of his foremen is another clue to Kohrs’ unique personality, which gained him the respect of cowboys and bankers alike.

changes to come. the move to the Sun River range also signified the beginning of Kohrs' utilization of the public domain for supplying cattle to markets outside of the territory.

The following spring, 1870, Kohrs and his half-brother, John Bielenberg, drove the "fat cattle" from the Sun River herd west over the Lewis and Clark Pass to Missoula. From there, the herd was driven south, and additional cattle were added in the Bitterroot Valley, bringing the total number of head to approximately 2,000. From that point, Kohrs and Bielenberg continued further south into Idaho, and then into northeastern Utah; and from Utah, they pointed the herd east toward Cheyenne, Wyoming; and finally, south again, towards Nebraska. In North Platte, Nebraska, the herd was loaded on Union Pacific railroad cars and shipped to the Chicago market.³⁷ Kohrs and his outfit used this route, with some variations, to deliver cattle to railheads in Wyoming and Western Nebraska until the railroad came to Eastern Montana in the mid-1880s.³⁸

By 1874, the shipments to Chicago were a regular and important feature of Kohrs' business. As the Chicago shipments grew into the tens of thousands, Kohrs sought assistance from commission firms that would help him to handle the cattle once they had arrived at the stockyards. Kohrs formed a partnership with the "highly successful" commission agent, Joseph Rosenbaum.³⁹ Rosenbaum's firm provided a variety of

³⁷Albright, Historic Resource Study, p. 22.

³⁸Ibid. p. 22, 42, 43. Albright explains that in the fall of 1879, Kohrs moved the cattle trail further East because of the "Indian scare" (referring to Chief Joseph and the battle of the Big Hole, which occurred about 80 miles to the south of present day Deer Lodge City). The new "eastern route" began on the Sun River Range and then turned southeast to Great Falls, where it crossed the Missouri River, and from there the trail went southeast along the southern edge of the Judith Basin, across the upper drainage of the Musselshell, and across the Yellowstone. At the crossing the trail turned south through the Tongue and Powder River valleys, continuing south until it encountered the North Platte. It followed this river toward Fort Laramie and western Nebraska.

³⁹Gene Gressley's Bankers and Cattlemen (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1966) includes Joseph Rosenbaum amongst the "highly successful" stock commissioners in Chicago. See Chapter VII, "The Commission Firm and the Banks."

important services, most importantly that of buying and selling cattle at the stockyards in Chicago. In addition to handling the money transactions, Rosenbaum provided the knowledgeable expertise that Kohrs needed if he wished to sell on a national scale. This connection proved especially advantageous during the formative years of the range cattle business.⁴⁰ Years before the boom on the northern plains, Kohrs had the support and recognition of the most prominent stock commissioners in Chicago.

Kohrs also benefited from access to some of the best grazing lands in the West. In the late 1870s and early 1880s, Kohrs' rangelands expanded to incorporate parts of Colorado, Wyoming and southeastern Montana. In 1877, Kohrs and his crew drove the first herd to the grass-rich "parks" behind the front range of the Colorado Rockies.⁴¹ In the summer of 1881, Kohrs added another range near Flat Willow Creek, located to the southeast of Lewiston in central Montana.⁴² He added these ranges to his total area, which already included the herds grazing along the Sun River range (in the Western part of Montana east of the continental divide), the Snake River ranch (in southeastern Idaho), the range along Goose Creek in northeast Wyoming, and his home ranch in the Deer Lodge Valley. By 1882, he also had herds along the Tongue River in Southeastern Montana.⁴³

⁴⁰John W Hakola. "Samuel T Hauser and the Economic Development of Montana: A Case Study in Nineteenth-Century Frontier Capitalism" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Indiana, 1961). Hakola writes about an incident in which Granville Stuart, at the time the manager of the "DHS" Ranch, in central Montana, was forced to sell the company's cattle to Kohrs-- Kohrs being the only person that knew how to "dispose" of cattle headed for the Chicago Market.

⁴¹The area that Kohrs referred to as "South Park" in his autobiography, is today called North Park, and is located just south of Rawlins, Colorado. John Albright, Historic Resource Study, p. 40.

⁴²The Flat Willow was also the major source for the DHS ranch, what would later become the Pioneer Cattle Company

⁴³Albright, Historic Resource Study, p.49.

The average shipping weight of the steers on the Tongue River in Southeastern Montana, between 1,300 and 1,600 pounds, attested to the excellent “product” that came off the “new ranges.”⁴⁴ In 1882, Kohrs shipped about 1,100 steers (just the herd on the Tongue River), for which he was paid approximately \$93,500.00. Even after subtracting fees for shipping and labor, Kohrs was making a substantial profit on steers purchased the year before at approximately \$40.00 per head.⁴⁵

During this time of immense growth, the typical routine consisted of trailing the younger cattle to graze on the ranges and grow, while the steers were driven to the eastern railheads and shipped to Chicago. But in 1883 Kohrs’ market expanded even more and brought a new market into the picture. The coming of the Canadian Pacific Railroad meant hungry construction crews, and Kohrs received the contract to supply the beef. In 1883, he sold over 1,500 head at \$62.50 per head, the total sale amounting to nearly \$94,000.00.⁴⁶

Later that same year Kohrs purchased the Andrew and Erwin Davis interest of the “DHS” (an acronym of the last name initials of Andrew and Erwin Davis, Samuel Hauser and Granville Stuart), a large open range ranch, located at the base of the Judith Mountains in central Montana. At the time of the sale, the transaction was reported as the “heaviest transaction in cattle that has ever taken place in the territory.”⁴⁷ Kohrs paid

⁴⁴Conrad Kohrs: An Autobiography, p. 75.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid. p. 76. See also Robert Fletcher. Free Grass to Fences. p.48.

⁴⁷Winfield Scott Downs, ed. Encyclopedia of Northwest Biography (New York: The American Historical Research Company. Inc., 1941), p. 22

\$400,000.00 for 1/3 interest in the ranch.⁴⁸ The deal also gave Kohrs his official title as “undisputed Cattle King of Montana.”⁴⁹

By the mid-1880s, Kohrs, in partnership with John Bielenberg, had cattle ranging on close to ten million acres.⁵⁰ Often working in partnership with other cattlemen, Kohrs minimized his risks by investing in herds spread out over four states and Canada. A loss on one herd was easily made up by gains on another. He also had his investments in mining and water interests, offering yet another source of income when cattle prices were low. Finally, Kohrs had the backing of bankers and stock commissioners who could count on Kohrs to deliver a quality product. Taken together, Kohrs had established a pattern of business that created enough stability to overcome the obstacles of both a fluctuating economy and an environment that impaired reliability. In future years, Kohrs’ business sense would help him to endure and survive what for others meant crippling financial losses.

⁴⁸ Conrad Kohrs: An Autobiography, p.76. The “DHS” Ranch is well documented in John W Hakola’s dissertation, “Samuel T Hauser and the Economic Development of Montana: A Case Study in Nineteenth-Century Frontier Capitalism,” pp. 255-307. In 1885, the owners of the cattle company, (Conrad Kohrs, Granville Stuart, Samuel Hauser, and H. P. Kennett) formalized the organization, and renamed it the Pioneer Cattle Company. As the largest shareholder, Kohrs was elected president of the company. Although the name changed, the brand “D-S” did not. For the purposes of this thesis, the Pioneer Cattle Company financial records receive more attention than the other cattle business ventures. The reason for this is simply that the Pioneer Cattle Company records contain the most complete financial data for the period of interest (between 1887 and 1900).

⁴⁹ *Yellowstone Journal*, Miles City, July 2, 1883.

⁵⁰ Of John Bielenberg’s early years, there is much less written. Born May 1, 1846 in Hamburg, Germany, Bielenberg immigrated to America with his family in July of 1854. At age 18, he left home, to join Kohrs in Montana, and at age 21 was a full partner in the Deer Lodge Ranch. Of the two brothers, John was the more educated. A dedicated animal breeder, Bielenberg was remembered for his love of thoroughbred horses. See “Grant Kohrs Source Book,” edited by Lyndel Meikle, p.7, in the Grant-Kohrs National Historic Site Collection.

Chapter 3:

Differentiation - Conrad Kohrs' ranching practices before the "Hard Winter"

In the more northerly situated cattle territory, Wyoming and Montana, heavy snowfalls are sometimes followed by freezing weather. The prairie is covered then by a crust of ice, and the cattle are not able to get enough food. In such extreme cases the poor, lean cattle, which are too weak to endure several days' fasting, die of hunger. This happens very seldom, as such storms are not frequent in this climate.

--Walter Baron von Richtofen, 1885¹

Prior to the "Hard Winter," Conrad Kohrs practiced two distinct methods of ranching. In the intermountain valleys of western Montana, Kohrs irrigated native and cultivated grasses, fenced his crops, and supplied winter feed for his livestock. On the open, arid country of the eastern plains, however, Kohrs adopted the methods of the "Texas ranching system."² This latter method was a poor adaptive strategy to the harsh environment of the Northern Plains, and like most large operators, Kohrs and Bielenberg suffered heavy losses, numbering in the tens of thousands, during the winter of 1886-87. Yet, unlike the boom-time

¹Walter Baron von Richtofen, Cattle Raising on the Plains of North America, 2nd edition (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1964), p. 27. This overly optimistic account about the profits to be realized from ranching was no more outrageous than the other books of the period. Von Richtofen, a German aristocrat, never even raised beef cattle. He did, however, own some dairy cattle and race horses in Colorado, and it is possible he had financial interests in other ranching enterprises. [Unfortunate timing for him, the work was published the year before the "Hard Winter of 1886-87."]

²This method of ranching evolved out of southwestern Louisiana and adjacent southeastern Texas, and is generally characterized by allowing cattle to care for themselves year-round on free range, without supplement feeding or protection. The strong Hispanic influence on the Texas ranching system is most apparent in the equestrian skills, such as roping, as well as the vocabulary, such as "lariat," "corral," and "remuda," which was adopted by Northwestern cattlemen in the late nineteenth-century. See Terry Jordan, Cattle Ranching Frontiers: Origins, Diffusion and Differentiation (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1993) Chapter Seven, "The Anglo-Texan Ranching System."

cattleman of the free-wheeling open range days, Kohrs had been around to witness the rapid growth of the cattle industry in Montana. Aware that adjustments needed to be made, Kohrs became an advocate for a more controlled range even before the devastating setback of the “Hard Winter of 1886-87.”

The name “Hard Winter” is misleading. In terms of actual weather, the legendary “Hard Winter” was not the most severe. Montana winters, before and since, have produced longer periods of sustained cold, with deeper snow and less relief from warm spells.³ Overstocking the ranges, not the weather, led to the “Hard Winter” of 1886-87. It is more accurate to argue, therefore, that financial speculation created the cattlemen’s disaster of 1886-87. In other words, the massive “die-off” on the Northern Plains was the work of humans, not nature.⁴

In the early 1880s, the great rush for the “open range” reached epic proportions. The extermination of the buffalo and the confinement of the Indians to smaller reservations opened up millions of acres of free, publicly owned grazing land. Simultaneously, the completion of the Northern Pacific railroad in 1883, provided the

³Dave Walter, “The Hard Winter of 1886-87: Was that winter a century ago really Montana’s ‘big one’ of all time?” Montana Magazine, #81, January-February, 1987, p. 62. Dave Walter’s article shows actual temperatures throughout Montana for that winter.

⁴The “Dust Bowl” of the 1930s is an excellent analogy for understanding the “Hard Winter of 1886-87.” While drought is a reoccurring fact of the southern plains, dust is not. For millennia, the native grasses of the southern plains served to keep the dirt in place, but in the teens a massive influx of settlers (a response to the Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909) culminated in the destruction of these well-adapted grasses. Just as the boom in cattle ranching resulted in the destruction of the native grasses of the northern plains, the boom in dry farming, a method of deep plowing and summer fallowing, resulted in the plowing up of more than 11 million acres of native prairie grass in Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska, Oklahoma and Texas. Similarly, just as too many cattle turned the bad winter of 1886 into a catastrophic disaster, the millions of plowed acres exposed to the sun exasperated the drought conditions of the 1930s. Like the catastrophic losses of the “Hard Winter of 1886-87,” the black blizzards that swept across the plains for an entire decade, from 1931-1941, were the result of poor adaptive strategies to the plains environment. A full discussion of the “Dust Bowl” can be found in Donald Worster’s Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

first direct link between Montana's Ranges and Chicago. With new markets in the East and an efficient means for shipping animals, the livestock industry became for a short period of time one of the nation's most lucrative business ventures. Investors from the East, the South, as well as foreign countries trailed thousands of herds into Eastern Montana.⁵

As important as the railroads were to the transformation of the Great Plains, the impact of the ideologues who promoted the free, "limitless grass" of the western range cannot be overstated. Through to the 1860s, maps of present day Montana still depicted it as a stretch of useless expanse, generally referred to as "The Great American Desert." The image of a barren wasteland, with less than adequate rainfall for growing crops, permitted people living in the East to concede that the land West of the Mississippi was best used as "a repository for recalcitrant eastern tribes."⁶ It took the convincing propaganda of the boosters to show the American public that, in fact, the West was truly the land of "unlimited" agricultural productivity.⁷

In 1880, James S. Brisbin, a general of the U.S. Army published the most famous report of the cattle boom era, titled The Beef Bonanza: Or How to get Rich on the Plains, in which he prognosticated the great profits yet to be made raising livestock for Eastern markets. With nothing but praise for the Montana grasses that "cure naturally on the

⁵Ernest Staples Osgood, The Day of the Cattleman, (Chicago: Phoenix Press, 1960), P 32. Between 1880 and 1885, Osgood estimated 1,925,784 cattle were trailed North from Texas.

