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# Cattle, Environment, and Economic Change: A History of Cherry County, Nebraska's Cattle Industry, from Earliest Times to 1940

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**CATTLE, ENVIRONMENT, AND ECONOMIC CHANGE:  
A HISTORY OF  
CHERRY COUNTY, NEBRASKA'S CATTLE INDUSTRY,  
FROM EARLIEST TIMES TO 1940**

by

Gail Lorna DiDonato

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: History

Under the Supervision of Professor John Wunder  
and Professor Benjamin Rader

Lincoln, Nebraska

November, 1998

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DISSERTATION TITLE

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NEBRASKA'S CATTLE INDUSTRY, FROM EARLIEST TIMES TO 1940

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CATTLE, ENVIRONMENT, AND ECONOMIC CHANGE:  
A HISTORY OF THE CATTLE INDUSTRY  
IN CHERRY COUNTY, NEBRASKA,  
FROM EARLIEST TIMES TO 1940

Gail Lorna DiDonato, Ph.D.  
University of Nebraska, 1998

Advisor: John Wunder

A modern cattle industry in Cherry County, Nebraska, developed as challenges of land use and pressures of economic change demanded new and flexible adaptation to the unique environment. Located in the Sandhills, a region only opened to legal white settlement after Indian removal in 1878, the area passed through phases of occupation. Open-range cattlemen drawn by lucrative local markets gave way to struggles over land use between farmers and ranchers. Early twentieth century legislation, the 1904 Kinkaid Act, designed to promote farm settlement, in the end, benefited ranchers the most. As the wedge to gain legal access to land ownership, it opened the county to development of a modern cattle economy.

Throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century, changing land policy, market fluctuation, and agricultural depression brought about modern developments. Consolidation of small land parcels into larger and more efficient privately owned ranches gave structure to a growing cattle industry. Larger spreads opened the way to the application of scientific land management and conservation practices. At the same time, improved breeding of livestock and specialized animal production allowed ranchers to meet the demands of a changing market economy.

Adjustments spurred by government policy and economic challenge continued to advance modern development throughout the 1930s. New Deal programs, such as soil conservation, introduced both better resource management and another example of government regulation. However, programs that instigated production controls did little assuage the drain on ranchers' returns. Local efforts to gain a foothold into the marketing phase of their production finally succeeded by the end of the decade when a regional organization provided an effective tool.

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## INTRODUCTION

As a fourth generation Sandhills rancher, Dave Hamilton knows the importance of the willingness to change. His family's spread covers almost 10,000 acres in southern Cherry County and northern Thomas County, and in his line of business, "you either improve or you go backwards."<sup>1</sup> Hamilton admits that when his great-grandfather and his four brothers arrived in the Sandhills in the mid-1890s, the idea of homesteading on cheap land left little room for environmentally sound practices. However, that changed with subsequent generations who have been committed to improved resource management since the 1920s. By the 1940s aggressive ditching took place to facilitate irrigation, and by the 1960s, range conservation programs, such as reseeding grasses and erosion control, became a way of life for the modern rancher.

Present day ranchers are keenly aware of their fragile and unforgiving environment. With 750 brood cows and over twice as many calves and yearlings, Hamilton and his father know that it takes a sizable amount of productive acreage to maintain the scale of their operation. With only 16 to 17 inches of precipitation a year, they turned to a new emphasis on irrigation. Rapid advances in the technology since the 1960s spurred wide acceptance of concepts associated with irrigation. Hamilton, addressing a water resources seminar at the University of Nebraska in 1984, extolled the benefits of self-propelled center-pivot irrigation systems to his operation. Explaining that

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<sup>1</sup>Dave Thomas, "Life in the Sandhills: A Rancher's Point of View," *Proceedings of the 1984 Water Resources Seminar* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1984), 85-88, *Heritage of the Sandhills*, Archive, James Ducey, ed. University of Nebraska-Institute of Agricultural and Natural Resources, [http://WWW.IRNA.UNL.EDU\(199.240.193.217\)](http://WWW.IRNA.UNL.EDU(199.240.193.217)), 3.

two center-pivots on his ranch covered 300 acres and irrigated alfalfa used for winter feed. To his way of thinking, the high-quality, better yielding forage gave a favorable balance of land use, and was more cost effective since he could expand production without purchasing additional land.<sup>2</sup>

Ten years later, some Sandhills ranchers had different ideas on how to be better “grass managers.” As the forerunners of a new philosophy of “holistic” resource management, they adopted new techniques of intensive but controlled grazing. By dividing ranges into smaller units, grazed by large numbers of animals, for short periods of time, advocates of the method claim the “system mows the grass more evenly, then gives the pasture a chance to rest before regrazing.”<sup>3</sup>

Cherry County rancher John Ravenscroft reported that his new system allowed him to discontinue feeding hay in the winter, an apparently radical departure. Instead, his cattle regraze pastures with the most summer regrowth and are fed a “little high-protein cake.” Considering meadow grazing better than haying, Ravenscroft generates almost \$100 per acre return by planning ahead.<sup>4</sup> He and his father, Jim, and brother, Rob, partners in the Cross O Ranch, operate their thousands of acres under the holistic system that places emphasis on managing the whole, where cattle ranching “actually farms the sun through grass and cattle. Rangeland is managed in a manner that encourages growth

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 2.

<sup>3</sup>*Omaha World-Herald* (Omaha, Nebraska), 20 August 1996.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

of warm season plants with broader leaves.”<sup>5</sup> Combined with controlled grazing, grass height is maintained which captures solar energy that is transformed into “useful form by growing green plants.”

Holistic management, according to Rob Ravenscroft, promotes diversity. With correct land use, the ecological processes of water cycles, mineral cycles, energy flow, and plant successions make possible the production of widely varied vegetation under different environmental conditions. Diversity not only extends the growing season but also encourages other changes in ranch operations. Under the new system, the Cross O Ranch gradually moved their cow herd into fall calving, a departure from local tradition, with great success. Moreover, in addition to better grass management, they have abandoned the center pivot fields that produced alfalfa and other forages.

Late twentieth-century changes in the operation of modern Sandhills cattle ranches are only the most recent alterations in over one hundred years of development. Building the structure and form of the modern livestock industry was a decades long process, most often characterized by intermittent periods of transition, modification, and struggle. Cherry County’s cattle economy grew as a result of human adaptability and profit-making motivation, in a place not easily taken for granted.

\* \* \*

The production of livestock has been a major component of Nebraska’s agricultural economy since the late nineteenth century. The Sandhills region of the state

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<sup>5</sup>Marianne Beel, “Managing the Whole Helps Ranchers’ Yield,” *Lincoln Star* (Lincoln, Nebraska) 19 August 1991.

has been particularly important to the growth and development of the state's cattle industry. Once considered inhospitable and barren for both humans and beasts, a series of legendary circumstances changed that perception. Early cattlemen discovered that their livestock thrived in the Sandhills. The combination of freely accessible natural resources and the nearby indiscriminating market outlet provided the elements for another business opportunity. Relocating in the region, open-range ranchers established a two-pronged business venture. While marketing better quality livestock to eastern markets, ranchers hedged their risk by supplying inferior grades of stock to newly established Lakota reservations in the Dakota Territory, adjacent to their Sandhills ranges.

In contrast to the open-range myth, the romanticized individualistic and independent cattlemen of the era depended on favorable government policies and cooperative efforts. Laissez faire attitudes regarding the control of public lands and veiled government subsidies enabled their enterprises to succeed. Like their counterparts in the industrial East, open-range ranchers resented any legislated intrusion while grabbing up government subsidized opportunities.

Despite the favorable social and natural environment, their short-lived hegemony over the region soon began to give way. Settlement, family ranching, and range organizations took root as the arbitrary focus of policy changed direction. As more public lands changed to private ownership, increased settlement brought conflict. Newcomer grangers and established herders vied for control. Struggles over claims such as those to hay producing valleys and water marked the uneasy coexistence.

However, economic survival in the Sandhills went beyond the boundaries of

social constraints; it demanded adjustment to meet the challenges brought on by the natural environment, a changing economy, organizational requirements, and the increasing role of the state and federal governments. Strategies for survival reflected what appeared as different types of attitudes that instigated the evolution of greater accountability. New relationships to the land, to livestock production, and to markets accompanied the growth of privately-owned ranches. At the same time, a growing new tolerance toward limited political intervention, an apparent shift in ideology, actually amounted to the evolving extension of the older, open-range livestock traditions. During the cattle industry's modern development, ranchers and their organizations most often welcomed and even invited government's intervention when policies appeared to enhance their type of operation. However, not totally convinced that all government was good, when confronted by unsuitable legislation, they manipulated and circumvented policies to meet their own needs.

Of the thirteen counties that make up the central region of the Sandhills, Cherry is the largest. Privately-owned cattle ranches occupy approximately ninety-five percent of its 6,048 square mile area. Federal and state lands, farms, towns, and villages make up the remaining 5 percent. The rhythms and cycles of life in Cherry County revolve around grass. In a landscape dominated by sand and hills and cattle, the grass stabilizes and sustains, it drives the regional economy. In a place where livestock outnumber people forty-eight to one,<sup>6</sup> it is a matter of pride that no cash crop today is grown in their county.

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<sup>6</sup>Paul F. Starrs, *Let the Cowboy Ride: Cattle Ranching in the American West* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 128.

Grain produced by the small number of farmers on hard land areas is intended for supplementary livestock feed. Ranchers harvest wild and cultivated grasses as hay for winter forage, and those with suitable land and irrigation may plant fifty to eighty acres of corn in some years. The wealth of Cherry County is not measured by its harvested crops; its richness is borne out of the grass-covered sandy hills that nourish quality livestock production.

Building the county's modern cattle economy spanned the first four decades of the twentieth century. It grew out of a "less systematic form of occupation" where free land and grass assured an easy profit.<sup>7</sup> While the legendary collapse of the open-range era in the 1880s and 1890s on the Great Plains left overgrazed grassland and animal carcasses in its wake, it played out differently in the Sandhills region. It took a crisis of low prices, the pressures of restrictive public range policies, and continuing waves of new settlers to jolt open-range ranchers out of their complacency and force many to leave. For those who remained, different efficiencies had to be found before they could realize economic recovery. Adjustment to a new order demanded capital investments that entailed improvised schemes for land tenure and strategies for better cattle production. Throughout the course of modern development, ranching interests remained dedicated to expansion and control of the land.

Livestock production could not be separated from the land and its resources. The grasslands that had lured migrating bison now sustained domesticated cattle. But,

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<sup>7</sup>Frieda Knobloch, *The Culture of the Wilderness: Agriculture as Colonization in the American West*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996, 80.



nature's equation limited the number of animals a range could support. Overgrazing caused environmental destruction: the loss of nutrients in the grasses, the invasion of weeds, the devastation of soil erosion. Control of better and strategically located rangeland, hay meadows, and water sources led to improved kinds of production. In this way, land was the key to launching modern development.

The men and women who brought structure to the developing local economy struggled over access and legal ownership to the land they required. Ill-conceived land laws, designed to promote farming in a region best suited for grazing, provided area ranchers with their initial long-term challenge. Yet, to the pragmatic Cherry County stock producers, most obstacles simply called for a different approach. And so through legislative loopholes and later just plain patience, they gained gradual dominance and eventual title to the land.

Organization also involved adjustment to a changing agricultural market-economy. Adaptation to economic change brought new types of pressures with equally as new responses. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, upturns and declines in cattle numbers and prices called for greater flexibility of reactions to a changing market economy.<sup>8</sup> Beginning with the agricultural depression of the early 1920s, economics played an even greater role in the shift toward modern production. When prices fell, land owners carrying high debts and mortgages were left with no alternatives and sold out. Through their misfortune, others were able to accelerate the

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<sup>8</sup>Charles Wood, *The Kansas Beef Industry* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1980), 67.

process of concentrating more ranch land into fewer hands. At the same time, a move toward specialization in livestock production was broadly accepted by local ranchers. Improvements in breeding with a new emphasis on the production of younger and better quality animals put Cherry County stock owners into a favorable position. The integration of new efficiencies into their type of operations allowed them to compete successfully in a new rapidly changing market economy.

By the mid-twenties the infrastructure for a rational and profitable livestock economy had been launched in Cherry County. The introduction of better resource and land management programs added another dimension to the development of profit-generating production. Expanded ranch property enabled ranchers to initiate better feeding techniques that not only stimulated greater productivity of the grasslands but also promoted resource conservation. At the end of the decade, economic recovery coupled with a new enthusiasm toward ways to greater efficiencies renewed optimism and the promise of future prosperity. Surmounting the challenges of the twenties had opened area ranchers to new adaptive techniques; what it did not do was prepare them for the crisis that appeared at the beginning of the next decade.

The depression of the 1930s compounded by a long and severe drought easily undermined decades of economic advancements. Plummeting cattle prices compound by drought forecasted failure and financial ruin for cattle raisers throughout the Great Plains. Although Cherry County ranchers faced the disruptive influence of a distressed market, environmental factors, unique to their region, insulated most from the greatest ravages of drought. With adequate amounts of grass to still maintain their animals, area ranchers

avoided the depletion of herds. Evidence of their fortunate situation was found in the increasing number of head that occupied the county's ranges. Cattle owners from greatly effected areas relocated their livestock investments to grassland ranges in the Sandhills.

While efforts to maintain the practices of scientific land management slowed with the challenge of the economic and environmental crisis, by 1935 new vigor was established. Reform measures channeled to revise federal policy focused on preserving productivity rather than promoting its expansion. New Deal programs, designed to bring relief and adjustment to agriculture, introduced new kinds of regulations. Measures aimed at improving conditions, however, amounted to a double-edged sword. While offering immediate relief they also provided the wedge for policymakers to legislate their way into local autonomy. Although most ranchers welcomed measures that eased their crisis, many, like their fellows throughout the Great Plains, saw a problem in the making. They wanted help not government regulation.<sup>9</sup> Never reluctant in the past to turn to political intervention, stock raisers began to fear the threat of stringent restrictions, and their fears became reality. While short-term initiatives brought emergency relief, long-range programs opened the door to dramatic changes.

Although forced to take on the harness of government's expanded role, Cherry County ranchers managed to loosen the grip of a different type of burden. Despite the ranchers' resentment of what seemed as intrusive regulation, the government's agricultural policies did, in fact, encourage productivity. The profit-draining structure of

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<sup>9</sup>John Schlebecker, *Cattle Raising on the Plains, 1900-1961* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 136.

the existing marketing process was altered; the control over prices, costs, and sales by terminal markets was ended. Past attempts to gain a greater influence over the final phase of production, the marketing aspect, had met with only modest success for Cherry County ranchers, but new kinds of modern transportation combined with improved roads and highways brought greater accessibility into and out of the region and gave a better chance of success to local marketing schemes.

When Cherry County ranchers took the initial steps and organized a marketing tool, they added a new voice to older ways. As a communal effort aimed at promoting regional production, it also maintained individual autonomy over the terminal phase of Sandhills cattle production. Through private entreaty, that is, direct-buying contracts, producers were able to set prices and terms of the sale. By building long-lasting business relationships, ranchers and corn-belt feeders could arrange for customized production that fit specific requirements and allowed buyers to obtain the stock they desired while local producers got the prices they needed.

Over a span of forty years, the cattle economy in Cherry County developed and evolved as a result of the integration of livestock production, a distinctive environment, policy modifications, and changing economics. During periods of either progress or regression, the interaction of these factors initiated adaptive responses that bought about change and gave new industrial structure to cattle production.

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This study focuses on the prelude to and the decades of building that modern cattle economy in Nebraska's largest county from its earliest years to 1940. The evolution

of Cherry County's ranching and livestock industry unfolded in phases, designated here as the early, middle, and late years of development. Not a simple linear chronological progression, instead the industry grew in chronologically overlapping episodes of challenge, acceptance, and adaptation woven throughout the decades of its modern evolution. The early years move from the geological beginnings of the environment to seasonal occupation by Native American groups and bison followed by the open-range cattlemen, and finally, to small rancher settlement which laid the foundation for a rational and ordered industry. During the middle years that began in 1900, ranchers were challenged by the struggle over control of the land and better management of natural resources. In the later years, the economic crises of the 1920s and 1930s pushed ranchers to initiate new techniques in tune with growing market and environmental demands, and precipitated change and modifications, the hallmark of cattle industry development.

Historian William Robbins correlates historical change in the American West with capitalism in *Colony and Empire: The Capitalist Transformation of the American West*. He shows that alterations in social patterns were essentially the "revolutionary consequences" associated with the western spread of capitalist economics.<sup>10</sup> According to Robbins, a capitalist development embodies the relationships of people to property and to the political forces of power. Therefore, he sees the explanation of historical change in "the material world: in the economic relationships among people; in the ever-changing

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<sup>10</sup>William G. Robbins, *Colony and Empire: The Capitalist Transformation of the American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 19.

dynamics of particular economies.”<sup>11</sup> Capitalism, in this sense then, is a principal of organization where values and modes of production become the “underlying theme for making sense of western history.”<sup>12</sup>

Like Robbins, Donald Worster gives economic organization a featured role in the development of the American West. In his article, “Cowboy Ecology,” Worster wrote “the capitalist revolution” spawned modern ranching. Likewise, it was a strong “determinant to a regional identity.”<sup>13</sup> However, Worster goes beyond the one dimensional parameters of capitalist development and suggests a broader view to explain the western cattle industry. His conception of historical change in the West encompasses the wider world of human ecology. From this vantage, the evolving and interdependent factors of environmental, human, and political forces flesh out a more comprehensive understanding of the process of cattle industry developments.

Within the framework of capitalism combined with the principles of the interdependency of environmental and social forces, the history of Cherry County’s cattle industry gains added dimension that moves beyond the romanticized chronicles of early-day cowboys and struggling settlers. It becomes an interactive process of adaptation to external forces played out in response to a demanding environment. Where the literature devoted to the legendary saga of the nineteenth century is broad, studies of the later

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid, ix.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Donald Worster, “Cowboy Ecology,” in *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 35.

periods of cattle industry developments have not received comparable attention. Most often, after the end of the open-range, western livestock production is viewed as tangential to the broader agricultural topic of grain farming. Those scholarly works that do focus on the history of cattle production in the United States, however, provide an essential starting point for this study.

Jimmy M. Skaggs' *Prime Cut: Livestock Raising and Meatpacking in the United States, 1607-1983*, traces the western movement of cattle production across the American frontiers and the pervasive influence of industrialized meat packing on cattlemen's decisions.<sup>14</sup> Skaggs provides an important overview of the evolution of the increasingly complex economic structure that evolved in the production and merchandizing of red-meat products.

While Skaggs' work focuses on the broad picture, John Schlebecker narrows the view to the Great Plains region. In *Cattle Raising on the Plains, 1900-1961*, he attempts to show ranchers in their struggle to adapt. Here, he chronicles the external pressures of increasing urban-industrial demands for beef and the ways in which science and technology influenced cattle production operations in relation to the Plains environment. Narrowing the focus further is Charles Wood who provides insight into how cattlemen in Kansas addressed the problems of development. In his important study, *The Kansas Beef Industry*, Wood examines the modern industrial growth of rural production. He shows changes in organizational structure and shifts in federal policy as important factors to the

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<sup>14</sup>Jimmy M. Skaggs, *Prime Cut: Livestock Raising and Meatpacking in the United States, 1607-1983* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 1986).

modernization process. Cattle producers throughout the Great Plains responded to these changes, however, and environmental differentiation made identical adaptation impossible to achieve, even if that were ever a goal. Nebraska cattlemen, like those in Kansas, upgraded the quality of livestock and incorporated scientific techniques to their means of animal production. They met the challenges instigated by the railroads and the packers and reaped the benefits of better roads and transportation. They did so to preserve and promote their growing industry and a way of life.

However, time and place established differences in relationships, in methods, in goals. Suitable arrangements in Kansas were not those that worked efficiently in Nebraska. Geographer C. Barron McIntosh directs his focus to the Nebraska Sandhills and weaves the early cattle industry into the historical geography of the region. In *The Nebraska Sand Hills: The Human Landscape*, McIntosh shows the region from both the geological and cultural perspectives, and tells a story of a unique place and its occupants.<sup>15</sup> His treatment of how cattlemen acquired the land leads to further inquiry into adaptation and changing practices of livestock and range management as well as future accommodations to economic forces.

Through the use of selected local histories and family and personal memoirs, a distinctive regional cattle culture emerges. In particular, Cherry County's centennial committee's publication, the two volume, *A Sandhill Century*, edited by Marianne Brinda Beel, Barbara Kime Gale, and Ruth Johnson Harms, suggests that the process of

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<sup>15</sup>Charles Barron McIntosh, *The Nebraska Sand Hills: The Human Landscape* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).



community and livestock industry development called for distinctive types of adaptation.<sup>16</sup> A type of adaptation that required a intimate relationship to land and its resources that developed a greater bond fostered over generations.

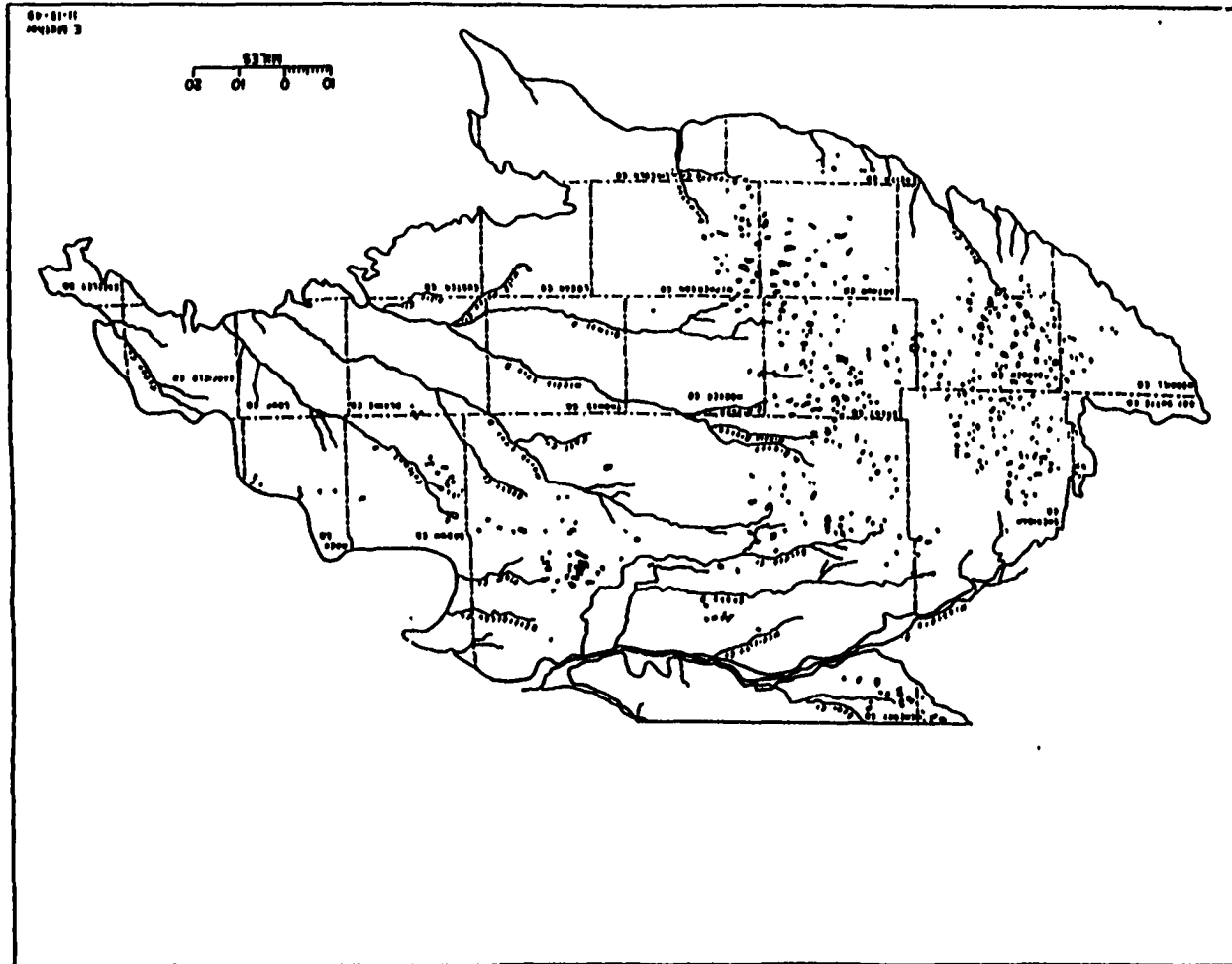
Some, like the Hamiltons who trace their time in Cherry County to the nineteenth century, or others, like the Ravenscrofts who moved in during the 1930s, survived in their enterprise through their adaptation to the fragile environment, through their relationship to the land, and through their eventual accommodation to powerful external forces.<sup>17</sup> In a place once considered inhospitable and unproductive, human industry and innovation brought new organization and change that sought harmony with the natural environment while building a strong local agricultural economy. The history of Cherry County's modern cattle industry shows the progress and process of forging the links that bind animals, environment, and ranchers in a continuing dynamic of interdependency.

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<sup>16</sup>Marianne Brinda Beel and Barbara Kime Gale, eds., *A Sandhill Century: Book I: A History of Cherry County, Nebraska* (Valentine, Nebraska: Cherry County Centennial Committee, 1986); Marianne Brinda Beel and Ruth Johnson Harms, eds. *A Sandhills Century, Book II, The People: A History of the People in Cherry County* (Valentine, Nebraska: Cherry County Centennial Committee, 1986).

<sup>17</sup>Despite their later arrival, the land on which the Ravenscrofts' operate connects them to the earliest days of the county's cattle industry development. Their Cross O Ranch occupies the ranges where John Bachelor's 7JHPL (7J) and later George Brandeis' Three Bar Ranch (the site of the early Buck-Waite open-range TO Ranch) cattle grazed. Beel and Gale, 55.

## Sandhills Region of Nebraska



Map Eugene Mather, "Cattle Ranching in the Sand Hills of Nebraska" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1951), 13

## THE EARLY YEARS

Cherry County's Sandhills cattle economy is only a new phase of occupation in a distinctive natural environment. Linked to its antecedents by the grassland ecology, the livestock industry that dominates the region today developed on the heels of cultural, social, and economic upheavals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While the same forces played a major role in other places as well, in the unique Sandhills region, natural phenomena colored the cattle industry's evolution.

Cherry County lies within the north central sector of Nebraska's Sandhills region. As the largest sand dune area in the Western Hemisphere, the Sandhills cover 19,3000 square acres. Stretching 265 miles across the state from east to west, the region roughly begins at the Platte River and reaches north to the South Dakota border. Most of Cherry County lies within the Sandhills region, the county's two hard ground areas, referred to as table lands north of the Niobrara River, vary in soils and topography. While the environment of the table areas accommodates limited crop cultivation, the dunes and valleys of the Sandhills are ideally suited to raising cattle. The grass-covered dunes serve as summer pasture, and the either wet or dry valleys and lake regions are prolific in hay production for winter feeding.

Even the hard land areas of the county are important components to the livestock economy because of their agricultural production. Although only marginally suitable for the cultivation of most farm crops, farms on the Crookston, or north, table in the eastern third of the county and those in the smaller triangular insertion of hard land on the west central county line produce hay and corn for supplemental feed. Because of the high

degree of specialization, the rhythms and cycles of life in Cherry County revolve around grass and cattle. Cattle, are in fact, the business of that Sandhills environment.

The Sandhills were formed upon ancient landscapes. Climatic changes over millions of years encouraged the sculpting of the terrain and the creation of a complex infrastructure of drainage systems, contrasting topography, and diverse soils. Throughout episodes of geological development, vegetation, or the lack of it, played a pivotal role in the formation of the distinctive landform. Sand dunes most notably characterize the region but their adjacent valleys often provide vivid contrasts. Unlike desolate, arid grasslands, many Sandhills valleys display an abundance of water. An immense natural underground reservoir feeds the lakes, marshes, bogs, and fens that in turn display different and varied communities of plants and animal life.

Always a fragile environment, the Sandhills have nonetheless sustained countless numbers of migrating animals over the years. From the ancient mammoth to the American bison, the region's grasses drew grazing herds. More as a temporary seasonal feeding range than a permanent habitat, the herbivores played a role in invigorating the growth and reproduction of vegetation. Grazing was essential to maintaining the quality and quantity of grass. While natural phenomena worked to protect from overgrazing, human hunters who followed the migration, added to nature's regulation. Native American dependence on the hunt insured an ecological balance. Seasonal kills served to cull wild herds which reduced the threat of overgrazing and preserved the productive capacity of the grass. However, the new migration of white settlers disrupted the rhythms of temporary occupation and gave way to more systematic types of control over the region. As bison numbers declined and reservations and homesteads replaced hunting

grounds, different types of pressures visited the land.

The transition of the Sandhills from hunting grounds to open-range replaced one culture with another. With the removal of Native groups from the region, the area became the domain of entrepreneur cattlemen. Grass that once nourished migrating bison quickly became the fodder of profit. In a place once considered a foreboding and desolate land, the region took on significance for the new opportunistic capitalist. Lured by the economics of free grass and a near-by lucrative market, open-range ranchers and their cowboys moved into the north central Sandhills.

However, their tenure was soon threatened by greater expansion of western railroads and the thrust of white settlement into the area. Dirt farmers who arrived with primitive plows and seed tried to eke out a living on a land already recognized as only suitable for grazing. As their numbers increased, their farms intruded onto cattlemen's ranges, and the legislated organization of Cherry County brought other problems for open-range entrepreneurs. Taxes and pressure to own land added expenses to a once profitable almost free operation. Most of the large open-range ranchers deemed the costs too high and moved on to other places. The few who remained played an active role in building Cherry County's modern cattle industry based on land ownership, family enterprise, and broadened growing markets.

The interdependent roles of environment, government policy, and markets in the initial organization of the county's cattle economy continues down to the present day. Nineteenth century struggles that provided the seeds for greater development and growth

were mirrored, even magnified, during twentieth-century challenges. Changes that demanded and strained the process of adaptation propelled the evolution of a modern cattle industry.

## CHAPTER ONE DEFINING AN ENVIRONMENT

Sometime in the 1950s, Cherry County cattleman, P.H. Young, placed a billboard on the hard-road that ran along the limits of his ranch. Meant to discourage speeding motorists, its message, “This is God’s Country, Don’t Drive Thru Like A Bat Coming Out Of Hell,” spoke in the pragmatic language of the Sandhills.<sup>1</sup> Young’s irreverent words may have puzzled those just passing through. Residents of the county, on the other hand, knew exactly what was meant. To those unfamiliar with the Sandhills, the strange and desolate looking place appeared useless except for an occasional glimpse of grazing cattle. For others, the slogan filled them with a glow of pride in the grassy dunes, lush valleys, and many lakes. Despite conflicting perceptions concerning the region, the sign told it all. Cherry County was God’s own cattle country.

Since the first stock raising activities entered Cherry County to transform its grasses into beef, adaptation to limits and possibilities dictated by the distinctive Sandhills environment was essential. Environmental adaptation also forced altered modes of production and redefined social organization. As nature’s integrated economy continued in its endless flux, “conditions of change giving way to order—of order dissolving into change,” human ingenuity met challenge. Through initiative, flexibility, and, sometimes, just plain stubborn persistence, coping with situations often led to new behaviors to gain advantage over environmental and social forces.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Mary Beman Schroeder, *Prairie Pioneers: The Beman Family History* (Self published, 1992), 27.

<sup>2</sup>Donald Worster, *Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*, 2nd edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 412; Don E. Albrecht and Steve H. Murdock, *The Sociology of U. S. Agriculture: An Ecological Perspective* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990), 22.

In a environment of dichotomy, limits and potentials were first determined by natural resources. Climate, soil, and water prescribed production. In Nebraska's Sandhills, nature's delicate economy balanced on fragile relationships. Cherry County shared in this diverse and unique grassland environment where agricultural limitations actually enhance its agricultural potential. Self-proclaimed as "God's Own Cattle Country," the entire central Sand Hills Region bred, fed, and grew cattle as its primary economic function. Achieving that role depended on men and women who introduced and developed the cattle culture by establishing an interdependency between nature and each other in what appeared as a sterile environment. Most challenges, competition, and co-operation they encountered were rooted in controlling resources. The systems and methods that emerged optimized both exploitation and material success. In short, it became essential to intimately know this place, Cherry County, and its ecology.

## **FIRST IMPRESSIONS**

Long before the identifying marker of a billboard, the search to identify and understand the unusual landscape in the midst of the High Plains had begun. Early exploration and later scientific investigation sought to know and understand the strange natural environment. Reports from the earliest non-Indian observations failed to mention any positive worth to the sandy terrain. In 1796, James MacKay, leading an expedition along the Missouri River, diverted his course and ventured out to the L'eau Qui Court (the Niobrara River) and traveled throughout southeastern Cherry County. In his terse and unfavorable report, he described a harsh, desert-like landscape "of drifting sand without



trees, soil, rocks, water, or animals of any kind”<sup>3</sup>

MacKay’s remarks lacked the voice of objective observation. As a stark contrast to his more familiar surroundings, the semi-arid sandy environment of the hill country might have appeared as a no-man’s land, at least not for this man. In reality, the area exhibited diversity, drama, and mystery that only unfolded over time. Trained and educated observers who followed MacKay’s course sought understanding of the sand, the grass, and the water. When explorers in search of scientific understanding crossed the terrain, they saw sand dunes, dry valleys, wetlands, and river canyons as the *mise en scene* for lush flora and abundant fauna.

More than sixty years later, Topographical Engineer Lt. G. K. Warren fielded two expeditions through the hill country. As part of the “massive scientific inventories” commissioned to dispel inaccurate information about the West, the survey groups sought to emphasize positive attributes that would appeal to prospective settlers. Earlier missions, much in the same spirit as MacKay’s, had painted a bleak image of the Plains.<sup>4</sup> As circumstances changed, however, the need to present a more attractive image of the underpopulated region became a priority.

Warren’s first experience in the Sandhills was a fifteen-day trip from Fort Pierre

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<sup>3</sup>Susan M. Miller, “Development and Use” in Ann Bleed and Charles Flowerday, eds., *Atlas of the Sand Hills* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, 1989), 207; James MacKay, recorded observations, 1796, in Curtis M. Twedt and Carl W. Wolf, eds., “Botanical Pioneers of the Nebraska Sandhills” in D. G. Glenn and R.Q. Landers, eds., *Proceedings of the Fifth Prairie Conference* (Ames : Iowa State University, 1978), 198-203, *Heritage of the Sandhills*, Archive, James Ducey, ed. University of Nebraska-Institute of Agricultural and Natural Resources, <http://WWW.IR.NA.UNL.EDU> (199.240.193.217/), 2 (hereafter *HSH*); Charles Barron McIntosh, *The Nebraska Sand Hills: The Human Landscape* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 42-59.

<sup>4</sup>John L. Allen, “Exploration and the Creation of Geographical Images of the Great Plains” in Brian W. Blouet and Merlin Lawson, eds., *Images of the Plains: The Role of Human Nature in Settlement* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), 6. See Herman R. Friis. “The Role of the United States Topographical Engineers in Compiling a Cartographic Image of the Plains Region” in *ibid.*, 59-74.

in what later became the Dakota Territory to Fort Kearny in Central Nebraska. Reporting on his travel through “unexplored Indian inhabited sand hills” he noted that the region appeared unsuitable for “continuous settlement . . . west of the 97th Meridian,” just east of present-day Wayne, Nebraska. However, military objectives demanded further exploration and investigation of the area.<sup>5</sup> During the second trip in 1857, Warren’s group ventured into the area surrounding the Middle Loup and Niobrara Rivers. When one of the party was felled by typhoid fever, they were forced to camp near the present wildlife refuge in Cherry County. Warren did not mask his desire to move on quickly. He found the entire place suited for no purpose, although graced by abundant water and lush vegetation.<sup>6</sup> One of his party remained behind to map and study the area, and his observations provided much of the commentary on the flora and fauna in the official report.<sup>7</sup>

Despite Warren’s negative feelings, the report, *Preliminary Report of Exploration in Nebraska and Dakota* favorably described the Great Plains region. As the Plains began to arouse official interests as a place for settlement, it became necessary to dispel notions of an interior desert region and, instead, to show a more favorable

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<sup>5</sup>Warren, quoted in Miller, 207.

<sup>6</sup>In his official report, Warren described the scenery as “exceedingly solitary, silent, and desolate, and depressing to one’s spirit.” The Sandhills area was considered to be “the common war ground” of several Indian groups, the Lakotas, Crows, Omaha, Poncas, and Pawnees and where the topography provided cover for a “stealthy approach or retreat.” Warren found the Sandhills (les Buttes de Sable) “most characteristic appearance just north of the Calamus river spread out in every direction.” He reported that he was told that further west the hills increased in height and were “impassable for horses.” Reprinted as “1855: Exploration in the Dakota Country, by Lieutenant Gouverneur K. Warren” in Lloyd McFarling, ed., *Exploring the Northern Plains, 1804-1876* (Caldwell: Caxton Printers, 1955), 222-23.

<sup>7</sup>McIntosh, 3; Marianne Brinda Beel and Barbara Kirme Gale, eds., *Sandhill Century: Book I: The Land: A History of Cherry County, Nebraska* (Valentine, Nebraska: Cherry County Centennial Committee, 1986), 75.

assessment.<sup>8</sup> Warren's report not only reflected a growing shift in perceptions about the region but also provided a basis for future exploration and study of the region to fill in the blank spaces.<sup>9</sup>

F.V. Hayden, who had accompanied the first Warren expedition in 1857, returned to the Great Plains the next year to expand his initial knowledge. Like others later who would share his perceptions, he "categorized" the region "using Edenic images." He saw an area "almost unmatched . . . a home fit for the highest expression of American culture."<sup>10</sup> From his loosely scientific observations, Hayden identified Nebraska's Sandhills region boundaries by the differences in topography and described the terrain as covered by cone-shaped hills and numerous alkaline marshes. More specifically, he made observations on the blow-out area scattered throughout the sand dunes where the absence of vegetation exposed the sandy soil to wind erosion. Expanding on his previous botanical observations, he added that although the common plants were well adapted to their sandy, semi-arid Sandhills environment, he remained skeptical of any successful introduction of tilled crops. While categorizing the Plains, as a potential "garden," he remained emphatic that the Sandhills would not support intensive agriculture but held promise for grazing.<sup>11</sup>

Hayden's conclusions were a departure from those of earlier observers. Most, like

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<sup>8</sup>David M. Emmons, "The Influence of Ideology on Changing Environmental Images: The Case of Six Gazetteers," in Blouet and Lawson, 125-27.

<sup>9</sup> Friis, 65; Martyn J. Bowden, "Desert Wheat Belt, Plains Corn Belt: Environmental Cognition and Behavior of Settlers in the Plains Margin, 1850-99" in Blouet and Lawson, 193.

<sup>10</sup>Emmons, 125.

<sup>11</sup>F.V. Hayden, *First Annual Report of the U. S. Geological Survey of the Territories-Nebraska, 1867* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1873), 1-64 cited in Twedt and Wolf, 3; Emmons, 125.

the fur traders who traveled through the region, had pictured the entire plains region as uninhabitable.<sup>12</sup> Not trained in record keeping, their comments held little, if any, credence to the scientific surveyors who followed decades later. Even Warren, “one of the most productive and outstanding professionals,” devoted more attention to drawing painstakingly accurate maps rather than scientific observation.<sup>13</sup> Hayden’s survey and observations introduced a single-minded perspective. His assessment of agricultural use, although correct, was based on an imprecise knowledge of the soil, climate, and geology available at the time. However, Hayden presented a beginning to an understanding of the region. More than mere scientific curiosity, understanding the natural history and ecological underpinnings of the Sandhills would encourage a more productive and, therefore, more profitable use of the land. Arriving at this point would require a century-long process of discovery, speculation, and theory.

## SAND AND HILLS

During the early twentieth century, theories about the geological formation of the hill region, like those about the entire Great Plains, remained merely “oversimplified

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<sup>12</sup>David J. Wishart, “Images of the Northern Plains from the Fur Trade, 1807-43” in Blouet and Lawson, 45-55.

<sup>13</sup>Friis, 64.

generalizations.”<sup>14</sup> In 1903, the state’s official geologist, Erwin H. Barbour, thought that young and unconsolidated sandstones quickly broken down into sand made up the basis of the Sandhills. Others theories followed which offered a geological potpourri of epochs and materials to explain the formation of the hills. However, the principle of eolian (wind-borne) deposits figured into all their equations. Advances in science, technology, and instrumentation eventually gave a greater advantage to scientists who, nevertheless, failed to reach a consensus.<sup>15</sup>

By 1965, H. T. Smith presented a theory based on three major episodes of dune building. Evidence from test wells driven into sand covered dunes placed the period of eolian deposition during the pre-Wisconsinian Pleistocene epoch. Smith determined that the first incident of dune formation occurred 50,000 years ago and resulted in very tall “transverse dunes.” Subsequent periods of greater precipitation followed by arid conditions accounted for two series of dune building formed over the original transverse dunes. Because of differences in wind direction during these widely separated phases, the area took on its diverse topographical characteristic. While the large, tall dunes were long ridges at right angles to a northwestwardly wind, the smaller dunes were generally

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<sup>14</sup>James Malin, “The Grassland of North America: Its Occupance and the Challenge of Continuous Reappraisals” in *James C. Malin: History and Ecology: Studies of the Grassland*, Robert P. Swierenga, ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 8. Although geologists held that wind action sculpted the dunes, speculation concerning their origin and development produced a wide range of theories. In the late nineteenth century, many held with the hypothesis, that the plains were formed by debris washed-out from the mountain system to the west. Once deposited, the covering laid largely undisturbed. According to this view, development of the soil resulted from disintegration of underlying rock as upper layers eroded naturally. Samuel Aughey, the University of Nebraska’s first professor of Natural Science, believed that the Sandhills were formed during the “glacial periods” and were composed of “modified loess deposits.” Few at that time took into consideration the consolidation of soil materials and the ongoing process of formation. Quoted in McIntosh, 6; Malin, “Factors in Grassland on Equilibrium” in Swierenga, 45.