⁶Robert Fletcher, Free Grass to Fences: The Montana Cattle Range Story, (New York: University Publishers Inc., 1960), p. 36.

⁷David Emmons, Garden in the Grasslands: Boomer Literature of the Central Great Plains (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971). Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950). This literature applies more to the Jeffersonian ideal of the yeoman farmer than the cattle baron of the 1880s. However, there are many parallels with the boosterism that inspired the cattle boom on the northern plains.

ground.” Brisbin exclaimed that “as a stock growing region Montana surpass[ed] all other sections of the Great West.”⁸ The success of Brisbin’s publication signified a final transition in the American perception of the land West of the Mississippi.

Prior to the introduction of European livestock, bison, elk, deer and pronghorns grazed freely over the northern plains grasslands. These free roaming native herbivores evolved a symbiotic relationship with the grasslands: the grass provided the nutrition for the animals, and the animals provided the requisite *occasional* heavy grazing to sustain the native grasses.⁹ Bison, especially, developed a unique symbiotic relationship with the grassland ecology of the great plains. Their natural roaming pattern (or what scientists call “short-rotational grazing”) provided the proper amount of grazing for vigorous growth, without the constant pressure of overgrazing.¹⁰ The discovery, in the 1870s, that buffalo hides could be turned into cheap leather brought an abrupt end to the coexistence and coevolution that had developed among bison and grasslands. Historian Richard White wrote about the massive slaughter on the northern plains:

The slaughter was so thorough and so quick that not even the hunters could believe what they had done. In the fall of 1883, many outfitted themselves as usual. But there was nothing to hunt except piles of bones bleaching in the sun and wind.¹¹

⁸General James S. Brisbin, The Beef Bonanza or How to Get Rich on the Plains, (Philadelphia: Lippincott & Co., 1881) p. 167

⁹Ernest Callenbach, Bring Back the Buffalo!: A sustainable Future for America’s Great Plains (Washington D.C., Island Press, 1996), pp. 22-30.

¹⁰Ibid, p. 24. A free, nomadic bison herd might not return to the same area for several years.

¹¹Richard White, “Animals and Enterprise,” The Oxford History of the American West, Edited by Clyde A. Milner, Carol A. Connor and Martha A. Sandweiss (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 248.

In a space of less than ten years, the balance that these animals had established over thousands of years vanished from the earth.¹²

The replacement of native grazing animals with vast herds of imported livestock, mostly cattle and some sheep, resulted in severe overgrazing. Within a couple of years, soil compaction, selective foraging, repeated close cropping of the grasses, and serious overgrazing near sources of water and salt, resulted in the disappearance of the more palatable species on Montana's eastern plains. Overall, this meant a reduction in the variety and volume of the native vegetative cover.¹³ Yet the inducement of large profits on cattle possessed cattlemen to continue overstocking the ranges.¹⁴ Additional incentive came from the federal policies that encouraged cattlemen to use the free grasslands.¹⁵ Thus, when the drought of 1886 hit the northern plains, the stage was set for disaster. Cattlemen were left with no choice except to wait and pray.

¹²There is evidence that a precipitous drop in bison numbers occurred at least three decades before the massive slaughter on the northern plains. Drought, introduced diseases, and the white invasion of the peripheral habitat appear to have been the main causes of the 1840's die-off. For a discussion of the early fate of the bison, see Dan Flores' "Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy: The Southern Plain from 1825 to 1850." Journal of American History, 78 (September 1991).

¹³Buffalograss (Bucloe dactyloides), little bluestem (Andropogon scoparius) and blue grama grass (Bouteloua gracilis) are typical native grasses of Eastern Montana. For a full discussion see Marion Clawson, The Western Range Livestock Industry, (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, Inc., 1950), Chapter 5, "Plant Cover in Relation to Range Livestock Production." Also Terry Joradan, North American Cattle Ranching Frontiers: Origins, Diffusion and Differentiation, especially Chapter One, "The Nature of Cattle Ranching."

¹⁴The term "overstocking" is controversial since the very notion of how many animals can be supported by a plant community originated in rainy European areas, where domestic animals were confined to fenced pastures. For hundreds of thousands of years, millions of bison and other species were able to survive in the vast, arid environment of the plains by naturally engaging in a "rotational grazing pattern." Callenbach, Bring Back the Buffalo, p. 27.

¹⁵This point is made repeatedly by critics of 19th-century United States public land policies. See, for example, Philip O. Foss, Politics and Grass: The Administration of Grazing on the Public Domain (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1960), pp. 31-38; Samuel Dana, Forest and Range Policy: Its Development in the United States, Second Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1980), pp. 49-50, 86-89

By 1885, there were twelve herds, along with the DHS (Pioneer Cattle Company) and CK (Kohrs and Bielenberg) herds, occupying the Fort Maginnis Range (in present day Fergus County), the majority of which had been there for at least three consecutive years.¹⁶ Overcrowding and a dry summer had all of the members of the Pioneer Cattle Company worried. In a letter dated May 31, 1886, Percy Kennet, assistant superintendent of the Pioneer Cattle Company, wrote to his step-father, Samuel Hauser, describing the deteriorating conditions:

Cattle are looking poorer on this range than I have ever seen them. There is actually no grass on this range, & if we do not sell most of the cattle will have to be moved onto a new range or they will all die next winter. This range is now about in the poorest country. Thoroughly eaten out.¹⁷

Kohrs, aware of the same “dry” and “crowded” conditions that Percy Kennet lamented, had already started to make plans. That year, he leased 237,000 acres in Canada for the Pioneer Cattle Company, as well as the Kohrs and Bielenberg herds.¹⁸

Kohrs intended to trail approximately 20,000 head to the Cypress Hills, situated across the border from Montana, in Alberta, Canada.¹⁹ Kohrs was one of the first to take

¹⁶Paul C. Phillips, ed., Pioneering in Montana: The Making of a State, 1864-1887 as Seen in the Journal and Reminiscences of Granville Stuart, second edition. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1977), p. 178. Legal brands were recorded with the county clerk, and between the years 1881-1886, books were prepared containing the marks and brands for every member and the range that they occupied. By 1886, Kohrs held interests with at least five different brands, representing various partnerships with other Montana cattlemen. The most well known brand, and the one on which Kohrs and Bielenberg built their reputation was the “CK,” first registered in May of 1876. Other brands associated with Kohrs’ name included: the D-S, called the “D H S” for Davis, Hauser and Stuart; the 79, called the “Seventy-nine”, and registered with the well known Eastern Montana cattleman, John T. Murphy; and the 5. The latter called the “five up and five down,” was initially registered with Kohrs’ close friend and partner, D.J. Hogan. Lyndel Meikle, park ranger at the Grant-Kohrs National Historic Site, has compiled a full chronology of all of Kohrs’ cattle brands, with the history and significance of each.

¹⁷John Hakola, “Samuel T. Hauser and the Economic Development of Montana: A Case Study in Nineteenth-Century Frontier Capitalism.” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Indiana, 1961) p. 249.

¹⁸*The New Northwest*, Deer Lodge, September 10, 1886.

¹⁹“Only female cattle,” Kohrs reasoned, since just about the time that the “calves” would be “ready to market,” Canada would have the facilities to ship dressed beef. When Kohrs purchased the 21

advantage of the Canadian leasing system, gaining him access to the yet untouched, bountiful supply of forage just across the Montana border.²⁰ That Kohrs had to pay at least a minimal leasing fee for the grazing ground did not appear to concern him.

Oddly, despite what could easily be interpreted as apprehension about Eastern Montana's overcrowded ranges, Kohrs remained generally optimistic about the pending winter. When asked about insuring his cattle for the coming year, Kohrs commented:

I do not apprehend a hard winter on cattle. It may be cold, but it is heavy snow storms we have to fear, and I don't think we will have them. Besides, despite the dry season, our cattle are fat and strong- in better condition than they were last year.²¹

Later, however, in the same interview, Kohrs contradicted himself, explaining that "while the average condition of the cattle is good, there are not so many fatted cattle as usual, and we only ship in that condition." Were the cattle "fat" and "strong"? Or were they not as "well fattened as usual"? Kohrs seemed rather flippant about the whole matter. Perhaps his indecisive answers reflected the thoughts of a man not well physically. Kohrs had been suffering from a bad case of bronchitis for months.²² Then again, his statements may have reflected his role as a community leader trying to maintain public confidence in the business.²³

year lease, Canada had a much smaller market than the United States. By offering American grazers entry without import duty, Canada could be assured large-scale growth. The leasing system also gave the Canadian government a basis for managing the utilization of the natural forage.

²⁰Robert S. Fletcher, "The End of the Open Range in Eastern Montana," The Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XVI, 1929-30, p. 196. Fletcher includes Conrad Kohrs with the other prominent cattlemen, such as John Conrad D.A.G. Floweree, that took advantage of the Canadian leasing system.

²¹*The New Northwest*, Deer Lodge newspaper, September 10, 1886.

²²Conrad Kohrs Warren and Patricia Nell Warren, eds., Conrad Kohrs, An Autobiography, (Deer Lodge, Montana: Platen Press, 1977) *The New Northwest* article, September 10, 1886, also comments on Kohrs' poor health at the time of the interview.

²³In the Historic Resource Study, Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site (Denver: Denver Service Center, National Park Service, 1979), John Albright suggests that Kohrs' needed to serve as a

While his indecisive words impart one impression, his actions reveal the more methodical and efficient characteristics of Kohrs' trademark personality. Upon securing the lease, Kohrs wired a telegram to Granville Stuart, manager of the Pioneer Cattle Company, requesting that he move the cattle to the new ranges.²⁴ The request, however, was never carried through. In his memoirs, Granville Stuart wrote that Kohrs neglected to state where the lease range was located.²⁵ Even had he known the location of the range, however, Stuart was not in favor of moving the cattle. "It was too late in the season to move cattle a great distance," he reasoned, and furthermore, he did not want to risk pushing them out onto the Canadian Plains where "severe blizzards... swept the open treeless plains that afforded no shelter for stock."²⁶ Instead, Stuart proposed shipping all the beef ready for market, cows as well as steers, and moving the rest, about 5,000 head, north of the Missouri, to the foot of the Little Rockies.²⁷

In August of that year, Samuel Hauser, the other major shareholder in the Pioneer Cattle Company, wired Stuart to tell him that he also was opposed to moving the cattle to Canada, and favored Stuart's plan to winter the cattle across the Missouri, in the Northeastern part of the state.²⁸ In the final outcome, few of the "D-S" cattle were driven to the Canadian Ranges. The partners moved the Sun River "CK" herds to Flat Willow

role model for the community as one possibility, p. 261. Then again, he may have truly believed that it would be a mild winter.

²⁴Phillips, ed., *Pioneering in Montana*, p.231 Granville Stuart did not give an exact date.

²⁵Ibid. It seems rather unlikely that Kohrs would forget to mention the location of the range. However, there is no telegram to prove the story either way

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid. p. 232. See also John W Hakola, "Samuel T Hauser and the Economic Development of Montana," p.250.

²⁸Hakola, "Samuel T. Hauser and the Economic Development of Montana," p. 250.

Creek (near present day Lewistown), and the remainder of the “D-S” herds were driven north of the Milk River Range to be decimated by the “Hard Winter of 1886-87.”²⁹

Three market forces had set the stage for the “Hard Winter of 1886-'87.” First, a beef glut in the Chicago market created a drop in prices. Theorizing that prices would rise the following season, cattlemen did not sell, thus adding to the crowding of the ranges. Meanwhile, during the 1870s, young breeding stock and stock steers from the farms of Illinois, Michigan, Iowa and Missouri, commonly known as “pilgrims,” had been pushed onto the Western ranges to fatten on the cheap forage. Unlike the cattle that had been born and bred in Montana, these young steers were not accustomed to the rigors of a northern winter, making the danger of winter losses correspondingly greater. Finally, on the Southern Ranges, a severe drought in 1885 prompted Texas and New Mexican cattlemen to trail thousands of cattle onto the Northern Ranges. Like the cattle trailed from the East, the Southern cattle, mostly two year olds, were brought to the Western Ranges to fatten on the open range. The cattle that came from the South arrived in poor condition, and as the ranges had already been heavily grazed, the thousands of new arrivals were left unprepared for the harsh winter that followed.³⁰

Fall rains never fell in 1886 leaving no chance for a partial recovery of the heavily grazed grasses. Then, in November, the first arctic cold front swept across the Plains. A warm “Chinook” wind from the Pacific followed the cold front.³¹ The pattern of blizzard and thaw continued for the next few months, and a thick layer of ice glazed over the deep

²⁹Phillips, ed., *Pioneering in Montana*, p. 235.

³⁰Osgood, *Day of the Cattlemen*, pp. 91-94.