<sup>15</sup>McIntosh, 6.

aligned from the northwest to the southeast.<sup>16</sup>

Challenges to the chronology of dune formation surfaced in the 1970s. James Swinehart of the University of Nebraska Division of Conservation and Survey brought new understanding to the study. His first major contribution corrected the faulty dating for the development of the region. Through intensive scientific investigation, Swinehart found that dune formation began during several episodes of drought followed by unusually wet periods that occurred as late as 8,000 years ago. A more recent period of significant dune formation happened from 3,500-1,500 BP (before present time).<sup>17</sup>

While not dismissing Smith's conclusions, Swinehart identified two major periods of modern dune building. The first episode developed when desiccated vegetation no longer stabilized the surface that had been laid down millions of years before. Generally accepted as a period of deep drought, winds—their velocity and direction—agitated sheet-like deposits of unconsolidated alluvial sands. Borne by the wind, a process called saltation sorted the sandy material. While particles of clay and silt were carried off, the lighter sand remained. In this way, the hills, the valleys, and the differently shaped and sized interdunes, gained dimension and form.<sup>18</sup> Two subsequent episodes of drought followed by wetter periods were responsible for the later phases of additional dune formation. Swinehart and his colleagues went on to classify the dunes according to type and distribution. They found that recent cycles of drought, the latest occurring in the

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<sup>16</sup>Paul A. Johnsgard, *This Fragile Land* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 9-10; McIntosh, 48. Smith held that it was in the final episode of dune building that the even less imposing sand hills were formed and were "partially reactivated by blowouts." Johnsgard, 10.

<sup>17</sup>James B. Swinehart, "Wind-blown Deposits," in Bleed and Flowerday, 53.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 45.

1930s, merely refined and lowered the existing hills.<sup>19</sup>

Six major dune types—sand sheets, parabolic, crescentic, dome-like, domal-ridges, and linear—were classified according to their shape and the number and position of their steep downward side and directional orientation. Further delineation into more refined subgroups resulted in eleven dune classifications. In the Sandhills, various types of formations were grouped together in associations that were most often characteristic of the different sectors of the region. The smallest dunes were found bordering the entire region while a complex of large wavelike and parallel-ridged, the “barchanoid-ridge” pattern, were typical of the central sector. Viewed as “mega dunes,” some extend as far as 40 kilometers in the western part of Cherry County. Only three types of mega dunes found in the entire Sandhills are not present in Cherry County.<sup>20</sup>

Because of the dune landscape, interdune areas became interspersed between the rising hills. The valleys varied in size and soil, directly correlated to the type of surrounding dunes. Researchers found that the larger flat-floored valleys were “linear and aligned with the dunes whereas the smaller are irregular in shape.”<sup>21</sup> In valleys next to the larger dunes, another distinctive but paradoxical feature of the Sandhills region, its lakes, gave a distinctive wetland character to an otherwise arid environment. Most were

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<sup>19</sup>Johnsgard, 10; Swinehart, 44–45, map of distribution of sand dune types; C. F. Keech and Ray Bentall, *Dunes on the Plains: The Sand Hills Region of Nebraska: Resource Report No. 4* (Lincoln: Conservation and Survey Division, University of Nebraska, 1978), *HSH*, 1-18; Vince Dreezen, “Overview of Nebraska,” *HSH*, 3. Dreezen cites the *Survey Reporting Series #RS-441* “The Dynamic Holocene Dune Fields of the Great Plains and Rocky Mountain Basin.” During the 1930s, drought conditions were far too short to have caused a major disturbance. In order for a major shift in the sand dunes to begin, a dry period of 20 to 30 years would be required to bring about a situation where 80 percent of the region’s ground cover had been destroyed leaving the sand surface vulnerable to wind and water erosion.

<sup>20</sup>Johnsgard, 10.

<sup>21</sup>Keech and Bentall, 3.

“common along a line from northwestern McPherson County to east-central Sheridan County” as well as pockets in the north and west. Of the 21 Nebraska counties that comprise the main body of the Sandhills, 80 percent of all the region’s lakes were found in Cherry County.<sup>22</sup>

## **WATER**

Although regarded as another inconsistency in the Sandhills environment, geology explains the region’s abundant supply of water. Here, climate serves as the mitigating factor while geologic and hydraulic conditions accounted for the amount and distribution of this natural resource. Streams and lakes are surface manifestations of the tremendous amount of groundwater beneath. During the initial formation of the Great Plains, eolian deposits covered water collected hundreds of thousands years before. Not one body of water but a series of caches throughout the middle portion of the nation made up the Ogallala aquifer. Beneath the Sandhills region the most concentrated and deepest levels accumulated.<sup>23</sup>

Recent estimates report the aquifer thickness at nearly one thousand feet beneath Cherry County. No mere coincidence, an intimate relationship exists between the texture of the sand and the concentrations of groundwater. Porous sand allows a very rapid

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<sup>22</sup>D. Bruce McCarragher, *Nebraska’s Sandhills Lakes* (Lincoln: Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, 1977), *HSH*, 1,6; Ann Bleed and Marilyn Ginsberg, “Lakes and Wetlands” in Bleed and Flowerday, 115.

<sup>23</sup>John Opie, *Ogallala: Water for a Dry Land* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), xv. The aquifer holds 67 percent of Nebraska’s entire groundwater supply under the Sandhills.



infiltration of precipitation recharging the groundwater below.<sup>24</sup> Under the pressure of confinement, the hydraulic process percolates groundwater to the surface and provides the flow of streams and water for lakes and marshes.<sup>25</sup>

Regional streams exhibit some of the steadiest flows of all the world's rivers. Not dependent on run off, but renewed by the constant process of groundwater percolation, Sandhills rivers and creeks have proved unique. More recent geological studies focusing on the Niobrara area have brought a new understanding of the region. In 1994, Jim Swinehart and his colleague, Dave Loope, unearthed fossilized deposits from two ancient lakes in north central Cherry County. Named after the owners of the property on which they were discovered, Lake Wobig, near Cody, and Cobb Lake, close to Eli, opened the way to verification of the geologists' suspicions. They believe that "the ancient Niobrara River, which ran a course relatively similar to the modern [river's], was blocked by at least two masses of sand large enough" to create the lakes.<sup>26</sup>

Sediment filled the lakes thirty to forty thousand years ago and provided "a rare glimpse" into the region's geological and historic past. Swinehart explained that dune-

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<sup>24</sup>This notable feature was recorded by Lt. G. K. Warren on this expedition into the region in 1855. Warren reported that "in the sandy region the rain that falls sinks into the surface and does not run off suddenly nor evaporate." Warren, 221.

<sup>25</sup>"Researcher Finds Water, Sand Closely Linked," *HSH*, 1-2; Dennis Lawton, "Groundwater Hydrology and Stream Hydrology, *HSH*, 1-3. Formed during ancient geological periods, the reservoirs developed during alternating episodes of aridity when sediments that made up the Ogallala Formation (12-2 million BP) were deposited. The lower and principal aquifer is comprised of a young sand and gravel layer over the older Ogallala Group which sits upon an older bedrock. An upper reservoir shows a composition of superficial sands and alluvial materials. Sand Hills' rivers, which all derive their flow from groundwater, are considered part of the upper aquifer. *Natural Resources Commission to the Report on the Sandhills Area Study*, "Appendix," *HSH*, 28.

<sup>26</sup>Anonymous, "Ancient Niobrara Valley Lake Beds Provide Clues to Past, Future," *Scarlet* 6 (November 1996):4 on *HSH*, 1-2. Comments on James Swinehart's presentation of his findings "Thick Pleistocene Lake Sediments Discovered in the Ancestral Niobrara River Valley, North-Central Nebraska" at the annual meeting of the Geological Society of America, Denver, 31 October 1996. Dave Loope was chairman of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Department of Geology at the time.

dams provide major data concerning the occurrence, duration, and impact of periods of drought. Only a drought of significant size could have created the dam and caused effects as those discovered. "By identifying patterns of weather cycles, scientists [could] better understand future changes."<sup>27</sup>

Evidence that proved the existence of dune-dams answered a number baffling questions. Understanding of drainage patterns and their relationship to lakes and peat beds became clear. Previously, no reasonable explanation accounted for the closed hydraulic system and the presence of wetlands in the arid environment. Early geologists theorized on the occurrence of the dune dams, but without substantiation. They had timed the formation of drainage patterns with that of the dunes and speculated that intermitted weather patterns had created conditions favorable for that formation.<sup>28</sup>

Suggestion turned into fact when evidence of ancient dams surfaced in 1977. Research geologist Robert Diffendal located and radiocarbon dated "lake sediments imbedded with freshwater fossils" around the area of manmade Lake McConaughy. Tests revealed its recent composition as close as 8,200 years before recent time. From the data, a hypothesis for the "little explored geologic phenomena" of dune-dams provided the

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>In 1935, geologist A. L. Lugin suggested a "well defined, east-tending drainage system." Formed during the early ice-age period of the Pleistocene (1.4 - 0.4 million BP), a return to arid conditions caused alluvial (water-borne) deposits to fill in the riverbeds and successfully block the riverine system. Interstream areas lost vegetation that anchored their surface sands. Now susceptible to wind erosion, the seared surface provided the material for dune formation. Once more favorable climatic conditions returned, the natural dams were "partly re-evacuated when streams were rejuvenated" restoring a viable system of rivers and tributaries. Keech and Bentall, 8.

reasonable starting point toward understanding a unique system.<sup>29</sup>

Diffendal's find, although confined to the southern and western limits of the Sandhills, had implications for the entire region, and pieces of the geological puzzle began to fall into place. Patterns of "triangular sand dunes south of the Platte River in Lincoln County . . . [were] similar to those in the Sand Hills north of the Platte."

Geologists had now established proof that the dunes had moved during an extended ephemeral period when the river had no flow due to the damming. Additional evidence regarding the sand duned region also pointed to the damming phenomena and led geologists to suspect that more lakes and bogs would reveal an identical origin.<sup>30</sup>

Swinehart explained that the "mosaic of shallow lakes, marshes, and wetlands" that came to characterize the region originated with the overflow of water from blocked streams.<sup>31</sup>

His discovery of the Wobig and Cobb ancient lakes in 1996 only confirmed his theory.

Lakes covered 65,800 acres in the Sandhills. Many were simply marshes or wetlands that did not meet the criteria for designation as lakes. Some ecologists believed a better description might be "lake-quasi-marshes."<sup>32</sup> Most were shallow and only averaged 3.2 feet in depth, although the largest and deepest lake covered an area of more than 2.47 acres and was 13.8 feet deep. Results of a survey taken in the 1960s reported

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<sup>29</sup>Swinehart explained later that repeated dry periods caused sand dunes to move across dwindling streams that dammed them and affected the drainage patterns. Basins, "for the many shallow lakes that grace the Sand Hills," were created when wetter conditions caused reinvigorated streams to leave their beds when dams prevented further movement. His explanation coincided in many ways with Lugn's earlier ideas. De[b]Jorah Lanner, "Discovery of Dune Dams Reveal Formation of the Sand Hills Lakes," *Resource Notes* 6 (1991):9-11, *HSH*, 1.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup>Marilyn H. Ginsberg. "Physical Characteristics: Hydrology" in *Proceedings of the 1984 Water Resource Seminar Series* (Lincoln: Nebraska Water Resource Center, University of Nebraska, 1984), 37-43, *HSH*, 1.

1,640 permanent and temporary bodies of water. In some valleys, researchers found an unusual characteristic of the lakes. Their surfaces were frequently aligned with the water table. A good “hydraulic connection” occurs when the top of the water table, the “zone of saturation,” and the lake’s surface are at the same level and “fluctuate in unison.” Under these conditions, lakes have less chemical salts in their composition. Where the rhythm was absent, lakes and water tables fluctuate independently and show a poor connection and higher concentrations of salts. Hydraulic conditions explain the low alkalinity of Cherry County’s lakes while others, in Garden and Sheridan Counties, were highly alkaline in composition. Essentially, in areas where poor hydraulic connections are the case, water chemistry reflects a lack of inflow of fresh groundwater.<sup>33</sup>

Ecologist D. Bruce McCarraher, who devoted eighteen years to the professional study of Sandhills lakes, published his findings in 1977. He reported that many lakes in Cherry County were “geologically once large expansive” bodies of water. Some, like Hudson Lake, formed and filled more than 5,000 years ago. Changing very slowly, the remnants of the older lakes now formed the margins and meadows of the lakes’ present basins. Change took place in small increments over a long period.<sup>34</sup>

Also included in McCarraher’s study were smaller intermittent lakes or playa lakes that covered less than 0.25h. As a category, they displayed a different ecology from

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<sup>33</sup>McCarraher, 6.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid, 2-3, 36. In his comprehensive report, McCarraher chose Hudson Lake as the example from Cherry County. Scientific investigation of the 130-acre lake showed water of a medium degree of alkalinity with water level varying in relation to “annual rainfall and surface water runoff from the marsh-meadow to the south.” In its northern sector, “abrupt Sandhills and drifting sand ridges have closed the outlet surface drainage.” At the lake’s southern reaches, inflow drainage from its surrounding 1700-acre marsh-meadow restored water levels lost to evaporation. Emergent vegetation, along the perimeter of the lake, presented a consistent “littoral zone” which displayed a distinctive variety of vegetation. Ibid, 36-37.

the larger bodies of water. McCarraher concluded that the non-mineralized playas he studied in Cherry County exhibited an “often capricious nature of the water levels” due, for the most part, to their location as well as the arrangement of drainage patterns. While the water quality suggested the presence of typical fresh-water life forms, fluctuating water levels inhibited the long-term occupation by certain species of flora and fauna.<sup>35</sup>

## FENS AND SOILS

While diverse characteristics differentiated lakes and hydraulic connection and water quality, and associated flora yielded criteria for classification, soils and sediments also provided characteristics to identify and compare.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps the most baffling to geologists and soil scientists are the numerous peat ponds found throughout the region. Until the 1940s all peatlands in North America were considered bogs, similar to but only distantly related to the British fen. Organic soils composed of peat and muck were the distinguishing characteristic of both. Peat, the product of the decomposition of plant materials such as roots, stems, and leaves, had not reached the degree of decomposition in bogs compared to fens. Another significant difference involved the source of water. Where the bogs received moisture “directly from rain and snow,” fens “were fed by groundwater which accumulated nutrients . . . making fens more nutrient rich and less acidic than bogs.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid, 39-40.

<sup>36</sup>D. W. Buchwalter, “Monitoring Nebraska’s Sandhills Lakes,” *Resource Report No. 10* (Lincoln: Conservation and Survey Division-University of Nebraska, 1983): 1-42, *HSH*, 4, 9-10.

<sup>37</sup>Gerry Steinauer, “Sandhills Fens,” *Nebraskaland* (July 1992): 1-16, *HSH*, 1. [hereafter “Sandhills Fens”].

Although identification and mapping of peat and muck soils in the Sand Hills took place in the 1920s, all were merely identified as bogs. Only after botanists from South Dakota investigated bog sites on the Minnechaduza Creek in Cherry County were the differences recognized. Reportedly, plant specimens held in museum collections proved that “botanists had visited these sites previously, but did not recognize them as fens.”<sup>38</sup>

Most fens in Nebraska are found in the Sandhills Region. Smaller and less common bodies outside the region, for the most part, had already been destroyed for commercial purposes. A study conducted by the Nebraska Games and Parks Commission and the Conservation and Survey Division at the University (CSD) in 1991 identified 120 potential fen sites within the borders of Cherry County. Field surveys at 62 yielded important insight into the properties associated with wetland areas. At several sites, situated at the headwaters of creeks, some fens measured 500 acres while smaller ones averaged only a few. Researchers found the water slightly acidic and sediment of varying thicknesses. Jumbo Valley Fen proved the thickest with sediment reaching seven meters, well over the three to five meters thickness found elsewhere. Two common features, a convex soil surface formed by the accumulation of peat and muck and increased peat

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

accumulation next to places where seepage occurs, signaled fen identification.<sup>39</sup>

One early analysis by the United States Bureau of Soils revealed that different gradations of sand made up the soil composition of the Sandhills. Composed of 73.7 percent of fine sand, 15.2 percent very fine sand, 7.7 percent medium grained sands, 1.9 percent clay, 0.7 percent silt, dune sand has no gravel. In contrast, dry valleys and basins were covered by a loamy sand with fine to medium grained sand, six to eighteen inches deep which “support[ed] a thick stand of grasses.” Wet meadow soils, found largely in Cherry, northeastern Deuel, and northwestern Garden Counties, showed a high percentage of organic matter combined with the fine sand. Ten to twenty-four inches below, a subsoil of finer grained sand, similar to the dune types laid close to the water table. The combination of organically rich soil lying over the highly porous sand provided a nutrient rich and well-drained environment for the “abundant production of meadow grasses and sedges.”<sup>40</sup>

Both the composition and relative youthfulness of the soil add to the fragile nature of the environment. Soils, in their early stages of development, lack the maturity that

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<sup>39</sup>Gerry Steinauer, “Sandhills Fens in Cherry County, Nebraska: Description, Inventory, and General Assessment,” paper presented at Research Symposium, Environmental and Natural Resources of the Niobrara River Basin, Lincoln Nebraska, 1993, *HSH*, 2-3. [ hereafter “Fens in Cherry County”] Jim Swinehart and his colleagues at the Conservation and Survey Division reported that in their research at Jumbo Valley in southern Cherry County, a test core “contained a layer of sand at three feet that dated at 960 years.” Peat bottomed-out at twenty-two and a half feet and twelve thousand BP. Layers of the core provided a visual representation of the effect of climate on the development of the fen. Eolian sands imbedded in the peat signified a period of drought when sand and other matter on the surface became air-borne and deposited elsewhere. Not only did the discovery offer insight into climate of the area at that time (significant eolian deposits occur during drastically arid periods), but also had significance to the management and conservation of the wetland areas in the region. Deborah McAdams, “Peat in Sand Yields Clues to Climate Change.” *Resource Notes*, 8 (1993-94 ):17-20, *HSH*, 1; *Omaha World-Herald*, 1 May 1996.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.* The types of soil with higher organic content, the Anselmo, Dunday, Elsmere, Gannett and others, represented variations on a theme, so to speak. More complex in soil structure, they show a sand quartz basis combined with different levels of loam and silt contents and varying degrees of organic matter. Gradations of structure determined the permeability or the water holding capacity of each distinctive soil. Keech and Bentall, 4.

“weathering” provides. Insufficient time must elapse for complete infiltration of decomposed material to darken and enrich soil before new deposits of sand invade a region. Then too, chemical reactions that work to form various minerals within a developing soil structure need to take place. Adding to the process, climatic conditions retard leaching since native plants use the available precipitation and any excess water quickly infiltrates into the groundwater reservoir.<sup>41</sup>

Analysis and classification of local soil types in the Sandhills began with the mid-nineteenth-century topographical surveys. Those reports combined the cursory observations of those who merely passed through and noted the region’s visible characteristics with the analysis of others who sought to find meaning in the landscape moving beyond the visual. In the same way that geological knowledge advanced, botanical studies of the region began with broad generalities. Trained eyes and knowing minds led to new scientific theories based upon the growing evidence that a correlation existed between Sandhills soil development and the plants that grew there. Vegetation’s role as a stabilizing factor for the wind-driven sands was equally as important as its function as a builder of soils. Because of the Sandhills’ geographical location and varied topography, a variety of diverse plants covered both the dunes and the wetlands.

## **GRASS AND OTHER PLANTS**

Approximately 240 different species and subspecies of plants were associated with the fen area. In six vegetation zones, researchers noted that human-induced

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<sup>41</sup>David T. Lewis, “Characteristics of the Soils,” *Proceedings of the 1984 Water Resource Seminar*, 62-73, *HSH*, 1; “Origin of Properties of Sand Hill Soils,” in *Bleed and Flowerday*, 57; Robert Kaul, “Plants” in *Ibid.*, 127.



disturbances altered established ecological associations. In attempts to manipulate the area into another kind of productivity, methods of drainage converted the fen and bog areas to the production of hay. However, even extensive ditching did not always succeed because the organic soils were so absorbent. "Sometimes only areas adjacent to ditches [could] be hayed."<sup>42</sup> In cases where it succeeded, visible changes occurred. Dried organic soils decomposed at accelerated rates and altered soils' water-holding capacity. Once put into agricultural production, other changes occurred. Native vegetation mowed for hay while at peak periods of growth in mid-summer invited exotic plants and weeds to intrude. Essentially, the newcomers enjoy a competitive advantage which "reduces the abundance and diversity of native plants." Researchers also discovered that at sites where successful ditching took place over a long period of time, fen characteristics completely disappeared along with its distinctive flora. In others, where earlier ditching processes had not been effective and were no longer maintained, "ditches often filled in with sediment and vegetation, and, in effect, healed with little or no permanent damage to the fen."<sup>43</sup>

One example of Sand Hills fens effectively illustrates the fragile equilibrium that underlies the region's natural productivity. An intimate relationship exists between an ancient geological infrastructure and the grasses that mantle its surface. No other sand-duned land mass in the world exhibits a similar environment where regional aridity produced a landscape marked by its abundant water and diverse vegetation. Like the evolution of geological understanding that spanned more than a century, the long process

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<sup>42</sup>Steinaur, "Sandhills Fens," 6.

<sup>43</sup>Steinaur, "Fens in Cherry County," 4-5; "Sandhills Fens," 6

to define and categorize the produce of the land hinged on scientific observation and theory.

A compelling link between geology and botany resided in the composition of the Sand Hills' soils. Researchers expected to find striking contrasts between the surface composition of dune areas and those of the river basin. However, significant differences within the various sectors of the region itself proved exceptionally noteworthy. Just as the soil structure of the fens and bogs was characteristically different from the surrounding terrain, soils in wet valleys, in dry valleys, and on dunes were all distinct. While soil in river valleys, terraces, and bottom lands developed from sandstone, dune soil developed from quartz sand. Geological studies show that seventy-five percent of the region's soils originated from the quartz-based Valentine Formation, a Miocene-age rock layer, deposited between 10 to 12 million years ago that never hardened and maintained a loose composition.<sup>44</sup>

Even the earliest Plains botanists recognized this uniquely ordered Sandhills environment. Species migrated into the region during and after phases of glacial retreat, and as a result the composition of regional vegetation differs from any of its surrounding areas. Distinctiveness, however, wasn't determined because of the number of unusual types of plants but was found in the mixture of many different types. Plants established new communities becoming the "product of the total environment." Adaptation was required in response to the complex interaction of climate, soil, and water, "making it

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<sup>44</sup>George Condra cited the report in his address to the state's agricultural board in 1915. George E. Condra, "The Development of Nebraska's Sandhills Area," *HSH*, 2-3. George Condra was director of the Nebraska State Conservation and Soil Survey.

difficult to identify cause and effect relationships independent of other factors.”<sup>45</sup>

Sandhills vegetation proved to be a complex of migrated species meeting in, what botanists would later recognize as a transitional zone. Species from the humid high grass prairie to the east and the short grasses from the arid high plains to the west moved into the Sandhills’ environment. In the same way, plants migrating from northerly reaches and even those few southern species capable of survival established a foothold in a developing ecosystem. The interspersed distribution of wetlands, dry meadows, and enormous duned areas offered a wide diversity of habitats for opportunistic vegetation. Migration and adaptation created new types of plant communities where different species and their relative number “adjust[ed] to themselves and to each other. . . . eventually [coming to a ] condition of relative stability.”<sup>46</sup> Communities differed according to the soils in which they grew and the amount of moisture available. Other environmental indicators such as the degree of exposure to the elements, the altitude at which they grew and even which side of a particular valley of hill they inhabited all played a role. Individual species exhibited individual natural characteristics and appearances in the variegated bouquet of Sandhills’ grasses.

Subtle differences, such as location upon a sand dune, affected the adaptation process of the “borrowed” plants.<sup>47</sup> In some places, adjacent areas only a few feet apart

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<sup>45</sup>James T. Nichols, “Vegetation” in *Proceedings of the 1984 Water Resources Seminar Series* (Lincoln: Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, 1984), 74-79 *HSH*, 1-2; Kaul, 137. Nichols, from the perspective of an ecologist, identifies the environmental factors as: climatic, edaphic, biotic, physiographic, pyric, and the latest classification, anthropic, which deals with the influences of humans. Nichols, 1.

<sup>46</sup>Charles E. Bessey, “Some Agricultural Possibilities of Western Nebraska,” *Fifteenth Annual Report State Board of Agriculture, 1900* (Lincoln: State Journal Company, 1901), *HSH*, 9.

<sup>47</sup>Johnsgard, 69; Kaul, 127.

had diverse and even contradictory characteristics that added another complexity to adaptation. Plants and their “different numbers of species” grew and thrived in “different topographic sites.” Dunes were assessed as “the most species-rich areas” while “valleys and wet swales [had] fewer species.” In comparison, “the richest aquatic environments” contained numbers of species still not fully assessed.<sup>48</sup> One rare Sandhills plant, the blowout or Hayden Penstemon (*Pentstemon haydenii*), grows only in areas denuded of vegetation and eroded by the wind. As the first to invade the newly exposed sand, the perennial plant reaches to almost two feet in height and bears large distinctive blue flowers. Although once common in the many blowout areas in the Sandhills, it has begun to disappear.<sup>49</sup>

Collected in the central Sandhills region in 1857 by F.V. Hayden, the blowout Penstemon seemed to be a new species, never seen before. Field studies failed to find any other sites other than seven Nebraska counties where the species grew. Even within the portion of South Dakota, in Bennett County, where the Sandhills intrude, botanists observed no evidence of the plant.<sup>50</sup> Despite the seeming hospitality of the blowout environment to this unique plant, its tenure often proved short-lived. Its typical lifespan of four to eight years was often interrupted as other plant species began to invade the area. Penstemon receded, eventually giving way to other plants and grasses that further

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<sup>48</sup>Kaul, 128.

<sup>49</sup>“IANR Restoration Effort Aids Endangered Blowout Penstemon” *Midland News* (Valentine, Nebraska) 14 August, 1996, 3B.

<sup>50</sup>David J. Ode, “Field Survey for Blowout Penstemon in South Dakota,” *Report to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Endangered Species Office, Report No. 89-22* (Denver: 1989), HSH, 1-6.

restored the blowout area.<sup>51</sup>

Hayden, the first to collect the rare native blowout *Penstemon*, also noted many other common plants, collecting them for display. Nearly a half century later, botanists had classified 119 different species of native grasses indigenous to the entire Sandhills region. In 1900, Charles Bessey, professor of botany at the University of Nebraska and botanist to the State Board of Agriculture, noted that regional diversity in his fifteenth address to the Board. Intent on reversing the public's misinformed perception of the Sandhills, he tried to show the region in the same light Hayden had suggested years before. Livestock grazing and not farming suited the unique environment. Bessey cited scientific data to establish the extent of vegetative variety and the nutritional value of such vegetation for domesticated livestock.<sup>52</sup>

Chemical analysis of regional grasses has broken down native plants' structures into their individual flesh and fat producing elements. When Bessey explained that the results compared favorably with the "best of the cultivated grasses selected by men from all over the world," his motives went beyond boosterism. He offered recent scientific proof and opinion that the wild grasses were what distinguished the region and believed that official promotion of the state should have emphasized that fact to prospective settlers.<sup>53</sup> In his opinion, "the early builders of Nebraska" were remiss by promoting the region as ideal for the cultivation of crops. Rather, it was "one of the most promising for

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid.; "IANR Restoration Effort," 3B.

<sup>52</sup>Bessey, 1, 6-10; Twedt and Wolf, 3.

<sup>53</sup>Bessey, "Agricultural Possibilities," 14-16.

the growing of herds of cattle, horses, and sheep.”<sup>54</sup>

Bessey incorporated data from recent scientific investigations compiled for the University and the State Conservation Commission into his report. Over the preceding seven years growing interest in the Sandhills region resulted in important new understandings of its natural development and resources. Bessey’s students, Roscoe Pound, Jared Smith, P.A. Rydberg, and Frederick Clements, contributed valuable insight into the region’s productivity and variety during summer excursions most often to Nebraska’s Sandhills. Throughout the 1890s professor and students conducted the Botanical Survey of Nebraska. By the mid-nineties much of the work surveying the Sandhills area of the state was nearly complete.<sup>55</sup> Pound and Smith conducted extensive collecting in the north central sector in 1892, while Rydberg surveyed adjacent areas in 1893. In both years, the survey expedition traversed near the area Warren and Hayden had traveled nearly forty years before. Interest in that particular sector, which by the 1890s included much of Cherry County, may have been conditioned by accessible transportation to the sparsely populated area. More to the point, the greater diversity of landscape most likely carried the greatest weight.

In the first expedition, Pound and Smith launched out into the Sand Hills region

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 2.

<sup>55</sup>Richard Overfield, *Science With Practice: Charles E. Bessey and the Maturing of American Botany* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1993), 133-35.

on the 5th of July, 1892.<sup>56</sup> Clearly adventurous, their journey also had far-reaching consequences. Not only did the young botanists confirm the presence of three new separate floras well established in the region, but their success established a new standard for successive survey expeditions. As a study to be “conceptualized as part of a larger, coordinated, and scientifically scientific effort,”<sup>57</sup> it laid the foundation for the study of plant geography that would gain world attention as a new field of “dynamic ecology.”<sup>58</sup>

Leaving from Alliance, Nebraska, the young men walked into the main group of sand hills in Sheridan County. They described their route as moving eastward from the 103rd meridian to the 98th and followed a route midway between the North Platte and the Niobrara Rivers. “[T]he greater part of the collecting” wrote Pound and Smith, “was done in the sand hills and the lake region of Cherry County.”<sup>59</sup> Building upon the results from earlier (1839 and 1858) plant collection expeditions, the botanists added “three floras in the region” to their growing list. In all they collected 298 specimens, 134 found in Cherry County alone. Dry valleys and the upper parts of the wet valleys, those areas located farthest away from the lakes, showed vegetation “scarcely different from the

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<sup>56</sup> An article in *The Alliance Times* (Alliance, Nebraska), July 8, 1892, credited sponsorship of the expedition to the State Board of Agriculture. However, records of the University Botanical Survey put that into question. Pound, a graduate student in botany who looked to Dr. Bessey as a mentor, was director of the Botanical Seminar (Seminarium Botanicum or simply “Sem. Bot.”) at the University of Nebraska. He accepted some funding from the state’s agricultural board, but it appears as if the expedition was intended to be associated with the scientific position espoused by the Bot. Sem. Jared Smith, at the time of the expedition, was with the Botanical Department at the University and later moved on to the United States Department of Agriculture. See Michael R. Hill, “Roscoe Pound and the Sandhills Botanical Expedition in 1892,” revised text of paper presented at Center for the Great Plains Interdisciplinary Symposium, “Exploring the Great Plains, Lincoln Nebraska,” April 1992, *HSH*, 3-4.

<sup>57</sup>Hill, 2, note 5.

<sup>58</sup>Frederick Clements used the term in a letter to Paul Sayre, 17 January 1945 cited in Hill, 2.

<sup>59</sup>Jared Smith and Roscoe Pound, “Flora of the Sand Hills Region of Sheridan and Cherry Counties and List of Plants Collected on a Journey Through the Sand Hills in July and August, 1892,” Botanical Seminar, University of Nebraska, *Botanical Survey of Nebraska*, 2: 5-30, *HSH*, 2,

prairies of eastern Nebraska.” All represented a mixed plant type. The wet valleys, especially surrounding the lakes, showed the most localization of different species. Vegetation unique to the sand hills region itself were found in the blow-out areas, the dry valleys, and the hills.<sup>60</sup>

Pound and Smith believed they “saw only the worst parts of Sheridan and Cherry County.”<sup>61</sup> In a letter to friend Omer F. Hersey, after returning to Lincoln in August, Pound wrote about following cow-paths to find water or ranches and camping at springy ponds in dry valleys. He described “barren and abominable” sand hills of varying size separated by valleys enclosed by the steep dunes. In contrast to the seemingly barren environment, hills of endless sand and sparse vegetation, the men encountered a small water fall along the Loup River.<sup>62</sup>

Pound described the scene when they arrived at eastern Cherry County’s lake region the next day. Dad’s Lake appeared like “a valley full of water—a magnificent sheet of water and the largest in the state probably.” The lake spanned five to six miles in length and almost one and three quarters miles in width. Beyond it, a network of bodies of water, with Pelican and Marsh Lakes the largest, were characteristic of the region. Pound also mentioned to his friend the twenty-four “good sized lakes [ ] visible” from a hill near Pelican Lake and not far from several ranches. Hanna Lake, actually three bodies

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 2; Appendix I, 8.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>62</sup>Transcript of letter from Roscoe Pound to Omer F. Hersey, August 14, 1892. Hersey was a student friend of Pound’s from his Harvard Law School years. The transcript is from his original in the Paul F. Sayer Collection, University Archives, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, in Michael R. Hill, “Roscoe Pound and American Sociology: A Study in Archival Frame Analysis Sociobiography, and Sociological Jurisprudence” University of Nebraska, Pd.D. dissertation, 1989, 789-800, *HSH*, 5.



of water connected “end to end” was miles away from ranches positioned at either end of the valley. “Free claims,” areas of settlement, and “droves of horses completed the scene.”<sup>63</sup>

Later, when Jared Smith reported on their findings he wrote of “sandy slopes and ridges” covered by hard-stemmed and hard-leaved varieties” of bunch grasses. In the “valleys and meadows surrounding the lakes [were] more prolific in species,” some “among the best in western hay grasses.” On the “boggy margins of the water holes” four species of “coarse slough hay abounded,” while “back from the swampy lake margins are the more valuable grasses growing in rich profusion” of intermixed grasses, rushes, sedges, and “weedy composites.”<sup>64</sup>

Although Smith’s report to the board made no mention of Pound, both men presented their findings to the Nebraska Academy of Science. While Smith apparently studied the general characteristics of the region, Pound devoted most attention to the flora of the hill country they traversed. Ultimately, the collection and discoveries figured into Pound’s 1898 dissertation, “The Phytogeography of Nebraska,” coauthored with Frederick Clements.<sup>65</sup>

P.A. Rydberg’s expedition the year following the Pound-Smith venture also contributed to Bessey’s report of 1900. Under the auspices of the U. S. Department of

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Jared G. Smith, “The Grasses of the Sand-Hills of Northern Nebraska” *Report of the Nebraska State Board of Agriculture*, 1892 as quoted, with omissions and emendation, in Bessey, “Fifteenth Report,” 10, 11-14.

<sup>65</sup>See Hill, “Roscoe Pound and the Sandhills.” Of the two men, Frederick Clements became a renowned botanist and ecologist. His theory of the “successional development” of plants communities and “the organismismic character of plant formation” dominated his writing. Coming to the University of Nebraska in 1890 at the age of sixteen, he soon became a protégé of Charles Bessey. During his four decades of University teaching and research, he left a profound impact on the course of ecological thought. Worster, 208-9.

Agriculture's Division of Botany and on the recommendation of Dr. Bessey, Rydberg limited his investigation to Thomas and Hooker Counties. Twice he ventured into Cherry County which borders both on their immediate north. His intent to follow the north prong of the Middle Loup River led across the county boundaries. Collecting plant specimens at various locations, he described the stream as originating in a valley with a lake at its eastern end. In order to arrive at the source, the botanist followed what appeared as a brook that disappeared from the surface only to reappear as a "sand draw running through a valley." As his group went on to follow the stream, the grass became better as they progressed.<sup>66</sup> Rydberg's second venture into Cherry County brought his group to wet valleys where he described the region as similar to the conditions reported by Pound and Smith.<sup>67</sup>

Rydberg collected about 200 species from sixteen different locales, classified according to five distinct districts. In two areas surrounding the Middle Loup and Dismal Rivers, he found vegetation that was "nearly uniform to that of the wet valley areas, but with the addition of some eastern plants." In addition to plants classified as dominant or common within individual districts, he also located undisturbed sites where twenty-four native and introduced weeds had migrated. The worst of the weeds, the Russian Thistle, apparently was not yet well established in 1893 but over time the noxious plant would become a nuisance.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>P. A. Rydberg, "Flora of the Sand Hills," *Contributions from the U.S. National Herbarium* 3 (1895), 133-203, *HSH*, 2; Twedt and Wolf, 3.

<sup>67</sup>Rydberg, 4.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, 7-8; Twedt and Wolf, 4.

Collection and identification of plant specimens by the early botanists made significant gains toward understanding Sandhills' ecological dynamics. However, the limitations of their field studies only pointed toward a more comprehensive classification of the unique flora. A later study by R. J. Pool, completed as a doctoral dissertation and published in the University of Minnesota's *Botanical Studies* as "A Study of the Vegetation of the Sandhills of Nebraska" in 1914, provided the most intensive examination to date. Important to his thesis were the "geographic origins of floral components which co-mingle in the Sandhills." According to this perspective, certain species of plant material most often found in the eastern prairie and the mountain west regions migrated into the sandy region. They intermingled with the "proper" plant communities of the Sandhills' which had evolved in response to environmental conditions and each other. In coming together, the plants formed new groupings or associations unique to the region.<sup>69</sup>

From Pool's perspective a myriad of conditions determined why and how vegetation grew. Environmental distinctions, such as topography, soil characteristics, the availability and proximity of water, and even the "direction and angle of slope" on dunes influenced the composition of new plant associations. Grasses that grew in tufts rather than in continuous sod, that is bunch grass communities, dominated the region. Little bluestem, grama grasses, and prairie sandreeds were also common. Less frequent needle-and-thread grasses became more prevalent as the vegetation moved farther north. Species of the westerly shortgrass prairie, representative of transitional areas, were found in the

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<sup>69</sup>Twedt and Wolf, 6.

Sandhills region, but they provided a sparser ground cover due to the heavier soil. In contrast, marshes and wet meadows were heavily covered with reed grasses and sedges, aquatic plant communities that could not withstand extensive drying and had to remain submerged.<sup>70</sup> While bunchgrass associations covered the upland dune areas, Pool identified “hay meadow associations” covering the floor of valleys. Native hays provided a continuous ground covering with plants that grew to a height of almost four feet. Dominated by sod-building perennial grasses like wheatgrass and big bluestem, Pool observed that showier plants, such as sunflowers, coneflowers and goldenrods, provide vibrant color. Adaptation of drought-enduring or evading characteristics allowed plant associations to withstand prolonged episodes of little or no precipitation.<sup>71</sup>

In the 1942 monograph, “Vegetation in the Northern Part of Cherry County,” W. L. Tolstead described the shoreline in wetlands as a “hygrophytic grass and sedge zone.” These periodically flooded zones varied from a few feet to as much as thirty feet in width depending on the slope of the underlying land. Distinctive associations occupied different sectors of the shoreline, many of which thrived when flooded to several inches. Dominant species in the northern region were classified as bluejoint and Sartwell sedges. In places where moderate fluctuation of the water table occurred, bulrushes, water plantain, and bur-reed proliferated. At more stable places, bottlebrush sedge and mannagrasses were most often observed. Tall grasses, big bluestem, Indian-grass, alkali cordgrasses, and

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<sup>70</sup>Kaul, 128.

<sup>71</sup>Johnsgard, 93-94.

“other meadow-adapted grasses” thrive in the higher and drier sectors of the wetlands.<sup>72</sup>

Efforts to identify and classify the vascular vegetation in the Sandhills has been an ongoing process. Botanical study since the turn of the twentieth century has identified and classified nearly 720 species. However, professionals in the field acknowledge that much remains to be learned and understood about the biota of the Sandhills.

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Identifying, understanding, and defining the natural environment of the Sandhills are ongoing processes. Where mid-nineteenth century survey observations found little value for the monotonous landscape, subsequent scientific inquiry has discovered a complex of distinctive and rich phenomena. Inland deposits of sand rise in a semi-arid region as dunes and hills formed over eons by wind and climatic changes. In the north central sector of the region, ancient bogs and fens, lakes, and marshes are found in the valleys and the lowlands between the dunes. The seeming contradiction reveals the wonder of the Sandhills, the massive aquifer that waters the region and allows for the adaptive productivity of its grass cover. This environment is recharged through the sand and soils and retained in the recesses of an ancient self-contained system.

Insight into the interdependent systems of the Sandhills progressed from casual, untrained observation to scholarly, informed collections of data. Science as “a house of

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<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 105-6. In 1989, Jean Novacek calculated the ecologically associated species found in wetland habitats. The diverse species “arrange themselves according to their water requirements, flooding tolerance, and various other ecological conditions.” Five wetland habitats were identified and each assigned the number of species found within its confines. Although some may have occurred “in more than one habitat,” diversity may have been more widespread. Novacek found 32 subirrigated meadow, 27 emergents, 27 semiaquatic, 17 subemergent, and 6 floating species. Ibid., 117.

many doors”<sup>73</sup> assembled a web of empirical knowledge that refined ecological thought and shed light on a systemic environment. Cyclical change, formations and migration became linked in natural interaction based on organic adaptation and dependency. To complete the environmental equation for the Sandhills, however, the structure of human social reaction and influence must necessarily be added.

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<sup>73</sup>Worster, 420.

## CHAPTER TWO BISON AND CATTLE, INDIANS AND COWMEN

Never a pristine and static environment, the Sandhills were created and developed in rhythm with nature's upheavals. Change disrupted periods of stability only to bring on a new altered pattern. In much the same way, human occupation of the Sandhills experienced similar periods that vacillated between balance and chaos. They were challenged by natural and social pressures that accompanied cultural adjustment.

Almost fifty years ago, historian James Malin, writing about the North American grasslands, recognized the merit of the Plains' semi-arid environment. He wrote that since "conditions had produced grass. . . . Occupance must be effected in terms of grass."<sup>1</sup> He viewed the grasslands as a place with distinctive soils, vegetation, and climate, as a complete ecological system that contained all that was necessary for successful human occupancy. Unlike a crop land or a forested region, here scanty rainfall was "its major value to the occupying human culture."<sup>2</sup> Aridity and the absence of leaching explained the fertility of the soil. In the resulting alkalinity, grass not only grew, it prospered. Still, human resourcefulness was necessary to use and culturally define the available resources, to recognize the environment on its terms.<sup>3</sup> Malin believed the grassland environment was impervious to human or animal destruction. Buffalo and elk had overgrazed or abused some areas. However, they revived. He held that "the influence of animals . . . was in

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<sup>1</sup>James Malin, "The Grassland of North America: Its Occupance and the Challenge of Continuous Reappraisals," in *James C. Malin: History and Ecology. Studies of the Grassland*, Robert P. Swierrenga, ed., (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 12.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>3</sup>Robert P. Swierrenga, "Editors Introduction," in *ibid.*, xxii.

many respects the nature of natural tillage.”<sup>4</sup> In the same way, with a human understanding of the capacity and nature of an environment, use would not exceed its limits.

## THE FIRST PEOPLES OF THE SANDHILLS

The key to a sustained and profitable occupation of land within a distinctive environment depended primarily on an awareness and appreciation of its discrete nature. Paleo, Archaic, and other early Indian cultures on the Plains appeared to have achieved such a successful relationship. Interrelated to the cycles and fabric of their culture, the migration of the animals of the grasslands ordered their lives. Artifacts found in blowout areas of the Sandhills testify to a succession of Indian cultures. They “were knowledgeable and creative in their adaptation to conditions encountered in their natural environment.”<sup>5</sup>

Evidence of early human occupation dates from only 12,000 BP. Projectile points located at several sites in the Sandhills, most often in blowout areas, showed the area visited by Paleo mammoth hunters. Scattered sites within the region also gave up fossilized bones of the extinct animal and the earliest buffalo in the area, *Bison Antiquus taylori*. Elsewhere, human remains were found in an eroding hill dating from the Archaic period, 7,000-2,000 BP. Artifacts in both private and public archeological collections

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<sup>4</sup>Malin, “Factors in Grassland Equilibrium,” *ibid.*, 42.

<sup>5</sup>Charles Barron McIntosh, *The Nebraska Sand Hills: The Human Landscape* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 28. Projectile points used as weapons during the hunt and as tools for dressing the kill was evidence of an advancement of knowledge and creativity as Paleo-Indian cultures evolved into other Native American cultures. *Ibid.*, 8-28.



suggest extensive use of the Sandhills as hunting grounds.

The earliest evidence of humans on the land that forms modern Cherry County are artifacts discovered at a Woodland period (2,000-1,000 BP) site on Dad's Lake. This find led archeologists to new conclusions. Although not the location of a village, "the relative abundance of pottery in the area would be due solely to the former presence of hunting camps."<sup>6</sup> While agricultural settlements dating to more recent periods, 1,000-500 BP, had surrounded the Sandhills region, recent information revised those dates. A site just south of Cherry County, in Hooker County, contained artifacts and "conditions [that] argued an occupation more substantial than a hunting camp." Thought to offer evidence of a pattern of summer villages located on "Sand Hills streams and lakeshores between May and October," they also showed signs of horticultural activity. As a new way of environmental adaptation, the evidence provided further insight into Native American cultures on the Great Plains and in the Sandhills.<sup>7</sup>

Ideas about early human adaptation draw upon archeological evidence and environmental data. Since the Sandhills were rich in natural resources, the region offered abundant vegetation and water supplies to attract a wide range of animal species. Bison found a particularly hospitable environment in which to graze. As an important feeding ground for migrating animals in their annual trek across the Plains, the hill country also attracted those who depended on the bison hunt for food and cultural sustenance. One

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<sup>6</sup>A. T. Hill and M. F. Kivett, "Woodland-lake Manifestations in Nebraska," *Nebraska History* 21 (July-September 1940); Steven R. Holen, "Anthropology: The Native American Occupation of the Sand Hills" in Ann Bleed and Charles Flowerday, eds., *Atlas of the Sand Hills* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, 1989), 193.

<sup>7</sup>R. Bozell and J. Ludwickson, "McIntosh [site]: A Central Plains Tradition: Summer Village in the Nebraska Sand Hills," unpublished paper presented at the Plains Anthropological Conference, Columbia, Missouri, 1987, quoted in Holen, 194. The McIntosh Site 25BW15 is located in eastern Hooker County.

anthropologist depicted the bison as providing almost all that was required for survival to the Native Americans who inhabited the Plains.<sup>8</sup> A successful hunt provided not only food but also materials for clothing, shelter, tools, fuel, and religious symbols. As verification of the region's importance, ethnohistorical data referred to the many bison found in the Sandhills. Native groups who hunted there and competed for control of the region left a cultural tradition that testified to the rich bison range.

Evidence obtained from archeological sites of village locations shows that many groups also supplemented bison-rich diets with the meat of smaller game, aquatic life, plant gathering and horticultural produce. Anthropologists interpreted the data as evidence that other types of subsistence activities, viewed as "back up" to the bison hunt, took place. They argue "that the human adaptation to the Sand Hills and its principal resource, bison, [was] reflected in a summer-fall settlement pattern of seasonal camps on river terraces and lakes." According to their hypothesis, migrations over thousands of years followed definite patterns. Location of hunting villages followed animal movements into the hills. In the winter Native peoples migrated to sheltered valleys on the periphery of the Sandhills.<sup>9</sup> However, patterns began to shatter as natural conditions altered and new challenges arrived in the region.

According to Malin, "the progressive change in the Indian-buffalo relation" influenced other elements in the environment that were "reflected in the animal-grass relations."<sup>10</sup> Buffalo numbers were decreasing throughout the early nineteenth century

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 200.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 203.

<sup>10</sup>Malin, "Factors in Grassland Equilibrium," 41.

creating serious food problems for those dependent on them for food.<sup>11</sup> In response, Indian hunters increased their take of smaller game which invariably had consequences for the environment's ecological balance. Natural patterns of aeration and seed distribution were disrupted as they eliminated greater numbers of "nature's tillers" from the system for use as human food.

Even before the commercial and recreational slaughter of buffalo, Indians faced a critical threat to their culture and existence. By the 1850s, Indian agents reportedly were convinced that the bison population was rapidly decreasing. Even earlier observers had noted the decreasing numbers, and some believed that if present rates of loss continued extinction would not be out of the question.<sup>12</sup> Beginning in the 1860s, changing climatic conditions, Euro-American western emigration along with their animals, and the coming of railroads contributed to the altered migration and breeding patterns of the Plains' bison. Although their migration "followed no precise annual route," their movement was not random. Confining their movements to "vaguely defined home ranges," the large ungulates were particular in selecting certain *habitats* over others. Disruption to the environment amounted to crisis. Diseases introduced by the adoption of the horse into Indian culture also had a negative effect on bison populations, and increased the normal mortality rate while calf numbers also decreased. Whatever the cause, the failure of the

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<sup>11</sup> Dan Flores, "Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy: The Southern Plains from 1800 to 1850," *Journal of American History*, 78 (September 1991): 280.

<sup>12</sup> Elliott West, *The Way to the West: Essays on the Central Plains* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 53.

hunt led to starvation on the grasslands.<sup>13</sup>

Arrival of the first wave of white buffalo hunters into Nebraska in the late 1860s signaled the beginning of the final chapter of modern Native cultural transformation on the Plains. Some Americans may have disguised their true motives when they asserted as justification for killing off the buffalo that bison would compete with domestic cattle for forage on the range. Bison and domesticated cattle followed different grazing habits, making competition unlikely. Other considerations came into play. Economics figured prominently as new markets for buffalo hides developed. Innovative technology made possible their use for machinery belts in the growing industrial sector. Even bones of dead animals produced carbon for the new sugar-refining industry. For some, the new application of bison byproducts may have justified their slaughter.

## **BISON AND CATTLE**

The introduction of cattle to grassland ranges presented a lucrative new incentive to eliminate the prairie bison. Despite public opinion and economic advantage, for Native Americans, “the disaster was not only socioeconomic, but also nutritional.” Although as late as the 1870s bison hunts still provided nearly one-fourth of the subsistence for Indians on the northern plains, by the early 1880s most were reduced to “hunting cattle to avoid starvation.” The U.S. government’s policy of providing beef and other rations to confined Indian groups introduced a diet rich in saturated fats and sugars.<sup>14</sup> According to

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 73-75; Flores, 481; Russel L. Barsh, “The Substitution of Cattle for Bison on the Great Plains,” in Paul A. Olson, ed., *The Struggle for the Land: Indigenous Insight and Industrial Empire in the Semiarid World* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 107.

<sup>14</sup>Barsh, 109.

James Malin, the diminishing number of buffalo beginning as early as the 1850s gave direction to new government policies. Reservations and government annuities introduced another way to contain and feed the Indian population on the Plains.<sup>15</sup>

The elimination of the source of cultural and physical sustenance had a direct correlation to the cattle industry in the interior Sandhills. Beginning in 1851, a series of manipulative tactics designed to benefit western progress reduced Indian territory in the Plains. At first, Native Nebraskans were put on reservations and the Sioux (Lakotas and Nakotas) were limited to hunting grounds in the northern Sandhills.<sup>16</sup> After a period of challenge and conflict in the mid- 1870s, the Lakotas and Nakotas were forced out of Nebraska. Cession of hunting grounds and relocation of reservations to Dakota Territory ended most Native occupation of the Sandhills. The federal government forced nearly

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<sup>15</sup>Malin, "Factors in Grassland Equilibrium," 41.

<sup>16</sup>See David J. Wishart, *An Unspeakable Sadness: The Dispossession of the Nebraska Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994). The peoples that have been known as the Sioux call themselves the Lakota, Nakota, and Dakota. This represents an evolution, over time, of three groups who speak different dialects of the same language. The largest, the Dakotas are thought of as the mother group. The Nakotas and the Lakotas follow in the size of their population. Immigrating from the south, the Dakotas, sometimes called the Santee Sioux, occupied a region in eastern Minnesota dominated by lakes. The Nakotas, or Yankton, split from the Dakotas, and moved into the prairie region of southeast South Dakota. In the same way, the Lakota people, the Teton Sioux, came to occupy the region west of the Missouri River.

Not all moved into the area at the same time. By the late eighteenth century white encroachment, decreasing game, and later U. S. military confrontations forced migration west. Coming in two waves, the first included the Teton, or western Sioux- Lakota, group of the tribes. Seven autonomous tribes made up the Lakota division: Oglalas, Sicangus (Brulé), Hunkapapas, Miniconjous, Itazipcho (Sans Arcs), Oohenonpas (Two Kettles), and Sisasapas (Blackfeet). The second wave involved the Santee division who fled American armies after 1862. While the Lakotas were dispersed largely on the northern Great Plains, the third division, the Yankton and Yanktonai lived on the tall-grass prairie, east of the Great Plains.

During the period between 1863-64, U. S. soldiers, many reassigned from eastern fronts of the Civil War, sought out the Santees who had fled Minnesota and who had sought sanctuary with other Dakota groups. Massacre and confrontation in the Dakota Territory, Nebraska and Colorado brought chaos, danger, and death to the bison-hunting grounds of the Plains and white settlers who haplessly stood in the way. Other Indian groups of the region including the Cheyennes and Arapahos allied with the Sioux tribes to prevent military control over their hunting lands.

After the conflict over the Bozeman trail and with the growing number of white emigrants moving west, forces in Washington sought to negotiate a peaceful settlements and treaties with the Indian groups. Beginning in 1868 with the treaty at Fort Laramie, the hunting grounds of the Sioux and other groups was systematically reduced. Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., *500 Nations: An Illustrated History of North American Indians* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 382-88.

7,000 Brulé Sioux to Spotted Tail's agency while a larger group of 12,113 Oglalas went to Red Cloud's reservation.<sup>17</sup> As one culture prepared to depart the Sandhills, another waited to move into the fragile environment. Settlers and cattle raisers, who loomed like a death rattle to ancient nomadic cultures, rapidly filled the void.

Congress, apparently taking a less altruistic stance than Malin suggests, moved on the principle that feeding Indians would be better than to fight them. They offered Plains Indians annuity benefits in beef and provisions, asking in return the cession of their lands. Government contracts were put out to eager entrepreneurs ready to meet the demand for beef. Contractors had entered a lucrative business. Beef purchased at low prices, \$12 to \$15 a head, could, after fattening on the range for several months, bring a 50 percent profit when sold to the government.<sup>18</sup> With two Indian agencies to the north, the demand for cheap beef attracted entrepreneurs to the open-range cattle business. A small initial investment could compound into a fortune in a very short time.

The open-range phase of the cattle industry included road ranchers, the experienced freighters, and the more enterprising cattle drovers, all of whom organized ranching operations with cheap cattle and free government land. Inexperienced easterners and foreign adventurers also joined the ranks. Men involved in this type of enterprise were not the pastoral herders of the agrarian ideal. They were shrewd business people who were concerned with costs, prices, and profits. Cattle were "valuable in number only" while the grassland provided the means to their production of beef. Cattlemen

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<sup>17</sup>Edwin A. Curley, *Nebraska; Its Advantages, Resources, and Drawbacks* (London: n. p., 1876), 311.

<sup>18</sup>Norbert R. Mahnken, "Early Nebraska Markets for Cattle," part 2, *Nebraska History*, 26 (April-June 1945): 99.

located their livestock wherever they found suitable forage, despite boundaries both public and private.<sup>19</sup>

Cattle had been a part of the Nebraska landscape since the days of the overland trails in the 1850s. Road ranches along the Platte valley trails offered fresh stock to replace footsore cattle for pioneers and hopeful gold seekers moving west.<sup>20</sup> Typically, the entrepreneur got the best of the deal. The breeds of cattle he obtained, notably from the midwestern and southern regions, were finer quality than those he had traded. After a period of recovery on the free range they even increased in value. Some early road ranchers later broadened their enterprise and joined in large scale open-range operations.<sup>21</sup>

However, the overland freighters ushered in the prelude to the modern cattle industry in the West. Their move into ranching became a natural extension of their operations and, a short time later, a real alternative when rail transportation reduced their business. During the 1850s wagon freighters transported supplies to settlements, military

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<sup>19</sup>Frieda Knobloch, *The Culture of Wilderness: Agriculture as Colonization in the American West* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 80.

<sup>20</sup>See Merrill J. Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road: The Covered Wagon Mainline Via Fort Kearny to Fort Laramie* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969). A discussion and listing of the road ranches between Fort Kearny and Fort Laramie appears on pages 269 to 280. Observers gave their observations about these "so called ranches" whose proprietors "neither cultivate the soil, nor do they raise stock." Others, however, mentioned the road ranch was a structure connected to corrals that could withstand Indian attacks. And still others found that "ranches provide alike for man and beast." The traveler observed a stockade, stables, feeding troughs, and hay ricks. *ibid.*, 270-71; Jack Morrow's Ranch, "half-way between Omaha and Denver" at the junction of the North and the South Platte Rivers was at one time described as the finest on the entire route and the next as having a hard name among emigrants along the route since it had a bad record of Indian stealing from the travelers. *ibid.*, 276-77.

<sup>21</sup>Nellie Synder Yost, *The Call of the Range: Nebraska: The Story of the Nebraska Stock Growers Association* (Denver: Sage Press, 1966), 27-37. Letter from C. A. Moore to the Nebraska Historical Society, 10 July 1933 published in *Nebraska History* 2 (April-July 1934): 113-14. The letter disputes an earlier published report that no ranches were located west of Paxton, Nebraska. Moore states that he aided the nephew of the Mullins brothers, who operated the Omaha Ranch in 1852-3, in trying to locate the site. Moore related that the ranch was situated sixty-five miles west of the junction of the North and the South Platte rivers, thirty-five miles east of the old California crossing, and about 150 yards south of the banks of the South Platte River. He believed the ranch was three miles southwest of Ogallala, but the nephew never located the site. *Ibid.*

posts, and mining camps throughout the trans-Mississippi West. One firm, Russell, Majors, and Waddell, dominated transportation throughout the Plains. In one year, 1858, their four thousand employees drove thirty-five hundred wagons propelled by forty thousand oxen across overland trails and roads.<sup>22</sup> Scores of other freighters, perhaps not as extensively equipped, also participated in the lucrative venture. For the most part, freighting in the Plains remained a seasonal operation. Late in the fall when transport was suspended, freighters released oxen onto the prairie to fend for themselves over the winter. Then, in the spring before business resumed, employees were sent to gather up any animals that survived. As a cost-saving measure, the routine proved a success. Oxen wintered on the Plains not only survived, they also thrived and exhibited good health and vigor. As rail transportation gained a greater portion of the transport business, many ex-freighters found opportunity in open-range cattle enterprises. Attuned to the environment and experienced with the successful grazing and wintering of oxen on the winter grasslands, they recognized the potential profit. Even the poorest quality of livestock improved on the government's free western rangeland. Sensible economics told freighters that a small investment in open-range cattle and little additional cost reduced the risk and offered good prospects.

In the same way, some drovers with interests in Texas livestock also recognized the opportunity. After five or six months on the hot, dusty and dangerous trail many opted

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<sup>22</sup>Oscar Osburn Winther, *The Transportation Frontier: Trans-Mississippi West, 1865-1890* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 26.



to remain and sought work for local stockmen.<sup>23</sup> Others like Print Olive turned the experience into a more lucrative venture. He first came to Nebraska in 1869 with a herd of 2,000 mixed, young southern cattle and 800 of his family's own livestock. Finding the conditions favorable for the cattle business, Olive eventually went on to establish a satellite operation to his Texas Longhorn ranch in the region north of the Platte River. After delivering the cattle to Fort Kearny, the Texan accompanied cattle purchased by other stockmen to their central Nebraska range and was favorably impressed by the expansive grasslands. Subsequent trips to Nebraska reinforced Olive's intent to locate his first cow-camp in the north central region of the state. The Panhandle region, despite the retreat of some Texas ranchers back to a warmer climate, had little available space for a new cattle operation. His vision of the prairie north of the Platte River covered with his own cattle took only a few years to realize.<sup>24</sup>

Frieda Knobloch, in *The Culture of Wilderness*, depicted the open-range cattle industry as a colonization process that ultimately resulted in "sedentary agriculture." Cattle operations did not seek to improve the natural setting by introducing crops. They only sought to exploit the grassland environment for personal gain. Open-range outfits claimed and held vast tracts of land, exhibiting the "colonial imperative to territorialize." As a result, the "violent and rapid deterritorialization of a preexisting Plains economy and

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<sup>23</sup>Marianne Brinda Beel and Barbara Kime Gale, eds., *A Sandhill Century: Book I: A History of Cherry County, Nebraska* (Valentine, Nebraska: Cherry County Centennial Committee, 1986), 5. The reflections and sentiments of Sam Hudson, Cherry County rancher, about the trails he traveled as a drover are quoted here. See David Dary, *Cowboy Culture: A Saga of Five Centuries* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1981), 105-253 for a discussion on Texas trails to northern markets, the changes brought about by the Civil War, railheads where the trail ended, and the northern ranges.

<sup>24</sup>Harry E. Chrisman, *The Ladder of Rivers: The Story of I. P. (Print) Olive* (Chicago: Sage Books, 1962), 93-209. See E. C. Abbott ("Teddy Blue") and Helen Huntington Smith, *We Pointed Them North: Recollections of a Cowpuncher*, 2nd ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954).

ecology” took place before farming was introduced. In this way, Knobloch sees the open-range phase of stock raising as a “primitive” endeavor “that merely reserved an area for a postponed cultivation.”<sup>25</sup>

She saw a “profoundly agricultural element” inherent in the open-range industry. Bodies of domesticated livestock relied on the range much as their wild counterparts did. In this way, something with no commercial value -- “grass” -- became transformed into something of great commercial value -- “beef” -- much the same way farmers used soil to grow crops. Despite the seemingly agricultural orientation, early western stockmen were primitive, from her perspective, “since not all of its elements were systematically subjected to the forces of ‘improvement’.”<sup>26</sup>

Lacking the tools that scientific understanding would later bring, early cattlemen gave no thought to quality or breeding or proper use of the range. Compensation for use of public lands or tax obligations remained even further beyond their consideration. From their entrepreneurial perspective, use of government land and grass looked, smelled, and felt like a “public subsidy,” free for the taking.<sup>27</sup> With little or no investment in land and equipment, open-range operations appeared as a profitable venture. The system they established “was unmistakably a modern capitalist institution” with cattle “a form of capital.” As a commodity with a high market value, livestock earned a profit by carrying the free western grass as flesh to markets both near and far. Investors in this type of

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<sup>25</sup>Knobloch, 82.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>27</sup>William G. Robbins, *Colony and Empire: The Capitalist Transformation of the American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 70.

enterprise stood little risk and, for a time, realized financial gain.<sup>28</sup> Omaha's millionaire businessman, Edward Creighton, with interests in the freighting industry, became one of the earliest ranchers in Nebraska. He ran cattle on the open-range as an investment. For others, like John Bratt, it also became a way of life.

### NEBRASKA'S FIRST CATTLEMEN

Nebraska's early cattlemen found their most stable markets at regional military installations, reservations, mining camps, and with railroad and telegraph construction gangs. Initially, most of the government's contracted beef came from the rangeland on the Laramie River spilling cattle over the Wyoming-Nebraska border. For a time, local mixed breed stock filled the need. However, increasing demands led cattlemen to seek cheaper sources. They did not have too far to look or too long to wait. Stock for their ranges arrived with the great southern herds. Purchasing Texas cattle driven close to the northern ranges was a low cost investment. Cattle driven north out of Texas not only alleviated the pressure of surplus cattle in relation to available grass but instituted the beginnings of an interregional economy. In the process, Kansas experienced another time of notoriety. Sites along the state's rail lines actively promoted the livestock business with the hope of growth and financial rewards. Booming cattle towns rose at railheads only to be left in the dust as trails veered their course. When flat markets at eastern terminals reduced profitability, Texas drovers sought other outlets and moved north to Nebraska and Wyoming. Eager buyers on northern ranges offered a growing demand.

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<sup>28</sup>"Cowboy Ecology" in Donald Worster, ed., *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 40.

Beginning in 1871, Nebraska gained in greater importance as another destination for drovers pushing cattle north. That year, Schuyler, Nebraska, as the Union Pacific Railroad's (UP) first concentration point for cattle on its line, experienced a brief stint as the state's important cattle town.<sup>29</sup> During the first season, cattlemen reportedly shipped 25,000 head to the new trail's end and sold a significant number to local open-range ranchers.<sup>30</sup> Within a year settlers and local herd laws had caused Texas trails to shift to a more westerly route and bypass Schuyler. Attention turned to other depots along the UP line. Special rail rates attracted those cattlemen who supplied cattle feeders in Iowa and Illinois, while the growing demand to stock the northern ranges lured many others.<sup>31</sup> Kearney, Plum Creek, and Cozad served as the market facility for southern cattle destined for the Plains' grasslands. Many of Nebraska's early cattlemen bought and sold stock at these intermediary markets. When the Texas trail veered again in 1874, cattle moved farther west out of Dodge City up to Ogallala. The UP built loading chutes and cowpens in Ogallala to stimulate the livestock business.<sup>32</sup>

Business at Nebraska's new cowtown, Ogallala, flourished. There, government contractors and ranchers found adequate supplies of cattle and a favorable market. Situated between the North and South Platte Rivers, Ogallala's significance to the

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<sup>29</sup>After 1872, Schuyler still remained a livestock market but only on the local level, that is a lively trade among farmers who were stocking with feeder cattle provided most of the business. Farmer-feeders shipped to South Omaha packing plants after cattle had reach a greater weight.

<sup>30</sup>Letter from Charles C. Haasa to editor of *Nebraska History*, nd, in *Nebraska History*, 19 (October-December 1938): 375-76.

<sup>31</sup>Ernest Osgood, *Day of the Cattleman*, 1929 rpt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 45-46.

<sup>32</sup>Norbert R. Mahnken, "Ogallala—Nebraska's Cowboy Capital," *Nebraska History*, 23 (April-June, 1947): 90.

Sandhills region became obvious by the end of 1876. Along with giving open-range ranchers a more centralized concentration point, the town's location also gave direct access to Sioux reservations in Dakota Territory and the newly opened markets in the Black Hills. The timing and location of Nebraska's newest cowtown played a major role in the development of the state's early cattle industry and its movement into Cherry County.

During the initial phase of the industry, most ranches grew up in the area along the Platte River valley. From the western Panhandle to the grasslands surrounding Kearney, cattlemen located their home ranches and camps near adequate sources of water and put their cattle on the range to browse. In addition to requiring plentiful water and good grass, the early ranchers aggressively sought locations close to the protection of forts or military camps. Ranchers later told of small raiding groups of Indians who slaughtered cattle and stole horses.<sup>33</sup>

Tradition holds that in 1867 M.C. Keith, early freighter-stage line operator, became Nebraska's first open-range rancher. Edward Creighton, however, reportedly bought three thousand head in Nebraska for his range operation that would be located in Wyoming Territory the year before. Keith started with "five American cows," added 200 of the same type the next autumn, and then purchased 1,000 head of Texas stock in 1869.<sup>34</sup> That same year, John Bratt began his Nebraska operation with 2,500 head that he wintered near Wood River. His headquarters, four miles southeast of North Platte, served

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<sup>33</sup>John Bratt, *Trails of Yesterday*, 1921 rpt. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, Press, 1980), 230-31.

<sup>34</sup>Curley, 34.

as the home-ranch.<sup>35</sup> Rangeland in the Platte River valley soon became crowded with livestock and cattlemen. Both small and large operations followed the usual pattern of locating near a good source of water and plentiful grass. Most avoided the area north of the North Platte, the Sandhills, with apparent good reason. Official government reports on the region had been quite unfavorable and some held to the notion that even the Indians avoided this north-central portion of the hills.<sup>36</sup> However, the real issue related to safety. Cattlemen recognized it as Indian country and were aware that many Sioux bands opposed whites intruding on their territory. Although tolerant of cattle trailed to Indian agencies passing through, the permanent occupation by grazing herds was another matter.<sup>37</sup>

## TO THE SANDHILLS

With range along the Platte Valley quickly filling, a few cattlemen struck out in another direction. Near the confluence of the Loup Rivers a small cluster of early ranchers congregated. When new settlers and other hopeful cattlemen began to move in, they found little room to expand. Unhappy with the situation, a few brave and enterprising ranchers moved up into present Custer County and onto the southeastern

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<sup>35</sup>Bratt, vii, 181; David Robert Burleigh, "Range Cattle Industry in Nebraska," M. A. Thesis, University of Nebraska, 1937, 21.

<sup>36</sup>W. D. Aeschbacher, "Development of the Sandhill Lake Country," *Nebraska History*, 27 (July-September, 1946): 206-7.

<sup>37</sup>Address of James H. Cook, naturalist and one-time Texas trail cowboy, to Nebraska State Historical Society, January, 1911, "Trailing Texas" Long-Horn Cattle Through Nebraska," rpt with additions, *Nebraska History*, 10 (October-December 1927): 341.

perimeter of the Sandhills beginning in 1872.<sup>38</sup> They were obviously relieved, and overjoyed at the prospect of a new market outlet when the government commissioned Fort Hartsuff two years later. With the military presence as protection, cattlemen pushed even farther into the Indian-controlled country. Transplanted Texans Print Olive and his brother Bob took control of several ranges and camps to run the herds they had driven to Nebraska. Once established on the range, they soon sought room for expansion in Sioux Country, the land of the “look-alike hills.”<sup>39</sup>

By all past accounts, the boldest move toward the hill country took place because of a prairie fire. In the late fall of 1874, a wildfire burned a wide area. Fire destroyed grass from Plum Creek on the east to Julesburg, Colorado Territory, to the west and reached from the Republican River to the North Platte River. Whether started because of Indians’ attempts to drive buffalo north or, as John Bratt believed, the carelessness of white buffalo hunters, the fire had a devastating effect on area ranchers.<sup>40</sup>

Bratt lost the use of the entire range he controlled except small patches between the fork of the Platte. With no winter forage for his herd, Bratt decided to act. He drove the bulk of his herd to the railhead and shipped one hundred and twenty car loads of livestock to the Chicago market. Then, with the remainder of his herd he crossed the North Platte River and moved north to the Birdwood Creek country, a tributary of the Platte. In his own words, “it was a risky move but imperative.”<sup>41</sup> After settling in, Bratt

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<sup>38</sup>Emerson R. Purcell, “Custer County,” in *Who’s Who in Nebraska* (Lincoln: Nebraska Press Association, 1940), 206.

<sup>39</sup>Chrisman, 191.

<sup>40</sup>Bratt, 228.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 230.

prospected the country far to the north and followed a fork of the Birdwood into the Sandhills lake country. There he found spring-fed water, "soft and good," abundant game, and most important, valleys that would provide hay. He had found the site for his future ranches and control of a vast range that spanned almost "twenty-four miles to the east and west and about sixty to seventy-five miles to the north and south."<sup>42</sup>

The push from the west into the Sandhills country began after 1876 when most of the Sioux were forced onto reservations or, in the case of Sitting Bull's people, fled to Canada. Cattlemen in the Panhandle region of western Nebraska established permanent ranches. With close ties to the Wyoming cattle industry, most were involved in contacts with Fort Laramie. However, to some of the Panhandle ranchers, the rush to the Black Hills looked like a better potential outlet for beef cattle.<sup>43</sup> With an eye for expansion, they moved into the Niobrara and White River valleys. In this way, they would service lucrative markets; gold fields and the Sioux reservations in Dakota Territory and the newly established Fort Robinson.<sup>44</sup>

Farther down the Niobrara valley, on the western edge of the Sandhills, E. S. Newman chose his new range in 1877 for his Niobrara Cattle Company, the Bar-H, headquartered on Antelope Creek along the Niobrara River in the hard land area that juts

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 232.

<sup>43</sup>Mahnken, "Early Nebraska Markets," 99. One of Nebraska's early freighting companies that entered into the cattle trade was Pratt and Ferris Cattle Company. The outfit broadened its range of operation by expanding into markets at the Indian agencies as well as the mining camps in Dakota Territory. Thomas Dunlay, "James Hervey Pratt: Frontier Entrepreneur," *Nebraska History*, 59 (Summer 1978): 213.

<sup>44</sup>Burleigh, 29.



into Cherry County's Sandhills area.<sup>45</sup> Newman, one of Creighton's past partners in the freighting trade, had extensive ranch holdings farther west. Moving cattle between his ranges, his herds approached 30,000 head. The vast Niobrara valley ranch covered an area of "thirty by sixty miles."<sup>46</sup>

Newman and the neighboring ranch of R. D. Hunter, to the west, held government beef contracts for the Indian agencies. Hunter, a major beef contractor and partner in a St. Louis commission house, expanded his enterprise to include raising his own livestock to fill the growing demand.<sup>47</sup> Together, the two outfits contributed to the aggregate supply of 12.5 million pounds per year needed by the hungry Sioux.<sup>48</sup> Since the quotas specified at least 250 head of cattle at a standardized weight every ten days, ranchers like Hunter and Newman looked to smaller ranches to help them meet the demand. Although cattle on the larger spreads figured in the thousands, at times contractors did not have enough suitable livestock to fill their quotas. When faced with this type of shortage, they bought stock from the area's smaller ranchers who had followed the lead to the Niobrara valley. In December, the situation became more pressing when contractors were to deliver the

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<sup>45</sup>Newman's 30 by 60 mile range was headquartered in the future northwestern region of Cherry County. The area lies outside the Sandhills land formation. Beel and Gale, 8.

<sup>46</sup>"How the Western Cattle Ranges Were Started" *Breeders' Gazette*, 6 (September, 1883): 297, excerpt reprinted in Robert H. Burns, "The Newman Ranches: Pioneer Cattle Ranches in the West," *Nebraska History*, 34 (March 1953): 23.

<sup>47</sup>Jimmy M. Skaggs, *The Cattle-Trailing Industry: Between Supply and Demand, 1866-1890* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1973), 78-82.

<sup>48</sup>Edward Everett Dale, *The Range Cattle Industry: Ranching on the Great Plains, 1865-1925* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1930), 94.

winter's entire beef shipments.<sup>49</sup> As often as not, the smaller ranchers made significant contributions to the cattle driven to the agency. As markets in the Black Hills expanded, regular contracts in the mining areas often called for the same type of cooperation between large and small ranchers. In effect, an efficient supply system, not very different from those in industrial eastern America, developed on the perimeter of the Sandhills.

Cattlemen, no longer restrained by the Sioux presence, moved into northern hill country without fear of Indian reprisal by 1878. The proximity to markets had been the initial drawing point. One outfit, Moorehead and Carpenter, had moved farther east of Newman's ranch to use Sandhills range primarily as a point to hold cattle for beef issue. Centered around Boiling Springs, the Apple Outfit (its brand was an apple) grazed cattle forty miles downriver from the Bar-H in what would be north central Cherry County. Although it appeared as a localized eastward moving frontier, others moved into the Sandhill ranges near the Niobrara Valley to stake-out their range.<sup>50</sup>

While accessibility to markets provided one kind of incentive, the grassland environment proved the biggest draw. Ranchers from the Platte valley and the Custer County area crossed over and around the hills when trailing herds to the reservations. Most avoided the north-central hills and its lake country. Gold seekers on their way to the Black Hills, mail carriers, and freighters who used trails through the hills, in their haste to get through, all failed to fully recognize the bounty of the grass. True, John Bratt

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<sup>49</sup>Letter, R. B. Miller to Catherine M. Donoher, Valentine, Nebraska, April 25, 1932, Cherry County Historical Society Archives, Valentine, Nebraska. R. B. Miller worked for the Newman and Hunter ranches until late December, 1879.

<sup>50</sup>Beel and Gale, 8, 217; Charles S. Reece, *A History of Cherry County, Nebraska: The Story of its Organization, Development and People*, replica of 1945 edition (Valentine, Ne.: Plains Trading Company Archives, 1992), 20-21.

had ventured to the southern fringes of the Sandhills and found it good grassland. Other ranchers pushed out of Custer County and moved toward the promising rangeland of the future Cherry County. Still, no one had anticipated the rewards of the unrecognized rich environment. The spring of 1878 changed that.

When a group of Newman's Bar-H cowboys went out to retrieve cattle that had wandered off during a March blizzard, they found more than snow-covered hills. Although the Newman's open-range operation laid on the western fringe of the Sandhills region, the area had been avoided. However, following the trail of the errant cattle, the men moved into a region that many considered the graveyard of cattle and men in the hope of finding some of the 6,000 head lost in the storm.<sup>51</sup> Instead of the few frozen carcasses they had anticipated, the cowboys found not only their own cattle but hundreds of others, some of which had been there for years. Near a sweet water lake they discovered scattered groups of unbranded cattle browsing among their own livestock. The ownerless wild cattle represented the offspring of those assumed lost after wandering off into the forbidding hill country. Even more intriguing was the condition of the animals. Unlike their own stock which were thin and rugged from the long winter, these cattle were in excellent shape, good enough and fat enough for the market. When word spread of E. S. Newman's windfall, the more adventuresome cattlemen sought range in this place of exceptional grassland and sweet water.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>Aeschbacher, 211.

<sup>52</sup>Address by James C. Dahlman to the Nebraska State Historical Society, January 10, 1922, "Recollections of Cowboy Life in Western Nebraska," in *Nebraska History*, 10 (October-December, 1927): 335-37. During the spring of 1879, the North brothers coincidentally found the same situation further south of the Newman cowboys. They were traveling through what was previously considered dry country and came upon a freshwater lake and hundreds of cattle. William D. Aeschbacher, "Development of the Beef Cattle Industry in the Sand Hills of Nebraska with Special Emphasis upon Grant County," M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska, 1946, 13-4; Yost, 87-89; Burleigh, 31.

## TO CHERRY COUNTY

As investment in the open-range cattle business became increasingly attractive, other ranching operations claimed their range in the north central Sandhills. Few filed formal land entries, adhering to the time-honored system of simply putting “down stakes” and calling the land their own. Since much public sentiment still regarded the region as useless for agrarian pursuits, many clung to the belief that leaving the area to haphazard grazing was an improvement. With officials’ blind eye turned to strict adherence to land policy in the region, entrepreneurs took advantage of the opportunity, selecting the most advantageous sites in wet meadows and valleys surrounded by grass-covered dunes.

Lured by tales of the grass, cattlemen rushed to the hills. Moorehead and Carpenter soon sold out to Texan Seth Mabry whose Circle Ranch also benefitted from government’s beef issue. This place on the Niobrara River continued to served as a holding point for cattle destined for delivery to the Rosebud Reservation rather than as a base of operation for the grazing of livestock.<sup>53</sup> By the end of the decade, other cattle entrepreneurs had established ranches and camps along the Niobrara and its tributaries.

Both small and large operations began to occupy the hill country of Cherry County in the 1880s. East of the Mabry spread the J.P. Poor ranch operated near the area of the present Nenzel bridge without formal claim. In the same manner, D.J.(Sugar) McCann operated his XX ranch on range near the confluence of the Niobrara and the Snake Rivers. An experienced government contractor and freighter, McCann, who had previously supplied the Red Cloud and Whetstone agencies in the early 1870s, now

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<sup>53</sup>Yost, 95, 124.

supplied the Brulé Sioux at Rosebud.<sup>54</sup> T. J. Foley, a North Platte merchant, also began his Sandhills cattle enterprise at the mouth of the Snake River. The major owner in the C Bar ranch, his foremen and cowhands initially cared for two thousand head.<sup>55</sup> Further to the east, Creighton's Sandhills cattle operations, now under the sole control of John Creighton since the death of his brother in 1874, were headquartered. The main ranch, the Oxyoke and J Ranch was located on Schlager Creek while several line camps were established in northwestern Cherry County near Merriman.<sup>56</sup> J. Peter Sharpe claimed range centered on the Minnechaduzza Creek. Still further down stream, the Kountze, Yates and Company, known as the Hat Outfit because of the shape of their brand, organized around Berry Bridge, at the eastern boundary of a timber reserve.<sup>57</sup>

Others established operations further into the hills. David Rankin, a millionaire farmer from Tarkio, Missouri, built his Bar 7 ranch operation over a vast range centered near Seneca on the Middle Loup River and reaching north into Cherry County up to the North Loup River. Tradition holds that the venture was only a sideline to his family's more intensive operations to the east. Rankin ranged herds of mixed midwestern breeds,

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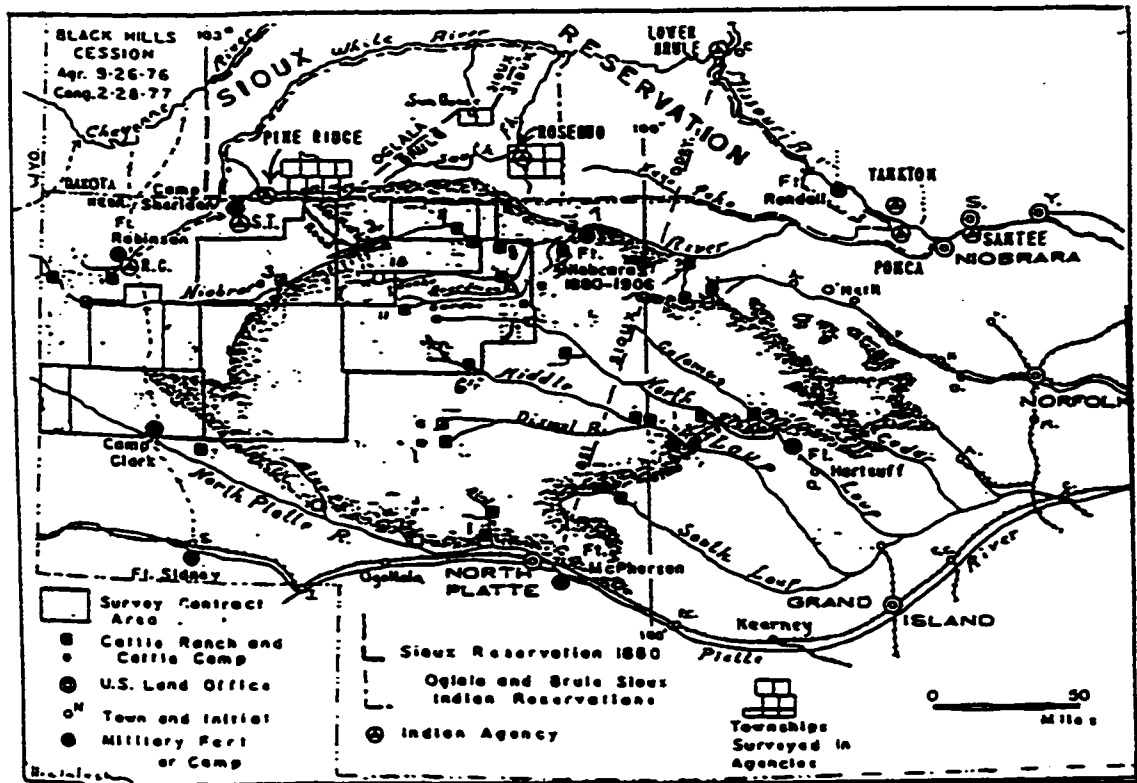
<sup>54</sup>McIntosh, 120; George E. Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk: A History of the Oglala Sioux Indians* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975), 191; Beel, 217.

<sup>55</sup>Yost, 120.

<sup>56</sup>Beel and Gale, 8, 34; McIntosh, 106.

<sup>57</sup>Yost, 120, Beel and Gale, 8; McIntosh, 101, 106.

# Open-range Ranches in North Central Region of Sandhills, 1877-1880 <sup>60</sup>



Map: Charles Barron McIntosh, *The Nebraska Sand Hills* (Lincon: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 101, amended.

## Ranches:

1. John Bratt
2. Newman
3. Hunter
4. Moorehead and Carpenter
5. Creighton
6. Rankin
7. Sharp
8. McCann
9. Watts
10. Foley
11. Keith

put up hay, and “wintered his bulls and saddle horses on deeded land.”<sup>58</sup> Although his methods reflected his experience as an agriculturist, the basis of the operation rested on the use of the free open range.

While Creighton’s spread, Sharpe’s Ranch and the Hat Outfit filed on the land where the headquarters stood as a guarantee to control the water source, others continued to occupy an area and claim range according to an unwritten western code.<sup>59</sup> Some cattlemen regarded their grassland as a temporary arrangement, to be used to its fullest as long as grass remained available or until settlers pushed the operation out. Rancher Russell Watts exemplified how the arrangement worked. Forced by settlement to move from the Republican and Platte River valleys he relocated his range in the Sandhills and headquartered on Boardman’s Creek. Running thousands of head of improved cattle, the Running W ranch located camps at area lakes, Watts Lake and Bull Lake. Eight years later, in 1890, Watts arranged to move his 13,000 head to Montana as settlers, once again, were crowding him out.<sup>60</sup>

Others, like M.C. Keith, added Sandhills range to their extensive holdings as insurance against a natural calamity. Keith established a new range on Gordon Creek after the devastating winter of 1880-81. Until then, few of Nebraska’s open-range cattlemen “had even experienced a bad storm.”<sup>61</sup> Unfamiliar with the region’s cycles of weather patterns, the winter that began in October and lasted well past the next March

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 89.

<sup>59</sup>McIntosh, 120.

<sup>60</sup>Yost, 75; Reece, 21.