³¹“Chinook” is a Native American word for the warm, wet air that moves inland from the Pacific, dumping rains west of the Rockies and flows down the east side in a rush. By the time it hits the plains, it is dry and warmer than when it left the sea.

snow. Cows that did not freeze to death standing in place bled from their noses and at the hocks in their attempts to “rustle” for forage. E.C. Abott (“Teddy Blue”), one of Montana’s best known old time cowboys, narrated a telling description of the massive suffering that ensued:

The cattle drifted on all the rivers, and untold thousands went down the airholes... They would walk out on the ice, and the ones behind would push the front ones in... The Horses’ feet were cut and bleeding from the heavy crust, and the cattle had the hair and hide worn off their legs to the knees and hocks. It was surely hell to see big four-year-old steers just able to stagger along.³²

In the spring, when the snow melted, cattlemen rode to the ranges to assess the damages and discovered more carcasses than live animals. An estimated total loss of 360,000 head of cattle, representing 55 per cent of the cattle believed to be on the ranges in 1886, perished in Montana during the “Hard Winter of 1886-87.” Translated to dollar amount, the total estimated loss to Montana stockmen and outside investors equaled about \$14,000,000.00.³³

All together, Kohrs and Bielenberg lost approximately 2/3 of their “CK” brand herds. In his autobiography, Kohrs wrote that the number of calves branded that spring dropped from 3,000 to 900.³⁴ However, the exact number remains fuzzy because Kohrs ran his “CK” brand cattle with the “D-S” herds. In an article published twenty years after the fact, Kohrs estimated an aggregate loss of 23,000 head of cattle for the Kohrs &

³²E. C. Abbot and Helen Huntington Smith. We Pointed Them North: Recollection of a Cowpuncher. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939), p. 176.

³³Dave Walter. “The Hard Winter of 1886-87.” p. 65. Historians have made impressive efforts to estimate actual losses based on financial ledgers, government documents, and newspaper accounts. However, the haphazard counting practices of the majority of cattle owners and the dubious reports presented to absentee owners and county assessors, make it impossible to give a fully accurate figure.

³⁴Conrad Kohrs, An Autobiography, p. 86.

Bielenberg and Pioneer Cattle Company.³⁵ He estimated total financial losses for Kohrs and Bielenberg at approximately \$30,000.00.³⁶ Regardless of the exact “book count,” Kohrs’ losses in Eastern Montana ranked among those “badly hit,” as other accounts attest to.³⁷

While there is no gainsaying the severity of the losses suffered by Kohrs and Bielenberg during the “Hard Winter of 1886-87,” they could at least take comfort in the knowledge that their best breeding stock, the purebred Shorthorns and Herefords, remained safe in the Deer Lodge Valley, where losses were much lighter. The howling blizzards that “broke” the cowmen of the Plains were not nearly as severe in the western valleys. For instance, Kohrs lost “only one old cow,” of the 200 cattle that he had grazing in the Big Hole Valley.³⁸ Likewise, estimated losses in the Deer Lodge and Beaverhead Valleys averaged 8 per cent, as opposed to the 30 to 50 per cent average losses on the Eastern Plains.³⁹

Milder weather certainly helped, but adaptation to the limits of the environment played an equally large role in the relative success of the intermountain ranchers. Kohrs and Bielenberg had been winter feeding their livestock since Christmas of that year, and

³⁵Conrad Kohrs, “A Veteran’s Experience,” *Breeder’s Gazette*, December 18, 1912, p. 1329. The Pioneer Company record, handwritten by Granville Stuart, shows a loss of 15,081 out of a total 22,622. Pioneer Cattle Company Inventory Record, Conrad Kohrs Papers, M73, Reel 5.

³⁶*The Butte Miner*, July 24, 1920 in Conrad Kohrs Papers, M73, Reel 3.

³⁷See, for example, John Clay, My Life on the Range, pp. 179 - 180; Granville Stuart, Forty Years, Volume II, p. 236; E.C. Abbot, We Pointed Them North, p. 184; and Robert Fletcher, Free Grass to Fences, p. 88. A classic example of exaggerated reporting is found in Edward N. Wentworth, A Biographical Catalogue of the Portrait Gallery of the Saddle and Sirloin Club (Chicago: Union Stock Yards, 1920), p. 143. Wentworth stated that “the severe season of 1886-87 practically ruined Mr Kohrs. His herd was reduced over 90 per cent by death from the cold and starvation.”

³⁸Fletcher, Free Grass to Fences, p. 89.

³⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 88-90.

“owing to the light snow” reported in March that their herds were in “better average condition” than usual for that time of year.⁴⁰

From the beginning, Kohrs had provided native and cultivated grasses to his cattle in the Deer Lodge Valley. Dictating his autobiography to his eldest daughter, Anna, Kohrs recalled that as a child his chores on the farm in Germany included caring for the horses, carrying grain to the mill, and feeding cattle “ground beans.” A significant comment as it proves that growing up, Kohrs had a Northern European notion of animal husbandry characterized by the need to provide winter feed.⁴¹ But his upbringing was not the only reason for Kohrs’ cautious habits. Prior to 1886, Kohrs experienced at least five severe winters in the Deer Lodge Valley.⁴² Recalling his first winter in the Deer Lodge Valley, Kohrs wrote:

On January 1st extremely cold weather set in and it continued cold, the thermometer often getting down below forty degrees [below zero], when quicksilver freezes. On January 27th the wind commenced blowing from the Southwest, a regular Chinook, and thawed heavily. The next day the wind sprung round to the northwest, leaving the snow with a heavy crust and cold weather continued. In March a great many of our cattle commenced dying. We killed the poorest, boiled the meat and mixed chopped hay with it, making a broth, and saved some cattle by feeding them this slop. I paid \$100.00 per ton for the hay I could get.⁴³

⁴⁰*New Northwest*, March 4, 1887. That same article stressed that for the small growers in Eastern Montana, “who nearly all carry some home feed, there will not be crushing losses.”

⁴¹Conrad Kohrs: An Autobiography, p. 1

⁴²*Ibid.* Kohrs mentions the heavy blizzards of 1865-66, 1866-67, 1872-72, and 1874-75, see pp. 42, 43, 58, 63. See also, Kohrs, “A Veteran’s Experience in the Western Cattle Trade.” The Breeder’s Gazette, December 8, 1912, in which Kohrs discusses the “spotted winter” of 1881-82. He estimated a 15% loss for the winter of ‘81.

⁴³*Ibid.* p.43

At “\$100.00 per ton.” it made sense for Kohrs, the cautious business man, to invest in his own hay lands. Between 1866 and 1885, Kohrs purchased 760 acres of prime arable land, in addition to his 160 acre homestead.⁴⁴

Initially, “stirrup high” native grasses distributed along the bench lands and rolling hills provided excellent cattle pasture, and tall grasses, such as Great Basin wild-rye (*Elymus cinereus*), supplied an abundance of native hay.⁴⁵ Kohrs recalled,

When I first reached Montana, the Deer Lodge Valley was one of the most beautiful stretches of bunch grass country imaginable. The grass waved like a huge grain field.⁴⁶

The native grasses didn’t remain long, however. Settlement along the bottomlands of the Deer Lodge Valley meant that more land was plowed for grain crops, and this in turn, resulted in more intense overgrazing. Some of the larger ranchers began supplementing the native hay with non-native species. William Wallace, a rancher who settled in the valley in 1863, was known to carry a bag filled with

⁴⁴Albright, Historic Resource Study, pp. 29, 42, 44, 434-35. Kohrs purchased 280 acres from his brother, John Bielenberg, in 1872. Eight years later, when they added property to this section of land, the transfer of lands from the previous owners was to Conrad Kohrs and John Bielenberg. Property transfers between Kohrs and Bielenberg were a constant part of the business (both ranching and mining). It is doubtful that the title transfers signified changes in the management of the operation. A more plausible explanation is that by shifting titles and consolidating, Kohrs and Bielenberg may have eased their tax burden.

⁴⁵ “Important Grasses on Montana Ranges.” Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 470 (Bozeman, Montana State College, 1951). Rough fescue (*Festuca scrubella*) and bluebunch wheatgrass (*Agropyron spicatum*) rank among the more well known native grasses for pasturing cattle on the benchlands of the valley

⁴⁶Conrad Kohrs, “A Veteran’s Experience in the Western Cattle Trade.” Breeder’s Gazette, December 18, 1912, p. 1329.

Timothy seed (*Phleum pratense*), and as he rode over the ranch he would spread it through his fields.⁴⁷

Irrigating hay fields also began early in the intermountain valleys of western Montana. By 1870, ranchers were diverting mountain streams to flood non-native hay meadows of redtop, timothy, clover, and bluegrass.⁴⁸ Creeks flowing into the Clark Fork River provided a natural irrigation system for the ranchers. Granville Stuart, writing for the *New North-West* in 1872, described the irrigation system developing in the region at that time:

...that which is most convenient for irrigation- is taken up...and very much of it is under fence. The most beautiful and productive of the ranches for grain are those which lie in the recesses of the hills along up the valley where little side streams come down from the mountains, and viewed from the opposite side look like emerald gems set in the niches of the hills.⁴⁹

In the decades to come, many of the ditches constructed for the purpose of placer mining would also be converted into irrigating ditches.⁵⁰

As early as 1868, Kohrs was fencing the lands extending from the Clark Fork River to the home ranch.⁵¹ These fences, constructed with the local timber supply, weren't built to keep the livestock in, but rather, to keep them out. The custom at that time was to fence off the grain crops so that the cattle wouldn't destroy the crops.⁵²

⁴⁷Anna Rosenberg, "Wallace Ranch: A History of Place History," unpublished report for the Nature Conservancy, 1995. Timothy grass can still be found growing in the pastures, today.

⁴⁸Fletcher, *Free Grass to Fences*, p. 129.

⁴⁹*New Northwest*, June 1, 1872.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, February 7, 1890.

⁵¹*United States General Land Office Survey*, Township 8 North, Range 9 West, Surveyed by Walter W Johnson, October 9, 1868. Microfilm available at the Bureau of Land Management, Billings, Montana.

⁵²Kohrs, "A Veteran's Experience," *Breeder's Gazette*, p. 1329 In *The Wire that Fenced the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1965). Henry D. and Frances T McCallum explain that the

Evidently, Kohrs used the bottom lands to raise mature hay, and the bench lands adjoining were plowed for grain.⁵³

Kohrs displayed the same concern for the livestock that wintered in Idaho. The Spring of 1872, Kohrs took several trips to visit his valued foreman, Tom Hooban, who was “fixing up” the ranch he located along the Snake River, in Idaho. This entailed “putting up hay,” as well as “building the cabins and barns.” Hooban’s decision to settle there was no coincidence. Clearly, it “was a great place for hay.”⁵⁴ The following fall, Hooban trailed a herd of 1,200 Texas cattle to the ranch, named “Hooban’s Bottom.”⁵⁵ Although Hooban raised hay and built barns, Kohrs learned of a disappointingly large winter loss the first year. Close to 100 head of the Texas cattle died due to the cold and snow. Upon receiving this news, Kohrs determined to sow excelsior oats at “100 pounds to the acre” at the home ranch.⁵⁶ Evidently, then, Kohrs was consciously reacting and, therefore, adapting to winters long before the “Hard Winter of 1886-87.”

Yet, when Kohrs moved beyond the boundaries of the intermountain valleys, he adopted the methods of the “open range system.”⁵⁷ In the more open, arid country of the eastern plains, Kohrs did not attempt to shelter, feed or fence. Without the natural barriers of steep slopes, so much a part of the development of

“ancient custom of enclosing fields to keep livestock out” was the dominant form of fencing in the West, until the spread of barbed wire in the 1880s.

⁵³United States General Land Office Survey, Township 8 North, Range 9 West, Surveyed by Walter W Johnson, October 9, 1868.

⁵⁴Conrad Kohrs: An Autobiography, p. 58.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Albright, Historic Resource Study, p. 32.

⁵⁷Also called the “Texas ranching system.” Terry Jordan, Cattle Ranching Frontiers, Chapter Seven, “The Anglo-Texan Ranching System.”

ranching in western Montana, roundup districts became the accepted means for gathering animals on the unfenced public domain.

Beginning in the early 1880s, the cattlemen who grazed cattle in Eastern Montana met annually to lay out the roundup districts. The districts followed the drainage basins south of the Missouri and east of the mountains.⁵⁸ In addition to mapping the region, the cattlemen met to discuss the date and place for the organized roundups, conducted twice a year, in the spring and the fall. "Pools," or the collective of cattlemen representing each district, met during the spring roundup to gather and to segregate cattle by brand, as well as to brand new calves. In the fall, the mature cattle were "cut" from the herd, and trailed to the nearest railhead.

Cooperation among cattlemen assumed a secondary role to that of rounding up the wandering cattle. Beginning in the early 1880s, cattlemen created laws to protect "their" property from "Indians, thieves, wild animals and disease."⁵⁹ This was the impetus behind the creation of the Montana Stock Growers' Association, which held its first meeting on February 19, 1879. For the older cattlemen, like Kohrs and Bielenberg, who had witnessed the growth of the cattle business from its inception, the influx of "steermen" from the South presented yet another difficulty.

Competition for feeding grounds was only part of the problem. Spanish longhorns trailed by Southwestern cattlemen presented a direct threat to the stockmen of western

⁵⁸Robert Fletcher. "Organization of the Range Cattle Business in Eastern Montana." Montana State College Agricultural Experiment Station (Bozeman, Montana) June, 1932.