<sup>61</sup>Yost, 119.

signaled a return to a stormy phase. Cattle operations along the Platte valley and farther west in the state suffered devastating losses of livestock. At the same time, many of those in the Sandhills experienced only normal winter attrition. For those fortunate not to have lost unusually large numbers, the lofty sand dunes provided more than a modicum of protection from the blowing winds. Availability of flowing water during many of the storms helped to sustain cattle. However, not everyone fared equally well. Sugar McCann, upon hearing of his outfits' drastic losses, gave up and turned over the stock that remained to his foreman and pulled out. Others, like Keith with range in the most devastated areas sought a more protected environment to winter their higher bred stock, and so moved further into the Sandhills region.<sup>62</sup>

As speculative fury reached a fever pitch, most entrepreneurs soon forgot winter's devastation. Throughout the early 1880s, western cattle business practices mirrored those of the industrial east. Both vertical and horizontal integration began to characterize the structure of open-range operations. While foreign investors spilled onto the grasslands to capitalize on money-making schemes, established open-range ranchers joined in the industry's expansion. Russell Watts broadened his involvement by investing in feed-lot operations in Iowa and P. D. Hunter altered and expanded his commission operation.<sup>63</sup> John Creighton, M.C. Keith, Herman Kountze with William Paxton, important Nebraska cattlemen with ranges on the southern periphery of the Sandhills, found an opportunity in the marketing sector. As a part of the small group of initial

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<sup>62</sup>Tbid., 120.

<sup>63</sup>Nellie Yost recognized Russell Watt as the first Nebraska cattleman to set up feed yard operations. However, they were located in Iowa. Yost, 145.



investors in South Omaha's stockyard and packing center, they reaped double benefit from the venture. Besides the financial gains from a wise investment, the central market facility benefited Nebraska and the surrounding region's cattle industry.<sup>64</sup>

In keeping with the opportunistic nature of the open-range industry, however, those cattlemen unwilling to be swallowed-up by foreign cartels moved onto virgin ranges further west. Many sold out their Nebraska operations to the eastern U. S. and European corporations hungry for western cattle investment. By mid-decade only a handful of the original open-range outfits remained in the north central Sandhills. Another disastrous winter, that of 1886-87, closed the chapter on the freewheeling prelude to the modern cattle industry in Cherry County and the Sandhills.

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The passage of bison to cattle, of Indians to cowmen, took place in a distinctive Nebraska environment, the Sandhills. As a semi-arid grassland with unanticipated lakes and marshes, the region provided seasonal grazing land for wandering bison which fed and clothed and ordered the lives of regional Native peoples. However, as natural and human conditions evolved, the culture of subsistence was disrupted; the bison were disappearing, hunting grounds were restricted, and people were forced onto reservations. With the elimination of both feral animals and their hunters, cattle and cowmen occupied

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<sup>64</sup>Omaha Union Stock Yard Board of Directors Minutes, 1883 list of stockholders, Omaha Union Stockyards Collection, Ms. 3676, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska, 3. Paxton was one of the earliest open-range cattlemen. Like many others, his entrepreneurial activities covered a broad range of interests. His interest in the Paxton-Gallager provisions enterprise was instrumental to his involvement in the livestock business. While building his open-range venture, Paxton was heavily involved in the ownership and management of a stock yard which ultimately gave way to the yard facility in South Omaha.

the Sandhills, drawn by the grass, the lakes, and the now nearby Native peoples they were enlisted to feed.

Cycles of interdependency between grass, animals, and peoples marked the occupation of the Sandhills. While the link between the bison and the Indian appears as self-evident, the relationship of cattle and open-range ranchers amounted to more than just filling a void. Removal of Native hunters made an expansive area of rich natural resources available for exploitation by open-range stockmen-entrepreneurs. Relocation of Indians to northern reservations, not eastern markets, provided the initial incentive for the region's earliest ranchers. An important part of their economic opportunity rested solely with providing inferior beef-cattle to reservation Indians at generous government prices. In this way the culture of subsistence was replaced with that of entrepreneurship both of which were rooted in the nourishing grass.

### CHAPTER THREE PRELUDE TO THE MODERN CATTLE INDUSTRY

By 1885, as one Chicago meat packer later wrote about the western open-range cattle trade, “What had been an adventure was converted into a business.”<sup>1</sup> His assessment, however, was only partially correct. Open-range cattlemen were not adventurers. They were quasi-land barons of the West. Taking an unwritten claim over vast areas of the public domain, they exploited natural resources, human industry, and animal flesh for personal profit. In their drive for capitalist gains, they manipulated or disregarded laws of the land while the code of the range came to dominate. The “romantic” epic tales of their wanderlust concealed the real work of industry building.

The open-range period in the Sandhills instituted the beginnings of ranch and herd management. A simple type of grassland conservation and pasture rotation took place when overgrazed areas had to be left vacant to allow grasses to regenerate. Market demands led to better breeds of stock and facilitated the transition to a more systematic structure of livestock and grasslands management. By the late 1880s, cattle raising began to move in the direction toward development of a modern industry. Demands for better quality food at reasonable prices caused western cattlemen to refocus their methods of operation and adjust to the natural and human environment.

As long as environmental factors remained favorable, the Sandhills region served as a lucrative location for the open-range cattle industry. An unpopulated grassland, acquiring and controlling rangeland posed no real problem. Laissez-faire attitudes toward regional

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<sup>1</sup>J. Ogden Armour, *The Packers, The Private Car Lines, and The People* (Philadelphia: Henry Altemus, 1906), 311.

abuses of land policy not only benefitted cattlemen, they encouraged and fostered their expanded operations. Another advantage was the fortuitous weather during the early cattlemen's tenure in the hill country. A wet phase of capricious weather cycles promoted an abundance of forage and water supplies. Without the bounty of natural resources, cattle outfits could not have sustained an operation in the hills. Essential to regional development, however, was the growing pressure of market demands. Initially, market forces served as an inducement but when consumers clamored for better quality meats, a new pressure to improved methods and techniques of traditional livestock management required a different type of stability, a kind of stability that the old, almost primitive, open-range operation was not equipped to provide.

John Schlebecker, writing about cattle raising on the Great Plains, notes that several indicators signaled the transformation to the modern industry. Better transportation and altered patterns of land tenure provided an infrastructure that encouraged further industry development including expanded markets. Improved animal husbandry and resource conservation became important strategies to stimulate balanced production.<sup>2</sup> Achieving that equilibrium became a long, slow, and often, challenging process that depended on adopting new attitudes that transformed a traditional cattle culture into a modern cattle industry.<sup>3</sup> All of this happened in Cherry County.

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<sup>2</sup>John T. Schlebecker, *Cattle Raising on the Plains, 1900-1961* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 11.

<sup>3</sup>John W. Bennett, "Human Adaptation to the North American Great Plains" in Paul A. Olson, ed., *Struggle For the Land: Indigenous Insight and Industrial Empire in the Semiarid World* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 59.

## **UPBREEDING**

Experience in the 1880s taught the lessons of the disaster of open-range methods on overgrazed grasslands. Economic and environmental crises forced improvements in animal husbandry. Ranchers moved from low grade southern cattle to upgraded Sandhills' animals. Texas cattle had made up most of the breeds on the larger open-range ranches. Most transplanted longhorns spent only a few months grazing on the range before delivery as government issue or to canning factories in the East. Although longhorn-mixed breed cattle proved hardy on the range, these grass-fed animals did not produce the quantity and quality of meat to meet new dressed-meat standards. Even though finishing the cattle on corn improved meat production, the fact still remained that Texas cattle were not genetically equipped for efficient or abundant meat production.

Interbreeding with other types of local mixed-breed, or native, cattle provided some slow improvement to beef producing herds, but the winter of 1880-81 accelerated the process of upgrading Sandhills cattle in an important way. Winter losses reached a significant level that depleted ranges. Some open-range cattlemen turned to eastern markets as the most efficient way to replenish their stock which introduced better quality livestock to Sandhills' ranges. In all, close to 185,000 head of one and two-year old heifers were shipped to western ranches continuing as late as 1883 to restock the range. More than new types of cattle were introduced to the region that way. J. M. Hanna, Cherry County's early modern rancher, wrote of his first experience in the Sandhills when he accompanied 1,000 cows "consigned to the Rankin Live Stock Company" in April of 1883. He explained that the cattle, all "natives" of Missouri and Iowa, were assembled by purchasing "small bunches" from small livestock dealers in the Midwest.

Contracted to Rankin and shipped “F.O.B. Omaha,” the livestock traveled from there to the closest end-of-line in the hill country, then were trailed, making the rest of the distance to the range on foot.<sup>4</sup>

Hanna described Rankin’s Bar 7 as running “Texas cows and their descendants—book count—about 6,000 head.” With a number of cattle already on the range, he wondered why the rancher bought these “misfit cows” in the first place.<sup>5</sup> The Missouri and Iowa natives, however introduced more efficient meat producing characteristics into Rankin’s depleted herd. Through natural reproduction, his herd improved in conformation and growth characteristics, a distinct enhancement over those cattle he had lost. By 1900, Sandhills cattle were “shorter legged, blockier, [and] better beef animals.” However, to a Sandhills rancher, they still were only Texans.<sup>6</sup>

Growing public demand for better quality meats, the introduction of dressed beef by eastern meat packers, and the increasing export trade in livestock made it imperative to raise better cattle. Cattle began coming into the Sandhills from Oregon, Idaho, and Utah as an attempt by far western cattlemen to participate in an expanding market. The influx of new cattle enabled hill country ranchers to maintain their margin of profitability. At eastern terminal markets, most notably Chicago’s livestock center, Texas cattle were

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<sup>4</sup>J. M. Hanna, “Sand Hills Ranching in the Eighties,” *American Cattle Producer*, Nebraska Edition (December, 1939) on *Heritage of the Sandhills*, James Ducey, ed. University of Nebraska-Institute of Agricultural and Natural Resources, <http://WWW.IRNA.UNL.EDU> (199.240.193.217/), 2 (hereafter *HSF*), 1. Hanna and his brother had come to the Sandhills with their own herd of 250 cows purchased from their father’s cattle dealer firm, Hulbert, Hanna & Company of Fontanelle in Iowa. Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>W. D. Aeschbacher, “Development of Cattle Raising in the Sandhills,” *Nebraska History* 28 (January 1947): 58, n.39, 58. In the Sandhills, Texas stock never was classified as a distinct breed. In determining their designation, Aeschbacher explained that “a herd of Texas cows served by bulls of various breeds for ten years would still be called Texas cattle. If the cows were served by bulls of only one breed, however, the next generation would be called by the breed name of the paternal line.” Ibid.

not bringing the prices of better qualities of livestock. Informed cattle entrepreneurs were always aware of prices. As early as the summer of 1878, prices for northern Plains “rangers” (local mixed-breeds) fluctuated between \$3.75 and \$4.40 per hundredweight. At the same time and place, Texas cattle, those moving directly from trail drives to eastern markets, sold for \$3.00 to \$3.95 per hundred weight.<sup>7</sup> The differential increased as more improved stock entered the markets although between 1878-1899 western native cattle never fell below \$3.10, reaching as high as \$4.75 per hundredweight only one time.<sup>8</sup>

Open-range cattlemen most often used their Texan stock for government issue while sending their better quality animals to market. As early as 1880, railroad records showed that fully three-fourths of Nebraska’s cattle ranged west of the 99th meridian went to eastern markets. Averaging four years of age, weights and selling prices recorded at Chicago clearly explained the emphasis paid to improving breeds. Texas steers, wintered over one or two seasons on the range, weighed an average of 950.5 pounds for those brought to market and sold for between \$23.97 and \$29.51 a head. In contrast, the median weight of the native steers, the offspring of better graded bulls, figured at 1,230 pounds and brought an average price of \$51.12. Half breeds, those produced from a Texas cow and an American (ungraded) bull, were only slightly lighter in weight. However, a real difference became obvious when they brought cattlemen almost twenty dollars a

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<sup>7</sup> Armour, 306-7.

<sup>8</sup> Schlebecker, 6.

head less than the improved native steer.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, price differentials alone sounded the death knell of the haphazard methods of the open-range phase.

By 1890 few of the big outfits survived. Hanna wrote that the early big outfits, “largely owned by nonresident speculators were doomed to failure at the onset.” He looked on that period as the “experimental stage” of the hill country’s cattle industry. Open-range operations made no accommodation for winter feed since they put up very little hay. Because of the inability to feed during winter storms, losses “were terrific—from 20 percent up.” When added to a 60 percent or less calf survival rate, financial stability became elusive. Location of range and control of hay meadows became important facets of a successful operation. When the advancing rush of settlers pushed into the region, ranchmen only saw another challenge to their enterprise and control.<sup>10</sup>

## **INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL MARKETS FOR THE SANDHILLS**

Government contracts for Indian agency beef issues and military installations provided an attractive market for Sandhills cattlemen-entrepreneurs, but reservations and protective forts also invited industrial development and white settlers with an eye for permanent occupation. Ironically, government action that provided a lucrative market for open-range cattlemen also brought notice to them that their days on the land were numbered. For a time, the construction of railroads added to their already lucrative

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<sup>9</sup>*Report on Cattle, Sheep, and Swine: Supplementary to Enumeration of Live Stock on Farms in 1880: Production of Agriculture*, Clarence W. Gordon, Special Agent in Charge, *United States Census, 1880* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1883), 57. The figures represent the average weights and values of grass-fed cattle sold in the Union Stock Yards, Chicago during November, 1880, and do not include those corn-fed cattle raised in the eastern section of the state which were largely consumed by Nebraska cities.

<sup>10</sup>Hanna, April, 1940, 3.



internal market and provided convenient access to livestock outlets in the East, an external source of business. The railroads, however, brought white settlement into the region, and settlers posed a growing threat to open-range operation. Division of range into privately held homesteads undermined the basic and essential methods of the free range enterprise.

To contain and marshal the Lakota Sioux on the Rosebud and Pine Ridge reservations a military presence in the region was considered necessary. According to the Department of the Platte, the site for a new fort required a strategic location to perform its mission. General George Crook choose 55,000 acres on “nearly dead level” land next to the Niobrara River Valley for the new facility. From its vantage point, the new fort would maintain order on the reservations. Besides an initial military force of “three troops from the 5th Cavalry and one troop of the 9th Infantry,” Fort Niobrara harbored a significant civilian settlement. Land seekers, farmers, and town developers were secure in the military presence and, perhaps more to the point, the fort would protect the interests of the cattlemen in the area.<sup>11</sup> Since late in 1878, cattlemen on the upper Niobrara range had agitated state and Federal government legislators to take action against reservation Indians who had burned ranges and killed or stolen livestock in a futile effort to scare the ranchers out. Losses from rustlers and horse thieves, most often Doc Middleton in the

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<sup>11</sup>K. L. Drews, “Pre-Settlement History,” History of Fort Niobrara,” typed ms., July 14, 1982, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, History file, Fort Niobrara Wildlife Preserve, Valentine Nebraska; “Fort Niobrara,” *Wi-Iyohi: Bulletin of the South Dakota Historical Society*, 12 (March 1967): 1; Thomas R. Bueckner, “Fort Niobrara, 1880-1906: Guardian of the Rosebud Sioux,” *Nebraska History*, 65 (Fall 1984): 302.

northern Sandhills, also caused great concern.<sup>12</sup>

Nearly completed and staffed with 273 military personnel by 1880, the new Fort Niobrara, on the Niobrara River in northeastern Cherry County attracted flocks of opportunistic land seekers and new ranchers. In less than two months after the arrival of the soldiers in April 1880, census enumerators recorded 1118 people residing in the Niobrara district of the state's still unorganized territory. Two hundred twenty-one persons identified as head of household listed their occupation as farmers. Most were concentrated on the marginal land that surrounded the fort. Farther to the south in the area surrounding the North Loup River, only four farmers were listed. The remainder of the population there, fifty-two men, identified themselves as herders. The enumerators counted only two "stockraisers," R. C. Bowen and N. Jameson, who apparently were involved in activities distinct from those of J. C. Vaughn, J. Bronnegan, and M. Frederick who were listed as "ranchmen."<sup>13</sup> In the central sector of the future Cherry County, the open-range outfits of Moorehead, Poore, and Carpenter and seventy-one herders gave a clear picture of the extent of cattle operations.<sup>14</sup>

The distribution of settlement and ranching operations by 1880 clearly defined

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<sup>12</sup>Harold Hutton, *The Luckiest Outlaw: The Life and Legend of Doc Middleton*, 1974 rpt. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 88-9. Creighton interests, W. A. Sharp, William Paxton, and Kountz and Yates were among the western Nebraska cattle entrepreneurs who petitioned Senator Paddock for legislation and military security for their cattle interests. *Ibid.*, 257, n2. Creighton even offered a \$500 reward for the capture of the most notorious of the horse thieves, Doc Middleton. *Ibid.* 89.

<sup>13</sup>The distinction of stockraisers, ranchmen, and herders most likely referred to occupational classifications. While stockraisers indicated the owner-operator of a ranch, ranchmen may have indicated an employee who acted with some authority, such as the modern day manager. Herders, on the other hand, most likely referred to the "cowboy" employee who tended the livestock. However, no printed census explanation defines the distinctions.

<sup>14</sup>Transcript from census, 1880, microfilm, Martin Nollett, Jr., ed, "1880 Census of Unorganized Territory in Nebraska Including most of Cherry County," 1989, Cherry County Historical Society Archives, Valentine, Nebraska, 1-31. The material covers approximately the eastern two-thirds of the county.

areas of specialized use of the land where environmental factors prescribed function. In the northeastern section, the hard, flat tableland supported adequate farming operations for subsistence and local market enterprises. The region to the south, next to the North Loup valley and well into the Sandhills land formation was a mixed environment and supported some farming with cattle ranching dominating. Increasing aridity and rugged topography gave the central region and the area further west over to open range for cattle. Over the next five years the balanced arrangements would begin to change significantly.

Although the fort served as a catalyst for drawing the initial influx of “home-builder” settlers and provided a lucrative new market, its distance from modern transportation added a complication.<sup>15</sup> With no easy access to rail transportation, supplies had to be freighted in. One hundred and twenty miles separated the fort from the Union Pacific at North Platte while plans for rail service through northern Nebraska remained on hold. The Fremont, Elkhorn and Missouri Valley Railway Company (FE&MV) had hoped to capitalize on the newly settled region but had fallen short of capital during the erratic 1870s. By 1880, spurred to build farther by more favorable economic conditions, the road pushed westward as rapidly as “money and labor permitted.” Rumors of additional competition from new railroads into the region added to the pressure.<sup>16</sup> By the spring of 1882, grading was completed through the eastern Sandhills and a section house was constructed at Wood Lake, three miles west into Cherry County. Advancing in ten

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<sup>15</sup>Karen R. Merrill, “Whose Home on the Range,” *Western Historical Quarterly*, 27(Winter 1996): 433-52. Merrill shows how government policy contained a “systematic set of idioms or tropes” that conveyed the Progressive periods ideal of an agrarian western society. Home builder was just one of those phrases. *Ibid.*, 434-5.

<sup>16</sup>Jay Van Hoven, “The History of the Fremont Elkhorn and Missouri Valley Railroad, 1868-1903” M. A. Thesis, University of Nebraska, 1940, 39.

mile increments to the west, the FE&MV built stations at Arabia, and Thatcher.<sup>17</sup> While the military and civilian populations welcomed a line into the region, the cattlemen were not as anxious to see railroad development take place. Experience had shown them that settlement soon followed the tracks which would disrupt their profitable arrangements.

By the next spring, 1883, track reached the village of Valentine. Although rail service into the region had been long in coming, a renewed flurry of rail construction sped construction of facilities across the now organized Cherry County. While construction from Thatcher to Valentine, a distance of 6.28 miles had taken almost a year, the track from Valentine to Chadron, 136 miles, was completed in just one year.<sup>18</sup>

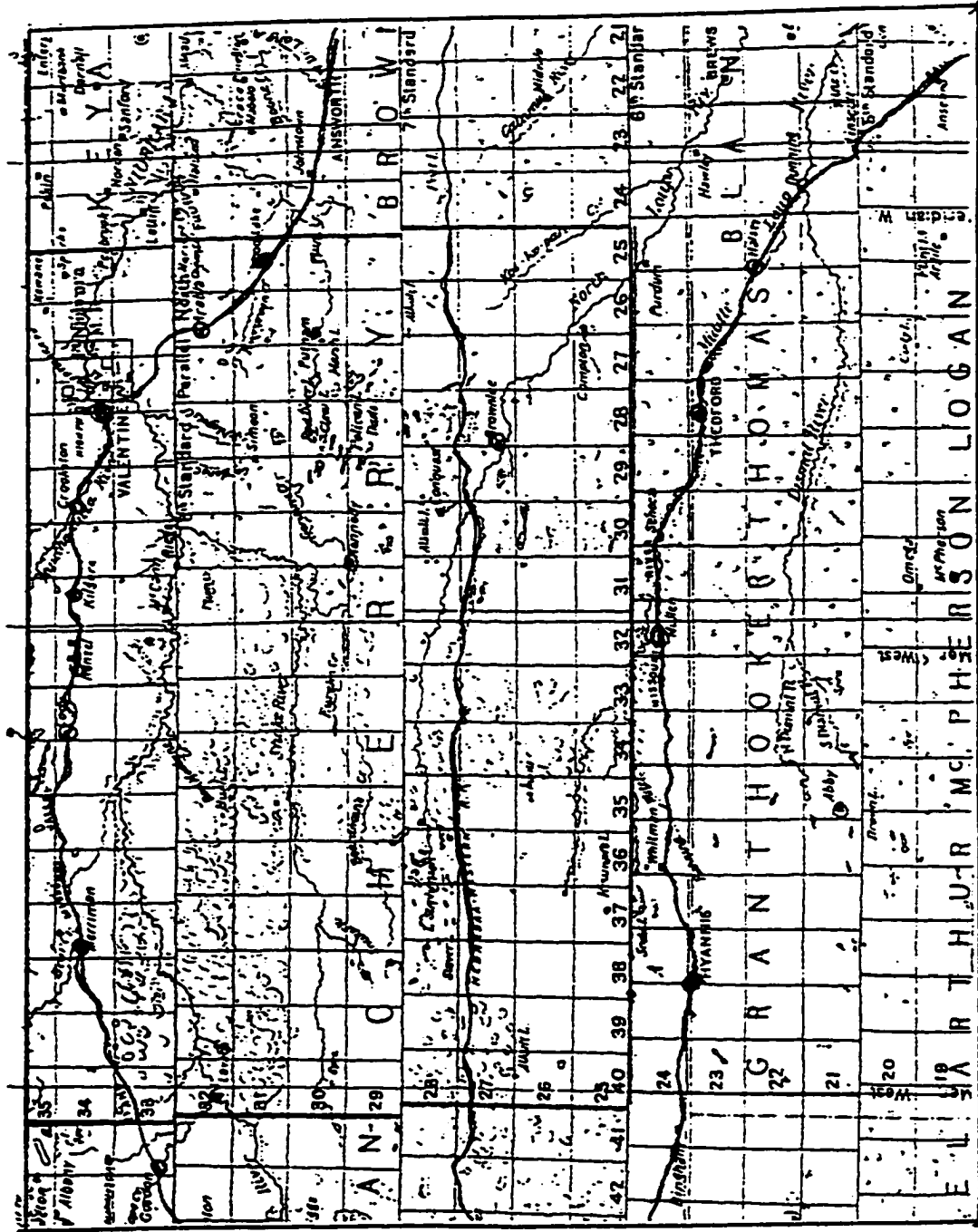
As the line rushed toward its junction to the Black Hills, construction camps and rail-end sites laid the basis for village development. Depots were built that gained in importance as settlement and the agricultural economy increased. Besides local development the new route stimulated new competition particularly for the UP which did a lucrative business in livestock transportation in western Nebraska and Wyoming. Evidence of the impact of the new line was published in the UP's 1885 freight and passenger earnings reports. A decrease of 604 carloads of livestock from the previous

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 41; Marguerite Wobig, "The Railroad in Cherry County" in Marianne Brinda Beel and Barbara Kime Gale, eds., *A Sandhill Century: Book I: A History of Cherry County, Nebraska* (Valentine, Nebraska: Cherry County Centennial Committee, 1986), 125, 129; Van Hoven, "The History of the Fremont Elkhorn and Missouri Valley Railroad," 41. In an interview conducted in December 28, 1938, in Bassett, Nebraska, by WPA writers project worker E. E. Holm, Mrs. Frank (Grandma) Leonard told of her experiences in the region. When her extended family homesteaded in the vicinity of Wood Lake, her mother-in-law took a claim on 160 acres near the lake. Later, the older Mrs. Leonard "jokingly referred to the 'wood' on the lake as consisting of two scrubby cottonwoods." Library of Congress, Washington D. C., American Memory Website, [Http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/84?wpa:./temp/~Ohgv::@SMU9 nebraska+agriculture](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/84?wpa:./temp/~Ohgv::@SMU9 nebraska+agriculture).

<sup>18</sup>*Yesterday and Today: A History of the Chicago and North Western* (Chicago: W. H. Stennett, 1899), 28; J. F. Irmiter, "History of the Chicago and North Western Railway in South Dakota," March 19, 1938; "Record of Construction of the C & N W Through Nebraska," Chicago and Northwestern Rail Road Archives, Northern Illinois University, De Kalb, Illinois.

# Cherry County and Adjacent Counties, 1890



year's total of 5,737, reflected a significant loss of business. According to the report, the shortfall was "almost entirely owing to the efforts of the Chicago NorthWestern Railway pushing . . . westward to Chadron and tapping the territory which has been virtually ours since the completion of the Union Pacific Railways."<sup>19</sup>

Competition entered a new phase in 1887 when the Grand Island and Wyoming Central Railroad, later the Burlington line, completed the push to Deadwood, South Dakota. Taking a northwest route from Grand Island to Alliance, the road laid track on a route almost equidistant between the UP and the FE&MV routes.<sup>20</sup> Only a few miles from Cherry County's southern boundary, the new line, like the more northerly FE&MV line, provided the focus for village and town development along the line that facilitated livestock shipments into and out of the region.

## SETTLING CHERRY COUNTY

Valentine, the future county seat of Cherry County, functioned like a camp-town before the FE&MV reached its boundaries. Still unorganized territory but attached to Holt County, two counties to the east, for "judicial, election, and revenue purposes," Valentine was home to several saloons and eating establishments that were actually shacks and a hotel patronized by "an estimated 300 burley workers" from the railroad. The town also provided a new outlet for cowhands fresh from the range. Only months

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<sup>19</sup>Union Pacific "Freight and Passenger Earnings, 1885," Omaha Union Stockyards, Ltd. Collection, ms 3701, unnumbered box, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska. The Fremont, Elkhorn and Missouri Valley Railway Company was financially connected and controlled by the Chicago and NorthWestern Railway company. It was an example of the complex ownership arrangements rampant in the railroad industry of that day.

<sup>20</sup>Richard C. Overton, *Burlington Route: History of the Burlington Lines* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 187.

after county organization, on January 1, 1884, the town of 250 residents incorporated. The daily bustle of land claimants, cattle shipments, and trade with the reservation Sioux gave Valentine a reputation as a raucous place.<sup>21</sup>

The military installation, the advent of rail transportation, and county organization all played a role in attracting regional settlement. A renewed influx of “grangers” convinced many cattle outfits to seek less crowded and “greener pastures” farther west. The fort brought a significant population to the area, and railroad construction added to the rush. Building metal roads through the Sandhills took extra time because of grading and preparation of unstable soils to bear the weight of the ties, rails, and trains. Crews that surveyed, graded, and laid track added a new market-outlet for a growing economy. Early settlers found the expanding demand for their produce reason enough to remain in the area, that is, as long as the environment supported productivity. At the fort alone, by 1885 the commissary’s beef contract amounted to \$8,400 annually while local farmers provided \$500 worth of locally grown vegetables. During the following year, the military installation expanded from a four to a six-company post which increased proportionately the \$100,000 annual payroll and the commissary demands.<sup>22</sup>

County organization and moving a land office to Valentine, the new Minnechaduza District, brought all types of prospective land claimants to the region. A week after the land office opened, a reporter for the *Omaha Daily Bee* told of a flurry of activity in Valentine. Usually just the “home of the cow-puncher,” the town now bustled with an assortment of people. Reservation Indians were there to haul supplies, and

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<sup>21</sup>Beel and Gale, 255.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 110.

Valentine hosted a colorful assortment of land-seekers, “men in brown overalls or cast off army uniforms . . . saying never a word to each other, and laughing very quietly when the cow-boys played tricks on each other.”<sup>23</sup> Since the office there first opened on July 2, 1883, business had been brisk. Reportedly the people were pushing into all parts of Cherry County. After 100 entries were recorded the first day, between 250 and 300 settlers posted additional claims during the next week. In the spirit of boosterism, the reporter wrote that “such a fight for good land was never seen” before.<sup>24</sup>

Most claimants chose tillable land along streams where timber and water were available. Plentiful rainfall during the 1880s allowed for good crops and gardens and encouraged others to seek land in the region. In an effort to locate on the most desirable spots many individuals and groups hired “locators” to direct them to the right types of places. Not many were like John Thomas who migrated from Blair, Nebraska, and waited a year before filing a claim. Thomas, the county’s first black resident, had arrived only two months before the land office opened. He first engaged in a business venture in Valentine by purchasing a small building where he operated a barber shop. Local townsmen, soldiers from Fort Niobrara, and cowboys coming off the range provided a steady clientele. Apparently Thomas did well at his business since in April of 1884 he sold his business and homesteaded on 160 acres on Goose Creek.<sup>25</sup>

Between 1880 and 1885, the population in the area rose by sixty-seven percent.

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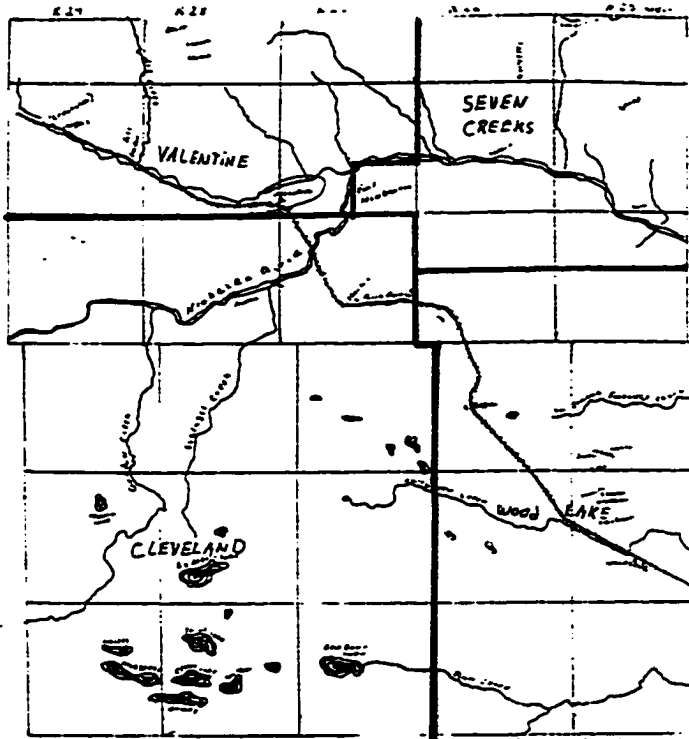
<sup>23</sup>“Up The Niobrara,” *Omaha Daily Bee*, 14 July 1883, 5.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

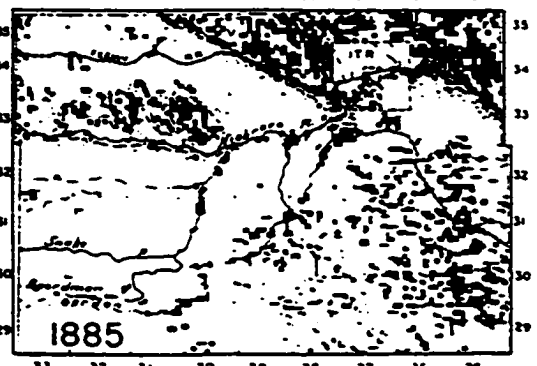
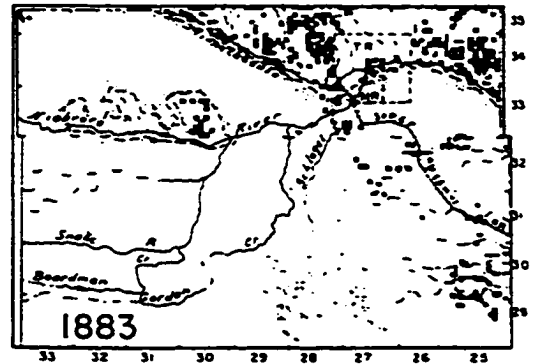
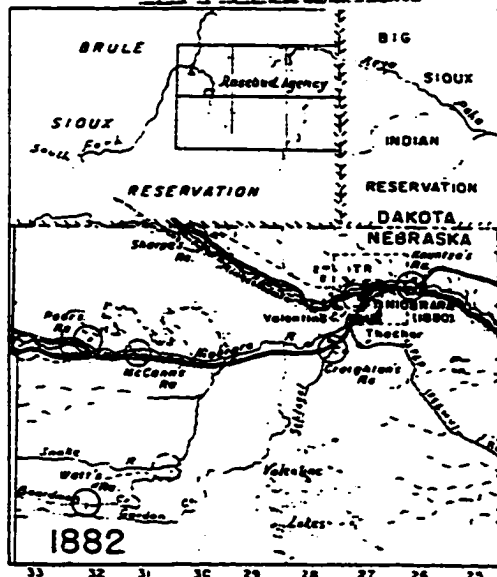
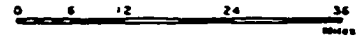
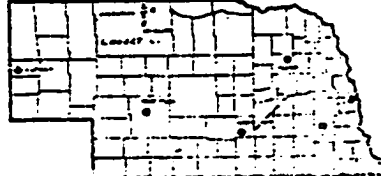
<sup>25</sup>James D. Bish, “The Black Experience in Selected Nebraska Counties, 1854-1920,” M. A. thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1989, 110-12.



### Cherry County Area Covered in 1885 Nebraska State Agricultural Census, 1885 and Valentine-Fort Niobrara Land Entries



This is the approximate area covered by the 1885 census of Cherry Co., NE.



Charles Barron McIntosh, *The Nebraska Sandhills: A Human Landscape* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1996)

According to the state's 1885 Agricultural Census, Cherry County population stood at 2,060. As had been the case with the 1880 census, the western portion of the county was not included in the compilation. In 1883 Cherry County was organized, and with expanded settlement over a wider range two additional voting precincts were added by 1885. Like the earlier general census, people in the western portion of the county were still not counted.<sup>26</sup> However, tax lists for the same period reveal that in addition to the Valentine, Seven Creeks, Wood Lake, and Cleveland Precincts, three others, in the western portion of the county, had taxable populations.<sup>27</sup>

In all, fifty-seven individual names of people and cattle companies were assessed for personal property in the western precincts which did not appear on the census manuscript. While individual holdings and aggregate totals of cattle were not provided on the lists, other sources gave a good idea of livestock numbers there. Composite figures from agricultural statistics for Cherry County showed approximately 15,000 head of cattle in the county in 1885. However, according to census data, residents of the eastern half the county claimed only 3,303 head. The remaining 11,697 head located in the western half were not included in the manuscript census. This total agrees with an estimate calculated from tax records that places between 9,000 and 12,000 head of beef-cattle in western Cherry County. Livestock now taxed as personal property at the rate of .0215 per dollar of appraised evaluation added to the expense of operations.

Unfortunately for the early ranchers, the once free range was not as free any longer under

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<sup>26</sup>Manuscript, schedule 1., Inhabitants; schedule 2., Products, *Nebraska State Agricultural Census*, 1885, microfilm, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska.

<sup>27</sup>Tax Journal of Cherry County, 1885, Cherry County Historical Society Archives, Valentine, Nebraska.

county organization.<sup>28</sup> More to the point, it showed that the older type of cattle operation now incurred additional costs.

In the westernmost precinct of Lavaca, only five tax listings were recorded. The low figure reflected the rugged Sandhills environment's suitability as open-range. For example, the personal property of cattleman John Enlow, original owner of the C Bar Ranch on Clifford and Gordon Creeks, originally had been appraised at \$16,070 but was later lowered to \$6,073 by the Board of County Commissioners. Although appraisers included other assets in the appraisal, the stark and primitive ranching operations led to the conclusion that most of the taxed property was livestock. The recorded payment for the C Bar Ranch made by T. J. Foley of North Platte, apparently an open-range absentee cattleman, suggested some type of partnership arrangement. Also found on the tax rolls in Lavaca Precinct was part of Newman's huge Niobrara Cattle Company's property assessment for Cherry County. Valued at \$8,400, the appraisal suggested the large size of the herds placed on the grass there.<sup>29</sup>

Boiling Spring Precinct, an area of lush wet valleys that first provided range for the Moorehead and Carpenter outfit, attracted large and small ranchers. Some, like H. R. Ditto, were shown to have only forty-dollars' worth of personal property while the Mabry, Merriman & Wilder outfit paid taxes on a value of \$32,921.92. The Rush Lake Cattle Company, an even larger operation according to taxes assessed, held property

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<sup>28</sup>A problem exists, however, in the classification of cattle. In totaling the data no differentiation is made between beef-cattle, milch cows, and oxen. Approximately 3,382 other livestock, not including chickens, hogs, and other fowl, could have been figured into the total, giving a range between 8,315 and 11,697 cattle on the western grasslands.

<sup>29</sup>Tax Journal of Cherry County, 1885, Cherry County Historical Society Archives, Valentine.

worth \$51,000. In all, fourteen different individuals were placed on the tax rolls with a total assessed value of personal property of \$91,143.42. Strong contrasts between the scale of operations in Boiling Springs Precinct foreshadowed the future of Cherry County while testifying to the state of the industry at that period. While the two largest open-range outfits controlled 91.5 percent of the precinct's material assets, the remaining twelve small operators held only 8.5 percent.<sup>30</sup>

Farther east, at the Sharp's Ranch Precinct, a greater number of names appeared on the roll. Russell Watts, with appraised property valued of \$28,170 in the Cleveland precinct, also paid personal property taxes of \$284.28 on his operations there. Assessed on more than 14,000 head, Watts' cattle operation appeared to be the largest in that area. Only the Waite and Buck, Lee and Northrup, and P.C. Van Norstran outfits out of the thirty-eight tax payers for the precinct began to approach the scope of his operation. Still, each was assessed less than half the amount assigned to Watts. The size of his range operation compared more favorably to those farther west in the county.<sup>31</sup>

In the more populated eastern third of the county, the census provided more specific information on the area's occupants. An analysis of the data illustrates how settlers perceived of their trades and occupations. Production figures on agricultural pursuits also show the extent of their operations. In the Valentine Precinct, the area surrounding Fort Niobrara, none of the 191 household heads classified their activity as ranching. Except for the one head-of-household who listed "stockman" as his occupation, the second most populated precinct, Seven Creeks with 148 households, was largely

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

comprised of farmers. As population figures of other precincts progressively decreased, cattle operations were more evident. Wood Lake (94 households) and Cleveland (105 households) tallied twelve and fifteen stockmen respectively. More to the point, both political subdivisions were in Sandhills terrain. Wet meadows and river valleys held the fickle promise of cultivation to farm-settlers and produced mixed occupation of the land.<sup>32</sup>

From the data a clear pattern emerges. Population decreased and cattle numbers rose in correlation to the westward expansion. Those listed in the census of the easternmost precincts, were mainly small, undercapitalized settlers. Cattle holdings were also small to moderate compared to those in the western precincts. Other livestock, such as milch cows, oxen, horses, and sheep, only amounted to 3,382 head while more than 38 percent of the 538 respondents claimed no livestock at all. Some, like the Gulick brothers, Charles, Henry, and Jessie, held claims on land in Cleveland Precinct but as individuals owned no livestock. However, their brother and partner, William, was listed as owning 240 head of cattle. On the tax list for that year, Gulick & Company was appraised at \$1,971.25. In the same precinct, David Hanna had 84 head and paid taxes on \$655 assessed evaluation.<sup>33</sup>

According to the 1885 agricultural census figures, 103,763 acres were claimed in the four precincts. Almost a third, 32,403 acres, were classified as meeting the required amount expended on improvements, either tilled, planted in trees, and/or fenced. In most cases the improved acreage amounted to only a very small portion of the amount of land

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

held. It appeared as if the occupants and their families were engaged in the early stages of building their farms and meeting the legal requirements of preemption, homesteading, or timber culture claims. Many who located a distance from the hard-land area used a combination of the three methods to establish holdings. Their total land claims amounted to more than the 160 acres that those on the hard-land usually occupied. Approximately 2.04 percent reported control of more than 420 acres, an amount in excess of the official provisions for free public land. All were in the Wood Lake Precinct, an area heavily involved in cattle raising.<sup>34</sup>

Settlers on the loess soils adjacent to the Sandhills found a favorable environment. Perceiving the climate and the landscape as similar to the forested and semi-humid places they had left behind, most attempted to replicate experiences and methods better suited to the East. Rebecca Culbertson Low Hutchinson of Sumner, Illinois, described her new home near Fort Niobrara in a letter, dated 23 June, 1885, to her brother, Cyrus Culbertson, back in Illinois. Hutchinson wrote that “our crops look nice here. . . . seven acres of each corn and sugar cane besides a fine lot of potatoes. . . . we have a nice garden with plenty of vines of all kinds, sweet corn in abundance with plenty nice beans.”<sup>35</sup> Seven months later, she wrote that much of the good vacant land had been claimed but some “nice land 160 or the claim can be had for \$300.00 or \$400-00 and \$600-00 with

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Letter, Rebecca C. Hutchinson, Fort Niobrara, Nebraska, 23 June 1885, to Cyrus Culbertson, Sumner, Illinois Hutchinson, Rebecca Culbertson Low Hutchinson file, MS 0904, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska. Charles Reece, son of a pioneering Cherry County farmer and rancher, spoke of the early settlers’ “sod crops.” A “hand planter” was used to plant corn while a spade dug holes for “potatoes, beans, melons, squash, pumpkin, etc.” He went on to tell of the earliest “heat crop we have heard about, was planted by J. A. Hornback . . . on his claim fifteen miles east of Valentine, on the south side of the Niobrara River.” Charles S. Reece, *A History of Cherry County, Nebraska: The Story of its Organization, Development and People*, replica of 1945 edition (Valentine, Nebraska: Plains Trading Company Archives, 1992), 33.

some improvements.”<sup>36</sup>

Evidently the land office in Valentine remained a busy place. Geographer C. Barron McIntosh mapped the land entries made in the Sandhills during the period 1883-1885 and found that north of Minnechaduzza Creek which converges with the Niobrara River south of the fort and the area north of the Niobrara “held the most desired land” for farmers. Soils appeared to resemble those in the East. Claims were concentrated in the vicinity of the major streams that ran through that part of the county, the Niobrara and Snake Rivers and Boardman’s, Gordon, and Schlagel creeks. McIntosh noted that by the end of 1885 settlers had filed claims along streams near all the open-range ranches, a trend that signaled their demise.<sup>37</sup>

## FARMER-RANCHER RIVALRIES

Town sites spanned the county along the FE&MV line and cattle shipment to and from the east gave the appearance of a livestock-dominated economy. However, as more farmers flocked into the eastern portion of the county and pushed out the last few remaining open-range ranches, a new power dynamic gained control. Farmers, not ranchers, were the majority and, as expected, problems arose. The harbinger of future challenges occurred shortly after county organization. Cattlemen, accustomed to unrestricted use of public and private range, viewed the farm-settlers as an unwelcome

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<sup>36</sup>Hutchinson to Culbertson, 9 February 1886.