⁵⁹Osgood. The Day of the Cattleman, p. 116. Ironically, the cattleman's success in maintaining *his* share of free pasturage required, on the one hand, a certain amount of negligence regarding the enforcement of public land laws, and on the other hand, it necessitated the assistance of both state and federal government. For instance, cattlemen relied on federal laws to enforce the reduction of Indian reservation lands (to allow for more free grazing lands), and state laws to raise the bounty fees for livestock predators.

Montana since for years they had been consciously, “upgrading their herds.” These leaner, lankier cows did not bring near the prices that the husky shorthorns, Devon bulls and white-faced Herefords received in Chicago. Furthermore, these cattle did not winter as well as the natives. It was up to these older stock growers to protect their cattle from inferior breeding lines.

Kohrs was at the forefront of the movement to regulate the quality, as well as the number of “well conditioned bulls” supplied on the range. At the Montana Stockgrowers’ Association meeting held in 1885, Kohrs presented a proposal suggesting that each stockman be required to supply an equal number of bulls, thereby guaranteeing a good calf crop in the spring. This meant “cutting out” bulls early in the season (by the first of November), and “hay feeding” them through the winter, so that when they were turned out in early June and July, they would be in prime condition to “beget calves.”⁶⁰

If all members conducted a bull roundup, Kohrs argued, “the stockgrowers would be assured that each member was continuing to improve breeds, and fill their quota for spring.” The persuasive document, written by Kohrs and presented to the Montana Stockgrowers’ Association, concluded with the statement:

The great American test applied to all proposal change is ‘Will it pay?’ In this case there can be no doubt about the answer. It will absolutely!⁶¹

Kohrs, ever the cautious business man, argued for the inspection of bulls on the range in order to meet the demands of the market. These were his most valued assets, as they

⁶⁰Proceedings from the Montana Stockgrowers’ Association. Miles City, April 3, 1885. Montana Historical Society Collection, MC 45, Volume 8. Beginning in 1884, the Montana Stockgrowers’ Association held meetings semi-annually Kohrs served as an executive committee member, representing Deer Lodge County.

⁶¹Ibid.

guaranteed him the creation of a high quality product. This concern for the quality of his herds, stemming from economic concerns, demonstrated Kohrs' early desire for a more controlled range.

This same practical business sense determined Kohrs' position with regards to overgrazing on the public domain. In an interview, dictated in Helena in 1885, Kohrs explained that:

It takes 20 acres on a new range to feed one cow, after the range has been grazed two years it will take almost 25 acres and after six years, it will take 40 acres.⁶²

In so stating the case, Kohrs explained that rangelands were more productive if allowed a period of rest. A cow grazing on a fresh range did not require as many acres as one that had been grazed repeatedly on the same range. The grasses needed time to reach full maturity before being grazed to the ground. But each new herd pushed onto the ranges diminished the prolific native ranges.

The extent to which Kohrs attempted to conserve or manage grazing on the open range prior to the "Hard Winter" remains purely speculative. To hold cattle off of the free grasslands, while others rushed to take advantage of every available section of range, might have been too much to ask. Although Kohrs was obviously aware of the need for more and better range, there is no sign that he was willing to reduce the size of his herds. On the other hand, Kohrs did fight to create policies that would protect the quality of his steers, demonstrating that if Kohrs did not wish for an end to the open range system, at a minimum he wished for more management of the herds that grazed on the public domain.

⁶² "Conrad Kohrs, Helena, Montana, 1885." Montana Historical Society, [Small Collections # 222](#).

As the story of the aftermath of the “Hard Winter” passed down to later generations, Kohrs’ plan to move the cattle to the Cypress Hills, in Canada, became somewhat of a legend in the Kohrs family. As his grandson, Conrad Warren, told it, Kohrs wired Stuart in early June, telling him to “gather the cattle and drive them to the new range.” Granville “never answered him,” leaving Kohrs to “assume” that the cattle were taken as planned. It followed that:

they had an easy winter up there in that part of the country [Canada]. It missed that part of the country and hit this part of the country... grandfather never thought much of Granville after that.⁶³

In this version of the story, if Granville Stuart had done what Kohrs asked him to do, there wouldn’t have been a “Hard Winter,” at least not for the Pioneer Cattle Company. However, since Kohrs’ correspondence records don’t date to this period, it is difficult to substantiate his grandson’s claim. In his autobiography, Kohrs does not mention any early interactions with Granville Stuart, except to state that “Granville Stuart denied the loss until after the spring roundup, when he found that the branding had dropped from 3,000 to 900.”⁶⁴

While the myths surrounding the “Hard Winter” remain just that, there are definite facts that fall into the category of truth. Long before the Hard Winter of 1886-87, Kohrs

⁶³Rex Myers, “Interview with Conrad Warren.” Deer Lodge, Montana, July 10, 1980. Tape 2. Grant-Kohrs Oral History Project, pp. 47-48.

⁶⁴Conrad Kohrs: An Autobiography, p.83. A fascinating letter from Mrs. Granville Stuart to Philip R. Barbour, dated October 11, 1940, explains Granville Stuart’s position, at least from his second wife’s perspective. She writes, “You need not let this get to Kohrs but it is the truth... They are determined to make out that Con Kohrs was the great Cattle King and I suppose he was but I would not like to know that Granville ever stупed to the cold blooded trickery that Con Kohrs did.” Kohrs’ “cold blooded trickery,” presumably refers to Kohrs’ plan for “increasing the herd and free grass” vs. Stuart’s plans for “buying irrigated ranches, cutting down the herds” and preparing to “feed winters and graze summers.” There is no other evidence to corroborate Mrs. Stuart’s claim. See MC 95 Box 3, The Philip Barbour Papers, Montana Historical Society

had begun to irrigate native and cultivated grasses, fence crops, and provide winter feed for his cattle that grazed in the intermountain valleys of western Montana and Idaho. Meanwhile, on the plains of eastern Montana, Kohrs had advocated for a more disciplined, organized system of grazing cattle on the public domain, specifically, with the idea to protect the quality of his cattle. In so doing, Kohrs displayed the very traits that would allow him to master the rapid changes affecting the cattle industry of the late nineteenth-century.

Chapter 4:

Recovery, Growth and Continuity, 1887-1900

Nature, while imposing some handicaps, has done much for humanity in this vast region and humanity has ever manifested an ability to make the most of nature's lavishness

--Conrad Kohrs, 1912¹

In the thirteen year period following the "Hard Winter," Kohrs remained at the forefront of the range cattle business linking the northern plains to the Chicago stockyards. Relying on the financial support of investors and stock commissioners, Kohrs rebuilt his herds with stock of quality and bred further to improve that quality.

Concurrently, in the Deer Lodge Valley, Kohrs and Bielenberg acquired an additional 20,000 acres. These two factors, breed specialization and the consolidation of the Kohrs and Bielenberg land holdings, permitted the efficiency and reliability necessary for the production of quality beef for the nation's growing urban population.

It is hard to imagine what it must have been like to travel through Eastern Montana that spring of 1887 with the stench from thousands of rotting carcasses strewn across the Plains. For many cattlemen the sight was too much to bear. Granville Stuart, Pioneer Cattle Company bookkeeper, and esteemed Montana pioneer, stated:

a business that had been fascinating to me before, suddenly became distasteful. I wanted no more of it. I never wanted to own again an animal that I could not feed and shelter.²

¹Conrad Kohrs. "A Veteran's Experience in the Western Cattle Trade." *Breeder's Gazette*, December 18, 1912, p. 1401.

²Paul C. Phillips, ed., Forty Years on the Frontier as Seen in the Journals and Reminiscences of Granville Stuart, Volume II. (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1925), pp. 237-238. This quote is cited in practically every history of the "Hard Winter." See for example, Ernest Osgood, Day of the Cattlemen, Third edition, (Chicago: Phoenix Press, 1960); Gene Gressley, Bankers and Cattlemen, (New York: Knopf, 1966); Michael Malone, Richard Roeder and William Lange,

Stuart's sympathetic response, although quoted by almost every historian of the "Hard Winter," was not typical of all Montana cattlemen. In February of 1887, Kohrs, who had just returned from a medical trip in New York, met a fellow stockgrower, Mr. Broadwater, who informed him of the large losses, to which Kohrs responded, "Broadwater, I have my health and that is worth more than the cattle."³ Kohrs felt the loss financially, but the extent to which he felt the loss emotionally remains less clear.⁴

If, in the aftermath of the Hard Winter, Kohrs experienced moments of self-doubt, they passed quickly. While others, such as Granville Stuart, at least temporarily rejected the business, Kohrs persisted with the same tenaciousness he had when he arrived to the Deer Lodge Valley twenty-five years earlier.⁵ The prominent Scott cattleman, John Clay, wrote this telling anecdote about his friend,

In his lifetime Mr. Kohrs had many financial adventures. As he used to say to me, 'I guess, John Clay, I have been broke more oftener than any man in the West, but I have always taken it cheerfully and gone to work again.'⁶

Persistence, determination and generous loans from bankers and stock commissioners united to propel Kohrs forward after the devastating losses of 1886-87.⁷

Montana: A History of Two Centuries, Revised edition. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993); and Robert Fletcher, Free Grass to Fences, (New York: University Publishers Inc., 1960).

³Conrad Kohrs: An Autobiography, p. 86.

⁴That spring Kohrs assumed Stuart's role as manager of the Pioneer Cattle Company Phillips, ed., Forty Years on the Frontier, p.238.

⁵By 1889, Granville Stuart was also back in business, although never on the same scale as Kohrs.

⁶John Clay, "The Passing of Conrad Kohrs," Breeder's Gazette, December 2, 1920.

⁷Kohrs' mining interests do not appear to have significantly aided him during the recovery period. Kohrs' statement that, "we made good money in 1888 and 1889," is only partially confirmed in the ledgers. The Pioneer Placer Mine Ledger, 1887-1895, shows that the Squaw Gulch Mine had a net profit of \$2,367.97 in 1888 and \$1,153 in 1889. However, the More and Wisner Mining Ground showed a net loss of \$3,370.01 for 1889. The next entry for More and Wisner Mining showed "\$1,331.40 water money due to Rock Creek Ditch." CK Papers.M73, University of

“One of the bright spots of the season.” Kohrs recalled of the year 1887, “was the kindness of Mr. A. J. Davis.”⁸ Andrew Davis, a prominent Butte banker and partner in the Pioneer Cattle Company, offered Kohrs a \$100,000.00 loan without any security “except the notes of Kohrs and Bielenberg.”⁹ The confidence of such a friend, recalled Kohrs, “added to my courage and I was very happy.”¹⁰ Friendship alone did not prompt Davis’ generosity. An equally precocious businessman, Davis had seen Kohrs’ past success, and was confident that Kohrs’ knowledge of the business guaranteed future returns.¹¹

Apparently, loaning on faith was more typical than exceptional. Gene Gressley, an expert on the relationship between bankers and cattlemen of the 19th-century, stated:

Again and again one fact about cattle financing comes to the fore: in the early era of the industry, it was a matter of personal relationship... A marginal operation- highly speculative for most investors, with returns constantly in doubt- forced investors to operate on faith as to their ultimate reward.¹²

Gene Gressley’s thesis is substantiated further by the fact that Andrew Davis was not the only faithful banker to help support Kohrs after the “Hard Winter.” Learning of the disastrous collapse, Joseph Rosenbaum, the highly successful stock commissioner, called together all the Montana cattlemen and volunteered to lend them a million dollars to assist in recouping their losses.¹³ Kohrs and Bielenberg were amongst the debtors that accepted the generous offer.¹⁴

Montana, Reel 4. It is difficult to determine how much of this profit was reinvested merely to keep Kohrs’ mining interest afloat.

⁸ Conrad Kohrs: An Autobiography, p.86.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 87

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 86.

¹¹ It took three years for Kohrs to pay back his debt to Davis. Rex Myers, “Interview with Conrad Warren.” Grant-Kohrs Ranch Oral History Project (Deer Lodge, 1980) Tape 10, p. 222.

¹² Gene Gressley, Bankers and Cattlemen, p.168.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 184.

¹⁴ The Portrait Gallery of the Saddle and Sirloin Club, p.143.

In the spring of 1888, Kohrs hired Dick Williams, a man “well acquainted all over the country,” for “five dollars per day” to assist with the purchasing of steers to rebuild his herds.¹⁵ The buying began in Boise Valley, Idaho, continued in Ontario, Oregon and finished in Malheur, Idaho.¹⁶ All together, Kohrs purchased 9,000 steers for which he paid “\$10.00 for yearlings, \$14.00 for twos, and \$18.00 for three year olds.”¹⁷ The majority of the cattle were shipped directly to Big Sandy, just northeast of Fort Benton, near the bend of the Missouri River. These constituted the “CK” herds (Kohrs and Bielenberg). The rest of the steers were shipped to Bowdoin, southeast of Fort Benton, to restock the Pioneer Cattle Company herds.¹⁸ Ironically, the forced liquidation of the “Hard Winter” had reduced overgrazing, at least temporarily, and, spring rains the following year produced a thick blanket of lush range grass on the eastern ranges-- extra support for cattlemen, like Kohrs and Bielenberg, that remained in the business.

Kohrs also used Texas cattle to rebuild his range herds. But as usual his methods were atypical. Unlike the Southern “steermen” who bought their Texas bred steers north to fatten for a couple of years before being shipped to market, Kohrs purchased heifers and “graded up” by crossing them with his purebred bulls.¹⁹ The benefits of this system were felt three and four years later, when Kohrs sold his high-grade calves.²⁰

¹⁵Conrad Kohrs: An Autobiography, p. 87

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸CK Papers, M73, Reel 5. Pioneer Cattle Company records for 1888 list 2,348 Idaho steers “bought by Kohrs”; and for 1889, 2,476 Idaho steers “bought by Kohrs.”

¹⁹Conrad Kohrs, “A Veteran’s Experience in the Western Cattle Trade,” p.1329. There is no record of this in the Pioneer Cattle Company records, which suggests that they brought the Texas cattle to the Fort Benton ranges, with the rest of the CK herds.

²⁰*New Northwest*, October 4, 1893.

Kohrs also benefited from his time-acquired skill for selecting high-grade cattle. For instance, while on a buying trip in Idaho, Kohrs encountered stockmen who were selling a herd of “fine four year old steers” at \$25 per head.²¹ The stockmen had “never shipped east and were timid about undertaking it.”²² Knowing a deal when he found one, Kohrs contacted Andrew Davis and told him he thought there would be “a nice profit in the trade.” Although Kohrs had already spent the initial \$100,000 loan, Davis wisely agreed to finance the deal.²³ Kohrs proceeded to pick out the best cattle. Those not sent to the range were shipped to the Chicago stockyards where the cattle netted a clean \$15 per head profit.²⁴ Examples such as this demonstrate the reason for Kohrs’ famed approval amongst Chicago’s livestock financiers.

After two years of steadily replacing their range herds, Kohrs and Bielenberg were paying one of the highest taxes in eastern Montana’s Choteau County. In 1889, the brothers paid an aggregate tax of \$1757.34 for an estimated total real property value of \$112,786.00.²⁵ Since neither Kohrs nor Bielenberg had major land holdings in Eastern Montana, the taxes represented total estimated value of cattle and horses. At an average price of approximately \$15 per head, the figure accounted for 7,520 head of cattle on the Fort Benton ranges.²⁶ In comparison, the 1889 tax lists showed that the Pioneer Cattle

²¹ Conrad Kohrs, An Autobiography, p. 92

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid. The information regarding Davis’ credit extension comes from Rex Myers’ “Oral interview with Conrad Warren.” Tape 10, p. 22.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Choteau County Tax Lists, 1888-1900, Fort Benton Court House.

²⁶ Average price per head of cattle in Montana comes from the annual livestock report for the House of Representatives, Executive Documents for the First Session of the Fifty Second Congress, 1891-92, Volume 38 (Washington: Government Printing Office), p. 313.

Company paid only \$189.40 tax for their range herds on the Fort Maginnis Range, in Fergus County.²⁷

Reassembling the herds on the Eastern range did not preclude attention to the Deer Lodge ranch. In 1890, Kohrs and Bielenberg added 7,705 acres to the home ranch.²⁸ Of the 7,705 acres, 5,630 acres were purchased directly from the Northern Pacific Railroad at approximately \$1.74 per acre. Another 1,435 acres were appropriated under the Desert Lands Act (at 25 cents per acre); the remaining 640 acres came from half-brother, Charles Bielenberg, for a fee of \$1.00.²⁹

That same year also witnessed a major addition to the home ranch: a two-story brick building with basement, living and dining rooms, a kitchen, and pantry and a second floor containing bedrooms. Gas lighting and indoor running-water also date to the 1890 additions. On the south side of the brick addition, a carbide gas generator provided light

²⁷Fergus County Tax Lists, 1887-1891. Lewistown Court House. There is the chance that the Pioneer Cattle Company had already moved most of their cattle to the northeastern ranges. Unfortunately, there is no way to confirm this using tax lists since the assessment roles for both Dawson and Valley County were literally "burned." Neither Kohrs nor the Pioneer Cattle Company appear in the Fergus County tax lists after 1891

²⁸Powell County Transcribed Deed, Powell County Courthouse, Book 5, pp. 66, 73, 74, 431 and 432; Book 7, p. 182.

²⁹Ibid. The Desert Land Act of 1877, one in a series of public land laws designed to settle the "vacant lands in the West," stated that any settler might purchase 640 acres of land (for 25 cents per acre) if he would irrigate it within three years after filing. The law, intended as a means of encouraging farmers to irrigate and settle the desert country, was a complete failure. In many cases the nearest water supply was so inaccessible that it would have required at least three years just to construct the ditch to bring the water to the lands making it impossible for the honest settler to take advantage of the law. Instead, cattle kings, like Kohrs and Bielenberg, took advantage of this act to acquire pasture land at give-away prices. Technically speaking, it was impossible under the law to acquire more than 640 acres. But cattlemen circumvented the law by fraudulent means. In this case, Kohrs and Bielenberg filed for their 640 acres separately, even though they were operating as one ranch. Kohrs' wife, Augusta, also filed for an additional 200 acres. For the specifics of the Desert Land Act, see Roy Robbins, Our Landed Heritage: The Public Domain, 1776-1936 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1962), pp. 218-219.

for the entire house.³⁰ The water came from a hydraulic ram located in the northwest pastures about 400 yards from the house. The ram, housed in a sunken wooden box about four feet by eight feet and about four feet in depth, received a steady supply of water from a spring at the site and was further supplemented by a tap off the Kohrs-Manning Ditch.³¹ The water was then propelled into the house by wooden pipes sunk into the pasture. Once in the house, the water flowed to various spigots and water heaters located throughout. Of the remodel, Kohrs wrote:

The new addition to the house proved a great comfort. The furnace, water-works and gas plant gave us all the conveniences of the city and lightened the burdens of the housekeeper perceptibly- no carrying of wood for six or seven stoves and filling of lamps.³²

The land purchases and the house remodel suggest that as early as 1890, Kohrs and Bielenberg had pretty well recovered financially.³³

Although there is no firm knowledge of the motives behind the tremendous land acquisitions, the most logical explanation is that Kohrs and Bielenberg purchased the lands for pasturing the growing herds of high-quality cattle and thoroughbred horses.³⁴ Maintaining high-quality bulls at the home ranch was an important asset for the Kohrs and Bielenberg cattle business. In addition to upgrading their range herds, the purebred

³⁰ John Albright, Historic Resource Study and Historic Structure Report for the Kohrs and Bielenberg Home Ranch, Grant-Kohrs National Historic Site, Montana (Denver Service Center: National Park Service, 1979), pp. 194-195.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Conrad Kohrs: An Autobiography, pp. 93-94.

³³ Although purchased at give-away rates, the total cost of the land acquisitions came to \$10,000.00, a significant sum of money in the 19th-century

³⁴ Kohrs had also witnessed the rapid development of the valley with more and more ranchers, sheep-growers, stockmen and breeders settling the public domain every year. There is the possibility, therefore, that Kohrs and half-brother Bielenberg decided to invest in land that they knew could be sold at a profit. After the turn-of-the-century, Kohrs invested heavily in real estate throughout Montana. His investments included the Higgins Block in Missoula as well as entire blocks in Helena and Butte.

Shorthorn and Hereford bulls were sold as herd-sires to stockraisers throughout the state.³⁵ On average the bulls sold for between \$50.00 and \$150.00 per head, depending on the market and the purity of the pedigree.³⁶ The ranch sold mostly Hereford and Shorthorn crosses, a combination that produced vigorous cows better able to withstand the northern climate. Ironically, the cross-breeds were more accidental than intentional. In a letter to a Wyoming customer, Kohrs explained that:

My herd has grown so large that I could not afford pasture room for each distinct and individual family and have been compelled to turn the different families of Hereford and Short horns into one general herd. the ranch has been a [mix] of the different bloods and are producing choice cross bred animals. In many instances the cross has not taken place and the blood of the Hereford or Short horn remains pure as ever yet under the circumstances I am unable to give you a truthful Herd Book pedigree to the animal.³⁷

Ultimately, “pedigree” papers mattered less to Kohrs than the performance of the animal. In fact, he never paid any attention to the registration papers.³⁸ As always, Kohrs focused on the important details: raising cattle that would survive the winter, produce healthy calves and bring good prices the following season.

Another reason for the growth of the home ranch may be attributed to the success of the Kohrs and Bielenberg horse business. Initially, the brothers became involved in the

³⁵Letterpress A and B, Reel 1, CK Papers, M73, University of Montana. The subject of much of the outgoing correspondence from the Deer Lodge Ranch involves the selling of bulls. See for example, Letterpress A, 195, July 14, 1893; A, 322, February 7, 1893; A, 323, February 7, 1893; Letterpress B, 46, April 8, 1895; B.65, February 16, 1897; B.70, March 18, 1897; B.76, May 5, 1897; B.91, October 27, 1897; B.93, November 3, 1897; B101, December 4, 1897. B.115, January 27, 1898; B, 132, March 28, 1898; B153, October 2, 1898; B, 166, January 11, 1899

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Letterpress A.50, April 4, 1892, CK Papers, M73, University of Montana.

³⁸Fergus Mitchell, “The History of the Pure Bred Shorthorn and Hereford in Montana.” (M.A. Thesis, Montana State College, Bozeman, 1923), p. 10. There are no footnotes for this thesis, however, from the writing, it appears that Mitchell personally interviewed both Kohrs and Bielenberg. He writes, “Before Kohrs went out of the business he had collected a whole trunk full of registration papers which he stated he had never read.”

business of breeding horses for their own use. Basically, they needed a horse big enough to rope a large Hereford-Shorthorn cross, and this resulted in the crossing of imported Thoroughbreds and the native Cayuse mares. About 130 “Dutch K” (brand) geldings were used for the “CK” roundups. Each of the fifteen roundup riders had 8 horses in his personal string- “one quite horse for night herding, and seven ‘Circle horses’ that also could rope and cut.”³⁹ What began as a hobby for improving the roundup herds grew into a profitable business. In the 1890s, the ranch imported Shires, Clydesdales, Standardbreds, Thoroughbreds and Norman Coach horses.⁴⁰

Of the two men, Bielenberg was the more expert as a horseman.⁴¹ Bielenberg took charge of the breeding, foaling, training and sales of the “Big Circle horses.”⁴² According to his nephew, Bielenberg “used haying” to break the horses.⁴³ Horse buyers would come to the hay fields to watch the horses mow the fields. If sufficiently impressed, the horse buyers would purchase all five horses as a “hay team.” The average price for a team was about \$400.00.⁴⁴ In addition, Bielenberg raised prize race horses that won awards in cities on the East and West coasts.⁴⁵ These sold for as high as \$1000.00 per horse.⁴⁶ The ranch also sold high-quality stage coach horses. Marcus Daly, owner of the greatest copper

³⁹Patricia Nell Warren. “Horses for the Big Circle.” Persimmon Hill, Volume 16, Winter 1989, Number 4, p. 37 During the “pool roundups,” which involved several cooperating outfits, as many as 600 or 700 horses were needed to gather the 15-20,000 head of cattle.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 35.

⁴¹Ibid, p.35. Myers, “Interview with Conrad Warren.” Tape 2, transcription, p. 32.

⁴²Warren. “Horses for the Big Circle,” p.37.

⁴³Rex Myers. “Interview with Conrad Warren,” Tape 1, transcribed, pp. 17, 32.

⁴⁴Ibid, p.17

⁴⁵Letterpress Book A.104, May 10, 1892. CK Papers, M73, Reel 1, University of Montana.

⁴⁶The racehorse, “Carmen,” and the yearling, “Regent,” were advertised for “no less than \$2,000!” Letterpress Book A104, May 10, 1892. CK Papers, M73, Reel 1 Letterpress A85, April 23, 1892; A192, June 13, 1893; A202-203, July 19, 1893; A316-317, October 10, 1895; Letter press B36, May 11, 1894; B39, February 16, 1895; B57, June 12, 1896; B148, June 1, 1898; B170, February 2, 1899, CK Papers, M73, Reel 1.

producing mine (Anaconda), purchased the first pair of trotting horses for the expensive sum of \$700.00.⁴⁷ Thus, although overshadowed by the cattle business, the raising and selling of draft and race horses played a significant role in the overall success of the Kohrs and Bielenberg partnership of the late nineteenth-century.⁴⁸ It is logical to argue, therefore, that the tremendous land acquisitions in the Deer Lodge Valley were connected to the growth of the horse business.

While the growth of the home ranch demonstrated at least a partial awareness of the need to adapt to a shrinking public domain, Kohrs continued to rely primarily on the free grass in Eastern Montana to support his thriving livestock business. Tax records, although few and far between, indicate that Kohrs had cattle grazing throughout the central and northeastern part of the state.⁴⁹ During the peak years of the horse business, Kohrs and Bielenberg also had large herds of well bred draft horses grazing along the Milk River Valley in northeastern Montana.⁵⁰ The “Hard Winter” did not appear to have effected Kohrs’ ranching methods in the eastern part of the state.

Crowded ranges and the constant threat of another “hard winter” did not deter Kohrs. In a letter to his close friend and business partner, Reece Anderson, post marked December of 1892, Kohrs noted that, “Texas cattle are coming in more plentiful than ever

⁴⁷Conrad Kohrs: *An Autobiography*, p. 96.