<sup>37</sup>Charles Barron McIntosh, *The Nebraska Sand Hills* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 125. Several new claims were shown in the vicinity of the Peter Sharp ranch near the Dakota border, near the Herman Kountze ranch on the Niobrara, and on the Schlagel Creek near the Creighton ranch. McIntosh also found claims near the McCann and Russell Watts operations and noted that none were in the name of the ranch owners. These claims could have been recorded in the name of some cowboy or ranch hand to control that part of the owner’s range and to keep settlers out, but it also could have been an indication that settlers were moving into that territory. *Ibid.*, 124.

intrusion. Grangers, not happy with the prospect of losing their crops to grazing livestock, saw ranchers as trespassers.

By the late 1880s protest over apparent disregard and violation of the state's herd laws pitted farmer against stockman. As an attempt to demonstrate their influence, Cherry County ranchers persuaded county commissioners to put the herd law to a vote. Ranchers proposed a reversal of the law's provisions, where farmers instead of ranchers were responsible for fencing their cultivated fields to keep cattle out rather than ranchers fencing pastures to keep cattle in. Farmers interpreted the proposal as an attempt by monied forces to impose added costs to the already financially strapped farmer. While farmers would incur the additional expense of fencing and its upkeep, the more prosperous cattlemen retained access to the free grass and water at no additional cost. Businessmen in Valentine, fearing passage of the measure would turn farmers away, looked after their own financial interests and joined the protest of the measure. The combined farmer-merchant force voted the measure down.<sup>38</sup>

The cattlemen's defeat on this first challenge established a climate that would prevail over the next several decades. David Hanna later described it as a state of "armed neutrality" between the "grangers and the ranchers, whose interests were so close yet whose points of view were so different."<sup>39</sup> Ranchers believed that since more than eighty percent of the land remained in the public domain, it was "theirs for the using." Many held that the farmers who took out claims on the best dry meadows were disrupting the natural environment. Farmers plowed under the native grasses and introduced exotic

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 123-24.

<sup>39</sup>Hanna, December 1939, 26.



plants that edged out natural vegetation. Ranchers held that the “plowmen” disrupted the delicate natural balance. Although not really motivated by conservation sentiments, with time the cattlemen’s assessment proved correct.

However, in 1883, for both groups, the drive to control the finite resources became identified with their own survival. Although some had come to the Sandhills just to farm, the “major economic focus” ultimately returned to livestock production. Settler-farmers lured to the hill country by promises of fertile land and bountiful production, struggled to manipulate the sandy soils into row-crop productivity. After one or two years, they usually failed. To those who came with an eye toward stock-raising, new kinds of methods and environmental interdependencies ushered in an “ecological transition.” Adaptation called for different types of rhythms of use and regeneration of natural resources. Methods and conditions suitable to the pastoralism of the open-range phase of the industry no longer were viable. Settlers, fencing, and market demands changed a “mobile resource utilization” into management-driven livestock agriculture.<sup>40</sup>

## **A CATTLE INDUSTRY EMERGES**

Adjustment required different attitudes. Cattlemen experienced with the earlier methods had to live with a new set of rules. For some, like Hanna, Sam Hudson, Dan Adamson, John Bachelor and William Quigley, the permanent roots of career, family, and ways of life were planted on the initial homesteads in Cherry County.<sup>41</sup> Christopher

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<sup>40</sup>Bennett, 59.

<sup>41</sup>See Beel and Gale, 22-62, for the history of the start of ranching enterprises owned and operated by the cowhands and managers from the large open-range ranches.

Abbott and his grandson J. H. Monahan established a home base for their family and its future ranch in southwestern Cherry County on the Grant-Cherry county-line.<sup>42</sup> In a few instances, settlers new to the environment, attempted to farm before turning to livestock and ranching. Extended families such as the Kimes or the widow Susan Berry and her many children contributed to establishing the legacy of family-centered ranching operations in the Cherry County.<sup>43</sup>

At the same time building permanent ranching operations was occurring with little fanfare, the period of massive speculation in beef was coming to a close. In its place, an “era of custodianship and the beginning of a land ethic” laid a secure foundation in ownership or legal claim.<sup>44</sup> Stability for many became equated with control of land. For the larger outfits, no longer able to “squat”<sup>45</sup> on free government land in the best hay meadows and water fronts, other means had to be found. No simple transition, the process of building a “land-based source of stability” met with challenge and conflict for all

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<sup>42</sup>See Earl H. Monahan with Robert M. Howard, *Sandhill Horizons: A Story of the Monahan Ranch and Other History of the Area* (Alliance, Nebraska: Rader’s Place, 1987).

<sup>43</sup>Susan Berry’s name appeared on the manuscript of the 1885 Nebraska State Agricultural Census (Schedule I/ district 1270/2). She had arrived with her husband Captain Samuel Preston Berry of the 11th Cavalry of Iowa Volunteers in 1882 with their eight children. After being widowed, she sought a homestead close to Fort Niobrara, where her husband was buried. The location of her claim provided both protection and a close water supply. In 1885, only three younger children, a son and twin daughters, remained at home to help operate a successful and productive farmstead. According to the census records, Berry had a small herd of cattle and produced corn and hay. By that time her older five children were either married or out of the home making their own living. Daughter Harriet married C. W. Hudson of Sparks Precinct in Cherry County who was involved in livestock as well as farming. Nebraska State Agricultural Census manuscript, np.; Marianne Brinda Beel and Ruth Johnson Harms, eds. *A Sandhill Century: Book II: The People: A History of the People in Cherry County* (Valentine, Nebraska: Cherry County Centennial Committee, 1985), 53.

<sup>44</sup>Paul Francis Starrs, “Home Ranch: Ranchers, the Federal Government, and the Partitioning of Western North American Rangeland” Ph. D. dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 1989, 35.

<sup>45</sup>Conversation between Sam Hudson and Addison Sheldon, 1 January 1934, noted in Addison E. Sheldon, *Publications of the Nebraska State Historical Society, Volume XXII: Land Systems and Land Policies in Nebraska* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1936), 178, n192.

involved.

As settlement increased, tensions ignited. By 1890 the population and anxiety had reached new heights. That year, census statistics showed 6,428 people residing in Cherry County.<sup>46</sup> With a growing majority of farmer-settlers now occupying claims in the county, renewed vigor to enforce herd laws created additional pressures upon cattlemen. Larger outfits, intent on controlling their range, manipulated new land acts in their own interests. Two new land laws enacted in 1897, the Reservoir Act and the Forest Lieu Act, enabled some ranchers to monopolize public range and water access.<sup>47</sup> Adding to the carnival atmosphere, drastic swings in climatic cycles followed by a national depression hardly encouraged stability and harmony throughout the decade and into the next century.

Although the new type of cattle operation depended on legal claims to land, access to the free range—public domain—determined success. Sentiments continued to flame over legal dictates on fencing that required the ranchmen to take responsibility for keeping livestock off farmers' fields. In order to comply with the law, ranchers hired herders to look after their herds to avoid both legal accountability for damages and the irate farmers' wrath. Hanna expressed the prevailing attitude of stockraisers when he asked the question, "Why has the man with the plow always been given legislative preference over the man with the cows?"<sup>48</sup>

Outside the western cattle country, public opinion favored farmers. Privately-

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<sup>46</sup>United States, Bureau of the Census, "Population Comparison," *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910: Abstract of the Census: Supplement for Nebraska* (Washington, D. C.: GPO, 1913), 576.

<sup>47</sup>U. S., *Statutes at Large*, 29 (1897): 484; 30 (1897): 36, in McIntosh, 196, 201.

<sup>48</sup>Hanna, March, 1940, 1.

owned agricultural homesteads as the future of the West were the nation's political goals based on prevailing social values. One-sided portrayals of ranchers and their cowboys sullied their national image, relegating them to a "bad guys" status in their struggle.<sup>49</sup> However, few policy makers or judicial enforcers were knowledgeable on rangeland matters. The even less defined understanding of the distinctive Sandhills environment created a crisis of opinion. Eastern views at odds with those held in the West spilled into the local arena.<sup>50</sup>

In the late summer of 1890, the *Grant County Tribune* published two editorials that addressed this problem. In an apparent attempt to defuse the land and fencing issues, if only in his own region, the Hyannis editor appealed to reason. Taking a neutral stance, he focused on the mutual dependency of the two groups.<sup>51</sup> Stating that only a "fractional and insignificant portion of the country is adapted to farming" it followed that "practically all is adapted to stock raising." Nevertheless, he went on, one who demands exclusive use from the other, "only antagonizes his own interests."<sup>52</sup> In the editor's view, without the stockmen, no farmer or businessman in the region could survive financially. Strict adherence to the herd law, in effect, would drive the cattlemen out, leaving the others with a shrinking local market and ultimate failure. According to this line of thought, he suggested that a home market be developed where farmers would promote

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<sup>49</sup>Merrill, 435-6; Nellie Snyder Yost, *The Call of the Range: The Story of the Nebraska Stock Growers Association* (Denver: Sage Books, 1966), 185-86.

<sup>50</sup>Bartlett Richards, Jr., *Bartlett Richards: Nebraska Sandhills Cattleman* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1980), 126.

<sup>51</sup>Editorials, *Grant County Tribune* (Hyannis, Nebraska), August-September 1890.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 14 August 1890.

their own interest to secure greater profit. Emphasis had to be placed on a fair and intelligent business spirit to insure “the greatest good for the greatest number.”<sup>53</sup>

While the struggle continued to play itself out in the sandy arena, other troubles arrived on the winds. Drought conditions over a series of years combined with searing blasts of heat devastated already struggling Sandhills farmers. The severity and arbitrary patterns of weather conditions affected cattlemen as well. Beginning in 1886, a five-year period of drought “climaxed in 1890 with a single-year rainfall deficit of 6.35 inches.” The entire state, including the Sandhills, faced a trying period. Similar conditions in other cattle-raising regions led ranchmen from those areas to winter their stock in the hill country. Environmental conditions there assured at least the minimum requirement of grass. However, after months of overgrazing, the outside cattle began to have a negative effect on the once abundant forage.<sup>54</sup>

Newspapers across the state heralded the return of rain in 1891. An excess of 7.11 inches of precipitation above the average followed the next year. While many had rejoiced at the return of good weather, the reprieve was short-lived. Drought conditions returned in 1893 and continued for three years. In 1894, one of the driest years in the

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 18 September 1890. Evidently, many held to notions that farmers and ranchers shared an interdependency in an environment that would support both. The editor suggested another way to view the growing problem. He spelled out a best case scenario where mutual encouragement would benefit both groups through local farm market growth and locally grown grains for fattening cattle and then concluded with the hard facts of the situation. “Natural conditions peculiar to the Sand Hills, do not permit a possibility of the livestock interests being eliminated.” Moreover, no plan did or would ever exist where cattle would be allowed to roam unrestricted or at will, i.e. “loose herding.” To undertake such methods, the editor argued, would destroy the foundation ranchers were intent on laying for their local enterprises and devastate the local farm interests. Ibid. E. Benjamin Andrews, Chancellor Emeritus of the University of Nebraska, expressed these sentiments in his book, *The Call of the Land: Popular Chapters on Topics of Interest to Farmers* (New York: Orange Judd, 1913). He wrote, “The ranch business affords the neighboring farmer his best if not his only market for hay, grain, butter, milk, chickens, eggs, and vegetables; all of which most ranchers prefer to buy rather than produce.” Ibid., 60.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 175.

history of the state, only a total of 13.30 inches of rain were recorded, 30 percent of normal precipitation.<sup>55</sup> Even the earliest residents of the Sandhills could not recall a worse drought or higher temperatures. Not even the great drought that would occur forty years later in the 1930s would equal the severity of the one in the 1890s.<sup>56</sup>

Other than an obviously stressed grassland, the Sandhills exhibited damage to its otherwise stable hydraulic system. One Valentine newspaper reported in June of 1895 that many of the smaller lakes were on the verge of drying up. Dependent on precipitation to recharge the groundwater, three consecutive years of severe deprivation left a telling mark. Stockmen, never before lacking easily accessible water for their livestock, found themselves strapped. However, the situation was not without alternatives. Wells to tap the groundwater always assured availability, but at a cost.<sup>57</sup>

Despite effect on regional sources of water, cattlemen weathered the drought. A ready supply of livestock kept a rancher's family well fed with available cash for essentials. Leasing their grazing land and selling cattle in eastern markets offered an important shelter. Farmers, on the other hand, were not as fortunate. Financially strapped after years of drought and failed crops, they lacked the cash to have additional wells dug to even attempt to garden in the dry wind. Often a neighboring cattleman's contribution of a beef-steer stood between a farm family and starvation. Throughout the early nineties, it was no surprise when ads for the sale of farm property appeared in local newspapers

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<sup>55</sup>McIntosh, 174.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid. The drought had an effect on the meat-packing industry as well. Cattle poured into the terminal market centers in Chicago, Kansas City, and South Omaha, and these markets acted as a form of temporary insulation to the ravishes of the long lasting episode of the depressed economy that followed the financial Panic of 1893.

<sup>57</sup>*Valentine Republican* (Valentine, Nebraska), 28 June 1895; McIntosh, 176.

soon after delinquent tax lists were published. A depression following the Panic of 1893 also tightened-up the economy making mortgages harder to negotiate at reasonable rates. To some, it seemed a waste to borrow money only to have it wither on the vine as the drought continued.

Incomplete census data makes it difficult to measure exactly the extent of exodus of farmers from Cherry County during the nineties. Aggregate population figures, however, show a slight increase of 113 people in 1900 compared to the printed totals from the 1890 census. Most could be attributed to natural increases or the beginning trickle of a new surge of settlers after the drought and depression ended.<sup>58</sup> As migration to the county resumed a steady flow, the perceived threat to ranchers was revived. Competition for control of water sources and hay lands continued. Fearing that another drought would again make water a problem, ranchers, now prohibited from increasing range by “playing” with land claims, sought other solutions.

## **LAND LAWS AND THE KINKAID ACT**

Evidence of fraudulent claims had led to the cancellation of the Preemption and Timber Culture Acts in 1891, denying ranchers an important means toward exerting control over water and hay resources.<sup>59</sup> However, in 1897, Congress passed two acts which restored confidence to a few. The first, the Reservoir Act, was designed to address the problem of water for western stockmen. Under its provisions, “any person, livestock company, or transportation corporation engaged in breeding, grazing, driving, or

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<sup>58</sup>*Thirteenth Census of the United States, Population*, 576.

<sup>59</sup>McIntosh, 197.

transporting livestock may construct reservoirs upon unoccupied public land.”<sup>60</sup> One hundred and sixty acres were allowed providing that the reservoirs “furnish water to such livestock.” A declaratory statement filed at the local land office placed responsibility for construction and maintenance in the hands of the person requesting the acreage. In turn, the government reserved the land from settlement as long as the reservoir remained operational and maintained. Moreover, the act stipulated two important provisions. First, “such reservoir shall not be fenced” and secondly, “shall be open to the free use of any person desiring to water animals of any kind,” thereby discouraging privatization of a public facility.<sup>61</sup>

Willet Raney, with areas of his range in Cherry County, held 171 reservoir claims in the Sandhills region. According to C. Barron McIntosh’s study, one large cluster of his holdings “overlapped the Brown-Cherry [county-line] between Goose Creek and the Calamus River.” Evidently, Raney had no intention of developing each site, but only excluded the land from other claims in the hopes of a “temporary stay in the settlement process.”<sup>62</sup>

Nevertheless, attempts such as Raney’s to gain control of public lands met with relative success. Other ways of gaining permanent access to the land had even better results and long lasting consequences. Passage of the Forest Lieu Act in 1897 gave some cattlemen the means to expand their holdings. Intended as a relief measure for settlers who relinquished patented land within the designated areas, others inevitably benefitted.

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<sup>60</sup>U. S., *Statutes at Large*, 29 (1897): 484; 30 (1898): 36.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>McIntosh, 197



Ironically, efforts to preserve far-western forests had one of its greatest impacts on Nebraska's nearly treeless plains.

When Congress enacted the Forest Reserve Act in 1891, areas in the mountain states of the western U. S. were set aside for the preservation of forest resources. During the terms of Presidents Benjamin Harrison, Grover Cleveland, and William McKinley fifty million acres within forty forest reserves were closed to further settlement. Although settlers requested compensation for the prospect of no future development, they made little progress. On the other hand, powerful monied mining, forestry, cattle, and railroad interests that held extensive land within the reserved areas, exerted their influence on Congress and gained the important concession. According to McIntosh, a miscalculation in the wording of the legislation provided a loophole which permitted speculators and large corporations to participate in a land exchange.<sup>63</sup>

During the course of the Forest Reserve Act's tenure, 1897-1905, almost 3,000,000 acres of patented western forest lands were exchanged for valuable government land elsewhere. Flagrant manipulation and favorable interpretation of the law in favor of the monied interests allowed speculators and large corporations to be the principal beneficiaries of the new provisions. Under these conditions, the forest lieu land became a money-making proposition rather than the intended vehicle for resettlement. Although some of the land exchange amounted to forest land for forest land, some selections of new claims took place in the interior grasslands region. In Nebraska the selection of the compensatory 11,587 acres took place at only three land offices, all peripheral to the

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<sup>63</sup>C. Barron McIntosh, "Forest Lieu Selections in the Sand Hills of Nebraska," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 64 (March 1974): 87-8.

Sandhills. Most of the 184 selections “were subdivided and patented in smaller parcels; only about one in eight of the “in lieu” patents exceeded forty acres.”<sup>64</sup>

As McIntosh noted, an isolated plot of forty acres would be worthless given the environment. However, the strategic location of a number of parcels added to a rancher’s previous holdings would solidify his control. For some, in lieu sections became important to the consolidation of ownership of surface water and hay producing wet valleys and the subsequent *de facto* control of adjacent grazing areas on public lands.<sup>65</sup>

David Hanna and A. J. Plummer both increased their land holdings in Cherry County in this way. By 1897, Hanna already controlled fourteen claims in the lake country of the east central portion of the county. Most of the land Hanna controlled showed soils of similar quality. Areas having more desirable soils and their adjacent hay lands were limited, but with additional “in lieu” acres he could enhance his holdings. Placement of small plots could successfully block further encroachment by settlers or ranchers into an area dominated by a cattleman’s arrangements of claims. Hanna gained valuable wet hay land and access to lakes through his creative maneuvering although the four in lieu parcels he acquired were only a small part of his extensive lands. Plummer expanded his Dumbell Ranch in southwestern Cherry County in much the same way. His extended family operation held thirteen family patents and sixteen conventional patents he obtained plus 24 “in lieu” parcels. These 40-acre claims allowed him to control the best valley land and water in the area.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 89.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 92, 99.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 93-94, 96.

While the new legislation benefited a few, a more comprehensive plan to secure access to the open range began to take form. Leasing public lands appeared a logical next step, but it remained primarily a cattleman's issue.<sup>67</sup> Official policy fostered private ownership, and under the existing system, western livestock interests could not secure title to enough land for a profitable operation. Although the past decade had taught once settlers gave up and moved out, ranchers could purchase patented property, a greater amount had been relinquished and thrown back on the government rolls. Sometimes patience did not pay off, at least in the case of homestead land.

In 1896, Congressman W. E. Andrews from Nebraska's Fifth District proposed new land legislation.<sup>68</sup> According to his plan, all unoccupied government land in semi-arid regions would be "deeded" to the state. The state would partition land into tracts, not exceeding 640 acres, and then deed or lease it to private individuals. While the plan went along with the official policy of alienating public lands, Congress had no interest and turned its back on the idea. Yet finding an equitable solution to disposal of the land to meet cattlemen's needs continued to be debated in the West.<sup>69</sup>

Near the end of William Neville's first and only term in Congress, he introduced an amendment to the homestead law. In April of 1902, the Fusionist Representative from North Platte proposed that settlers be allowed to claim 1,280 acres in the semi-arid West beyond the 100th meridian. Not all Nebraskans favored the proposal, although they

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<sup>67</sup>Sheldon, 181.

<sup>68</sup>W. E. Andrews' district did not include any of the Sandhills counties which were in the Sixth District during that period. However, the Fifth District did include the south central counties that were heavily involved in the cattle business. Eric Johnson. ed., *Legislative Handbook Manual of the State of Nebraska* (Lincoln: State of Nebraska, 1897), 166.

<sup>69</sup>McIntosh, *Nebraska Sand Hills*, 214.

generally acknowledged the need for a solution to the public land problem. An editorial from a western Nebraska newspaper even called the homestead act “a dead letter. . . . There is not a quarter section [160 acres] of land west of the 100th meridian on which a man can make a living.”<sup>70</sup>

One-fourth of a section in the West could not equal the productivity of the same amount of land in the humid East. Even in Washington, D. C., antiquated laws were clearly seen to be no longer suitable for the disposal of those public lands. President Theodore Roosevelt came to recognize the inadequacy and appointed a Public Lands Commission to study the issue. In its partial report of 7 March 1904, the Commission concluded that the existing laws were no longer an effective and economical way of “disposal of land to actual settlers.”<sup>71</sup>

One month after the release of the report, Moses P. Kinkaid built upon Neville’s plan. He introduced a bill to set aside the provisions of the Homestead Act in the Nebraska Sandhills. Kinkaid was aware of the fact that no one land policy could address all the variations in climate, topography, and soil in the western lands; he also believed that the soils of the region were too sandy and dry for cultivation. On the other hand, two sections (1280 acres) would be enough for a small livestock undertaking. According to his bill, regions suitable for irrigation would be left out of the area proposed for the experimental new land law. After consideration and revision by the Committee on Public Lands, the bill provided for a 640-acre homestead claim. According to the thinking of

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<sup>70</sup>*Alliance Times* (Alliance, Nebraska), 8 April 1902, quoted in Arthur R. Reynolds, “The Kinkaid Act and its Effect on Western Nebraska,” *Agricultural History*, 23 (January 1949): 21.

<sup>71</sup>U. S., “Report of the Public Land Commission,” Senate Document 189, 58th Congress, 3rd Session (Washington D. C.: GPO, 1905), quoted in Reynolds, 21.

many committee members, the smaller acreage was appropriate. This conservative and perhaps less informed approach hoped to curtail the devious methods employed by big cattle outfits to gain control of the land. Strict provisions were also added that required permanent improvements worth \$800 to be placed on the claims. Later that same month, President Roosevelt's signature made it law.<sup>72</sup>

Kinkaid's original proposition reflected his understanding of the conditions in Nebraska's semi-arid land. He had moved from Pierre, Dakota Territory, to O'Neill, Nebraska, in 1881. His stint as a state senator from the five-county district put him in touch with people from Holt County to the Wyoming border. As a state legislator he had introduced the bill to organize Cherry County in 1883, and he had encouraged settlement in many of those areas his federal proposal hoped to improve. Later, as a judge for thirteen years he found himself caught between conflicting interests. Kinkaid tried to serve his district in the "interest of the homestead element," while remaining on the "good side" of local businessmen and ranchers.<sup>73</sup>

Cherry County rancher Dan Adamson later recounted how he and Charles Cornell, one of Valentine's founders, had approached Kinkaid with a scheme of their own. Conflict and recrimination over control of the range had taken various forms of

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<sup>72</sup>Reynolds, 22.

<sup>73</sup>Memorial address of Representative Humphrey, from Nebraska, *Moses P. Kinkaid: Memorial Addresses Delivered in the House of Representatives of the United States in Memory of Moses P. Kinkaid Late Representative from Nebraska* (Washington D.C.: GPO, 1924), 8-10. Until the month before the introduction of the enlarged homestead act, Kinkaid's record in Congress had not inspired local approval. In fact, some viewed his record with only sarcasm. The Democratic newspaper in Valentine (Kinkaid was a Republican) published an article about the Congressman in March of 1904 that summed-up those sentiments. His election promises, said the newspaper, to make Fort Niobrara a permanent cavalry post and to help the farmer, the cattleman, and the businessman so far had only been empty words. As the editor saw it, Kinkaid had only helped the trusts. *Valentine Democrat* (Valentine, Nebraska), 3 March 1904.

extralegal activity. Some of the more public spirited men had expressed hope that government intervention through legislation could make public lands financially affordable. Reportedly, Cornell approached Adamson to ask for help. Cornell had devised some type of workable solution to the range problem. Adamson then proposed a two section and additional homestead privilege scheme that Cornell brought to Kinkaid. In the cattleman's view, the revised measures inserted by eastern lawmakers were a reaction to the fear that "the two-section bill was a big land grab."<sup>74</sup>

Passage of the Kinkaid Act only served to exacerbate the conflict over the range. Expecting greater difficulties without some type of formal resolution, Cornell once again approached his Congressman with a suggestion. He presented Kinkaid with a twenty-one section bill that proposed awarding leases by an auction system. Rent would be set at one-half cent per acre for twenty years. Under the provisions, entrymen could lease twenty acres for each acre of their homestead. Homesteaders could not put a claim on the land without reimbursing the lessee. Cornell's well planned leasing scheme, however, made no impression on the legislators.<sup>75</sup>

In 1910, a report to the Nebraska State Board of Agriculture was prepared that dealt with local perceptions of the merits of the Kinkaid Act. Sentiments put forth conveyed the frustration of many Sandhills cattlemen. Letters submitted by area businessmen expressed concern for their own financial well-being since the present accommodations suited neither farmers nor ranchers. One correspondent from Cherry

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<sup>74</sup>Typewritten manuscript of Dan Adamson article, *Journal Stockman*, 12 June 1929, Cherry County Historical Society, Valentine, Nebraska.

<sup>75</sup>*Valentine Republican* (Valentine, Nebraska), 12 January 1906. A trimmed down version of a range lease bill introduced by Congressman John Lacey (R-Iowa) met the same disregard.

County summed up the Kinkaid Act by declaring, "It was a bad business proposition for the people in the first place." With little or no money to start with, how could anyone expect a person to live on the tract with no funds to begin operation. Another businessman from Cherry County said that "the government bets the entryman 640 acres against \$14, the price of the original entry he cannot live on the land for five years."<sup>76</sup>

Apart from their opinion that the act itself was inappropriate, each respondent made clear that the issue of public lands in western Nebraska needed other solutions. Each conveyed the idea that after a period all parcels of land not taken up by homesteaders be "turned over to the state to handled as it does school lands, open for lease." According to a Grant County writer, that arrangement would satisfy settlers and produce more beef. His implications, of course, were based on the correct understanding that the Sandhills environment would not support farming. Stock raising, under the conditions that land holdings "were large enough to give incentive and a fair profit," remained the only means to a productive use of the land.<sup>77</sup>

By 1910, from the businessmen's perspective, the cattle industry in the region had not been progressing sufficiently and appeared to be in decline. High prices proved no inducement, and some believed "the unsettled conditions were wearing out [the] best

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<sup>76</sup>G. W. Hervey, "Kinkaid Act Report," *Nebraska State Board of Agriculture: Annual Report for the Year 1910* (Lincoln: Jacob, North & Company, 1910), *HSH*, 2, 6.

<sup>77</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

cattlemen” who were cutting down the size of their herds.<sup>78</sup> Although a myopic view of their own region’s circumstances, cattle numbers had decreased nationwide over the last decade. Nevertheless, the businessmen understood the linkage between land, cattle, and their own financial interests.<sup>79</sup>

Cattlemen too had their financial interests at stake. Many had come to the hills with the idea that they would have control of the range and its use. To their way of thinking, that was the only way to build a strong financial destiny for themselves. Instead, homesteaders had followed in their wake and now they disrupted the land base.<sup>80</sup> Nearly 4,000 more people had been added to Cherry County’s population from 1900 to 1910. However, it was not the number of people added but their distribution and activity throughout the region that caused cattlemen concern. Plowing and attempts at cultivation exponentially affected grazing. For every sixty acres turned over, thousands of acres of the surrounding lands became unavailable and useless for grazing. A long period of regeneration of natural grasses would be necessary; moreover, “exotic” plants that were introduced had a devastating effect on the environment.

To ranchers, the businessmen’s suggestion offered a sensible and more efficient use of resources. Transferring unclaimed land to the state, 700,000 acres in Cherry County alone in 1910, would benefit all. Appraisal and then leasing would place unoccupied parcels of land on the tax rolls and contribute to community development. Speculators and unscrupulous investors would no longer pose a threat to change

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

<sup>79</sup>*Thirteenth Census of the United States: Volume V*, 342-43.

<sup>80</sup>Adamson, 6.



“unreasonable prices for grazing privileges.” Stockmen could move their fences. By lowering operating costs, both small and large cattlemen would realize material benefits. That alone would stimulate and encourage future ranch development.<sup>81</sup>

Not all cattlemen applauded the leasing of government land. Some larger outfits, like Bartlett Richards’ Spade Ranch, already fenced part of the public domain to keep other stock out of their pastures. Others merely continued the old practice of running stock on the open range. Many ranchers drew dead lines, symbolic boundaries they protected by intimidation and warnings for those who ventured on “their” land.<sup>82</sup> Remnants of the old “code of the range,” however, began to disappear as settlers and government changed the way cattlemen accumulated their holdings.

Bartlett Richards and his operation exemplified, to many, the plight of the Sandhills cattleman. Like so many others, he followed cow country custom in putting together his sprawling spread. Other large ranches in the West had employed buried claims to increase their range. In the Sandhills region, the Standard Cattle Company gained a foothold in southern Cherry County through a number of innovative land deals. Monahan’s outfit in Grant and Cherry counties also bent rules to enlarge their control.<sup>83</sup>

Richards did it with flair and Civil War widows.<sup>84</sup> He established himself in the Nebraska Sandhills in the mid 1880s and over the next ten years developed his 800 square miles of rangeland into “manageable units.” He first acquired from Nellie Overton

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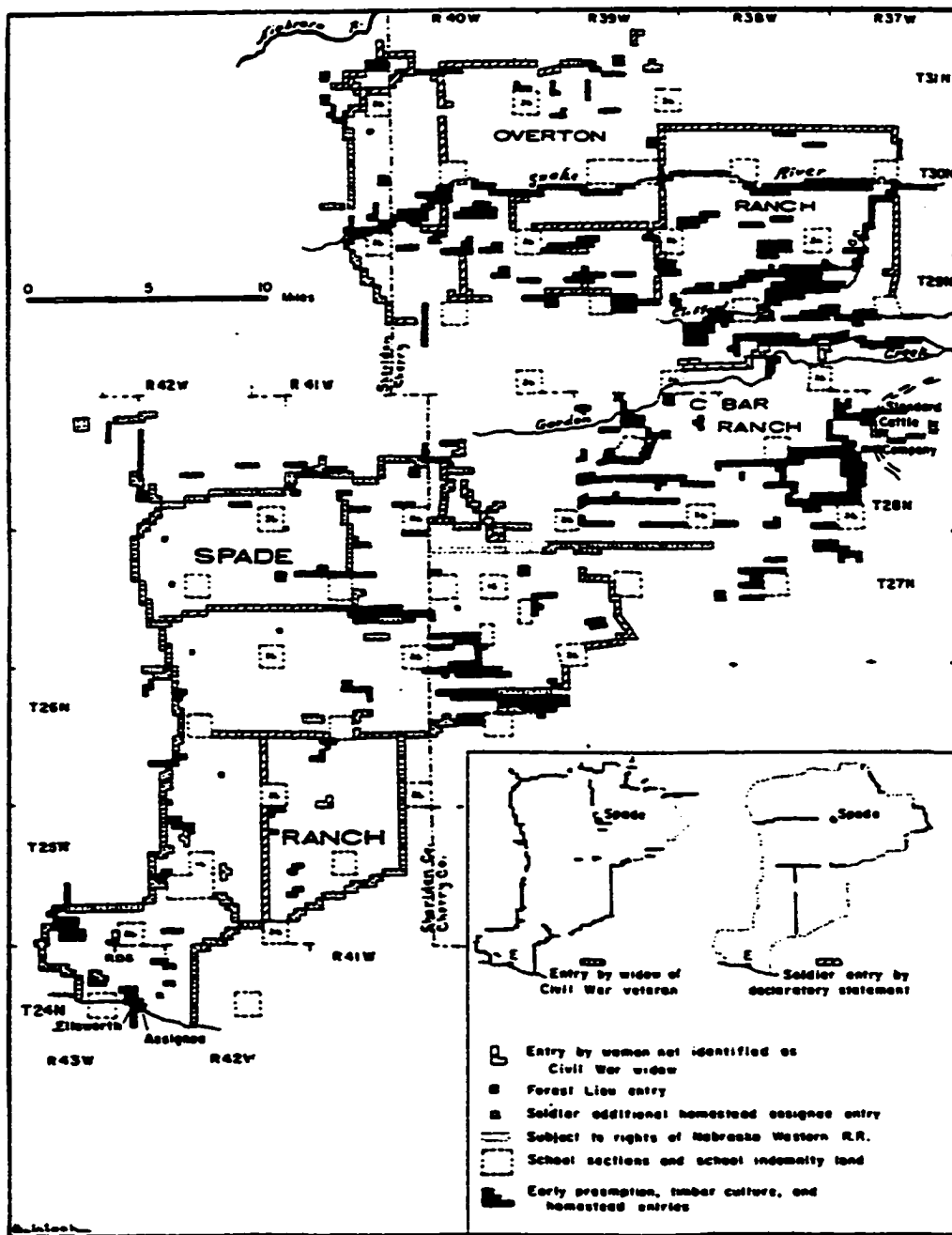
<sup>81</sup>Hervey, 6.

<sup>82</sup>Marguerite Riordan, “Frontier Kingdom, Part II.” *Nebraska Cattleman*, (December 1950), *HSH*, 13.

<sup>83</sup>McIntosh, *Nebraska Sand Hills*, 202-5.

<sup>84</sup>Riordan, 13.

### Nebraska Land and Feeding Company, Spade, Overton, and C Bar Ranches



Charles Barron McIntosh, *The Nebraska Sandhills: A Human Landscape* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1996)

the Overton Ranch, on the headwaters of the Snake River, and he made it his first headquarters. For Richards and his partners, government contracts and eastern shipments to packing centers provided a lucrative business. To facilitate the transport of livestock, he moved his headquarters to neighboring southeastern Sheridan County while retaining the Overton ranch property. He next bought out Bennett Irwin's ranch near Bean Soup Lake, and in 1897 added another ranch. This time, a change in partnership brought Will Comstock and his C Bar Ranch on Gordon Creek into the Richards enterprise. Two years later Richards with Comstock incorporated his holdings into the Nebraska Land and Feeding Company.<sup>85</sup>

The partners added other land in 1902-3 by inviting war widows "to file a string of claims" on the company controlled land. Intended for one purpose, the long narrow claims provided a fence line that enclosed open range. Time and great thought had been given to finding the widows and predetermining locations of claims that would be most effective. By mid 1903, however, they sought other ways to completely encircle their range. Stretching a congressional law to its legal limits, the partners found another option in the Soldiers and Sailor's Homestead Act. Service men or their agents could gain a homestead tract by filing a declaratory statement which provided that within six months the claimant must take up residence and make improvements to the claim.<sup>86</sup> Through land agent Francis M. Wolcott, who reportedly "papered central Cherry County with eighty

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<sup>85</sup>Richards, 58, 68-7, 78-9; Riordan, "Frontier Kingdom, Part I." (November 1950), *HSH*, 5. Earlier, Newman whose N-Bar spread reached into the northwestern portion of Cherry County had controlled the range occupied by the Overton Ranch.

<sup>86</sup>U. S. *Statues at Large* , 17 (1872): 333.

land patents,” the Nebraska Land and Feeding Company enclosed even more range.<sup>87</sup>

Blind claims under the Soldiers and Sailors Homestead Act added to Richards’ “creative use” of land policy to augment his control of the range. For the most part, the latest maneuvering provided the land on which the Overton Ranch’s fence line ran. In addition, four of the twenty Forest Lieu parcels he held connected “widely spaced wells.” With no legal way to obtain the vast tracts of public land required to carry on a large-scale operation, cattlemen had few alternatives other than taking advantage of loopholes in existing laws. Under the prevailing system, many ranchers fenced and claimed the public domain for their cattle.<sup>88</sup>

However, the government’s tolerance of illegal fencing came to an abrupt end between 1902-3 when a strong anti-fencing program gained government sanction. To Sandhills cattlemen, government actions came like a doubled-barreled blow. The order to remove illegal fences was soon followed by the passage of the Kinkaid Act. This eradicated the remaining vestiges of the Sandhills open-range cattle industry. Control of environmental resources had gone hand-in-hand with a successful operation. Since cattlemen first entered the Sandhills, they had recognized “what land was absolutely essential, what land was adjunctive, and what land was not worth the cost, time, and effort required to claim it.” When the Kinkaid experimental land policy opened a new, larger vista for settlement, most of the land of strategic value to the control of water, hay, and grazing was already occupied.<sup>89</sup> Ranchers had at least been partially prepared.

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<sup>87</sup>McIntosh, *Nebraska Sand Hills*, 206-11.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., 212.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., 213.

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Ranchers defined land according to its specific uses. Uninformed in matters of geology and botany, they unwittingly established patterns in harmony with the physical environment. Holding to traditional ways for a time, they used, sometimes abused, but never destroyed the productive nature of Sandhills resources. In the name of western expansion and capitalistic improvement, pressures to conform created chaos. "Progressive" legislation instituted further change. Unrealistic expectations about the scale and type of production placed extreme stress on the total environment. Farmers found the land and the climate unsuitable for successful cultivation, and ranchers found the legal climate counter to their mode of operation.

The prelude and early phase of the cattle industry in Cherry County was part of a regional transformation. During the evolution to a modern economy, human intrusion into Nebraska's Sandhills required adaptation to a unique and limited natural environment. Distinctive in the distribution and combination of its resources, the Sandhills' fragile nature dictated the extent and scope of its use. In time, artificial limitations, such as government land policies and regulations, attempted to manipulate and nearly destroyed the grassland environment.

Since the earliest attempts to classify the region, scientific opinion held that the most efficient, and possibly the only, use for the land was the grazing of livestock. Historically consistent with the passing phases of animals and cultures dependant on the Sandhills' natural resources, nineteenth-century cattlemen found the region more than adequate for their needs. Their proclivity to lay claim through extra-legal ways had served their purposes well. Complacency was challenged, however, when a shift in

national policy assaulted their environment and threatened their control. The plow, as they correctly saw it, undermined the productivity of the grass.

Putting the public domain in the hands of small private owners made sense for tillable and productive land. In a fragile environment, such as the Sandhills, it only spelled disaster. A debacle for farmers and a major challenge to ranchers, federal policy paid little attention to the suitability of the land. Nevertheless, the failure of the farmer allowed the rancher to reclaim the region, and in that process evolve into a modern cattle industry.

## THE MIDDLE YEARS

Cherry County's cattle economy began to take the shape of a modern, capital driven industry at the turn of the twentieth century. Beginning in the mid-1880s, the entrepreneurial open-range days gave way to opportunistic settlement by farmers. In keeping with the spirit of the times, pressures to encourage further farm development in the region led to the enactment of an experimental land policy in 1904 that drew undercapitalized and ill-advised farmers to an environment best suited for rangeland and hay production. When their initial small successes turned to recurring years of fruitless effort, a significant number left, either relinquishing or selling their land claims. From this disaster emerged the building blocks of a land-based, environmentally dictated, family-operated ranch economy in the Sandhills. Some of the farm settlers turned to livestock as the way to survive; those already established in a cattle operation acquired additional rangeland and meadows in a move to expand their operations. By 1920, a cycle had been completed as the Sandhills reverted to its more natural proclivity as a rangeland.

However, as a privately-held resource, the grassland environment demanded a fresh approach. Ranchers cultivated the skills to continue productivity. Area stockmen had moved beyond the days when scheming and subterfuge had been necessary to support a growing livestock operation and became a new kind of businesspersons who traded in the commodity of land. Private ownership became the core of their enterprise. Whether leased, rented, or individually owned, legal control over large areas of range and meadow introduced a new kind of organization to Cherry County's cattle producers. Fences that once illegally enclosed public land were torn down and replaced by those that

enclosed pastures better to manage the breeding and feeding of highly improved stock.

As county population rose and fell, farmers relented to the growing cattle economics. Ranches of various sizes, shapes, and resources came to dominate the landscape. From individual to corporate and investment tenure arrangements, cattlemen and the results of their efforts drove the business of the Sandhills environment. However, as modern scions of earlier entrepreneurs, ranchers were forced to develop new attitudes and practices to restore and perpetuate the productivity of that environment. During the middle years, conservation and preservation became key elements to sustaining a profitable level of production. Informed through the results of scientific experiments in range management, animal husbandry, and agricultural economics, ranchers gained knowledge and understanding of their distinctive means of production.



**CHAPTER FOUR  
RANCHING AND CONTROL OF THE LAND,  
CHERRY COUNTY, 1900-1930s**

The transition of the open-range cattle trade into a modern, rationalized cattle industry began with resolving control and use of the land. Livestock interests in Cherry County gained initial control through tactics and schemes to privatize and develop ranches and ranges. Poorly conceived and tailor-made land policies opened the region to ill-prepared farm-settlers whose way of production never conformed to environmental dictates. For almost forty years, the incoming flow of plowmen and croppers experienced trials and defeats in their challenge to harvest more than native grasses. By 1920, county demographics revealed a new direction. As the farming population decreased, the network of family-owned ranches expanded. In terms of the Sandhills grassland environment, this more suitable utilization of the land opened the way to effective and rational use of natural resources, the second phase of acquiring control of their land. As scientific range and ranch management grew in acceptance, ranchers developed an intimate relationship with their environment and entered into an expanding modern rationalization of the cattle industry.