⁴⁸In her article, “Horses for the Big Circle C.” Patricia Nell Warren wrote that in the nineteenth-century, “total annual horse sales [for the Kohrs and Bielenberg home ranch] exceeded the Shorthorn sales by far.” While this may be true, it is not apparent from the financial sources available in the Conrad Kohrs Papers.

⁴⁹In 1892, Kohrs and Bielenberg paid \$635.80 in Choteau County and \$673.17 in Dawson County. The Pioneer Cattle Company paid \$1,252.00 and \$1,209.05 in the same counties, respectively. Taxes for Choteau County are listed in the Letterpress A, p. 132, as well as the Choteau County Tax Lists at the Fort Benton Court House. Taxes for Dawson county appear randomly in the Conrad Kohrs Collection. Letterpress Book A, *CK Papers M73*, Reel 1, pp. 131 and 350, for 1892 and 1897

⁵⁰Conrad Kohrs, “A Veteran s Experience in the Western Cattle Trade.” p. 1329. Kohrs does not provide a date, but most likely he is referring to the early 1890s.

before, of which 185,000 came to the state this year."⁵¹ Of these 185,000 cattle, 26,000 grazed on the same ranges as Kohrs'.⁵² The crowding was compounded further by the addition of 30,000 head of sheep.⁵³ These figures parallel the general livestock trends occurring throughout the state. In 1891, there were an estimated 932,697 cattle as compared to 633,716 cattle in 1886.⁵⁴ Even more impressive than the rapid recovery of the cattle numbers was the enormous increase in the number. By 1891, there were an estimated 2,089,337 on the Montana ranges.⁵⁵ These statistics show that overstocking of the ranges did not appear to decline in the years immediately following the "hard winter."

Furthermore, Kohrs' refusal to herd fewer animals on the range implied a certain acceptance of the problems associated with overstocking. In the same letter to Reece Anderson, Kohrs lamented that:

Warm Springs Creek on which we have kept a large number of our breeding herd, about the only running stream in our range, is getting fenced up by grangers and sheepmen, consequently, our cattle can't get to water.⁵⁶

Overstocking and the fencing of the range, Kohrs concluded, meant disaster, if there should be another "hard winter."⁵⁷ Despite dire predictions, however, Kohrs did not move the herds off the range.

The winter of 1892-93 was even worse than he predicted. Writing to an investor, E.G. Bailey of New York, Kohrs warned:

⁵¹Letterpress Book A, pp. 149-153, Kohrs to Reece Anderson, December 1892, CK Papers M73.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Executive Document, First Session of the 52nd Congress, 1891-92, Volume 38 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1892), p. 313; Annual Report of the Auditor and Treasurer of the Territory of Montana, 1886.

⁵⁵Executive Document, First Session of the 52nd Congress, 1891-92, Volume 38 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1892), p. 313.

⁵⁶Letterpress Book A, pp. 149-153, Kohrs to Reece Anderson, December 1892, CK Papers M73.

⁵⁷Ibid. The herd numbered about 11,000 head at that point.

losses this winter will be quite heavy, our winter has been longer and colder then the one we had in 1886-87... snow last Sunday was still from 6 to 16 inches deep on our range with a heavy crust... the cattle are very poor. and will not stand much more cold weather, if winter should break now our losses will be from 30 to 40 per cent on our range cattle.⁵⁸

Four months later, Kohrs wrote to the Rosenbaum Brothers. “no change in the weather still winter... no grass... the latest spring we have had for the 31 years I live in Montana.”⁵⁹ At final count, the “CK” herds ranging north of the Milk River lost more cattle than during the winter of 1886-87. Kohrs reported a loss of 50 per cent on his native steers and between 60 and 80 per cent on the young steers he had brought from Texas the year before.⁶⁰ In financial terms, the losses amounted to \$175,000.00.⁶¹

Yet, overall, the repeat of another severe winter appears to have had less of an impact on Kohrs’ well being than the disloyalty of his long-time foreman, John Smith. In a detailed letter, to his friend and stock commissioner, Joseph Rosenbaum, Kohrs wrote that John Smith left without notice to join another outfit and took the entire crew with him. This left Kohrs with an inexperienced roundup crew and a “great deal of unnecessary expenses.”⁶² The roundup system relied on the hard work and honesty of the foreman and his crew. Without them, keeping cattle ownership straight, settling water-hole rights, and controlling cattle theft were impossible. A foreman’s desertion meant extra work and time, of which Kohrs had neither. “Take it all around,” Kohrs wrote,

I have had more trouble in business this spring and winter then I have ever had before, large losses in hard winters have never worked on my mind [like] this petty trouble.⁶³

⁵⁸Letterpress Book A₂, pp. 159-160, January 16, 1893, CK Papers M73, Reel 1.

⁵⁹Ibid. pp. 163-164. Kohrs to Rosenbaum, April 28, 1893.

⁶⁰Ibid. pp. 187-188. Kohrs to D.J. Hogan, June 15, 1893.

⁶¹Ibid. pp. 184-186, Kohrs to Rosenbaum, June 17, 1893.

⁶² Ibid. pp. 94-100. Kohrs to Rosenbaum, May 6, 1892.

⁶³Ibid.

For Kohrs, a disloyal foreman was worse than the severest winter. From his earliest years in Montana Kohrs had been coping with “hard winters” and he was prepared to continue to do so. As he stated, “experience has taught me to be careful as ... hard winter[s] hardly run far[ther] apart than five years.”⁶⁴ Deceitfulness, on the other hand, was new to Kohrs and John Smith’s actions caught him off guard.⁶⁵

Even with the heavy losses of 1892-93, Kohrs made a profit on the remainder of the herd.⁶⁶ Following the advice of the Chicago commission men, Kohrs held his cattle until the fall, when prices were expected to rise.⁶⁷ He ordered hay for the Malta range; 150 tons at \$4 per ton, explaining that “I want the hay well stacked,... 18 feet at the base” and “properly taped so that [the] wind cannot blow off [the] top.” To support himself until the fall shipments, Kohrs turned to his faithful investors, the Rosenbaum Brothers, and asked, “should you be easy and could spare some money until shipping time commences [sic] let me know... I have no money.”⁶⁸ In October of that same year, 1893, Kohrs’ name appeared amongst the “heavy cattle shippers of eastern Montana,” having reportedly loaded 40 cars (about 20 cattle per car) from the Malta railhead.⁶⁹

In the fall of 1893, Kohrs resumed the routine of restocking the range herds. Money was not a problem, as Kohrs reported, “I have plenty of money offered to me at

⁶⁴Letterpress Book A, pp. 163-164, December, 1892, CK Collection, M73.

⁶⁵ Unfortunately, Kohrs does not mention the reason for Smith’s desertion. A careful study of the Coburn and Milner ranch histories might reveal more of the story. Kohrs indicates that Smith left to work for Milner’s operation, and both Coburn and Milner dropped out of the Bear Paw Pool that same year

⁶⁶Conrad Kohrs: An Autobiography, p. 94.

⁶⁷*New Northwest*, “Beef Cattle and Wool,” June 21, 1893; “Beef Cattle Shipments,” July 19, 1893

⁶⁸Letterpress Book A, CK Papers M73, Reel 1, pp. 184-186, June 17, 1893.

⁶⁹*New Northwest*, October 4, 1893.

present.”⁷⁰ This time, however, it was John Boardman (Kohrs’ son-in-law), who traveled to Idaho to pick next year’s yearlings for the eastern ranges.⁷¹ John Boardman and Kohrs’ eldest daughter, Anna Kohrs, married in the spring of 1891.⁷² The celebrated union gained Kohrs a new manager, as well as a new son-in-law. Immediately, Boardman received managerial status of the eastern ranges. This meant he had the authority to select cattle for purchase, pay the hired hands, cancel shipments if railroad rates were too high, and generally take care of the daily financial concerns of the business.⁷³ Even against his better judgment, Kohrs allowed his son-in-law to experiment. Whereas, Kohrs preferred to buy two-year-olds, “on account of running less risk,” Boardman chose to purchase calves, with the idea of winter feeding them at the home ranch and bringing them to the range in early May.⁷⁴ Increasingly, then, Kohrs was letting his son-in-law assume new management techniques for the eastern herds. In the years to come, as Kohrs slowly retired from the business, he allowed his son-in-law to take more control of the operations. As he recalled in his autobiography, by 1894,

Aside from planning, I took no active part in the purchases. My son-in-law and his assistants managed the work.⁷⁵

⁷⁰Letterpress Book A, CK Papers M73, Reel 1, Conrad Kohrs to D.J. Hogan, December 26, 1893.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²The wedding warranted front page headlines in the Deer Lodge newspaper as “one of the most brilliant weddings ever celebrated in Montana.” *New Northwest*, April, 1, 1891.

⁷³Letterpress Book A, pp. 101-103. Kohrs to Rosenbaum, May 6, 1892; pp. 101-103. Boardman to Cripples, May 10, 1892; pp. Boardman Isadore Mayer, June 8, 1893; pp. 180-181, June 10, 1893, CK Papers, M73.

⁷⁴Letterpress Book A, pp. 232-234. December 26, 1893, CK Papers M73.

⁷⁵Conrad Kohrs: An Autobiography, p. 97 The same could be said of the home ranch where increasingly Bielenberg assumed management of the business affairs (i.e. most of the correspondence in Letterpress B, 1892-1902, are written and signed by John Bielenberg). The shift in management may have been related to a fall Kohrs took while inspecting the ditches and mines at Rock Creek. Kohrs fell from a bridge, “horse and all” and hit the pommel of the saddle. The fall laid him up for a “number of days” and Kohrs claimed that he “never recovered” from the injury. At the time of the fall he was 59 years old.

Still, Kohrs made sure to be at “all the shipments.” and he rarely missed a roundup.⁷⁶

If Kohrs had less direct management of the herds, he certainly did not retire completely from the range cattle business. For one thing, there was still too much insecurity to leave the operations completely under the direction of outsiders even if they were family. The winter of 1893-94 proved to be even more difficult than the previous year. In a letter to Samuel Hauser, a partner in the Pioneer Cattle Company, Kohrs stated:

the winter of 1893 was a disastrous one in the affairs of our Company. The losses...exceed in my estimation the loss of the winter of 1886-87.⁷⁷

The Pioneer Cattle Company lost 9,449 head of cattle, amounting to 65 per cent of the “D-S” cattle.⁷⁸

The heavy losses, no doubt a result of continued overstocking on the eastern ranges, did not stop Kohrs. The next season, Kohrs followed the expected pattern with shipments from Idaho and Oregon to restock the herds.⁷⁹ Again, the financial support of the Rosenbaum Brothers appears to have been a major factor in Kohrs’ recovery.⁸⁰ Throughout the 1890s, the Rosenbaum Commission Firm continued to assist Kohrs’ cattle operations by advancing funds on anticipated sales.⁸¹ Indeed, Kohrs’ financial records provide more support for historian Gene Gressley’s conclusion that, “the Western range cattle industry during the last two decades of the nineteenth century was operated basically on borrowed capital.”⁸² But, whereas, Gressley describes frustrated cattlemen,

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Letterpress Book A, pp. 242-244. Kohrs to Hauser, February 10, 1894, CK Papers, M73.

⁷⁸Pioneer Journal, Cattle Inventory Record, Reel 5, CK Papers M73, Reel 5.

⁷⁹Letterpress Book A, pp. 251-254. Kohrs to R. Williams, April 23, 1894, CK Papers M73, Reel 1
Boardman made the trip West to gather the new range herds.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Letterpress Book A. Conrad Kohrs to Mssrs. Rosenbaum & Co., June 17, 1893. February 2, 1898:
March 12, 1899. CK Papers M73.

⁸²Gene Gressley, Bankers and Cattlemen, p. 145.

who “dreamed about surplus[es] that never materialized.” Kohrs’ story is one of overall success. Despite the drastic up-and-down fluctuations of the range cattle economy, Kohrs’ business continued to grow through to the end of the nineteenth-century. The “hard winter” did not stop Kohrs from continuing to supply the Chicago market with high-quality, fat, range fed steers.

One explanation for Kohrs’ continued success is that he never gave full control to the commission firms. In contrast to other operations that ostensibly gave the commission firms the power to manipulate their cattle company according to the demands of the Union Stockyards, Kohrs retained enough power to control his product. The commission firm may have specified the age of the cattle, and the price in return may have been determined by the market conditions prevailing when the cattle arrived in the stockyards, but Kohrs ultimately made the most important decision: he selected the type of cattle he wished to graze, be it on public or private domain.

For instance, Kohrs never became a full participant in the “feeder system” that dominated the industry by the mid-1880s. The term “feeder cattle” referred to steers that were shipped from the Western ranges to midwestern feedlots, where they were fattened on corn before shipped to their final destination at the Chicago stockyards. The “feeder” cattle system maximized the efficiency of meat production. Whereas under normal conditions cattle lost weight in the winter, using the “feeder system” cattle could be shipped off in the fall and fattened on corn through the winter months. As the historian William Cronon stated, cattle became inter-state commodities, “born in one place,

fattened in another, and killed in still a third.”⁸³ For Kohrs, however, selling “feeder cattle” implied a financial loss. Specifically, it meant selling the weakest cattle at low prices to feedlots in Iowa. Thus, as much as possible, Kohrs continued to fatten the cattle on the free grasslands, shipping them as three and four-year olds to the Chicago stockyards.⁸⁴

Breed specialization might be another explanation for Kohrs’ continued prosperity through the 1890s. In the early spring of 1897, Kohrs and Bielenberg started to sell Hereford calves. From that time forward, records for calf sales appear sequentially in the early spring of 1898, 1899, and again in 1900.⁸⁵ These notices suggest that Kohrs and Bielenberg had slowly been making the transition from a steer operation to a cow-calf operation. Recognized as one of the largest breeding ranches in the state of Montana, Kohrs and Bielenberg made the switch without difficulty.⁸⁶ The praise of the local newspaper is testament enough to Kohrs’ recognition as one of the finest cattle breeders in Montana. It stated:

It is safe to say that no better judge of stock can be found in Montana than Mr. Kohrs, the senior member of his firm.⁸⁷

⁸³ William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W W Norton & Company, 1991), p. 224. Cronon writes extensively about the significance of the development of the Chicago stockyards and its dramatic impact on the Western rangelands, see especially Chapter Five, “Annihilating Space: Meat,” pp. 207-225.

⁸⁴ Kohrs never even mentions “feeder cattle” in his autobiography. Records for the Pioneer Cattle Company show they shipped cattle directly to the Chicago stockyards.

⁸⁵ Letterpress Book B, p. 88. Bielenberg to William Williams, of Helmville, CA., October 16, 1897, p. 89. Bielenberg to Joseph King, of Lewiston, Montana, October 23, 1897. Other notices appear in Letterpress Book B, pp. 106, 107, 108, 112, 117, 121, 122, 123, 125, 126, 128, 129, 130, 134, 161, 162, 163, 168, 202. *CK Papers, M73*, Reel 1. It is also interesting to note that Bielenberg was writing to ranchers in California, Washington, and Oregon, demonstrating the increasing pull of markets on the West coast.

⁸⁶ *New Northwest*, December 15, 1897.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

The switch from raising breeding bulls to raising Hereford cow-calf pairs occurred simultaneously with the acquisition of more land in the Deer Lodge Valley. John Bielenberg began the acquisitions in January of 1895 when he received 160 acres under the Timber Culture Act.⁸⁸ Later that year, they added a 40 acre parcel to the property with a private purchase from a Mrs. Mary Hart.⁸⁹ But the largest acquisitions did not begin again until 1898 when Kohrs and Bielenberg purchased 3,177 acres from the Northern Pacific Railroad, to which were added another 4,401 acres in 1899, and another 3,175 acres in 1900.⁹⁰ Between 1898 and 1900, the brothers purchased 10,753 acres from the Northern Pacific Railroad for an average cost of \$1.30 per acre. In addition to the railroad sections, Kohrs and Bielenberg purchased another 360 acres of private land.⁹¹ Altogether, between 1895 and 1900, the home ranch had incorporated an additional 11,311 acres.

In terms of animal husbandry, the growth of the home ranch pastures meant better supervision of the livestock. Within a year after the first large land acquisitions, the Kohrs and Bielenberg correspondence records show heavy reliance on the cultivation of non-native hay crops. In March of 1893, Beilenberg ordered 1,000 lbs. of Timothy seed, and in December of that same year, he ordered another 10,000 lbs. of bran and shorts. The following January, Kohrs requested that Joe Rosenbaum send 500 lbs. of “the best” red

⁸⁸Deed Book 12, p. 112, Powell County Transcribed Deed Book, Deer Lodge Court House. The Timber Culture Act, like the Desert Lands Act, was another failed attempt by the government to dispossess the public domain. Intended to encourage the “growth of timber on the western prairies,” the Act stated that any person that could maintain 40 acres of timber over a ten year period would be entitled to the quarter section (160 acres) of which the 40 acres was a part. In general, however, the act was used to exploit the already diminishing supply of valuable pine and fir lands. See Roy Robbins, Our Landed Heritage, pp. 218-219.

⁸⁹Transcribed Deed Book 12, pp. 160-161. Transcribed Powell County Deeds.

⁹⁰Ibid, pp. 595-596. 514-516. 625, 501. Transcribed Deed Book 10, pp. 510-11, 591

⁹¹Transcribed Deed Book 12, pp. 608-9 and Transcribed Deed Book 7, p. 578.

clover seed.⁹² In addition to providing winter feed, pasturing livestock on private land required developing better watering facilities, as well as paying closer attention to the quality of the range.⁹³

Meanwhile, on the eastern ranges, the latter half of the decade marked an increasingly limited supply of free grass and water, making it more and more difficult for Kohrs to operate his large scale steer operations. In 1899, Kohrs complained,

our range are getting to be in such shape that you can count from 20 to 25 percent on loss. ... Southern cattle owners seem to feel that the[y] are to have as much or more than the[y] got last year...⁹⁴

Apart from depleting the range grasses, overstocking also implied that the cattle had to wander longer distances to get to water. Kohrs' only solution was to buy land and fence it off. In 1899, Conrad Kohrs and John Bielenberg purchased the N-N ranch house and property from brothers William and Frederick Niedringhaus.⁹⁵ The ranch was located in Dawson County (now McCone County) on Prairie Elk Creek, which flows north into the Missouri River near Oswego. The purchase of the eastern ranch warranted headline news in the local press. One headline banner stated, "Kohrs as a Cattle King," and proceeded to describe Kohrs as "the biggest cattleman in the state" and further, "many think [the purchase] is the forerunner of the day when he will be the heaviest owner of stock in the state."⁹⁶ In addition to the ranch, Kohrs scripped 14,000 acres.⁹⁷ Most of the "scrip" was

⁹²Letterpress Book B, p. 14, March 21, 1893, Bielenberg to Matt Peterson (Helmville); p.31, December 20, 1893, Bielenberg to Nelson Storey (Bozeman); and Letterpress Book A, p. 236, January 13, 1894, Conrad Kohrs to Joe Rosebaum (Chicago), CK Papers, M73.

⁹³Letterpress Book A, pp. 366 and 372, Kohrs and Bielenberg to A. M. Holter & Co., Helena, Montana, March 3 and 11, 1899, CK Papers, M73. These letters place an order for 25,000 feet of barbed wire, and tin for roofing the cow sheds.

⁹⁴Letterpress Book A, pp. 378-379, Kohrs to Rosenbaum, March 12, 1899, CK Papers, M73.

⁹⁵Lee I. Niedringhaus, III, Home Land and Cattle Company: The Cattle Enterprise of William F. and Frederick F. Niedringhaus, (New York, Niedringhaus, March 1994).

⁹⁶*The Daily River*, Fort Benton, April 23, 1900.

issued by the Forest Service to homesteaders that had settled on what was to be Forest Service land. The “scrip” consisted of a piece of paper that could be taken to the land office and exchanged for acres on the public domain (what is now mostly BLM land). Kohrs and Bielenberg took advantage of the situation by purchasing the “scrip” directly from the homesteaders.

In retrospect, the purchase of the N-N marked a significant transition for the Kohrs and Bielenberg operations. It might even be interpreted as the end of the freewheeling open-range days. Yet, for some years after the purchase, Kohrs would still attempt to maximize the vast stretches of as yet untouched public domain. In an interview, years later, his grandson, Con Warren described how the purchase allowed Kohrs to continue using the public domain:

They took up 20's and 40's and 60's and 20's and 40's right up the creek. And that gave them control of the water...by owning about 6,000 acres of deeded land, they controlled about a million acres of range, the land that lay between the creeks. And it worked pretty well for awhile.⁹⁸

Buying water rights to control vast amounts of land, a common practice of the day, allowed Kohrs to continue free grazing well into the 20th-century. According to Kohrs, the decline of the range cattle industry did not actually begin until 1909, with the large influx of dry farmers who “swarmed” over the range, forcing cattlemen to retire because of “inadequate pasture.”⁹⁹

⁹⁷Ibid.

⁹⁸Myers, “Interview with Conrad Warren,” transcribed, tape 1, p. 24.

⁹⁹Conrad Kohrs, “A Veteran’s Experience in the Western Cattle Trade,” p. 1401. For the dry farming boom on the northern plains, see Mary Hargreaves, Dry Farming in the Northern Great Plains: Years of Readjustment, 1920-1990, Second edition (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1993).

Ironically, 1909, the year of the “nester,” also marked the best year of Kohrs’ career with gross sales of cattle exceeding \$500,000.00.¹⁰⁰ Shipments to Chicago continued with regularity well into the 20th-century. Between 1888 and 1913, Kohrs and Bielenberg shipped on average between 8,000-10,000 cattle per year.¹⁰¹ The significance of these statistics are made even clearer by the statement of Arthur Leonard, President of the Union Stock Yard Company, that Kohrs “shipped more cattle to Chicago than any other individual in the business.”¹⁰²

After the “Hard Winter” many cattlemen “slipped away unseen” and were “soon forgotten.”¹⁰³ This could hardly be said of Conrad Kohrs. Between 1887 and 1900, Kohrs rebuilt his range herds, expanded the home ranch, purchased the N-N in northeastern Montana, and made the transition from steer to cow-calf operator. He did not accomplish this by himself. As with most successful Western entrepreneurs of the late nineteenth-century, Kohrs had the help and support of eastern investment. Repeatedly, bankers and stock commissioners who maintained faith in his stockgrowing abilities helped Kohrs recover from bad years. Kohrs also had the support and expertise of his half-brother John Bielenberg, who managed a thriving thoroughbred horse operation at the home ranch. And perhaps most importantly, Kohrs had his prized cattle. Breeding remained the most effective method for securing Kohrs’ financial interests.

¹⁰⁰Conrad Kohrs: *An Autobiography*, p. 100. This number is confirmed in the Pioneer Cattle Company Journal, March 4, 1901 - January 1, 1911, p. 271, Small Collections #1648, Montana Historical Society.

¹⁰¹Albright, *Historic Resource Study*, p. 88.

¹⁰²Ibid.

¹⁰³John Clay, *My Life on the Range*, p. 75. In this quote, Clay is referring to the young men from the East, “mostly worthless in a business sense,” and the influx of Harvard and Yale men, very few of whom survived the “ordeal of hard winters, overstocked ranges and other vicissitudes.”

Conclusion

Historians have played a significant role in perpetuating the myth of the “Hard Winter of 1886-87.” An obvious reason for the misinterpretation of the historical record stems from the biased sources upon which these historians relied.¹ Most obviously, the “book count” of large cattle corporations presented a distorted picture of total livestock losses. Similarly, inaccurate newspaper accounts presented exaggerated statistics that confirmed the dire predictions of radical changes in the system of stockraising. Yet, perhaps even more significant than false book counts and prognostic newspaper accounts, historians perpetuated the “Hard Winter” myth because it gave them an opportunity to conclude their story appropriately. The abrupt, dramatic, tragic ending to the romanticized years of the open range, historian Leland Everett Stuart explained, provided a “fitting conclusion to a great story.”² More recently, the myth has been perpetuated to provide a superficial explanation for the shift from open range ranching to stock farming. In both scenarios, the myth of the “Hard Winter” furnished a place and a time for the termination of the carefree days of riding and roping.

Contemporary scholarship indicates, however, that the “Hard Winter” did not precipitate a revolution in the range cattle industry. Contrary to common wisdom, the

¹An example of the traditional historical interpretation of the Hard Winter can be found in Edward E. Dale’s *Cow Country*. He writes “The range cattle industry never recovered from that terrible winter of 1886-87, which no other in the memory of the oldest inhabitants could even remotely compare.” See also Ray H. Mattison’s, “Hard Winter and the Range Cattle Business,” *Montana Magazine of History*, I, October 1951, pp. 5-21. The article is rife with quotes that reaffirm the traditional interpretation, such as, “the days of the open range never returned.” and “No other single factor dealt such a severe blow to the open range cattle industry.”

²Leland Everett Stuart, “Men and Cattle on the Northern Plains, 1860-1887” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Oregon, 1971), p. 117

nineteenth-century cattle industry remained primarily a free range enterprise. In 1890, for example, 92 per cent of all livestock feed came from the public domain, a figure only slightly lower than that of 1880, when 96 per cent of the feed came from this source.³ Furthermore, while it is common wisdom that the boom of the early 1880s brought an unprecedented number of stock to the Northern Ranges, it is generally less recognized that by 1890, the number of cattle on the public domain more than exceeded peak numbers of the 1880s.

New investment by Eastern and foreign capitalists did decline for a few years following the frightening disaster of 1886-87, but the solid entrepreneurs-- those with experience-- help onto their stock. The collapse of 1886-87 did not stand as “the bust” of the late nineteenth-century. During the financial collapse of 1893, the range cattle industry suffered another heavy setback, presenting some of the worst financial losses yet.⁴ Nor did the heavy investment of the early 1880s fade entirely. Throughout the 1890s, there were other cycles of peak capital investment. For instance, between the years 1898 to 1901, more cattle corporations were formed than had been initiated during the boom years of the early eighties.⁵ Thus, the boom and bust cycle of the range cattle industry continued through to the end of the nineteenth-century.