**THE CHANGING NATURE OF LAND OWNERSHIP**

By 1920, thirty-six years after organization, plat maps of Cherry County showed a checkered, “crazy quilt” pattern of privately held parcels of land. Oddly shaped over years of small land acquisitions, boundaries of ranches and farms often jutted beyond section and township lines. In part the result of a hasty survey and later attempts to rectify

errors, the uneven section lines and misplaced markers proved a boom to some cattle interests. Adding to the seeming disarray, the cut and paste technique used by some ranchers to sell-off or buy desired plots only complicated the geometry.<sup>1</sup>

These maps illustrate the linear dimensions of property holdings. For the most part, the largest tracts in Cherry County belonged to ranchers and cattle companies. In some cases, outfits like the Fawn Ranch or the Sandhills Cattle Company were represented by a number of unconnected parcels spread over a large area of the county. In contrast, smaller, one section holdings showed the location of individual farmers. Most often isolated from other farming ventures, they were fortunately adjacent to rangeland. In addition to privately held land, two major blocks retained by the government were prominent by their lack of further subdivision. The Niobrara Division of the Nebraska National Forest and the Fort Niobrara Wildlife Refuge together covered several thousand acres of valuable property. At the forest, grazing leases, under Department of the Interior's management, were let out to eligible livestock operations while on the preserve, and government employees maintained a small herd of bison and other grazing animals.<sup>2</sup>

Although ranchers controlled the largest subdivisions of privately-held land, farmers were, in fact, the largest sector of the county's population. According to an analysis of the population data from the 1920 census in Table 1, only six out of forty-four precincts in Cherry County were solely occupied by ranchers. In each of the remaining thirty-eight, both farmers and ranchers held parcels regardless of soil types or topography.

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<sup>1</sup>*Standard Atlas of Cherry County, Nebraska* (Chicago: Geo. A. Ogle & Co., 1919).

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.* The National Forest lands in Cherry County are now called the Samuel R. McKelvie National Forest. To the southeast in Thomas and Blaine counties is another section called the Nebraska National Forest.

In the entire county, 865 heads of households, listed farming as their primary industry and trade. In comparison, ranchers numbered 573 on the same census schedule. However, a third group of 186, indicated their occupation as stock-farmers, an important growing accommodation to environmental conditions.<sup>3</sup>

**Table I**  
**Population Statistics for Cherry County, Nebraska, 1900-1920**

	1900	1910	1920
<b>total population</b>	6581	10,529	11,753
<b>head of households</b>	1453	2654	2648
<b>farmers</b>	512	1398	865
<b>ranchers</b>	352	344	573
<b>stock-farmers</b>	42	178	186
<b>other</b>	547	734	1024

Manuscript of U.S. Census 1900, 1910, 1920

Stock-farming, a twentieth-century phenomena for the region, involved the diversification of farm production. One type of adaptation to the semi-arid Great Plains, the balanced use of resources gained in acceptance as a way for farmers to hedge against crop failures and financial ruin. In a majority of cases it had taken a short time to show them the error of their ways. Because of limited crop specialization, farmers soon turned to diversification. Although the system of dual emphasis on grain crops and livestock gained widespread acceptance across the Great Plains Region, in the Sandhills'

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<sup>3</sup>United States, Bureau of Census, Manuscript of Population, *Fourteenth Census of the United States*, microfilm, Nebraska State Historical Society Archives, Lincoln, Nebraska. The stock-farmer designation is given to those agricultural producers who list sixty percent of their operation devoted to crop production with the remaining forty percent in livestock.

environment grain crops and cattle were not a good mix. After an initial gain of stock-farming in the region, fewer turned to the alternative. A fourfold increase over the first decade of the twentieth century slowed to an almost insignificant increase between 1910 and 1920 and was largely confined to limited areas where soil conditions could support a crop. Although this type of activity appeared coordinated with environmental conditions, John Schlebecker pointed out in *Cattle Raising on the Plains* that stock-farmers beginning with the earliest examples were no better in their efforts to conserve the rangeland than their single activity neighbors. Like most, they showed little regard for the symptoms and causes of overgrazing. Guilty of other abuses as well, the diversified activity offered no advantage over other methods.<sup>4</sup>

Adding cattle to a farmers' operation was not always any easy transition. In many cases the new theory of dry-farming that gained wide acceptance between 1900 and 1910 had proven to be unsatisfactory without incorporating livestock production.<sup>5</sup> All farmers and ranchers raised some type of livestock for work, transportation, or food, and for many whatever corn and oats they could grow went for the maintenance of the stock. Including profit-generating cattle to their Sandhills venture involved more than simple addition. Few realized that the five acres of grass needed to sustain one head of livestock in humid eastern regions was inadequate in their new semi-arid environment. In the Sandhills ranchers calculated cattle needed 20 acres per head on their land, or they leased additional range and hay land. To raise livestock on an profitable level, it became

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<sup>4</sup>John Schlebecker, *Cattle Raising on the Plains, 1900-1960* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 24-25.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 22.

necessary for farmers to invest further in land and cattle, something few could afford.

Some early homesteaders faced years of challenge before successfully incorporating cattle and farming. For example, Francis and Julia Etta Arnot arrived in Cherry County in 1884 and homesteaded on the Snake River. Their bright prospects dimmed when the climatic conditions changed and the wet cycle that had painted the environment green turned to drought in the 1890s. After almost ten years of struggle, Francis struck out for the northwest in hopes of locating more favorable land. However, he was not successful in finding any good Oregon land so he returned to Nebraska with a herd of cattle that he shipped to Colorado for sale. In 1901 the family moved from Gordon, Nebraska, in neighboring Sheridan County to a ranch five miles west of Merriman where they combined feeding livestock with a farm operation. Under favorable conditions, the family succeeded in growing enough potatoes, watermelons, and alfalfa hay to ship their surpluses to eastern Nebraska markets while maintaining a successful ranching operation.<sup>6</sup>

Although data from the 1920 census might depict a county organization dominated by farming interests, a comparison of figures to preceding census years tells a different story. Statistical variations signaled a shift in direction that reflected a movement toward the reconciliation of human activity to environmental conditions and appeared to be a first step toward establishing a productive ecological balance. Since the turn of the century an influx of population, largely made up of farmers, had rushed into the Great Plains. Passage of the Kinkaid Act in 1904, specifically intended to develop

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<sup>6</sup>Marianne Brinda Beel and Ruth Johnson Harms, eds. *A Sandhills Century, Book II, The People: A History of the People in Cherry County* (Valentine, Nebraska: Cherry County Centennial Committee, 1985), 35.

Nebraska's Sandhills region, drew many to Cherry County.

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, Cherry County's general population jumped from 6,581 in 1900 to 10,529 ten years later and then to 11,753 in 1920. See Table 1. While the percentage of farmers in the county's total population rose by only eight percentage points, farmers as heads-of-households in Cherry County jumped from 35 to 52 percent in 1910. While not all of the 1398 who reported to be farmers in 1910 were actually engaged in agricultural activities, only 39 percent of those who claimed land actually intended to establish a permanent home. In some cases, the five-year residency requirement seemed a small price for what seemed a sure profit. Others only occupied the land on a part-time basis in order to meet those requirements for final proof.<sup>7</sup> However, since claimants were required to be engaged in a productive occupation, for many specifying their occupation as farmer became the extent of their agricultural activity. At times the only verification required was the sworn testimony that laundry had been observed drying in the wind.<sup>8</sup> Under these types of circumstances, if a claimant lasted as long as the required time for final proof of claims, newly deeded land was soon sold for a very handy profit. However, despite circumstances of occupation and activity, by the time of enumeration for the 1920 census, the number of Cherry County's households headed by farmers had fallen to 39 percent.

During the first ten years of the twentieth century, ranchmen who accounted for

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<sup>7</sup>Mary Wilma M. Hargrave, *Dry Framing in the Northern Great Plains: 1900-1925* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957), 6. The 39 percent calculation is Hargrave's estimate according to her extensive research.

<sup>8</sup>Mary Beman Schroeder, Archivist, Cherry County Historical Society, *Prairie Pioneers: The Beman Family History* (privately published), unnumbered. Schroeder recounted the story her father often told about proving up on a claim in a telephone interview, January, 1997.

24 percent of all heads-of-households in 1900 dropped to only 12.9 percent in 1910. Increased population due in a large part to farmers skewed the percentages. In actual numbers, a difference of only eight ranchers was recorded between the two census enumerations. Despite the intrusion of large numbers of settlers, cattle interests remained a persistent influence on the county's agricultural economy. By 1920, a 229 jump in the number of heads-of-households included a growing number of farmers who deserted their plow to take up the rope and saddle.<sup>9</sup>

By 1913, new farmers to Cherry County knew that crops alone could not support a family. Along with plowed fields, haystacks dotted most flat valley land. Charles and Minnie Anspach who purchased a relinquishment ten miles north of Seneca in 1913 exemplified the new type of Cherry County farmer-rancher. They brought five horses and three milk cows from their farm in eastern Nebraska to Cherry County, and they obtained sixty-five head of Texas cattle. However, their initiation into the Sandhills environment came swiftly when before the year was out they lost half of their herd in a blizzard. Six years after their disastrous beginnings, the Anspachs gave up farming and bought into a ranch operation southeast of Swan Lake, the first of their several ranching ventures.<sup>10</sup>

As farm settlers arrived and then either left or changed their mode of operation, Cherry County's population continued to climb. By 1920, figures peaked. After the initial jump in the 1890s, a 59% increase was recorded between 1900 and 1910 (see table I). The 1,224 increase in population recorded in 1920 that brought population to a new high point of 11,753 was highly indicative of a new momentum away from the land. By 1910,

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<sup>9</sup>Comparison of data drawn from the manuscript of Thirteenth and Fourteenth Census of the United States.

<sup>10</sup>Beel and Harms, 33.

approximately three-fourths of the county's apparent growth could be attributed to the expansion of towns along the Chicago and NorthWestern railway. Business enterprise drawn to the area by the previous years of rural prosperity boosted town development. Coupled with the declining numbers of farmers, long the mainstay of the county's increasing population, and countered by the new trend of growing numbers of ranchers, it became apparent that a new direction of agricultural production had arrived in Cherry County.

A closer look at census data suggests a renewed emphasis on the environment's natural rangeland proclivity. Beginning with 1900, the number and average size of farms (a designation that included ranches), statistically depicted agricultural development of the land. While the average size of units continued to increase steadily, their number dropped dramatically by 1920. Five years later, Nebraska's agricultural census recorded another dramatic decline, this time of 263 farmsteads, that brought the number of farms in the county to a low point of 1,401 units. From 1910 to 1925, a total of 786 farms had disappeared from census rolls. At the same time, the average farm size rose by 1,622 acres in size. See Table II. By 1940, the number of farms in Cherry County was approaching the 1900 level while the average size of farms had almost tripled.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>United States, *Sixteenth Census of the United States, Agriculture* (Washington, D. C.: GPO, 1943).



**Table II**  
**Cherry County, Nebraska, Land Statistics, 1900-1940**

	1900	1910	1920	1925	1930	1935	1940
population	6,541	10,414	11,753	NA	10,898	NA	9,637
number of farms	1,088	2,187	1,664	1,401	1,480	1,450	1,217
average size farm / acres	663.2	933.4	1791.9	2285.2	2310.4	2421.8	2935.5
land in farms/ acres	717,625	2,041,388	2,981,685	3,201,590	3,419,445	3,511,611	3,572,549

United States Population Census, Agricultural, 1900, 1910, 1920, 1930, 1940; United States Agricultural Census 1925, 1935.

According to census statistics in 1930, cattle ranches in Cherry County averaged 4,191 acres in size. Only Grant County, bordering on the south, recorded larger average figures. In the case of this much smaller county, fewer units and the addition of one large 60,000 acre spread inflated the average. In comparison, the largest contiguous parcel in Cherry County fell somewhat short listed as only encompassing 55,770 acres. While comparison of average sized units provided boasting privileges over the stock yard fence, size of individual operations did not always reflect the type or profitability of a rancher's effort.<sup>12</sup>

The size of a rancher's property did not always reflect the extent of his operation. Several types of tenure arrangements clouded a statistical representation. Some operations were organized as individual holdings while others represented complex corporate arrangements. While individually owned ranches might cover a great expanse, even the most highly structured corporate arrangement might be small but efficiently managed. Land

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<sup>12</sup>Eugene Mather, "Cattle Ranching in the Sand Hills of Nebraska," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1951, 40.

was owned, rented or leased or, at times, even borrowed and traded. In some situations, sections of a ranching operation were separated by distance and sometimes “the largest owner in one county [was] also the largest owner in another.” During the mid 1930s, the J. H. Minor Company owned approximately 50,000 acres in Grant County and another 25,617 in Cherry.<sup>13</sup> By 1946 Minor had increased his property holdings to more than a total of 114,000 acres, much of which had been acquired in the 1920s and 1930s. By that time, his company represented a family enterprise that included his children and their families as well as others in his large extended kinship group.<sup>14</sup>

Minor’s trail to success followed the characteristic course of land accessions found in the modern history of a number of the region’s large ranches. While most never achieved the extent of the Minor enterprise, all engaged in the activity of assessing their land needs and buying or leasing those parcels that filled the requirement. Not a new innovation, since the 1880s ranchers sought control of millions of acres of western grasslands through their creative and strategic use of land patents and, often, a greater degree of subterfuge.<sup>15</sup> Access to the public domain remained essential to their continued economic advantage. However, as settlement under the provisions of the official land policies increased, competition for use of the land grew stronger. Later, through programs designed to forestall the further destruction of the western environment, the government’s

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<sup>13</sup>Addison E. Sheldon, *Land Systems and Land Policy in Nebraska* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1936), 302, n362, 305, n362 continuation.

<sup>14</sup>Marianne Brinda Beel and Barbara Kime Gale, eds., *A Sandhills Century: Book I: A History of Cherry County, Nebraska* (Valentine, Nebraska: Cherry County Centennial Committee, 1986), 22-23.

<sup>15</sup>See C. Barron McIntosh, “Patterns From Land Alienation Maps,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 66 (December 1976): 570-82.

progressive new role entailed “watching over the use of public lands as much as simply acting on their sales and disposition.”<sup>16</sup>

Cattlemen’s adjustments to external pressures were not easy. Adaptation required a different set of attitudes about who and how to use the land. At the end of the nineteenth century, a series of poorly administered executive orders took the place of Congressional action to curtail cattlemen’s control of the western public domain. At the time, “Congress was ill-prepared to short-circuit use of public lands by livestock ranchers.”<sup>17</sup> With no real solution forthcoming, the struggles continued. By 1900, agitation for change had pitted the views of farmers against those of cattlemen.

In Nebraska’s western counties, cattlemen continued to urge their state and Congressional representatives to consider a long-term leasing plan.<sup>18</sup> Farmers, on the other hand, sought larger tracts of land through more liberal land policies. With the passage of the Kinkaid Act in 1904, farming interests claimed victory, or so it seemed at the time. Within less than two decades of its passage, the error of the new land policy had been demonstrated. Farmers could not survive on the sub-marginal land while the evidence of their occupation only added distress to the cattlemen who ultimately returned the grass to its primary use. Provisions for enlarged homesteads were limited to thirty-seven counties and land deemed unsuitable for irrigation. Specifically designed to promote settlement of the area, the legislation proved a be a “mixed bag.” Farmers’

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<sup>16</sup>Paul Francis Starrs, “Home Ranch: Ranchers, the Federal Government, and the Partitioning of Western North American Rangeland,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 1989, 92-93.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 90.

<sup>18</sup>Sheldon, 181.

maladaptation to the Sandhills environment not only disrupted a fragile balance but also sanctioned human failure. While they were challenged to produce beyond the capacity of the land, speculators and, ultimately, the small ranchers reaped the rewards of unsuitable legislation.

Included in the number of acres taken up in 640 acre lots were those additional parcels allowed to settlers who had previously taken a homestead claim and chose to expand. Additions were required to be contiguous with the original homestead, but under certain circumstances when adjacent land had been occupied, property could be claimed apart from the original claim.<sup>19</sup> In this way, family groups which held a number of individual homesteads were able to expand their initial holdings over a large and non contiguous area. For those involved in a livestock operation. tactics that recalled open-range maneuvers of by-gone days appeared to have modern-day sanction. The opportunity offered new ways to gain use of needed range or insinuate control over hay meadows and water by strategic manipulations of the additional claim. Cattle occupying one end of a seemingly fertile valley or meadow effectively dissuaded farmers from locating there. The prospect of trampled crops was too great a negative in a region already carrying a great risk.

## THE KINKAID CLAIMS

By 1915, a Congressional survey of the Sandhills showed “important and

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<sup>19</sup>Charles Barron McIntosh, *The Nebraska Sand Hills: The Human Landscape* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 216-17.

significant” changes.<sup>20</sup> Virtually all government land opened for entry had been taken. Although the older provisions of the Homestead Act still applied, most land entries had been entered as Kinkaid claims. The United States land office at Valentine reported that 95 percent of the acreage in the Minnechaduzza District, that included Cherry County, had been allocated in 640-acre parcels. Of the 1.3 million acres of government land that had been initially available for entry, by July of 1913 only 116,120 acres remained unclaimed. Earlier that year additional acres had been opened when federal legislation released part of the abandoned Fort Niobrara Military Reservation for settlement. A lottery to dispose of these parcels drew 1,250 entrants.<sup>21</sup>

A brisk business in land sales clogged the county clerks’ office. From patents and final deeds to quit claim deeds, all transfers of property required official and accurate documentation. In a printed study of land patent records, certain patterns of cultural settlement came within the ranchers’ reach. Much in the same way that earlier groups of ethnic settlers of the Plains chose homesteads in close proximity and formed their own cultural communities, similar patterns prevailed for the Kinkaiders. Geographer C. Barron McIntosh identified the initial thirteen members of a Jewish community who settled in three adjacent townships in west-central Cherry County. Their homesteads “overlapped the eastern portion of the Spade Ranch and the western portion of the C Bar Ranch” in the area once claimed by Civil War veterans and widows.<sup>22</sup> As ranch land, the

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<sup>20</sup>*United States Congressional Record*, 64th Congress, 1st Session, 1535, quoted in Sheldon *Land Systems and Land Policy in Nebraska*, 163-66 n.183.

<sup>21</sup>Beel and Gale, 72.

<sup>22</sup>McIntosh, *Nebraska Sand Hills*, 228.

parcels had a proven value; as farm land, at best they were marginal. The question remains open, however, as to whether the community intended solely to pursue farming. According to records of the Jewish Agricultural and Industrial Aid Society, which sponsored and funded the migration to Nebraska, none of the settlers listed agricultural trades as their occupations. Instead, “five tailors, three carpenters, two shoe makers, two machinists, and one tinsmith” made up the original group. In 1911, three years after the first claims were filed by the group, the society’s director reported that the settlement’s distance to rail-towns was a detriment and settlement “would only be of temporary duration.”<sup>23</sup> Despite the short term viability of the community, other settlers joined the group over the next two years.

After staying on the land for the required five years, the initial settlers began to leave the county in 1913. With the period required to gain the land patent shortened to three years in 1912, the remaining Jewish settlers made a quicker departure. By 1915, the entire community had left the county. For the most part, the land returned to its natural proclivity as a feeding place for grazing animals. Most of the Jewish settlers sold to large ranches and realized a good return on their initial dollar investment and time. McIntosh noted that several parcels bought by the Fawn Lake Ranch Company to the north of the community and those sections transferred to the Dumbell Ranch to the south sold for between two and four thousand dollars each.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 229.

<sup>24</sup>McIntosh, *Nebraska Sand Hills*, 230. Franklin Jackson writes that although the Jewish settlers sold out they left their young horses behind. When the war created a demand for horses, the previous settlers sent a representative out to Cherry County “to see if he could gather these horses.” Jackson’s father agreed to retrieve the animals for \$2 a head for the job, but when he produced twenty-five head he received \$100 from the grateful man. Franklin C. Jackson, *Echoes from the Sandhills* (Lincoln, Nebraska: World Services, 1977), 22-23.

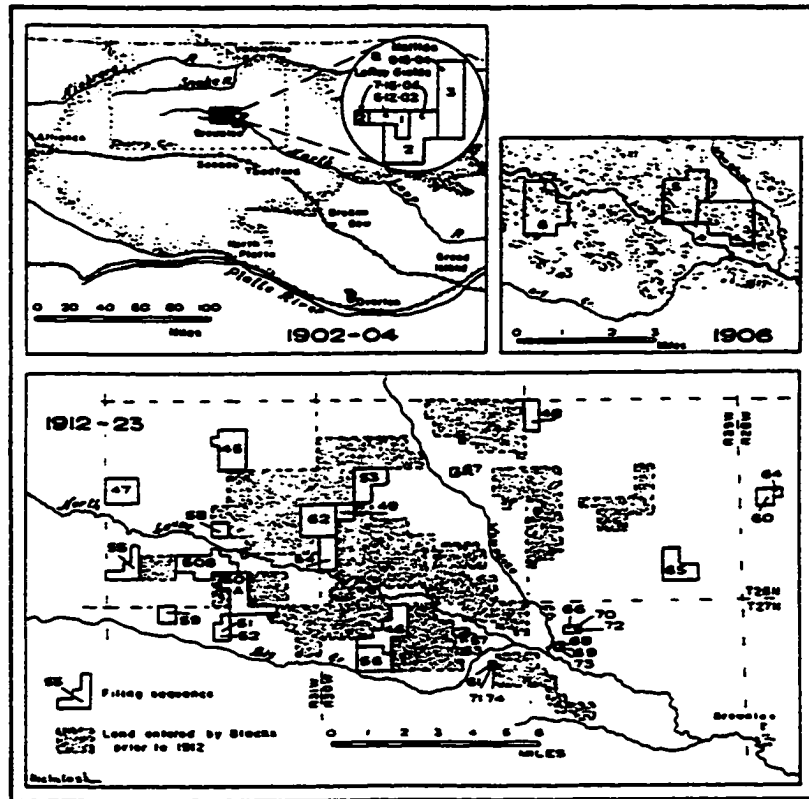
Like the settlers in the Jewish community, Black Kinkaiders were also conduits to ranchers gaining legal claim to rangelands and meadows. Homesteading in the vicinity of the small settlement of Brownlee, African American settlers sought land to farm. Some, like other Kinkaiders, chose areas not well suited to raising crops. By 1911, forty-four claims had been filed, some on the dune land pasturage encompassed within the Standard Cattle Company and its 101 Ranch controlled range. While the area had proved an ideal environment for cattle, farming was another story.<sup>25</sup>

Before adoption of the Kinkaid Act, the 101 covered over 83,000 acres, fifty miles east to west and 20 miles wide in southern Cherry County. Comprised of the Pass, Carver, Marshall, Big Creek, and Pullman ranches, the company held a combination of scattered deeded land and miles of open range. Unlike the Spade, the 101 complied with government orders and removed fences that illegally enclosed public lands, apparently undaunted by the prospect of an invasion of new settlers. However, whatever cavalier spirit inspired the 101 owners soon dissipated as farmers compounded other drains on profitability. By 1906, only a few years after the enactment of the Kinkaid legislation, the company pulled out of Cherry County and moved north to the Dakotas. Leasing their privately-owned parcels to neighboring ranchers, the remainder of the 101's controlled ranges were government-owned, and they soon passed into Kinkaid claims. Most of this land that had been used as range was dominated by steep sandy dunes. Black settlers who

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<sup>25</sup>McIntosh, *Nebraska Sandhills*, 230-31.

### African-American Community in Cherry County, 1902-23



Charles Barron McIntosh, *The Nebraska Sandhills: A Human Landscape* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1996)



took up this land added to the already formidable risk by settling there.<sup>26</sup>

Just as with similar settlement throughout the region, relinquishments became a regular occurrence in the African American community. Although as late as 1915 new settlers still joined them, their addition to the land claimed by Black settlers was greatly overshadowed by the rapid rate of sales or cancellations of claims. Over the next twenty-five years the pattern continued until 1940 when only one black-owned Kinkaid tract still remained. Many parcels were patented only to be later sold to ranching interests. Moreover, the agricultural depression that followed World War I had quickly reduced the community's population as well. McIntosh notes that "almost one-fifth [of Black owned or claimed parcels] were sold as sheriffs's deeds after owners were unable to pay their taxes." In this way, some ranchers were offered a less expensive avenue to gain legal control of land in certain areas.<sup>27</sup>

Despite its apparent purpose, the Kinkaid Act did create a vehicle for modern capitalist development of the cattle industry in the Sandhills. Settlers attracted by the offer of larger parcels of land accelerated the fragmentation of land into small individually-held properties, and once alienation from government control was completed, part or whole sections could be sold on the commercial market. As often as not, the sale of Kinkaiders' deeded lands simply was transferred to a neighboring rancher for a reasonable price.

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<sup>26</sup>The dune area in the Sandhills is highly unsuitable for the cultivation of any crops other than the wild grasses that fully adapted to the environment. The economic risks involved in attempts to farm in the Sandhills region were compounded by the location of claims in the sand dune areas. See James D. Bish, "The Black Experience in Selected Nebraska Counties, 1854-1920," M. A. thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1989.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 232-33.

To cattlemen who settled Cherry County, the parade of new neighbors were like pawns in a familiar waiting game. Contrary to tales of widespread animosity and violence shown to the new settlers, many believed, like J. H. Monahan, that the Kinkaid legislation was “a good thing for those who could stay.” The new policy had ended the domination of the big ranches who had over-exploited the free-range while small ranchers increased their land holdings by buying up deeded land.<sup>28</sup> Monahan, who came to the region along with his extended family of Missouri cattlemen, added to their extensive control of ranchland in just that way. His operation began with acquisition of the initial sections adjacent to the Grant-Cherry county line. For the nucleus of his Circle Dot ranch, Monahan acquired 58,000 acres just inside southwestern Cherry County.<sup>29</sup> As part of an extended family who turned into a Sandhills ranching dynasty, Monahan and his relatives began to amass ranchland in the late nineteenth century. Later, as Kinkaiders began to sell, he, as well as his other family members, often paid the asking price as part of a fair deal.<sup>30</sup>

## THE NEW RANCHERS OF CHERRY COUNTY

Most cattlemen began their ranches on a small scale. Lack of money or financing

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<sup>28</sup>Earl H. Monahan with Bob Howard, *Sandhills Horizons: A Story of the Monahan Circle Dot Ranch and Other History of the Area* (Alliance, Nebraska: Rader's Place, 1987), 61.

<sup>29</sup>The Monahan Ranch was headquartered in Grant County and its property reached into southern Cherry County before arching into Hooker County.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 81-102. The Monahan, Gentry, Abbott, and Minor families developed their ranching enterprises in an area that spanned from Hooker, Grant, Sheridan counties into southwestern Cherry County. Christopher “Dad” Abbott can be considered the patriarch of the kinship relationships that describe the five and six generation long dynasty. Beel, 22. See Robert D. Clark, “The Settlement of Blackwood Township. Hayes County, Nebraska, 1878-1907,” *Nebraska History* 66 (Spring 1985) 74-110 for the role of kinship relationships in relation to the persistence of settlers to a given area.

made them less aggressive in acquiring additional land. Many like Garould Fairhead waited until new settlers were in desperate straits and jumped at the chance to sell out at almost any price. In the meantime he welcomed his new farm neighbors with compassion and a friendly handshake. His son Joy often recounted how his father took the whole family to meet the new people. As a man who never carried a gun, the elder Fairhead would greet suspicious, rifle toteing settlers by extending his open hand. Believing that friendship and cooperation would be mutually beneficial, he offered the use of his team, his wagon, or his hay often adding “we can use you when you need work and if you ever want to sell, we will try to buy.” Joy later wrote that because of his father’s friendly gestures to a passing array of new neighbors, “we had friends, and we put together a wonderful ranch” when they left, as most did.<sup>31</sup>

Transfer of real estate became like moves in a gigantic game of pitch, attempting to build a spread with every draw and discarding those cards useless to your hand. For settlers to Cherry County, the stakes were higher than just winning a hand. Land parcels, once wrested from the public domain, became the high cards and low cards for developing a business. Most of the earliest ranchers began with the filing of a “hay claim homestead” which for many became the base for their future ranching operations. Once more “players” joined the game, the real action began. Land partitioned and alienated from the government domain became a commodity to be bought and sold for what the local market would bear. Value was assigned not only by location but, more importantly,

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<sup>31</sup>Joy J. Fairhead, *Hi, Stranger!: Get Off Your Horse and Come In* (self published, 1980?), 30; Joy J. Fairhead reported by J. J. Moreland, “Hello There,” *Nebraska Cattleman* (March, 1958), *Heritage of the Sandhills*, Archive, James Ducey, ed. University of Nebraska-Institute of Agricultural and Natural Resources, [http://WWW.IR.NA.UNL.EDU\(199.240.193.217\)](http://WWW.IR.NA.UNL.EDU(199.240.193.217)), 2 (hereafter *HSH*). Garould Fairhead and his three brothers settled near Merriman in 1884.

by the quantity and quality of its natural resources. Ranchers hoping to expand their base of operations viewed land not only for its close proximity to their pastures and ranges but assessed how it would meet their needs. Property boundaries expanded and contracted, jutted and retreated, giving individual ranches their distinct spatial characterization. In this way, the land-ranch nexus became the base upon which the modern cattle industry evolved.

An important chapter to the story of the ranch building process was largely told in local newspaper notices of relinquishment of claims. The blur of people moving out was countered by the saga of those who remained. It was the experiences of these survivors that colored county and family histories. Most often they were depicted as heroic examples of sacrifice and persistence that most often led to almost mythic success. Some of the earliest ranchers in the county traced their local beginnings to work for one of the large open-range outfits before “going it alone.” Others moving in brought along family and friends in the hopes of a cooperative new start. Among the earliest settlers and the later Kinkaiders, a significant number came only to get into ranching. Their intentions focused on the cattle business from the start. Hopeful new ranchers like Elizabeth Davis and her oldest son, A. T., believed farming in Lincoln County would no longer succeed. Instead, in 1888 the mother-son team moved north into southwestern Cherry County, sixteen miles from the town of Hyannis. As the first settlers in the area they were unrestricted as to where to establish their claim. Starting with their first quarter section in one of the better hay valleys, they proved up their claim and eventually built a successful

2,000 acre ranching operation that produced 2,500 tons of hay per year.<sup>32</sup>

Laboring on the land for another twenty-three years, A. T. Davis withstood times of economic downturn, low cattle prices, and episodes of violent weather, waiting for success. Around 1912, Davis married for the first time. He brought his young wife Essie to his OLO spread. Her previous occupation as a small town milliner had not prepared her for the challenge she would face. In March, 1915, when their son, Thane, was only four months old, A. T. died leaving his widow with a baby, a ranch, and an \$80,000 debt.<sup>33</sup>

The ranchmen in the Sandhills were not sympathetic to women who thought they could operate a ranch. As the widow arranged to take over ranch control, neighbors ridiculed her and prophesied failure. What Essie did not know about ranching, she set out to learn. With the help of her business-minded family, she turned her inherited debts into a profitable operation. By attending livestock sales she gained knowledge from the experienced cattlemen and soon established a quality herd. Davis also added to the OLO acreage by buying up almost 400 Kinkaid claims, all in 640-acre blocks. By the late 1930s, she had increased her Cherry County holdings to 30,000 acres. More than 160 miles of fence was required to enclose the OLO range and hayland that boasted seventy windmills that drew up ground water for stock. Recognized as one of the region's leading ranchers, one of this women's long remembered achievements, however, rested in the fact that at the end of her life her land was debt-free.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Martha McKelvie, *Sandhills Essie* (Philadelphia: Dorrance & Company, 1964), 11; Beel and Gale, 23.

<sup>33</sup>McKelvie, 12, 22.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 38-9.

Essie Davis' unfortunate experiences that forced her into life as a rancher was only one of the many personal paths traveled in Cherry County. All kinds of alternatives brought prospective ranchers to the Sandhills. George Sawyer who arrived in 1898 was motivated by what he believed was a matter of life or death. After being diagnosed with consumption and given less than six months to live, he followed his doctor's advice and moved to a drier climate. According to family tradition, "he left the University of Wisconsin . . . and headed for the Nebraska cattle ranch 40 miles south of Valentine that his father, Henry Sawyer, had purchased for an investment." George survived and soon took over management of the ranch located on Pelican Lake. Ultimately he bought out his wealthy father and expanded by the purchase of other land.<sup>35</sup>

While the Davises had a strong drive to succeed and Sawyer a source of financial backing, many of those who took the same course lacked one or the other of these assets. In a majority of cases, ranchers who established permanent roots started with a land claim, a few cows, and little more. Only access to good range still unclaimed on the public domain saved many of the disadvantaged from failing. In some cases, work as a ranch hand helped to ease the way. Just as in the late nineteenth century when established larger ranchers were unable to file on any more land, they turned to the newest ranch-hand to "do the deed." Early twentieth-century cattlemen saw no problem with continuing the practice.

L.C. Beel's experience was a classic example of the way schemes from the older days benefited a new generation. He arrived in Cherry County in 1902 to work for John

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<sup>35</sup>Helen Sawyer Drews, *Shadows Along Pelican Lake* (Chadron, Nebraska: Chadron State College, 1987), 1; Beel and Harms, 355.

Bachelor who had already begun to amass a network of ranches. Young Beel's time on the ranch not only allowed him to gain insight into the environmental demands of the region but also provided him an entrance for his own long-term family enterprise. As a cooperative employee, when the Bachelors sought additional land, he was the one who filed the claim on the designated 160 acres. Then, in the time honored custom of the time, he traded the parcel to Bachelor for some cattle. For the next three years, the young man continued in his \$9 a month job while buying and selling cattle for additional income, so that by 1906 Beel was ready to start his own spread. Bachelor's brother Ben sold him land with improvements, a sod house, corrals and a barn, for a good start. Family records show that L. C. Beel filed a Kinkaid claim for an additional 480 acres to which he was legally entitled, and with the purchase of another 560 acres the next year he began his ranching enterprise. In addition to his own efforts, his two brothers, Fred and Henry, often appeared on the ranch's payroll until they established their own base of operations close by.<sup>36</sup>

Marriage to Sadie Call in 1912 not only brought a woman into L. C.'s operation, it also added acreage. Her homestead claim to the east of the small ranch served as the newlyweds' home until she received final proof in a few short years. Moving their home to a better location, the couple settled down to raise a family while continuing to procure additional land. By 1925, after buying out both of his brothers' properties, the husband

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<sup>36</sup>Charles Reece, *An Early History of Cherry County: The Story of Its Organization, Development, and People*, 1922 reprint (Valentine, Nebraska: The Plains Trading Company, 1992), 112; Marianne Beel, "Duck Bar Ranch," in Beel and Gale, 41-42. Marianne Beel, a newspaper correspondent, writer, and historian, used family records as well as the Beel children's recollections to compile her article on the Beel ranch.

and wife had increased their Duck Bar Ranch to 10,000 acres.<sup>37</sup> Like many other successful cattle operations, the ranch passed to the control of Beel's sons when their parents retired, maintaining the continuity of the land and its management.

Nuclear and extended family partnerships dominated ownership arrangements on most Cherry County ranches. However, other types of limited agreements also came into play, sometimes in a big way. As with most human affairs of an economic nature, individual profit motivated sharing control. Much of the maneuvering had more to do with what kind of land was under a rancher's control than with how much land was in his possession. Mutually beneficial agreements between families and neighbors as well as outside investors drove further development of the county's cattle industry. While important ranchers like Monahan could trace their beginnings to family enterprise, others like Bachelor went beyond the family circle.

As early as 1914, John Bachelor was recognized as one of largest ranchers in the area. Bachelor began his ranch in the late 1880s with a land claim on a quarter section seven miles west of Merriman. Even with his land claim he continued to work for other ranchers until 1891. That year he married and entered into a partnership with his father-in-law, rancher John Nye, and Bachelor added his homestead to the operation. In 1899, after selling his homestead, Bachelor and his young family relocated to Boardman's Creek valley, where the young cattleman established the nucleus of his 7J Ranch. With time his land holdings amounted to 14,000 deeded acres, but this represented only the

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<sup>37</sup>Beel, "Duck Bar Ranch," 42.



beginning of Bachelor's ranching interests.<sup>38</sup>

In true entrepreneurial spirit, much like the legendary urban business moguls in the East, Bachelor began to invest in land and cattle at a rate and proportion well beyond the reach of most Cherry County ranchers. In 1905, he entered into a limited partnership with Omaha investors E. P. Meyers and cattleman E. M. Brass of Grand Island. After the purchase of 50,000 acres of the Carver and Big Creek portions of the former Standard Land and Cattle Company, the partners incorporated their own company. According to local sources, the new Sandhills Land and Cattle Company had paid \$5.25 per acre. In one report, Brass transferred 20,000 acres of his personally-held property over to the company to be used as collateral for a \$100,000 mortgage.<sup>39</sup> Bachelor acted as vice-president of the corporation and also managed the large scattered spread. At one point the operation was feeding 25,000 head of cattle.<sup>40</sup>

Bachelor continued to acquire other interests in ranching operations despite his already extensive holdings. In 1911, he, his brother Ben, and Meyers bought a ranch adjacent to the 7J which they incorporated as the Boardman Cattle Company. Later Bachelor bought out his partners and added a 1,200 head grazing capacity to his home ranch. Four years later, he turned over the management of his ranching interests to his

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<sup>38</sup>James Cowan, "Substation Notes," *Crookston Herald* (Crookston, Nebraska), 2 January 1914; Beel and Gale, 24-25; Beel and Harms, 37.

<sup>39</sup>Record of deed, 29 May 1911, Cherry County Clerk, Valentine, Nebraska. After the British-owned 101 pulled out of Cherry County, many of the early ranches that made up its holdings were leased to local ranchers and ultimately sold. Some like the Pass Ranch, part of the larger Carver Ranches, passed from lessee Bill Moshage to owners Milt Hanna and Harve Andrews in a span of three years. Later the Hanna sons, Don and Seth, bought-out parcels of the larger Pass in 1915 and 1922 respectively, putting the entire Pass in Hanna hands. The remainder of the 101 property was purchased in 1911 Ed Meyers, Ed Brass of Grand Island and John Bachelor. Beel and Gale, 51.

<sup>40</sup>*Valentine Democrat* (Valentine, Nebraska), 2 February 1911.

son, Otho, and bought the Antelope Ranch in South Dakota just north of Valentine. There he farmed 3,000 acres and raised up to 5,000 hogs. In 1934, Bachelor sold the Antelope Ranch holdings, and although he was past the age of 67, he continued to participate in active ranch speculation. Within a short time, he was at it again. This time he bought a spread in Todd County, South Dakota, four miles northeast of the Rosebud Reservation where he spent his later years engaged in a highly speculative steer operation.<sup>41</sup>

Although Bachelor found advantage through outside investors, his partnerships were opportunistic and not intended to be long-term. His extensive land and ranch properties remained a family-centered operation. Partnerships served their purpose by giving access to land that might achieve the right combination for a more balanced operation. Cherry County ranchers were continually engaged in that ongoing search. At times, changing environmental conditions seemed to have the whole county in a perpetual state of flux. For Bachelor, dealing in land and livestock schemes served his family's best interests. Dissolving the Boardman Cattle Company partnership in 1921 enlarged his home ranch's operation while financial maneuvering prompted his selling of his interests in the Sandhills Land and Cattle Company to his partners, Brass and Meyers, several years before in 1916.

## **LEASING SANDHILLS RANCH LAND**

E. M. Brass and E. P. Meyers were both long-time investors in the Sandhills. When John Bachelor sold out to them, they simply took in a new partner, who managed

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid.: Beel and Gale, 24; Beel and Harms, 37; John Henry Bachelor obituary, typed copy, Obituary File, Cherry County Historical Society Archives, Valentine, Nebraska.

their operation and held a 10 percent interest. They “incorporated as Meyers, Brass, and Waggoner for one million dollars.”<sup>42</sup> Later, with what would seem an “uncanny” insight into the economic climate, in 1918 the partners sold their cattle holdings and leased-out the land. What appeared to be folly during a period of prosperity showed the partners’ business acumen when the bottom fell out of the livestock market. Then as the cattle economy further declined with the rest of agriculture in the 1920s, the investors knew it was time to reinvest. However, with their own property still under lease, land became a problem. Fortunately, a golden opportunity was just “over the next sand dune.” When Bartlett Richards’ properties came on the market for lease, Brass and Meyers found a solution.

In keeping with their entrepreneurial inclinations, the cattlemen now hoped to reestablish a large herd while prices were low. They intended to ride out the economic storm on leased land, and then make a financial killing when prices rose. Leasing offered a profitable alternative. Instead of a large capital investment in land, low rent in comparison to high interest payments was a cost-saving measure. Even with paying for hay and a caretakers’ wages, the leasing option was a better business decision.

Under certain conditions, leasing had always been a practical option. In the same way that cattlemen leased school land tracts from the state for grazing or hay resources, many ranchers entered into private agreements with neighbors and even absentee owners. This type of tenure arrangement was vital to ranchers for a number of reasons. Leased property allowed ranchers to plan and carry out production outcomes. In addition,

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<sup>42</sup>Merle Yaryan, “More About the 101” in Beel and Gale, 52.

temporary needs were best met through leasing arrangements rather than tying up capital in land investments that may not be needed the following season. With the development of new skills involved in range management, the leasing of land took on a new significance.

Leasing of entire ranch properties was another, not uncommon, option for many ranchers. After a foreclosure, banks and mortgage companies often would resort to leasing out the property until a suitable resale or subdivision could be arranged. Local estimates placed over 100,000 acres open for lease during the farm depression following World War I. All was not equal when it came to debt. In some cases, ranch companies were able to hold on to part of their land or cattle while others lost it all only to see their years of struggle and hard work transferred to new hands.<sup>43</sup> Brass and Meyers took advantage of this type of opportunity when Bartlett Richards' Nebraska Land and Cattle Company (the Spade Ranches) property was offered for lease.

Hard times for the Spade had a new twist. Since the imprisonment of Richards, the once renowned cattle operation had lost ground. His untimely death shortly before his impending release in 1911 furthered the decline. Although Richards' partner Will Comstock made attempts to bring the company back to its previous condition, Comstock's death in 1916 signaled the final downward spiral of the once prosperous ranch. Observers believed that, "even with all the debts, and Richards gone, Comstock . . . could have won out if [he] had just lived two years longer . . . until cattle prices

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<sup>43</sup>Ruth VanAckeren and Robert M. Howard, *Lawrence Bixby: Preserver of the Old Spade* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton, 1995), 59-60.

climbed.<sup>44</sup>

By 1923, under the weight of heavy mortgages the Spade, reduced to about 60,000 acres, fell to new debts. By that time, most of the assets were in land. Bad weather and the absence of authoritative management had reduced livestock numbers to unprofitable levels. After the war, sharp declines in the cattle market compounded money problems. Cattle numbers dropped from a high of 12,000 in 1899, valued at \$421,000, to 2,074 head worth only \$75,000 in 1923. Undervalued cattle combined with land mortgages of \$177,000 and other debts brought total liabilities to a staggering \$424,000.<sup>45</sup> Creditors, clamoring for their money, forced the sale of all livestock and the placement of all land up for lease in an attempt to recoup some of their losses.

The creditors hired Lawrence Bixby, a long-time loyal employee of the Spade, to continue to put up hay and oversee the overall operations on the leased land. At the same time, he also managed his own operation on the family's home place with the hope of one day expanding now that his childhood dream of owning the Spade seemed all but dashed. Bixby did, however, manage to get a piece of the business when at the liquidation auction he purchased "55 head of thinner cows and mismatched calves" for eleven dollars a head. Unable to compete with the more prosperous buyers who bought the best cattle, he nevertheless felt lucky to get at least the scrubs of the lot.<sup>46</sup>

Bixby's new work brought him real opportunity. Meyers and Brass hired him to

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 9.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 44.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 70. Besides his work for the old Nebraska Land and Cattle Company and his commitment to his home place, Bixby also expanded his responsibilities and took on the responsibility as assessor for the King Precinct in Cherry County.

look after their cattle, and they arranged to buy all the hay he mowed. By 1926 Bixby reported that he was feeding 10,000 tons of hay at seventy-five cents a ton just to the Meyers and Brass Sugarbowl branded cattle.<sup>47</sup> Conditions, however, changed. The Sandhills Cattle Company diversified its herd in 1928 by adding cows to its all-steer operation. In the next three years at least 14,000 head of steers and heifers made up a mixed herd that were pastured on the leased pastures.<sup>48</sup> Although Bixby's work load increased, his profits from private hay sales grew. By 1934, he could charge the going rate of \$5 per ton for his hay.<sup>49</sup>

Despite his now lucrative work for the entrepreneur cattlemen, Bixby nevertheless still harbored some small hope that one day he could own the Spade. During the thirteen years of a trusting and respectful business arrangement with Brass and Meyers, Bixby had been buying up the "old ranch piece by piece" until he had put together 40 sections of the original Spade's home ranch in the Home Valley.<sup>50</sup> Although local banks provided most of the loans for land purchases, Bixby was also able to secure needed funds from his trusted employer E. P. Meyers. A twelve-year-old boy's dream reached a fitting climax when in 1954 Bixby and his wife moved from their old home place into Richards' former

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<sup>47</sup>Beel and Gale, 31.

<sup>48</sup>VanAckeren and Howard, 73.

<sup>49</sup>Agreement for hay contract between L. Bixby and O. A. Viereg, Secretary of the Sand Hills Land and Cattle Company in *ibid.*, 86.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 63.

summer house in Ellsworth.<sup>51</sup> As a newspaper editorial later stated in a tribute to the persistent cattleman, “Bixby picked up the pieces after the cattle barons and homesteaders had their innings.”<sup>52</sup> Crediting his “considerable success to others,” he was able to “stay on and establish a line of succession through sons who also were his partners.”<sup>53</sup>

### “ABNORMAL” RANCHERS

Different types of partnerships and tenure arrangements figured into the way ranchers controlled the land in Cherry County. While the family-based operation was most widespread, other types of relationships to the land also encouraged and shaped the cattle industry. Farms and ranches were organized according to the obvious owner-operator, tenant, and partner designations on census schedules with those classified as “abnormal” belonging to another type of economic genre. For the most part, ranches and farms under this classification were affiliated with a larger institutional structure, such as University of Nebraska operated research facilities. In most cases their production was not intended to participate in the fluctuating market economy other than as a non-profit type of operation.

Other kinds of “abnormal” organizations accounted for 61 farms or ranches in Cherry County. By far the largest number, 46, were classified as part-time operations

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 99-100; Beel and Gale, 31. E.M. Brass died in 1929 leaving E. Meyers in full charge of the Sandhills Land and Cattle Company. Brass’ portion of the investment remained in his estate and the property is still owned by the Brass family. Beel and Gale, 39. Meyers maintained his association with Bixby. During the depression Meyers cut back his herd and Bixby turned back the cattle he maintained to the company. Throughout the years of association the men had enjoyed a mutual respect and trust. VanAckeren and Howard, 100.

<sup>52</sup>Editorial, *Alliance Times-Herald* (Alliance, Nebraska), 30 May 1982, reproduced in *ibid.*, 152.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

where the proprietor spent 150 or more days at another occupation, “provided the value of products of the farm did not exceed \$750.”<sup>54</sup> Another subtype basis of operation, the institutional or country estate, also figured into the county’s numbers. This designation included spreads larger than ten acres owned or operated by a “public or semi-public agency.” Property held by schools, churches, foundations, or asylums was designated institutional. Estates, on the other hand, were defined by the value of the residence. A home valued at over twenty-five thousand dollars situated on ten or more acres of land fit the specifications of an estate.<sup>55</sup>

For example, St. Francis, the Catholic Mission on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota, owned and controlled through leases 3,946.45 acres of grazing land in Cherry County.<sup>56</sup> As an extension of their Mission Farm enterprise that both produced food for the Native children as well as generated outside income, the spread would be classified as an abnormal farm according to the United States census. Located on the western edge of the upland hard ground, the Nebraska land holdings accounted for less than half of St. Francis Mission’s farm and ranch enterprises. Incorporated under the statutes of the State of Nebraska in 1908, the Cherry County ranch engaged in raising stock as well as limited production of other foodstuffs for the support and benefit of the mission and its school. By 1937 the entire operation in Nebraska and South Dakota

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<sup>54</sup>United States, Bureau of Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930: Agriculture: Volume III: Type of Farm: Part 1—The Northern States* (Washington: GPO, 1932), 3.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Typed report of all land owned and controlled in Todd County South Dakota and Cherry County Nebraska, 22 March, 1937; Copy of information provided for the application of a loan by the Rosebud Educational Society (St. Francis Mission), ca 1933, 2, St. Francis Mission Collection (SFM), unprocessed box, Marquette University Archives, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.



encompassed over 8,600 deeded acres with an additional 5,200 acres leased.<sup>57</sup>

On December 31, 1885, German Jesuits, Father John Jutz and Brother Ursus Nunlist, arrived at a “struggling mission” on the Rosebud Indian Reservation in Dakota Territory. Established as St. Francis Mission the next day, the Jesuits “assumed the responsibility of evangelization of the Brulé Lakotas.” Part of the financial burden of establishing the mission was taken up by a benefactor, Catherine Drexel, who gave \$65,000 to build the original school.<sup>58</sup> Before the end of the first year, 1886, the mission’s “first substantial frame building, 40’ by 90’,” accommodated fifty Sioux children. By 1898, 200 students were enrolled, but this increase was in part due to contention and competition over educating reservation children that led to only one mission school remaining by 1891, that is, St. Francis.<sup>59</sup>

While the Jesuits favored public funding for mission schools, the federal Office

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<sup>57</sup>Articles of Incorporation of the Mission Farm Company, 7 September 1908 unprocessed box, SFM; typed report of property, SFM.

<sup>58</sup>Two other mission schools operated by the Episcopalians as well as seven government schools were already scattered throughout the reservation. Yet the Jesuit “black robes” were there at the request of the Sioux themselves. Early contact with the Belgian Jesuit, Pierre De Smet, had established good will and trust with the Sioux Indians. Later, chiefs Red Cloud and Spotted Tail had converted to Catholicism. On the Rosebud, Father Francis Craft, although not a Jesuit, had operated a small school for the Lakotas in 1884 as well as “catechizing to the reservation Sioux in their own Lakota language.” According to the priest, Spotted Tail had declared as he was dying that he wanted his successor as chief to be a Blackrobe. As the first priest to arrive after the chief’s death, Craft was appointed to that status and given the name “Hovering Eagle.” When Craft declined the honor he was instead adopted into the Brulé band and made a member of Spotted Tail’s family. After Craft moved on to minister to the Lakotas at Standing Rock Reservation, the Jesuits arrived at Rosebud. Father John Jutz, S.J. and Brother Ursus Nunlist soon took up the void left by Craft’s departure. The day after their arrival they founded the St. Francis Mission. Ross Alexander Enochs, *The Jesuit Mission to the Lakota Sioux: A Study of Pastoral Ministry, 1886-1945* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1996), 27-29, 31.

In a letter Father Florian Digmann, superior at St. Francis Mission, wrote to the Jesuit community at St. Ignatius in Chicago, he told how shortly before the mission was built government supply wagons had arrived with materials to build a government school in the area. Turning the wagons back, the people in the Owl-Feather-Hat village told the driver they were “promised a Blackrobe school and wanted no other.” Letter, Reverend Florian Digmann to St. Ignatius, Chicago, 19 September 1902, SFM.

<sup>59</sup>Typed manuscript, “Reminiscences, Rev. Florentine Digmann, Ca. 1917,” 1, series 7, box 5, folder 11, SFM.

of Indian Affairs held to the opposing view. By 1900, the U. S. government had withdrawn all funding, and then a second blow hit when in 1901 the Commissioner of Indian Affairs ruled that children who attended mission schools as well as their parents would no longer be eligible to receive government rations stipulated in the Treaty of 1876. For the 243 students at St. Francis Mission's boarding school, they "had to get on without getting from the Government an ounce of food, a stitch of clothing or a red cent." Even the "promised assistance" from the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions was delayed because of a shortfall of membership.<sup>60</sup>

Although they believed that "in due time this will surely prove a blessing for the *rising and able-bodied generation*," the missionaries also recognized that it would require many years of hard times for most residents. Mission Superior Fr. Florentine Digmann wondered what would become of them after the present source of maintaining them, the tribal funds, dried up? Moreover, how would the Jesuit outreach to the Sioux be effected? The Indians would be in no position to contribute toward the operation of the mission schools, and the missionaries who did not receive a salary could only offer their physical efforts and prayers. Fr. Digmann pondered how the few farm crops and heads of stock could meet the students' needs without substantial aid from outside benefactors.<sup>61</sup> While at the time Digmann was suggesting charitable contributions, the expansion of the farm

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<sup>60</sup>Digmann letter, 19 September 1902.

<sup>61</sup>"Reminiscences, Rev. Florentine Digmann, ca. 1917," series 7, box 5, folder 11, SFM.

and ranch into Cherry County introduced another avenue.<sup>62</sup>

From a broad prospective, the Mission Farm operation bore similar characteristics to the typical family ranch. Production and the proceeds from the sale of surpluses on the Mission Farm fed and clothed the Sioux students and staff. On the other hand, it also had the characteristics of a corporation with a manager directing its operation, a decision-making board of directors, and the issuance of shares of stock. In many regards, the Jesuit ranch functioned in the same way as the larger, multi-unit cattle companies. However, its institutional foundation and structure set the Mission Farm Ranch apart from others in the county. While capitalism did not motivate its participation in the livestock market, the need to be self-sufficient did. Income generated through the sale of cattle financed, in part, the entire mission's operations. From early in St. Francis' history, school tuition and fluctuating outside charitable contributions fell short of covering operating costs. Changes and withdrawal of government assistance created the need to participate in the market economy.

The mission school survived as a result of its own enterprise. From early on, the school's rationale promoted the teaching of skills and trades to prepare students for a productive life. Leaders at the mission fully appreciated the plight of the Sioux. With little of their traditional cultural economy remaining for survival, their land allotments would have to provide for their sustenance. Industrial training in the tools and techniques of agriculture became an important part of students' education. At St. Francis the slogan,

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<sup>62</sup>The Rosebud Educational Society obtained a chattel mortgage of \$13,000 in February of 1932 from E.G. Davenport and J. W. Tobian of Valentine Nebraska with the collateral of their entire herd of over 800 head. Chattel Mortgage form; Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Directors of the Rosebud Educational Society, a Corporation, 1932-137, unprocessed box, SFM.

“every boy learns to plow” had a practical purpose. Digmann wrote “the very poverty of the missions [had] been converted . . . into a medium of progress for the children and their homes.”<sup>63</sup>

Farming and ranching became crucial elements to the Jesuit’s goals. Not only did the Mission Farm Ranch provide a classroom for some to learn modern skills; equally as important, food production and funds obtained through the marketed produce sustained the entire mission. However, changing dynamics required more land on which to produce. When all types of rations for Indian schools were completely phased out between 1907 and 1909, the Jesuits were ready to make up for the lack of food. By 1909, the Mission was in the cattle business, selling 134 head for a total receipt of \$3,468.<sup>64</sup>

Through a series of land transfers beginning at the turn of the century, the Mission Farm Ranch took shape. Stockholders in the Jesuit corporation, T. F. Digmann, E. M. Perrig, H. Grothe, A. Vollmeyer, and H. Rupp, all Jesuits, filed 160-acre claims on land adjacent to Nebraska’s state line. After final patents were issued, each sold their property for the nominal sum of one dollar to the Mission Farm Company.<sup>65</sup> An additional parcel of land first purchased by Creighton University, a Jesuit institution in Omaha, Nebraska, and then sold to the mission’s corporation for one dollar added more acreage to the Nebraska land holdings. Further expansion involved a variety of sellers and a wide span of prices. One quarter section passed from the hands of the patentee through a series of

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<sup>63</sup>Fr. Florentine Digmann, S.J., typed manuscript, “The Catholic Mission Schools,” ca.1900, 4, SFM, series 7, box 5, folder 8.

<sup>64</sup>Mission Farm Co. *Daybook*, board of directors meetings minutes, Crookston, Nebraska 1908-1922, 10, Mission Farm, Financial, SFM.

<sup>65</sup>Cherry County, County Clerk records of patent and deeds; *Daybook*, 3

owners in a short span of time that included a foreclosure and sale to the Muscatine Mortgage and Trust Company in 1892. Two more owners held the property before the now expanded parcel was sold to the Mission Farm Ranch in 1903 for \$2300. Another 320 acres were acquired in 1913 from the estate of Mary Sherwood for a total of \$8,960. Even after 1920, the Mission Farm Ranch continued to add to its land holdings in Cherry County.<sup>66</sup>

In order to keep in step with the modern cattle industry, the Jesuits incorporated the latest techniques and methods for raising a commercial beef herd. Upbreeding of cattle and modern management innovations enhanced the land based production. Although located just outside the Sandhills on an upland north table, the ranch faced many of the same challenges that confronted other cattle operations in the county. The Mission Farm Ranch, like its neighbors, achieved greater efficiency in production and successfully competed on cattle markets.<sup>67</sup>

Under the tutelage of several careful managers, the Mission Farm Ranch built a commercial herd of almost 1,000 head by the early thirties. Because of the nature of the western cattle industry, students at the mission school had few hands-on experiences with raising the herds. Most of their participation was confined to the peripheral, but

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<sup>66</sup> County Clerk records.

<sup>67</sup>Articles of agreement between Miny O. Kane of Polo Illinois and the St. Francis Mission, 28 August 1940 for the sale of 130 Hereford yearlings, with the Mission Farm brand at a price of \$9.25 per hundredweight, unprocessed box, SFM.

necessary, activities of cutting hay, digging wells, and at times, mending fences.<sup>68</sup> Yet the size and welfare of the herd were intimately related to the students, because the cattle provided them with food and other necessities of life at the mission. Records and reports show the monthly transfer of beef cattle to the South Dakota mission. One ranch report, dated February 1, 1937, listed ten head to the mission at \$30 each for a total of \$300. The same report showed 738 head of stock of varying ages and gender that remained in the herd.<sup>69</sup>

## THE GENTLEMEN RANCHERS

The Mission Farm Ranch as well as the other non-traditional ranches had a dampening effect on profit-orientated stockmen. While the mission's participation in the cattle market, both buying and selling, generated income, it was not the primary or motivating factor for their operation. To an even greater degree, the wealthy urban and often absentee ranch owners had a serious impact on the prices and costs for local ranchers. Taking advantage of low land prices they bought the land that best suited their needs. Often connected to recreational activities, ranching amounted to a part-time hobby for them. Not restricted by an embarrassment of funds, the gentrified stockmen directed their managers and foremen to stock their herds with the best bred cattle at any cost. This

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<sup>68</sup>Interview with Ray Baird, historian, 15 April 1996, St. Francis Mission, St. Francis, South Dakota. When interviewed in 1971, Moses Big Crow remembered well his days at St. Francis Mission in the 1920s. He spoke of the mission farm that had a dairy and raised chickens and hogs. The ranch attached to the mission offered a practical setting for industrial education. Only the older boys worked there. Evidently, it was a highly desired assignment since the skills acquired at the ranch equipped students for a practical career in ranching on the reservation. Quoted in James T. Carroll, "Americanization or Indoctrination: Catholic Indian Boarding School, 1874-1926," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1997, 248-49.

<sup>69</sup>Ranch Report, 1 February, 1937, unprocessed boxes, SFM.

caused a boom for regional breeding stock and calf markets, and local commercial ranchers were priced out of competition. In the same way, not concerned with generating profit, part-time owners' operations often had a negative effect on the price of cattle on the sellers' market.

Despite real and personal property holdings in Cherry County, the gentleman ranchers stood apart from a true Sandhiller. They lacked what locals referred to as "sand in their shoes," the almost spiritual union of person and place.<sup>70</sup> For some, the country became an occasional refuge from the pressures of a rapidly evolving business world in the East. The Sandhills environment, especially during the fall and winter hunting seasons, lured many simply because of the abundant wildlife and waterfowl. Others actually took up "residence" to fulfill a lifetime dream.

The connection between domesticated cattle and regional wildlife sprang not only from sustenance from the environment but also from the concept of a ranch as hunting lodge. Migrating and nesting waterfowl added to the natural abundance of wildlife that populated the rivers, marshes and lakes in Cherry County. Settlers had often relied on wild game to supplement or at times be the only source of food and cash. However, when hunting wild animals took on the guise of manly sport, a new type of hunter appeared on the scene. Office-bound businessmen attempted to regain part of the vigorous lifestyle they had traded away; they sought out remote wilderness environments to prove their prowess. Cherry County's lake-littered landscape and abundant game was a favored locale.

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<sup>70</sup>Reprint of an article, "Sand in My Shoes," dated 20 September 1977 that appeared in an unnamed newspaper on its agricultural news page, in Donald A. Cox, *Settling the Nebraska Sandhills* (Kirkland, Washington: Knutson Enterprises, 1996), 168.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, hunters from Omaha as well as farther east established clubs in wetlands areas. William Keeline, of Council Bluffs, Iowa, in 1935, wrote his memoirs of the Elkhorn Valley Club, "better known in Cherry County as the Council Bluffs Club."<sup>71</sup> Jon Farrar, who later edited the unpublished manuscript, explained how the club had originally bought out a deeded Kinkaid acreage southeast of Valentine. Members had hunted in that area since the 1890s. According to Farrar, the 200-acre tract Keeline and his partners had purchased was ideally suited for duck shooting rather than pasture or hay land. Comprised of "five contiguous, 40-acre tracts," most of the wetlands parcel actually was under Marsh Lake during cycles of even "average precipitation."<sup>72</sup>

Like similar groups that came to the Sandhills to hunt each fall, Elkhorn Club members experienced the abundance of natural resources. Members and their guests rode the train to Valentine. There they hired a cook and driver to complete the party that journeyed to the large three-room house built on the club's land. Facilities to store the daily "bag" that more often than not amounted to 300 ducks, preserved the fowl not consumed by the men. Local ranchers and town merchants provided services and assistance in the name of neighborliness. However, for the most part the club and its members remained separated from the county community.<sup>73</sup>

Another long established group, the Merganser Club, established its headquarters

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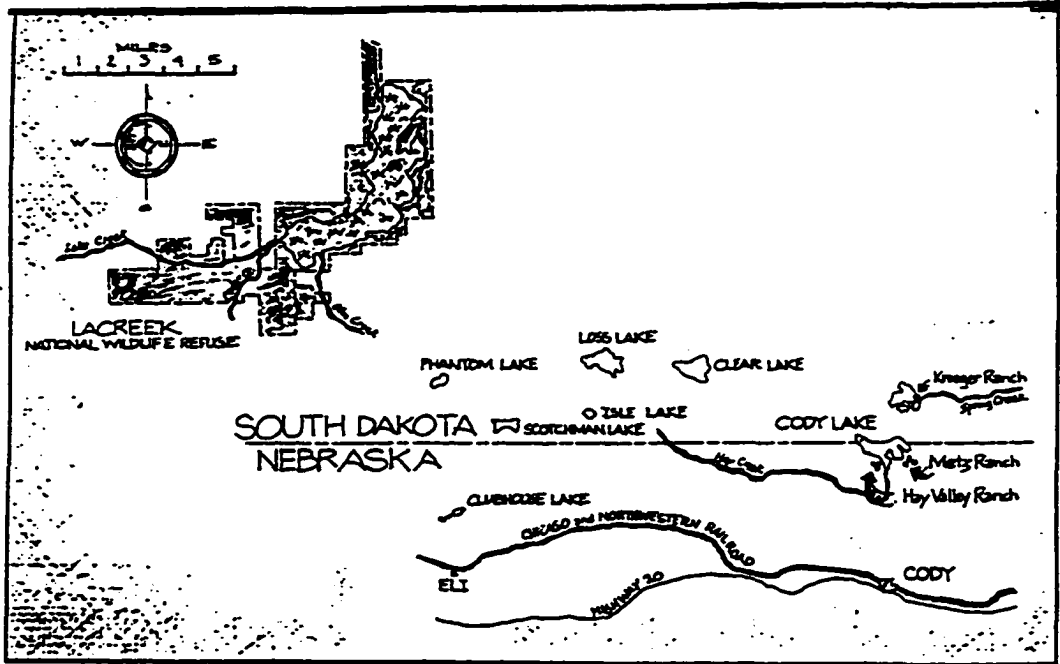
<sup>71</sup>Jon Farrar, ed., "William S. Keeline's Sandhills Hunting Tales: Jackrabbit Pie, Lost in the Fog, Fish-eating 'Redheads,' Ten-Mile-wide Roads and Rope Snakes," *Nebraskaland* 75 (August/September 1997): 32.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

<sup>73</sup>Jon Farrar, ed., William S. Keeline: Sandhills Hunting Tales: Sinking Ships, Shell Games and a Pig out of a Poke," *Nebraskaland* 75 (October 1997): 19-21.



# Charlie Metz Ranch, Cherry County



NebraskaLand Magazine 72 (November 1994)

in northwestern Cherry County. Located on Cody Lake, the owner of the land soon incorporated a ranching operation to augment the hunting aspect of his holding. Omaha brewer Charles Metz and his frequent hunting companion, Sandy Griswold, and two others were introduced to the area in the 1890s. Guided by Anson Newberry, local “rancher and outfitter,” the group discovered a virtual hunters’ paradise.<sup>74</sup>

Griswold, a newspaper writer about the out-of-doors for the *Omaha World-Herald* told his readers, “in florid prose,” of the Cody Lake environment. He spoke of “jeweled marshes with its . . . rice and reeds, its splotches of gleaming water . . . [of] muskrat palaces” and densely abundant with ducks and geese of every description and species.<sup>75</sup> To the avid hunters, the idyllic conditions simply aroused the “insatiable appetite for Sandhills wildfowl hunting” in men like Metz.<sup>76</sup>

By 1906, Metz began to act on satisfying his obsession. As a man of great wealth, Metz could well afford to guarantee his hunting rights through owning the land himself. He began acquiring land around the lake. Beginning on its eastern rim, parcel after parcel were added to his holdings. Most of the land he initially purchased had passed two years before from his “old hunting host” Newberry to Charles Chase, an investor from eastern Nebraska who made the sale to Metz. Efforts to gain possession of the entire lake area were hindered, however, when the Cole Corporation refused to sell its Hay Valley Ranch

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<sup>74</sup>Newberry supplemented his income by providing food, lodging, and guide services to wealthy hunters from outside the Sandhills.

<sup>75</sup>Jon Farrar, “The Merganser Club: Afield with Charlie Metz,” parts I and II, *NebraskaLand* 72 (October 1994) and 72 (November 1994), *HSH*, 1.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

on the western half of the lake.<sup>77</sup> Forced to settle for only a part of his “principal hunting grounds,” Metz then proceeded to add nearly three full adjoining sections of land after 1912 by buying small parcels from “Kinkaiders who worked for him in one capacity or another.” Later, bending the letter of the law as many others during the period had done, Metz filed a homestead claim on forty acres for himself.<sup>78</sup> Completing his land acquisitions with “several 40-acre tracts” in 1930, the entire spread covered more than 7,000 acres from Cody Lake north into South Dakota.<sup>79</sup>

As early as 1907, Metz had considered a practical use for his hunting paradise. With much of the newly acquired land most suitable for rangeland, cattle production became a year round activity. From the brewer’s vantage, the integration of hunting with ranching appeared to be an effective and logical dual purpose for the use of the land. Besides constructing accommodations to house fifteen or twenty guests in a “big ranch house, model Ducking Lodge” as Griswold described the duck hunters’ clubhouse, a frame home for the ranch manager was built at the Cody Lake headquarters. Also constructed were a complete compliment of necessary outbuildings like barns and feed houses to accommodate the cattle operation.<sup>80</sup>

Beginning with typical common cattle, Metz went on to build a better herd

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<sup>77</sup>Judge A.D. Cole who lived on the Rosebud Reservation began to put together the Hay Valley Ranch in 1885. He began to claim the land by leasing an adjoining piece of school land in the valley north of the town of Cody. He relocated in that town and by the time of his death in 1895 “he owned or controlled the heart of the valley.” The estate remained in a family corporation which had added land as Kinkaiders sold out. The Cole family continued to acquire land until they finally sold the 20,000 acres in the late twentieth century. Beel and Gale, 50.

<sup>78</sup>Farrar, “The Merganser Club, 3-4.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 3-4.

<sup>80</sup>*Omaha World-Herald* (Omaha, Nebraska), 21 November 1920, quoted in *ibid.*, 7.

through the introduction of registered Hereford bloodlines into his stock. Sometimes, after a registered bull had served its purposes, the manager of the Metz ranch would sell the animal to neighbors “at a reasonable price.”<sup>81</sup> In this way, even though few of the ranch’s neighbors could afford to introduce the highest quality sires to improve their herds, they were given some kind of opportunity to upbreed their stock with a purebred bull past its prime.

Herefords and hunting proved a popular combination for another Omaha businessman, George Brandeis. According to tradition, Brandeis along with Walter Eagle, president of Standard Oil of New Jersey, and N. B. Updike, a prominent grain and coal dealer, spent several fall hunting seasons at the T O Ranch in Cherry County owned by Jake Stetter.<sup>82</sup> The wealthy Omaha merchant learned to appreciate the Sandhills for its wild game when first introduced to it by nearby ranchers Ben and Earl Bachelor and Judge W. B. Quigley. In need of a retreat from the pressures of presiding over the operations of a major department store, Brandeis sought out a location to build a hunting lodge for himself and his friends. John Bachelor offered a spot immediately west of his home on the family ranch, 55 miles southwest of Valentine.<sup>83</sup>

In 1925, Cherry County’s local newspapers announced an Omaha merchant had bought one of the area’s larger ranches.<sup>84</sup> Brandeis negotiated the purchase of the Stetter

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<sup>81</sup>Farrar quoted Jim Kroeger, the son of a Metz Ranch neighbor during the Charlie Metz era. Farrar, *Merganzer Hunt Club*, 11.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, 8; *Cody Cowboy* (Cody, Nebraska), 9 April 1925, 2; Ann Barnes Stetter and Marjorie Ravenscroft, “T O Ranch” in Beel and Gale, 55.

<sup>83</sup>Beel and Gale, 283.

<sup>84</sup>*Cody Cowboy*, 9 April 1925, 23 April 1925.

place for his new Central Land and Cattle Company. The addition of adjacent acreage eventually enlarged the ranch to 50,000 acres complete with the intact hunting lodge that was moved ten miles west to its new location. Brandeis branded the Three Bar on his extensive herd of Herefords until his death in 1958 after which his heirs sold the spread to local ranchers' families.

Men such as Metz and Brandeis realized their strengths and weaknesses. Like other rich "gentlemen" of the time who took up the fashionable and "manly sport of hunting," a few days or weeks in the rural wilderness served its purpose of relieving stress. Yet no matter how exhilarating the veritable slaughter of birds and other fowl, the true excitement of their lives lay in the board rooms or trading floors in the urban environment. Investment in western land did offer two benefits; first, as a place for recreational pursuits, and secondly, as a speculative economic venture. Combining a hunting facility with a livestock operation made the entire investment take on lucrative possibilities, and by arranging for competent management to take charge of day-to-day operations, the gentleman rancher could enjoy the fruits of two worlds.

Local ranchers held mixed feelings about the prominent "suitcase ranchers." Although urban businessmen owned land and ranches in the Sandhills region, they made little effort to become a part of any community outside of their own urban world. Few, if any, sought to be identified as any more than an investor in cattle, and they avoided any suggestion of the cattleman title. Gentleman rancher Sam McKelvie, however, proved an exception. As publisher of the *Nebraska Farmer*, an agricultural newspaper, and former governor of Nebraska, McKelvie exerted his influence to introduce new types of economic organization and recognition for the entire region.

No stranger to the region, Governor McKelvie and members of his administration made several visits to Cherry County. He frequently joined sportsmen as a private citizen for vacation holidays at both the Metz and Brandeis hunting lodges as their guest-books from the 1920s indicated.<sup>85</sup> Yet his interest in the Sandhills went beyond the official and social obligations his public life demanded. McKelvie was the majority owner of a section of land, the old Renyolds' place eight miles north of Dunning, just south of Cherry County. From his ranch property he received a yearly rental payment of \$100. He was a self acknowledged "country boy" who yearned to be a rancher.<sup>86</sup>

Local entrepreneur ranchmen, aware of McKelvie's inclination, attempted to draw him into their ranch buying schemes. When economic downturns in the agrarian sector forced some financially strapped ranchers and farmers to sell, their more secure neighbors avidly sought capital to buy them out. One Cherry County rancher, enthusiastic about "a wonderful buy" of unencumbered land urged investment. He described the property as lying close to the farming country with a "rich alfalfa valley subirrigated . . . [and] surrounded on two sides by a big scape of practically idle sand hills where very cheap grazing could be had." The rancher, Ed Belsky, suggested a fifty-fifty partnership in which McKelvie would supplied the capital and Belsky, his "services and stock."<sup>87</sup> Earlier, Belsky sent a telegram and letter advising about the availability of a 9,000-acre

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<sup>85</sup>Cited in Farrar "Merganser Hunt Club, 8; letter from C. B. Bachelor to Governor S.R. McKelvie, 17 October, 1921, McKelvie Collection; letter from S. R. McKelvie to C. B. Bachelor, 24 September, 1929, Samuel R. McKelvie Papers, RG 1SG27, box 6, series 5, file 11, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska (NSHS).

<sup>86</sup>Letter, Governor Sam McKelvie to Percy Shockley, vice president of Seneca State Bank, Seneca Nebraska , 21 December, 1923, McKelvie Papers, box 6, series 5, file 1, NSHS.

<sup>87</sup>Letter, Ed Belsky, Eli, Nebraska, Cherry County to S. R. McKelvie, ca. May, 1925, McKelvie Papers, box 6, series 5, file 1, NSHS.

spread selling for \$7.50 an acre that would produce 2,000 tons of hay, flowing wells, and close proximity to a railroad station.<sup>88</sup>

Three years later, in 1928, the National Life Insurance Company of Chicago wrote to McKelvie at his offices at the *Nebraska Farmer* in Lincoln, Nebraska, about a land proposition. Word of the publisher being in the market for a ranch “to serve as a game lodge and for the establishment of a small herd of purebred cattle” had prompted the letter. O. M. Kreuger, of the company’s investment department, suggested that a portion of the 9,500-acre Ballard Ranch that the company owned would meet McKelvie’s requirements. Described as 2,000 acres adjacent to the Brandeis lodge, the parcel of land contained lakes, hay meadows, and grazing land. Ranch buildings and a twenty-five year lease on the state’s school lands, Section 16, would provide ample space for a hunting facility as well as livestock.<sup>89</sup>

Located in an area of lakes and marshes, the Ballard Ranch property offered for sale in 1928 represented only a part of the original 25,000 acre spread. W.G. Ballard along with his brothers John and Henry had taken out separate homestead claims in the 1880s. W. G., apparently the more aggressive, bought out his brothers and expanded his horse raising operation. After acquiring additional land from homesteaders and Kinkaiders, his venture grew to include several hundred head of cattle. In 1912, W. G. retired a wealthy man having liquidated his livestock holdings and sold the land to his

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<sup>88</sup>Western Union Telegram, Ed Belsky to S. R. McKelvie, 13 April, 1925, McKelvie Papers, box 6, series 5, file 1, NSHS.

<sup>89</sup>Letter, O. M. Kreuger, Investment Department, National Life Insurance Company of the United States, Chicago, Illinois to Samuel R. McKelvie, 29 August, 1928, McKelvie Papers, box 6, series 5, folder 11, NSHS.

sons.<sup>90</sup> Sixteen years later, reversals of W.G. Ballard's son's efforts towards building a ranch led to an even bigger subdivision of the land.

Although McKelvie had considered the Ballard Ranch prior to Kreuger's offer, he tactfully declined the offer.<sup>91</sup> Finally, in the early months of 1931, McKelvie realized "an ambition of many years," when he completed the purchase of a different ranch in the Sandhills.<sup>92</sup> Sam and his wife Martha discovered a place for their summer ranch on the return from an October Cherry County hunting junket. According to his biographers, while en route to Valentine via the "fifty-mile trail road from the Ben Bachelor ranch" they viewed a "broad green valley" from the top of a hill. An old ranch near the shore of the valley's crystal-blue lake caught the couple's eye. Within days Sam had contacted Ben Bachelor to negotiate with ranch owner George Christopher over the selling of the place.<sup>93</sup>

Because of the prevailing economic climate, McKelvie resisted committing to "a large cash investment," as Ben Bachelor suggested. As a compromise he offered to pay part of the selling price in stocks. The 280 shares of stock in Northwest Bancorporation, a holding company for a number of national banks in the Northern Great Plains and Minnesota region, appeared an equitable alternative. Valued at sixty dollars per share, "stock had more actual value per dollar of deposit and proportionate earning capacity than

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<sup>90</sup>E W Ballard and Mary Ballard Parkhurst, "W. G. Ballard" in Beel and Harms, 41-2.

<sup>91</sup>Letter, S.R. McKelvie to O.M. Kreuger, 4 September, 1928, McKelvie Papers, box 6, series 5, folder 11, NSHS.

<sup>92</sup>Sam McKelvie and Martha McKelvie, "1931" in *By The Way, XXXI*, self-published booklet, 1955, np.

<sup>93</sup>Bruce H. Nicoll and Ken R. Keller, *Sam McKelvie: Son of the Soil: Sketches of a Self-Reliant American Who Cheerfully Fought His Own Battles* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Johnsen Publishing, 1954), 151.



any other group stock in the country, according to McKelvie.” Returning three percent a share, to his way of thinking, was an excellent deal for the ranch’s seller. Not only would Christopher receive the balance of the \$27,000 in a cash payment, he would also have an “investment in substantial securities that have well-known earning power.” McKelvie reasoned that “the earnings of the stock were equal to the earnings of the ranch. . . . [and] always can be used as collateral should he need to borrow money.”<sup>94</sup>

For Christopher, whose Cherry County business interests included an ice plant along with previous ranch investments and operations, the arrangement proved suitable. His ranching and other business ventures revealed the entrepreneurial instincts that motivated the cattlemen of the period. He had moved into Cherry County in 1905 and homesteaded near the present Simeon precinct. By 1916 he had sold his Sunnyslope Ranch and opened an ice plant near Lake Minnechaduz. Leaving the operations to his sons, he moved to Omaha in 1918, returning three years later to buy the Box T Ranch near Brownlee. Christopher also purchased the Piper Ranch which he sold a short time later to McKelvie.<sup>95</sup>

The transfer of ownership and the further subdivision of land holdings continued at an accelerated pace throughout the thirties. As farmers and small ranchers fled Cherry County because of depression and drought, their farms and ranches were often divided into smaller tracts and sold to neighboring stockmen. Between 1919 and 1938, the clutter of small private land holdings gave way to large, if oddly shaped, ranch properties under

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<sup>94</sup>Letter, Sam R. McKelvie to C.B. Bachelor, 11 December 1930, RG 1SG27, box 6, series 5. File 11, NSHS.

<sup>95</sup>George Christopher II, “George Christopher,” in Beel and Harms, 84. Christopher sold the Box T in 1935.

increasingly sophisticated and complex types of ownership.<sup>96</sup>

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Entrepreneur cattlemen and risk-taking capitalists had long encouraged the commodification of land in the Sandhills, in the same way that historian Donald Worster found rife among Plains' wheat farmers of the period. As a commodity, land was the object of speculation where its value became equated with economic advantage.<sup>97</sup> In this sense, agricultural entrepreneurship was a central factor in the settlement of the Plains. Worster described it as "the animating ethos of the economic culture of capitalism." Entrepreneurs "smelled an opportunity to create a profit" and in their "classic way . . . charged out to create" it.<sup>98</sup> In the Nebraska Sandhills environment, farmers took a greater risk even when the Kinkaid Act offered an additional bonus of larger land claims. Ranchers, on the other hand, faced their own obstacles of controlling enough land. Over the passage of people and time, changes in the patterns of land use and tenure eventually moved in step with economic developments.

For the most part, during the 1920s stockmen throughout the Plains were better-off than dry farmers.<sup>99</sup> Differences in the types of agrarian production in some important ways cushioned the livestock industry against the most debilitating of market forces.

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<sup>96</sup>*Standard Atlas, 1919; Atlas of Cherry County, Nebraska including A Plat Book of the Townships of the County* (Valentine, Nebraska: Cherry County Farm Bureau, 1938).

<sup>97</sup>Donald Worster, *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 101.

<sup>98</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup>Schlebecker, 120.

Unlike farmers often troubled by the perishability of their produce, ranchers could hold back livestock until market conditions improved. Nowhere in the region was this more obvious than in the Sandhills. While farmsteads and plowed acres were soon abandoned, many who were engaged in a specialized livestock operation managed to maintain their hold on the land. Decennial statistics show the slow drain of population, most likely due to economic failure that began in 1920, as well as the steady increases in the size of farms and ranches as farmers left but ranchers remained.

The census, however, is not able to reveal the restless mobility of those who remained. Cherry County's local family and ranch histories, however, tell a story of changes of residence, transfers of property ownership, and variations in land tenure. In the process, a few of the enterprising cattlemen gained the status of county aristocracy because of the size and success of their ranches. At the same time, those who operated on a smaller scale also participated in the drive toward better economic opportunity through the addition of some rangeland or the lease of a productive hay meadow. Gentlemen ranchers like George Brandeis, Charles Metz, and Sam McKelvie also were part of the economic equation that drove Cherry County's growing cattle industry.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup>*Cody Cowboy*, 2 October 1925.

**CHAPTER FIVE  
RANCHING AND THE EVOLUTION OF  
MODERN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT,  
CHERRY COUNTY, 1900-1930s**

Once the struggle over who could control the land appeared resolved, the question of how to control its resources took greater precedence. Over the first thirty years of the twentieth century, efforts to restore and enhance natural resources in the Sandhills involved the introduction of cultivated grasses for the purpose of limiting land to its proper usage and, in effect, increasing production. Scientific strategies and applications gave the Cherry County ranching community competitive leverage improving cattle production through efficient and cost-cutting schemes. Throughout this period, most often characterized as years of depression and drought, ranchers experienced a rapid transition of modern and scientific industrial development.

In a study of the economics of the Sandhills cattle industry, Harold Hedges of the University of Nebraska Department of Rural Economics followed the experiences and maneuvers by cattlemen who had survived the severe economic depression of the early 1920s. Over a three-year period, 1924 to 1927, he examined all aspects of operation to determine the relative importance of factors contributing to the success or failure on 47 ranches, most of which were located in Cherry County. His aim was to “bring out facts or suggestions which may point the way toward improving the financial standing of ranches . . . and aid in securing greater efficiency in production.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Harold Hedges, *Economic Aspects of the Cattle Industry of the Nebraska Sandhills: Bulletin 231* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska College of Agriculture, 1928), 3.

Low prices and indebtedness after 1919 had forced many ranchers and farmers to go out of business but by 1924 a turning point had been reached in the cattle economy. The ranchers who remained, over the next three years, experienced renewed economic prosperity with 1925, the most lucrative year. Ranches involved in the study averaged 6,681 acres in size ranging from the smallest land holdings of 1,360 acres to the largest of 29,280 acres, and they represented a variety of tenure arrangements. In some cases operators controlled only deeded land while others relied solely on leased rangeland and meadows, and in some cases a combination of arrangements were employed that fit their individual management and financial plans.<sup>2</sup>

Hedges showed that although not all of the forty-seven ranching enterprises were equally capitalized or equally prosperous, none could be mistaken for a small business unit. Regardless of size, all were engaged in big operations, each on its own scale. Total capitalization for individual ranches recorded from a low of \$16,815 to a high of \$332,073. Hedges used the rate of return on owner equity as one measure of results. During the years under study, he recorded significant fluctuation. After the first year of recovery, 1924-25, ranchers in his study averaged only one half of one percent of return while the following years' advances were very optimistic. In the period 1925-26 close to a 9 percent return was earned followed by a decrease to five and a half percent the next year. Hedges explained the increase as most likely the result of market-cattle inventory alone, since breeding herds were considered as part of ranch equipment. This showed up as inventory increases only during the liquidation of a ranch business.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 10, 27.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 10, 12.