A careful study of Conrad Kohrs’ cattle ranching operation in the years immediately before and after the “Hard Winter” demonstrates that the shift from “open range” to “ranch farm” was not as dramatic as common knowledge might lead one to believe. At least a decade before the Hard Winter, Kohrs had already made adaptations in

³John T. Schlebecker, Cattle Raising on the Plains, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1963), p. 15.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Gene Gressley, Bankers and Cattlemen, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p.109-110.

his operations to meet the conditions of the intermountain valleys. Never relying exclusively on the free grasses of the public domain, he had begun feeding, select breeding and counting his cattle in the early 1870s. These adaptations helped him to weather the more severe winters that, according to Kohrs, could be expected in five year intervals.

Nor did the “Hard Winter” precipitate a significant transition in the methods of ranching on the open range. In the more open, arid country of the Eastern Plains, Kohrs persisted with the methods of the “open range system.” That is, he allowed his cattle to care for themselves for most of the year, without supplemental feeding or protection. Despite the constant threat of another “big die-off,” Kohrs continued to send the majority of his range cattle to graze on the free grasses of the public domain. Not until well after the turn-of-the-century, with the large influx of homesteaders, are there any signs that Kohrs felt compelled to make significant changes in his open range operations.

In all areas of American life, the period between 1865 and 1900 is generally regarded as years of increased specialization. For Kohrs, there could not be a more profound truth. From the beginning, he bred his cattle to meet the demands of the market. As he spread out onto the open range, he continued to upgrade his herds, using high-quality bulls. Acting by instinct, Kohrs took advantage of the abundance of natural resources available to him on the “limitless” Western range. What today might be seen as “blatant greed,” was to Kohrs, and the men of his time, pragmatic use of an otherwise “useless expanse.” Perhaps Kohrs’ Northern European upbringing made it easier for him to adapt to the harsh, cold climate of Montana. Regardless, the German immigrant who grew up feeding beans to his Northern-bred stock and brought his ideas of animal

husbandry to the West succeeded because he “knew cows.” With the financial surplus of the East and the natural wealth of the West, Kohrs created an irreplaceable niche for himself within the national economy of the nineteenth-century.

Afterword

Driving east on highway 90, from Missoula to Butte, it is easy to imagine the Deer Lodge Valley as it appeared over a century ago. Despite the large billboards signs, the gas stations, and rest stops, the valley retains the same essential elements as in Kohrs' day. Craggy mountains, cresting as high as 10,000 feet, provide a dramatic backdrop for this long, broad semiarid valley. Coniferous forest dominates the landscape down to about 5,000 feet, at which point the Ponderosa Pine and Douglas Fir become interlaced with the upland native grasses and forbs that carpet the rolling hills.¹ Descending to the bottomlands, riparian meadows border dense stretches of irrigated hay meadows. Mountain streams emanating from the Flint and Granite Ranges thread across the hills and supply the much coveted water supply for hay production. Eventually these major tributaries flow into the meandering Clark Fork River. Lined with cottonwoods, quaking aspens and a lush understory of shrubs, the Clark Fork provides two key elements--shade and shelter--for raising livestock. Within this setting, the Grant-Kohrs National Historic Site, virtually unaltered from the way Conrad and Augusta Kohrs left it in 1900, blends

¹ Although this paper does not delve into the subject, it should be noted that white settlement of the Deer Lodge Valley brought large changes to the topography. For instance, biologists and ecologists believe that the increase in sagebrush and conifer forest occurring over the past 100 years is the result of fire suppression. Prior to white settlement, Native American burnings and natural fires throughout western Montana limited the habitat of the coniferous forest to rock outcrops, talus slopes, and other microsites where they were not in proximity with vegetation (fuel) for fire. Photographs of the Deer Lodge Valley in the early 1880s show that grass-dominated communities were formerly more extensive. These photographs also show that forests at lower elevations lacked a significant understory of trees and shrubbery. Personal communication with Jack Lossenski, ecologist for the Forest Service, Northern Region, August 4, 1995. See also Stephen F. Arno and George G. Gruell, "Fire History at the Forest-Grassland Ecotone in Southwestern Montana," in the *Journal of Range Management*, Volume 36, May, 1983 and Stephen F. Barrett and Stephen F. Arno, "Indian Fires as an Ecological Influence in the Northern Rockies," in *Journal of Forestry*, Volume 80, October, 1982.

remarkably well. The bunkhouse, buggy shed (equivalent in size and status to a 12-car Rolls Royce garage), ice house, granary, draft horse barn, cow stables, thoroughbred horse barns, and corrals complex, presents an enduring model of the day-to-day workings of a large-scale 19th-century cattle ranch.

Typical of the most successful Montana entrepreneurs, Augusta and Conrad moved to the “mansion district” of Helena in 1899. By that time, all of the children had left home. Both daughters, Anna and Katherine, were married, and their only son, William, was away at college. Perhaps William would have returned upon finishing college and picked up where his father had left off. There is no way of knowing. In the spring of 1901 William died of an appendicitis attack while attending Cornell University. The impact of this tragedy on Conrad Kohrs remains unknown. In the years following William’s death, Kohrs continued to purchase small parcels of land for the home ranch. In Eastern Montana operations continued as they had under the management of John Boardman. By 1904, however, there is evidence that the large-scale roundups, especially those involving “pools” were coming to a close.²

The unexpected death of his son may or may not have been the impetus behind Kohrs’ decision to consolidate the business operations. In 1907, Conrad and John consolidated to form the Rock Creek Ditch and Mining Company and the Kohrs and Bielenberg Realty Company. One year later, Conrad, John, and Augusta created the Kohrs and Bielenberg Land and Livestock Company. Although Kohrs continued to advise

²This date is speculative. John Albright bases this date on a letter from J.H. Gehrmann. Historic Resource Study, (Denver Service Center: National Park Service, 1979) p. 97. A vivid description of the eastern ranch (including the CK roundup) can be found in the letters of Betty Wingert, John Boardman’s niece, who spent the summer of 1910 at the eastern range headquarters of the CK. see “Wingert Letters,” Grant-Kohrs Historic Site Collection.

and consult from his home in Helena, John Bielenberg was the only family member who remained at the home ranch. Bielenberg stayed until his death in 1922.

In 1915 the “upper ranch” was leased to a group of investors for growing wheat (presumably for WWI) and this marked the first step towards the dissolution of the cattle empire.³ Then in 1919, Charles H. Williams and Peter Pauly, a partnership of ranchers in the Deer Lodge Valley purchased 12 sections of contiguous land east of the ranch house for \$100,000.00. Later that same day the partners purchased another 12,000 acres for \$50,000.00 and, most importantly, the water rights held by the Rock Creek Ditch and Mining Company.⁴ The 1919 sales left only a small portion of land totaling about one section on the north-south axis and the huge twenty-one-plus section of pastureland to the east (known as the Dog Creek and Humbar pastures). In keeping with Kohrs’ ability to predict the direction of the market, the majority of the ranch was sold just a couple of years before the 1920s crash in American agriculture.

In 1920, Conrad Kohrs died. Two years later, John Bielenberg and John Boardman also passed away. By 1924, the last sections of pasture land had been sold to a co-partnership known and designated as Nelson and Sons.⁵ Until 1932, the remaining parcels of land connected to the home ranch stayed in a caretaker status. Augusta Kohrs continued to visit the ranch for a couple of weeks in the summer, and young Conrad Warren, son of Katherine Kohrs Warren, worked as a ranch hand in the summers. In 1930, Warren moved to the ranch permanently as a hired hand. Two years later he agreed to run the ranch. Warren proceeded to re-acquire the contiguous lands and pastures,

³Albright, Historic Resource Study, p. 102.

⁴Ibid, p. 103.

⁵Ibid.

enough to bring the ranch to an efficient size for raising cattle, and by late 1933, had built a herd of 150 purebred Herefords.

Following in the dynamic tradition of his grandfather, Conrad Kohrs Warren became a leader in animal development and improvement. The “Warren Era,” which dates from 1932 to 1972, is represented at the ranch by various barns and feed sheds, a dairy, a blacksmith shop, and the addition of a small house built in 1934. Consistent with the changes being made throughout the livestock industry, these structures reflect the shift towards government regulation of the beef industry. For instance, the emphasis on livestock health and safety is reflected in Warren’s collection of veterinary equipment, just as the shift towards mechanization of farming practices is represented by tractors, sprinkler irrigation, and modern swathers. Genetic breeding, scientific testing for disease and pregnancy, antibiotics, and blended feeds prepared in distant mills (supplemented with minerals and growth inducing chemicals), are all represented in the modern Warren Era Collection. Yet, despite an increased reliance on technology to manage nature’s challenges, the basics of the cattle business—raising the fattest, fastest growing cattle as is economically possible—have stayed constant. And some things, like the weather, remain as unpredictable as ever.

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1. Home ranch and Deer Lodge Valley ranges
2. Sun River range
3. Pioneer Cattle Company range (DHS)
4. N Bar N ranch and associated ranges
5. Powder River range
6. Milk River range
7. Cypress Hills range (Canada)
8. Fort Benton ranges
9. Malta range
10. Snake River ranch ("Hooban's Bottom")
11. Fort Steele range
12. North Park

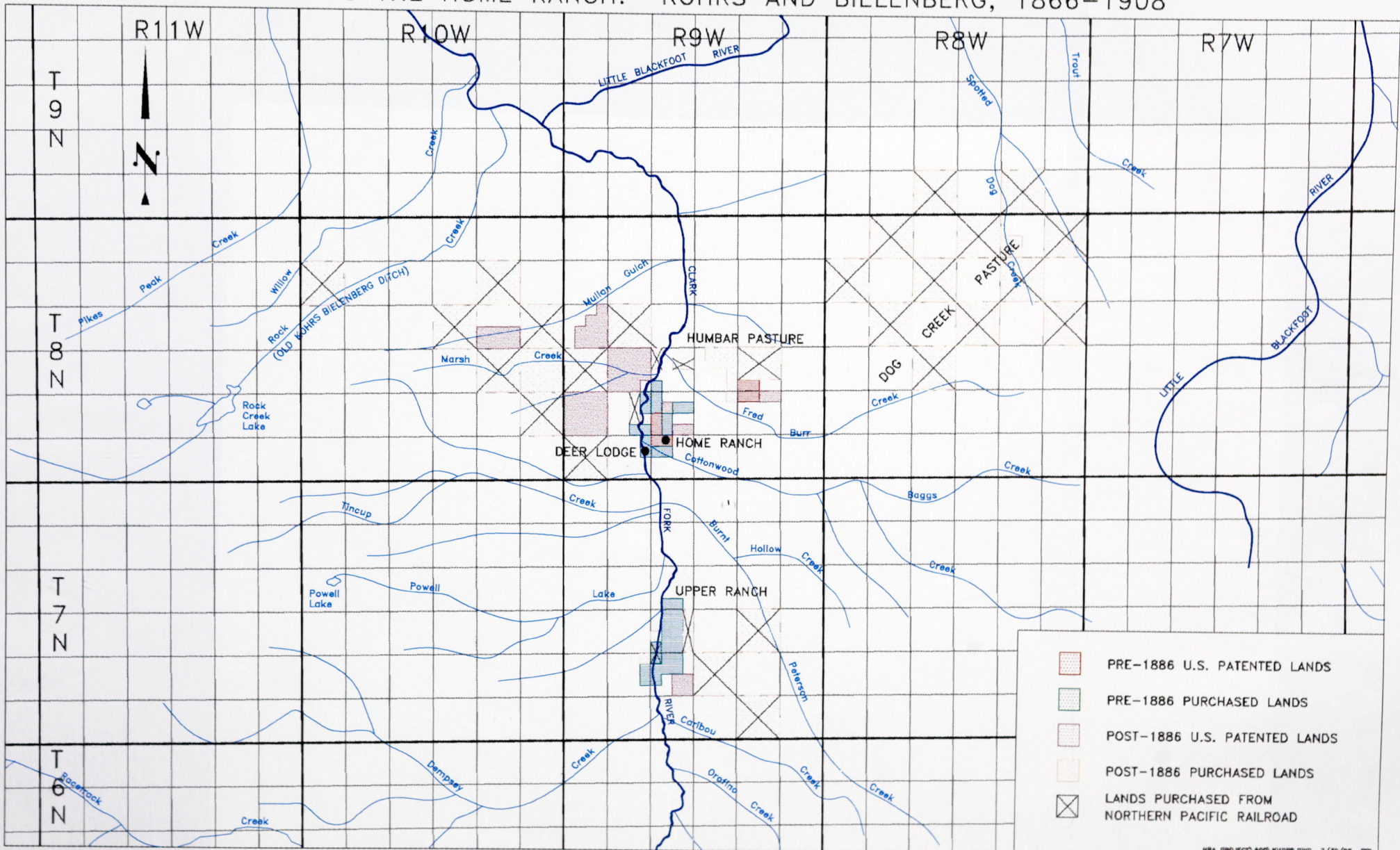
**KOHR'S & BIELENBERG GRAZING AREAS
& CATTLE TRAILS, 1862-1924**

Map prepared by George Reinbold
Rocky Mountain Regional Office, National Park Service



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BUILDING THE HOME RANCH: KOHRS AND BIELENBERG, 1866-1908



SOURCE: MAP BASED ON POWELL COUNTY AND ORIGINAL DEER LODGE COUNTY DEED BOOKS

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