Over the study period more than 32 percent of the ranches made the major portion of their gross income from cattle. Much of their cash expenditures went for labor, feed purchases, rental of leased land, and taxes, all expenses crucial to the cattle operation. An important factor in determining income and profitability, holding down the cost of production, resided partially under the control of the operator. His ability to manage and spend wisely significantly influenced the size and rate of return. As a consequence, Sandhills ranchers began to look on "bad luck" as more often the result of poor management.<sup>4</sup>

Hedges found that overgrazing had not been a concern among those ranches he studied. Recent liquidation of farms and ranches and down-scaling of herds had materially reduced the number of cattle. Concerted efforts at improving range and hay meadow conditions had increased the food supply, notably through integrating legumes, that is clover, into native grass environments. The added protein value of the hay for winter feeding had a positive effect on the production of calf herds.<sup>5</sup>

While the study showed the economic dimensions of ranching in the north central Sandhills, it also revealed new developments and positive attitudes about the conditions and use of the land. Unlike the region's earliest cattlemen entrepreneurs who wantonly exploited the environment before moving on, ranchers in the 1920s took on a role of unsentimental stewardship and took steps to conserve and make better use of natural resources. From their modern economic stance, land and cattle were both commodities and means of production that required skilled management, careful use, and practiced

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 12, 21.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 26-27.

protection.

## UPBREEDING

Successful commercial ranches revolved around two central and interdependent factors. Adaptability of livestock to thrive in the Sandhills environment and the efficient use and conservation of that environment became the hallmarks of good ranch management. Unlike their late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century open-range counterparts who sought profit from unrestrained, abusive use of the land, the modern cattleman found greater dividends in a regulated and scientifically oriented arena. It could not have come too soon.

By 1920, ranchers in Cherry County, albeit the entire Sandhills Region, were moving away from the more speculative steer operations of the past where mature neutered bulls and cows were fattened, turning instead to a cow-calf cattle enterprises. Within six years, Dan Adamson reported that “most of the ranchers [were] getting away from” steer operations and “planning to sell all their cattle young. The yearlings and calves are what the feeders want.”<sup>6</sup> Increasing numbers of cattle feeders in Illinois, Iowa, and eastern Nebraska began to contract with Sandhills’ cattlemen for stock of certain specifications with the assurance of quality. This growing practice brought an added measure of economic stability to the western ranching industry. Under contract, the risks associated with central market transactions were eliminated. Prices received, \$30 to \$35 dollars a head in 1926, were not diminished by costs of transportation or stockyard and

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<sup>6</sup>*Valentine Republican* (Valentine, Nebraska), 27 August 1926.

commission fees.<sup>7</sup>

Feedlot operators' preference for better stock reflected meat packers' demand for quality animals. In this way, according to historian Charles Wood, the packing industry "played no small part in the upbreeding process."<sup>8</sup> Although the transition to better-bred livestock had begun earlier in the nineteenth century, a new emphasis on nutritional needs of animals and a more efficient use of natural resources contributed to the professionalization of livestock production. Different breeds of cattle utilized feed in distinctive ways in their development while not all exhibited similar traits in response to the same environmental conditions. Some breeds failed to thrive in the arid, colder plains environment while others, such as the Hereford, were ideally suited. In addition, rates of maturation, proclivity of reproduction, and even the temperament of certain breeds became pressing considerations for area cattlemen in assessing their herds.

In 1904, E. A. Burnett, a professor at the University of Nebraska Agricultural College, told the state's stockgrowers that their range cattle "were too small and matured too late." His advice to turn to "heavy-boned, low-built cattle proved a challenge, as no single breed possessed all the required attributes. While Durham cattle were the heaviest breed and added size to the Texas cattle, the animals were not "good at finding their own food, 'rustling' in the winter." Herefords, a more docile and more easily handled breed, offered a real alternative. Black cattle, the Polled-Angus, although more short tempered,

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Charles L. Wood, "Upbreeding Western Range Cattle: Notes on Kansas, 1880-1920," *Journal of the West* 16 (January 1977): 17. Charles Wood was born in Nebraska and educated in Kansas. His early life was closely connected to the cattle ranching industry. As a professor of history at Texas Tech University, he drew on his experiences to teach agricultural and Great Plains history. Wood died of acute leukemia in the mid-1980s, at age 42, and is buried near Hemmingford, Nebraska.



held similar advantages. Finding suitable purebreds for improving herds then came down to a matter of choice.<sup>9</sup>

By 1920, local opinion viewed the preceding twenty years as a period of great advancement in the breeding of better herds. In 1899, Charles Faulhaber reportedly ran Cherry County's first herd of purebred Herefords near Brownlee. Through the sale of bulls to neighboring ranchers, he had actively encouraged the upbreeding of local stock. Other ranchers, who preferred other types of purebreds, introduced improved Shorthorns and Angus to the county's expanding cattle population. Breeders of blooded animals filled the growing demand for registered sires which determined the classifications of animals produced. An improved herd only required the services of a blooded bull, while a registered herd, less common and used entirely for breeding purposes, required cows and bulls of one breed. In some instances, ranchers who owned commercial herds, that is those who produced only for market, began to see the wisdom of upbred cows. The demand for Hereford and Angus cows in Cherry County increased.<sup>10</sup>

Ed Belsky, of the Eli community, promoted the breeding of purebred livestock to give "dignity and tone" to the community's production, not to mention increased profit. Through careful selection of Hereford sires, "mated to the right type of females," the rancher just as easily produced and more readily sold "choice marketable meat" as the lesser grades of animals produced in the area.<sup>11</sup> By the 1940s thirty-one established herds

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<sup>9</sup>W. D. Aeschbacher, "Development of Cattle Raising in the Sandhills," *Nebraska History*, 28 (January-March 1947): 60-61.

<sup>10</sup>Charles S. Reece, *A History of Cherry County, Nebraska: The Story of its Organization, Development and People*, 1945, Replica Edition (Valentine, Nebraska: Plains Trading Company Archives, 1992), 70-71.

<sup>11</sup>*Valentine Republican*, 17 October 1919, 1.

of registered Hereford cattle served the needs of local ranchers and the demands of cattlemen in nineteen other states.<sup>12</sup>

After the destructive March blizzard of 1913 and the heavy loss of livestock in Cherry County, registered herds played an important role in restocking the range there. While the state's agricultural census in 1905 had reported 143,224 head of cattle in the county, ten years later only 126,155 found their way onto the assessor's rolls. By 1925, the number of cattle in Cherry County had once again risen, this time to 187,225 head increasing to 210,262 head by 1935, most of which traced their lineage to a blooded sire.<sup>13</sup>

Registered breeders' organizations, such as the Northwestern Hereford Breeders Association, established in 1914, promoted the introduction of blooded bulls into local cow herds. Ed Belsky, early secretary of the association, and others touted Herefords as ideally suited to the Sandhills environment. At the same time, those who preferred other purebred stocks campaigned to promote their preferred breeds. Even before the devastating blizzard, local stockmen publicized the merit of the registered breeds. Stockman C. S. Reece had written in 1908 that although he was no "breed crank" and that buyers were "invariably impartial," in his opinion, black cattle Angus was the superior breed. To his way of thinking, it was a wise move to take up the breed to develop and improve herds by the techniques of "systematic grading." While not discouraging the upbreeding of Shorthorns or Herefords, he believed it would "be a mistake to cross any

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<sup>12</sup>Reece, 71.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

high grade of cattle with another breed.”<sup>14</sup> During the pre-war years, cattlemen produced mixed herds by breeding cows to Hereford or Shorthorn bulls in a haphazard manner. Until packers demanded uniformity of livestock, little emphasis was placed on purity of breed among most of the county’s herds.<sup>15</sup>

Reece’s suggestion of purebred lineage implied a new effort by ranchers to manage and control livestock reproduction. By maintaining the strain, improvements in production and quality were more easily achieved. Because blooded livestock represented a greater investment in effort and money, developing a better graded herd called for greater attention to environment and resources. Success required that ranchers “keep abreast of advancing knowledge” in the latest techniques and methods in the developing field of range and livestock management.<sup>16</sup>

## **SANDHILLS RANGE MANAGEMENT**

For the most part, the land transfer activity among ranchers in the first decades of the twentieth century represented an early expression of some rudimentary type of range management. Acquiring the favorable balance of range and hay lands with adequate water supplies motivated the seeming frenzy of land purchases, leases, and trades. Conservation practices implemented during the Progressive era offered little toward a greater understanding on the individual land owner’s level but did open the way for some ranchers to a sympathetic view to the fragile environment. Grazing practices and policies

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<sup>14</sup>*Valentine Democrat* (Valentine, Nebraska), 19 March 1908.

<sup>15</sup>Aeschbacher, 61.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

imposed by the Forest Service on the national forests, including the Niobrara Division of the Nebraska National Forest in Cherry County, often strained the patience of cattlemen. To the foresters and the conservation minded, grazing was viewed as a “subordinate use” of the land to be “harmonized with their major purposes of timber growing and watershed protection.”<sup>17</sup> Ranchers held another view, that however restrictive and inadequate the regulations appeared, they set an example for the need of some type of regulated resource management.

By 1923, western stockmen’s organizations were trying to approach the Forest Service philosophy from a more rational vantage. One national livestock monthly publication, *The Producer*, while calling for adjustment of grazing fees and regulation to meet changing economic conditions, also exhorted the government to expand on the proven methods tested on forest ranges in the handling of livestock. “Scientific application of studies in range management and improvement marked one of the more important steps of progress,” according to some cattle interests.<sup>18</sup>

Although speaking for the collective body of United States stockgrowers, *The Producer*’s statement reflected a growing concern of Cherry County ranchers. Industry demands had required a better quality and earlier maturing type of livestock. Feeders no longer found it economical to fatten older animals for the packers’ market since maturity slowed down the rate of weight gain. They now sought younger but better developed stock. Ranchers met the new market challenge with a characteristic pragmatic approach

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<sup>17</sup>*Cody Cowboy* (Cody, Nebraska), 31 December 1926.

<sup>18</sup>John H. Hatton, “National-Forest Grazing Regulations,” *The Producer: The National Live Stock Monthly*, 4 (April 1923): 8.

and built-up better herds. With the added capital investment in livestock, a new type of control over the range environment became necessarily an adjunct activity.

The evolving “science and art of planning and directing range use” gained in support.<sup>19</sup> Leaders in the new agricultural science, such as Arthur Sampson, looked on the range and its resources as the industrial fuel for the manufacture of meat, leather, and a myriad of other by-products. In the same way as the industrial eastern sector of the nation elevated efficiency of production, range scientists saw efficiency on western ranges as residing in modern practices. Since animals were viewed essentially as living factories where natural vegetation was converted into a commodity, it became necessary to view range forage “whose composition, growth, and harvest could be controlled for maximum yield of both forage material and the animal products into which it was converted.”<sup>20</sup>

While cattlemen in Cherry County were less inclined to draw a correlation between the nation’s industrial sector and their cattle feeding activities, they nonetheless recognized the complexity of the animal-range relationship. Their economic viability on the home range depended on an understanding and deepening of their intimate affinity with their environment. What had begun as the open range became a place of intensive manufacturing and production. Primitive and often destructive attitudes toward the land were transformed to a stabilizing scientific perspective of animal husbandry and range management that reflected the changing concerns and relationships to the land. Range

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<sup>19</sup>William Barnes, *Western Grazing Grounds and Forest Ranges* (Chicago: Breeders Gazette, 1913): 8 quoted in C. H. Wasser, “Early Development of Technical Range Management Ca. 1895-1945,” *Agricultural History*, 52 (January 1977): 63.

<sup>20</sup>Frieda Knobloch, *The Culture of Wilderness: Agriculture as Colonization in the American West* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 94.

forage took on the characteristics of a crop. Rancher interests necessarily had to turn to the range's composition, growth, and harvest that "could be controlled for the maximum yield." Efforts to restore and increase productive capabilities led to the introduction of domesticated grasses and plants, like clover and alfalfa, which played an essential role in the "transformation of the range into an agricultural entity." Efforts to increase the yield of range cattle by controlled breeding of livestock to assure conformity of size, shape, and rate of maturity hinged on better quality pasture and range management.<sup>21</sup>

Ranchers had begun to move toward a more systematic method of stock raising when they began to put up hay for winter feeding in the 1880s. Other steps toward the early precursor of management could also be identified by their investments in deeded land, leasing arrangements, and the division and fencing of land into pastures. Upbreeding of herds proved another important component toward the development of the modern western cattle industry.<sup>22</sup> While each major step met challenges, cattlemen were able to accommodate the changes within their own frame of reference. The new techniques and methods of scientific range management, however, introduced the external forces of animal husbandry, botany, agronomy, soil science, as well as other scientific disciplines that were beyond the everyday grasp of most ranchers. Some type of conduit that sifted through the scientific jargon and brought the message home to the rancher had to be found.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 94, 80; Laurence A. Stoddart and Arthur Smith, *Range Management* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1955), 288.

<sup>22</sup>Knobloch, 95.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

The scientific community had not far to look. Livestock association publications and agricultural journals helped distribute the new information to ranchers and stockmen throughout the western range regions. Railroad companies, such as the Burlington and the Chicago and NorthWestern, also incorporated range information into their educational programs. State extension agents, affiliated with agricultural colleges of state universities, educated those ranchers willing to participate in the programs they offered. All drew from the body of technical knowledge and skill made available through the U. S. Department of Agriculture's various division bulletins and reports. On the more local level, university experimental stations provided valuable information on local conditions and applications.

As an interdisciplinary study, range management gained professional status when Arthur Sampson went to the University of California at Berkeley to offer courses in the new science. Over the next six years, his work and findings from his experiences while with the Forest Service provided the basis for three books on the new science. With emphasis on systematic deferred grazing where animals were restricted until grasses had gone to seed, Sampson urged his students and readers to consider all aspects of livestock feeding. How the cattle grazed, the amount of forage consumed and the availability of palatable food became concerns of a good range manager in the professor's view.<sup>24</sup>

Range research and grazing experimentation formally began in 1910 under federal auspices. James T. Jardine, head of the Office of Grazing Studies in the Forest Service, and his former colleague Sampson made an important contribution to the study of range management by implementing a program of "range reconnaissance." Essentially a range-

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 100.

resource inventory, the range reconnaissance information provided the “groundwork for the later and more detailed observations of grazing resources and conditions.”<sup>25</sup> Surveys of grasslands, initially conducted by botany students, collected data on vegetation, topography, and range conditions, and it was compared to information drawn from the notes and observations of earlier botanists’ surveys.<sup>26</sup> Range conditions had changed even over short times. Studies and observations by Roscoe Pound, Jared Smith, P. A. Rydberg, Frederick Clement, and R. J. Pool in Nebraska not only had local significance but made important contributions to the entire discipline of range research.

As a part of the broader objective, the rationalization of agriculture, the range management program introduced a new stability to the Sandhills. Through the efforts of federal and state agencies in Nebraska, land classification and environmental protection of flora and fauna spurred research throughout the 1930s and the following decades.<sup>27</sup> For many Sandhills’ stockmen, after forty years of experience in the fragile and unique environment, science had affirmed what they always knew: it was cattle country. Moreover, the new official emphasis now appeared to provide the tools of scientific technology and methods for efficient and better land usage as a way to increased production.

Local and regional studies of range management were conducted by state agricultural experiment stations. The introduction of the new range science into state

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<sup>25</sup>“The History of Western Range Research,” prepared by Division of Range Research, Forest Service. United States Department of Agriculture, *Agricultural History*, 18 (July 1944): 133.

<sup>26</sup>Knobloch, 101.

<sup>27</sup>Albert Z. Guttenberg, “The Land Utilization Movement of the 1920s,” *Agricultural History*, 50 (September 1976): 477-81.



universities' agricultural curriculums brought new vigor and enthusiasm for discovering ways to better utilize a region's natural resources. Places, such as Arizona and Nevada with vested interests in livestock and grazing on their arid land, were early contributors to the new discipline because of their overriding concerns with water and range.<sup>28</sup> In states like Nebraska with a mixed agricultural economy of farming and ranching, an ideal situation would divide research time and dollars between the two. However, with early priorities placed on the promotion of farming, studies of the state's rangelands took a back seat. When growing attention began to focus on range management, university and state officials began to recognize the maladapted use of western Nebraska grasslands. In response, range studies gained new relevance, particularly in an area of economic importance for the state's future.

The University of Nebraska's experiment stations became living laboratories and classrooms. Working on the cutting edge of their disciplines, professors and their students participated in changing the face of American agriculture.<sup>29</sup> An early western leader in agricultural studies, the University of Nebraska's faculty became increasingly concerned about the abusive practices used on the western grasslands. Renowned University scientist and teacher Charles Bessey had advocated research into the problem as early as 1890. He based the problem on the absolute dependence on native grasses to meet the state's agricultural needs. He suggested the cultivation of native grasses and forage plants best suited to the environment and the introduction of domesticated species was

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 130.

<sup>29</sup>Robert E. Knoll, *Prairie University: A History of the University of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 49.

potentially desirable. Although no easy undertaking, Bessey believed a better more stable base for forage and hay production would result.<sup>30</sup>

Bessey expressed concern over the apparent imbalance between disappearing forage plants and cattle in the Sandhills region of the state. Depletion of such a valuable resource as native grasses would spell economic disaster for the entire state. To Bessey's way of thinking, overgrazing as well as overproduction of crops were at the heart of the problem. The ongoing work of his students with the Botanical Survey of Nebraska only served to reinforce his resolve that a solution was necessary for the unique region of Nebraska. While the experimental station at the University had turned over "some small plots" to experimental cultivation of native grasses at Bessey's urging, the need for substations placed throughout the state became evident.<sup>31</sup>

In 1909, the University of Nebraska Board of Regents voted to establish an experiment substation near Valentine, Nebraska, in Cherry County. State legislators had earlier passed HR 114 that provided for a Sandhills station along with an initial appropriation of \$15,000. Under University control, the facility served the counties of Sioux, Dawes, Box Butte, Sheridan, Keya Paha, Brown, Rock, and of course, Cherry. Rapid settlement of the area had created problems that only specialized remedies could correct. Under the provisions of the legislation the substation was instigated for the "furtherance and promotion" for several areas of agriculture, including livestock

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<sup>30</sup>Richard A. Overfield, *Science with Practice: Charles E. Bessey and the Maturing of American Botany* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1993), 66.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 66-67.

interests.<sup>32</sup>

Located on 1,090 acres of the Fort Niobrara Military Reservation, the land was initially leased and then in 1914 purchased by the Board of Regents. Within the eight counties that the substation served, only 694,440 acres of the entire ten million acre region was under cultivation. Although many had hoped that the substation would help determine new possibilities for farming in the region, early results were not encouraging. Yields were low and cultivated soils deteriorated rapidly.<sup>33</sup>

In 1919, when a new substation superintendent, E. M. Brouse, took over, few Kinkaiders or other small farmers remained. However, evidence of their presence and activity had taken a toll on the range. Within four years of Brouse's initial observations, conditions had deteriorated greatly. Under Brouse's direction, new programs were initiated that would benefit local stock-farmers and ranchers. In continuing cooperation with the University's Lincoln experimental station, the Cherry County substation initiated studies into small grain, forage, alfalfa, and grass production. At times hindered by an absence of new technology, Brouse and his small team of specialists diligently worked to find ways to improve conditions in the region.

Research at the substation focused on range, sub-irrigated meadows, and cattle. Brouse, himself, was credited with solidifying the close relationship between agronomist and rancher and the cooperative grazing studies conducted there.<sup>34</sup> Since only two-tenths

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<sup>32</sup>E. M. Brouse and M.L. Baker, *The Valentine Experiment Station* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska College of Agriculture, 1963), 4; Elvin F. Frolik and Ralston J. Graham, *The University of Nebraska-Lincoln College of Agriculture: The First Century* (Lincoln: Board of Regents, 1987), 347.

<sup>33</sup>Brouse and Baker, 5-6.

<sup>34</sup>Frolik and Graham, 348.

of one percent of Cherry County's almost four million acre area exhibited the same types of soils as on the substation property, some of the range analysis necessarily was conducted off site on privately-owned ranches. In this way, grassland and grazing studies provided valuable insight and new operating techniques to the cattlemen of the region. Through the publication of research bulletins, observations and experiment results filtered from the community of range scientists to the stockmen who benefited nearly as much as the environment.<sup>35</sup>

By 1932, substation studies conducted in Cherry County encouraged and advanced the understanding of the interconnectedness within the Sandhills ecological system. Agronomist F. D. Keim with Anton L. Frolik and George. W. Beadle published a report of their four-year study from 1926 to 1929 on the botanical structure and yields of Sandhills hay meadows. Taking the entire environment into consideration, the scientists found a high correlation "between the depth of the ground water table and the botanical structure of native vegetation." Through an understanding of this relationship and a knowledge of the land's characteristics, ranchers could gauge the amount of hay a meadow would produce.<sup>36</sup>

Types of plants associated under distinctive conditions also had significance in the study. The researchers found that yields of hay increased when clover was present. An equally important increase in the nutritional value of the hay also was recorded. As an essential building block for the health and required development of profitable livestock,

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<sup>35</sup>Brouse and Baker, 8-18.

<sup>36</sup>F.D. Keim, A. L. Frolik, and G. W. Beadle, *Studies of Prairie Hay in North Central Nebraska: Research Bulletin 60* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska College of Agriculture, 1932), 1-54.

increases in the amount of protein available for livestock had economic benefits.<sup>37</sup> Later experiments by other researchers demonstrated the extent of the value. Results from Cherry County experiments on the winter feeding of calves emphasized protein requirements obtained through hay or supplemental feeding. Hay of higher protein content reduced the amount of cottonseed cake or soybean oil meal required to sustain weight and successfully weather the season.<sup>38</sup> By increasing the protein content of hay, new cost cutting measures were found. Reduction of supplemental feeds that required cash payments could be significantly reduced by the upgrade of meadow production.

Keim and his associate T. E. Brinegar conducted another study in Cherry County between 1937 and 1940. Through an analysis of vegetation on short and tall grass prairies, they were able to assess the “effect of grazing intensity upon the vegetation.” Studying the activity of cattle on the tallgrass range of the Sandhills and the shortgrasses north of Valentine revealed that the grazing-resting cycles of livestock on the shortgrass range was shorter than for those on the Sandhills range. Further investigation led the researchers to conclude that the distribution of cattle on the range was directly correlated to over and under grazing of certain areas.<sup>39</sup>

While too many animals over too long a period would strip a range of its productivity, under grazing had similar results. Certain range plants and grasses required grazing activity to regenerate and expand. As an example, blue grama, a grass found

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>E. M. Brouse, *Wintering Calves in the Nebraska Sandhills: Bulletin 357* (Lincoln: Experimental Station of the University of Nebraska College of Agriculture, 1944), 3-29.

<sup>39</sup>Brouse and Baker, 16.

throughout the Sandhills, naturally escaped close grazing due of its low conformation. Tests showed that cattle harvested only half the plant and so confirmed the ranchers' rule of thumb, "take half and leave half for forage."<sup>40</sup>

Researchers also found that nutritional and productive characteristics varied among different species of native vegetation. Prairie sandreed, an important grass for Cherry County ranchers, "contributed more to summer grazing and upland hay than any other one grass." It made up 26 percent of livestock's forage on most Sandhills' range. However, under heavy grazing conditions, the grass began to decrease, allowing weeds or sands to infiltrate the area which greatly reduced productivity.<sup>41</sup> Timing became another crucial factor. Coordination of grazing with the most advantageous time of plant growth had important economic considerations as well as environmental consequences. Correct seasonal use and the length of time animals were allowed to graze on a particular range affected the rate of weight gain on cattle. Needle-and-thread, a native, leafy bunchgrass also common to the Cherry County area, had been classified as a cool season plant. Most of its growth occurred during spring and early summer when growing season temperatures registered their lowest readings. Research into range grasses showed that unlike the warm-season grass species, such as bluestems, switchgrass, and grama, needle-and-thread plants were dormant during the hot weeks of late July and August. Not only was the nutritional value greatly reduced, but the brittleness of the small leaves could

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<sup>40</sup>C. M. Schumacher, "Thrives, And Is Common In Low Rainfall Area of the West: VIII: Blue Grama," *Nebraska Cattleman*, 9 (June 1953): 84.

<sup>41</sup> C. M. Schumacher, "Summer Grazing and The Upland Hay Value Is This 'Increaser' Grass: IV: Prairie Sandreed." *Nebraska Cattleman*, 9 (February 1953): 64.

cause physical damage to grazing livestock.<sup>42</sup> Grazing was consequently not recommended.

Seasonal characteristics, plant associations, and the grazing capacity of certain ranges became important factors to stockmen. An intimate understanding of the land and its resources became the measure of successful cattlemen. Stockmen faced the challenge of becoming familiar with and carrying out faithfully a good range management program. In order to succeed they had to learn about the key grasses found in their pastures as well as the vegetation's patterns of growth.<sup>43</sup>

Modern human intervention into the Sandhills environment reflected changing attitudes about resources and production; steps taken to nurture the land's productivity protected its value as a commodity. Ranchers turned away from the destructive and abusive practices of the past and donned a mantle somewhere between conservationist and preservationist. Ranchers' intentions were motivated more toward profit than to any lofty ideals of stewardship. Land like machinery in eastern factories required careful maintenance for optimum results. In the modern industrial sense, scientific management and efficient use of resources became a key to a successful Sandhills cattle economy.

As capitalist producers, Cherry County cattlemen chased after profit with the new philosophy of what was good for their pastures was good for their pocketbooks. Sandhills ranchers began to learn that the amount of beef sold in the fall was the primary gauge of success. How much gain per head and pounds of beef produced per acre

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<sup>42</sup>C.M. Schumacher, "Correct Seasonal Use Is The Key To Profitability: VII: Needle-and Thread," *Nebraska Cattleman*, 9 (May 1953): 42.

<sup>43</sup>D. L. Higgins, "What is Good for the Pastures Is Good for Ranchers Pocketbook," *Nebraska Cattleman*, 13 (June 1957): 32.

measured ranchers' successful usage of their grazing lands. Overstocking over a period of seasons carried hidden costs felt in later years when drastically reduced production occurred.<sup>44</sup> Only through an informed use of the range could efficiency of operation and management guide Sandhills ranchers to economic stability.

### **DROUGHT, DEPRESSION, AND THE CATTLE BUSINESS**

Despite the signals of an unraveling of the nation's economy, Cherry County ranchers in 1929 celebrated the "wonderful evolution" of their industry since that of "old range days." On October 31, the *Valentine Democrat* published an address long-time rancher Dan Adamson gave to the Nebraska Stockgrowers convention held at Valentine the previous May. Determined to omit the romantic connotations often attributed to stories about the cattle country of the American West, Adamson was viewed by the newspaper as relating "only facts." Having located in the county during the 1880s, the wise, old cattleman could take an objective view of the changes and the benefits.<sup>45</sup>

He painted a vivid picture. Private ownership and ranch organization had brought structured use of the land to a new level. Better livestock and a balanced use of hayland and seasonal pastures encouraged a thriving industry. According to Adamson, Sandhills cattle were developing "a countrywide reputation for their excellent feeding qualities." Employing improved methods and techniques of animal husbandry, cattlemen were raising earlier calves and having better survival rates by controlled breeding seasons and supplemental feeds, like cottoncake which was fed to cows with early calves to produce a

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>*Valentine Democrat*, 31 October 1929.



better calf herd. The rancher observed, unlike the earlier times on Cherry County ranges, that “very few calves [were] roughed through on hay” any more.<sup>46</sup>

Improved range and meadow conditions had other far-reaching benefits. Fenced and then cross-fenced, meadows and rangelands now separated different classes of cattle and enabled regulated use of the grassland environment. New techniques of scientific management promoted perhaps one of the greatest boosts to production. Along with the purposeful use of the land, the introduction of different types of domesticated vegetation increased production of forage to new levels of efficiency. Adamson noted that “water plants of all kinds have been developed [and] we are seeding and growing a lot of red clover in our meadows which is increasing the quality and quantity of our hay.” Although unschooled in the highly technical and scientific understanding of the range scientist, Adamson described the practical application and integration of their work. Like Hedges, he depicted a region where cattlemen were making important strides toward improvement where “judicious handling” of pastures and rangeland brought greater profits.<sup>47</sup>

While many of the problems associated with traditional methods of livestock production in the semi-arid environment had alternative solutions, some did not. The suggestion made in 1919 that increased production of hay and fodder crops could be achieved by including redtop alfalfa or timothy with native grasses proved correct. As the number of livestock steadily increased over the next fifteen years, so did the production of hay. Area figures for the number of acres in hay production stood at 262,000 in 1920.

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

Tonnage figures of wild hay and alfalfa, timothy, and clover rose from 16,578 in 1925 to 380,545 in 1930. By 1934, acres producing hay in Cherry County had almost doubled in only fourteen years.<sup>48</sup> Much of the increase was the result of better methods of land use. However, new practices of management had no control over climatic conditions and by 1934 most sectors of the state were reeling from the effects of a long lasting agricultural price depression followed by a cycle of devastating drought.

Drought caused concerns about feed for livestock. Dried-up range grass and reductions in the hay harvest would spell financial destruction for many small ranchers. While hay production in some parts of the region dropped to only fifty percent of the usual yield, it was rare to hear of a Sandhills rancher who suffered complete failure. However, long-time county residents could not remember a time that compared to that year's failure in hay production. In fact, until 1934 no serious hay shortage had been experienced in the county's fifty-one year history.

Although catastrophic for most parts of Nebraska, the impact of drought in the Sandhills generally had a less drastic effect. Some grassland and hay meadows were damaged and overstocked, but state officials reported that, for the most part, they were much better maintained than elsewhere in the state.<sup>49</sup> Environmental factors made the difference. A unique system of hydraulic characteristics, soils, and vegetation spared the region from the brunt of drought devastation felt elsewhere.

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<sup>48</sup>"Basic Information for a Land Use Program in Cherry County," Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, University of Nebraska, Land Use Program files, RG/ 11/6, Table 6, Love Library, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln Nebraska; *Fifteenth Census of the United State: 1930: Agriculture, Volume III: Types of Farms: Part I-the Northern States* (Washington, D. C.: GPO, 1932), 1233; U. S. *Census of Agriculture, 1925-Nebraska*, 1163.

<sup>49</sup>A. E. Anderson, "Agriculture," *The Nebraska Blue Book: 1938* (Lincoln: Nebraska Legislative Reference Bureau, 1938), 396.

While most of the state reported departures from normal precipitation in double digits, data for the Sandhills show less deviation. In contrast to the more humid eastern sector of the state, the Sandhills average yearly rainfall varies from the 24.5 inches a year at its far eastern boundary to 16.6 inches at its western margins. Cherry County's average mean precipitation of 18.36 inches reflects its central Sandhills location. Weather stations in and surrounding Cherry County recorded annual precipitation totals for the thirties as showing some variations.<sup>50</sup>

**TABLE III  
ANNUAL PRECIPITATION FOR CHERRY COUNTY  
AND VICINITY 1930-1938**

	Val.	Nen.	Mer.	Mul.	Hya.
1930	22.43	20.55	20.72	Na	23.12
1931	14.62	18.36	13.98	Na	12.19
1932	16.05	16.77	17.77	22.95	15.45
1933	17.74	20.42	12.99	Na	20.65
1934	11.52	12.86	15.37	Na	11.53
1935	16.80	18.24	18.52	Na	16.60
1936	12.50	14.96	14.83	16.35	10.69
1937	18.29	12.13	11.77	16.23	12.38
1938	18.10	20.08	17.11	22.07	18.00

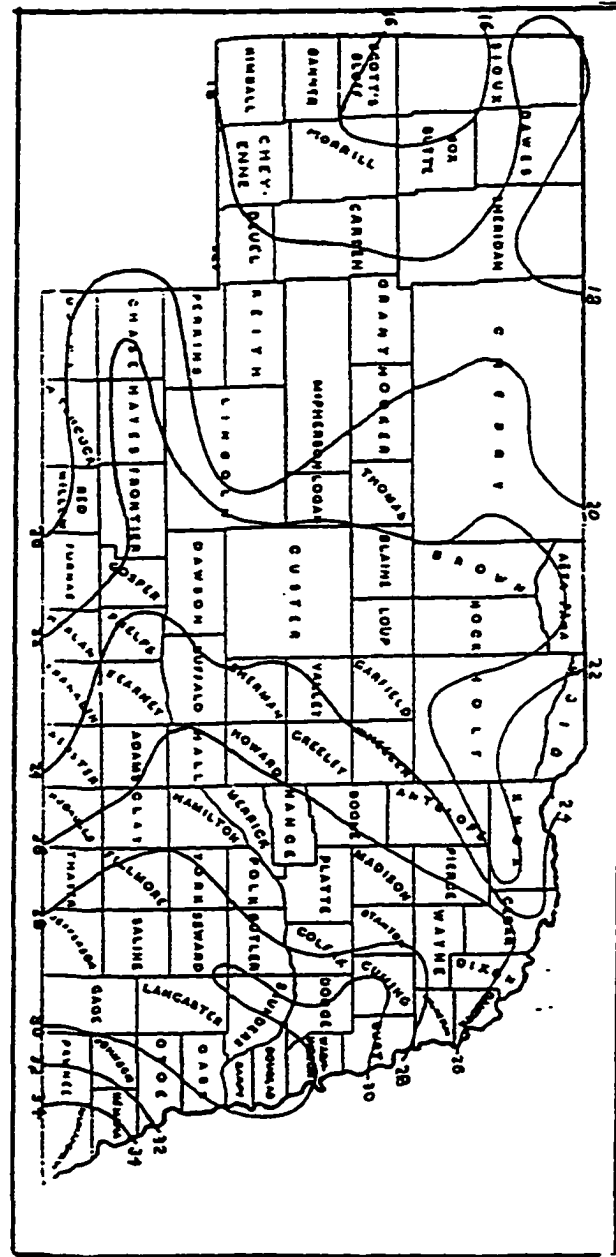
WEATHER STATIONS AT VALENTINE, NENZEL, AND MERRIMAN IN CHERRY COUNTY, MULLEN IN HOOKER COUNTY, AND HYANNIS IN GRANT COUNTY. T. A. Blair, Lincoln, Nebraska, "Nebraska Section," *Climatological Data*. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Weather Bureau, 1930-1938.

According to Department of Agriculture statistics, in 1934 rainfall at the Valentine station amounted to 11.52 inches, a 6.82 inch departure or a 37 percent reduction from normal. The station near Nenzel reported 12.86 inches of annual rainfall, a 30 percent or 7.97

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<sup>50</sup>Marianne Brinda Beel and Barbara Kirne Gale, eds., *A Sandhill Century: Book I: A History of Cherry County, Nebraska* (Valentine, Nebraska: Cherry County Centennial Committee, 1986), 178.

# Normal Precipitation in Nebraska, 1898-1932



"Nebraska Section," *Climatological Data*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Weather Bureau

inches deviation from normal totals. At the same time, gauges farther west at Merriman recorded 15.37 inches of precipitation that same year, a difference of 4.78 inches or a 24 percent reduction of normal figures. Records for Hyannis near the southwestern sector of Cherry County showed only 11.53 inches of precipitation that year.<sup>51</sup> As the fourth and drastically drier year in a cycle of drought, 1934 rainfall totals caused greater problems to farmers and ranchers in the eastern townships of the county. Those located in the west were fortunate that vegetation there demonstrated greater adaptability to drier conditions. See Table III.

Agricultural producers in the northeastern section of Cherry County faced the full brunt of the drought. Even the option of quickly selling off cattle held little chance of escaping failure. General economic conditions compounded problems associated with the lack of rain. With the entire nation in the throes of the Great Depression, price structures for livestock fell in tandem with the rest of products in the fractured economy. While the government's emergency purchases had alleviated further pressure on the Sandhills environment, other programs administered under the Agricultural Adjustment Acts of 1933 and 1938 also offered a gleam of new hope. Programs initiated in 1935 introduced a new emphasis on range conservation.<sup>52</sup> Coordinated and directed through the extension service in Lincoln, the operation enlisted local ranchers to set up a conservation program that fit the guidelines established by the Department of Agriculture. Among the earliest

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<sup>51</sup>United States, Department of Agriculture, Weather Bureau, *Climatological Data*, "Nebraska Division," Lincoln, Nebraska, 1934, 77. The weather statistics appear to be inconsistent since they place normal totals for Valentine 1.81 inches below those assigned to Merriman when climate studies of the Great Plains have clearly shown that precipitation levels decrease moving west from the 100th meridian,

<sup>52</sup>According to rancher Bud Ganser of the Goose Creek area, there was no range program in Cherry County until the spring of 1935. Beel and Gale, 169.

recommendations was the installation of additional stock wells to encourage the greater movement of grazing animals as a way to prevent overgrazing in certain areas. Other recommendations stressed the planting of temporary pastures to improve drought ravaged grasslands. County agents throughout the region promoted the planting of soil enriching plants for greater hay production, and by 1938, a revised program allowed for payments to cattlemen who implemented deferred grazing.<sup>53</sup>

### NEW DEAL LAND POLICIES AND CHERRY COUNTY

Passage of the Taylor Grazing Act in 1934 ended the reckless policies for the disposal of public lands. The remaining government domain was first placed under the direction of the Forest Service and then transferred in 1946 to the newly established Bureau of Land Management.<sup>54</sup> Some westerners balked at the instigation of new regulations, but for most westerners the resolution of the question of grazing rights on public lands looked like a long overdue solution. Local consultation in the administration of each grazing district provided a measure of control needed to silence the more vocal critics.<sup>55</sup> Decision-making powers for the use of the forest's range rested with a local

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<sup>53</sup>*Merriman Monitor* (Merriman, Nebraska), 20 May 1937, 3 June 1937, 1 July 1937, 11 November 1937.

<sup>54</sup>Ross W. Gorte and Betsy A. Cody, "The Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management: History and Analysis of Merger Proposals," *Report for Congress*, Congressional Research Service, November, 1995, 4. The Taylor Grazing Act of 1934 was enacted to answer the problems associated with deteriorating range conditions on public lands. Depression, drought, and more importantly, overuse were considered to be drastic obstacles to maintaining the productivity of the public lands. While the Act implied that the public domain would be transferred out of federal ownership, federal management would be retained.

<sup>55</sup>David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 228.

advisory board elected by those who had permits to use the land.<sup>56</sup>

State-controlled lands were placed under another kind of arrangement that figured into some ranchers' plans. Although the state retained land for specific purposes, like the Cherry County Sub-Fish Hatchery and the University's experiment farm, the majority of state lands was comprised of school sections, sections 16 and 36 in every township within western counties, which gave cattlemen the advantage of long-term leasing. In Cherry County, its 336 school sections accounted for a total of 215,040 acres of sand dune rangeland, dry meadows, or wetland areas. Although sections in the eastern part of the state had been sold, state regulation finally adopted a policy of leasing the sections to generate perpetual funding for its educational endowment fund.<sup>57</sup> Leases awarded at public auction to the highest bidders sometimes went for rents that exceed the assessed land value when strong competition drove up bids. School sections surrounded by one owner's private property very often remained under lease to the same ranch operation through several generations, and became an important facet of ranch operations and when ranchers sold out, purchase agreements included the transfer of the leases.

While school lands provided additional hay producing and range areas for local ranching interests, grazing on the Nebraska National Forest gave another option. Grazing on forest range functioned more as a temporary arrangement than the long term leases required to control school sections. Obtaining access to grazing privileges on forest ranges allowed ranchers an opportunity to accommodate fluctuations in the size of herds

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<sup>56</sup>William D. Rowley, *U. S. Forest Service Grazing and Rangelands: A History* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1985), 152.

<sup>57</sup>See Jon A. Souder and Sally K. Fairfax, *State Trust Lands: History, Management, and Sustainable Use* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996).

and changes in the conditions on a rancher's rangeland. Located in the heart of Cherry County, the forest area drew overflow cattle from ranches throughout the county. Three classes of grazing permits accommodated: ranchers with property adjacent to the forest, class A; those with property not adjacent, class B; and transient herders who had no claim on local property, class C.<sup>58</sup>

When the Nebraska National Forest was created on April 16, 1902, some Sandhills ranchers joined other western ranchmen in opposition to forest reserves wherever they were located. Locating a man-made forest in the treeless dune region was regarded as a "crazy fool idea." Coinciding with the final closing of the open range and the push to prosecute stockmen for illegally fencing the public lands, the institution of grazing fees for use of forest land created an uproar among area ranchers. After the initial resentment subsided, stockmen began to support the efforts made toward environmental conservation. Some of Cherry County's most visible opponents, as in the case of ranchman Bob Fadis, gratefully grazed their stock on the forest's grassland ranges.<sup>59</sup>

Nebraska's National Forest grew out of the frustrated efforts of botanist Charles Bessey to persuade government officials that trees would and should grow in the Nebraska Sandhills region. When the results of his 1891 test planting in Holt County were finally investigated eleven years later, the Division of Forestry considered the implementation of a large-scale program. After the examination of various locations, a presidential proclamation established two reserves, the Niobrara division in Cherry

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<sup>58</sup>Rowley, 59. The classifications of grazing permits were put into effect in July of 1905. Under the Taylor Act modifications were put into place.

<sup>59</sup>John Clark Hunt, "The Forest That Man Made." part II, *American Forests*, 71 (December 1965): 34.



County and another on the Dismal River, spanning an area in Thomas and Blaine counties farther to the southeast.<sup>60</sup>

The Niobrara Division, later renamed the Samuel McKelvie National Forest, lies in the heart of Cherry County. A total of 115,638 acres, a 12 ½ miles by 18 miles tract, between the Snake and Niobrara rivers was withdrawn from entry to make up the reserve. Early cattlemen had long considered the area the place where a long lost and dead forest had once stood. Over the past twenty years ranchmen and settlers had secured a considerable amount of fuel, fencing, and building materials from the trunks and stumps of large trees embedded in the sand.<sup>61</sup> Although early plantings were not all successful, Eastern Red Cedar, Ponderosa, Jack, and Scotch Pines all succeeded in the sandy soil but cover only 5,000 acres of timber. The remaining area was retained as native range which allowed for multiple uses as wildlife habitat, recreational activities, and examples of improved range management.<sup>62</sup>

Grazing on the reserve accommodates 12,000 head of cattle annually which accounts for the 36,000 animal unit months of use (animal units are a standard used in the computation of range capacity; one cow and calf translate into one animal unit). A modest grazing fee was immediately implemented, calculated according to animal units

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<sup>60</sup>Richard Overfield, "Trees for the Great Plains: Charles E. Bessey and Forestry," *Journal of Forest History*, 23 (January 1979): 28. See Charles E. Bessey, "The Reforesting of the Sandhills" in *Annual Report of the Sandhills* (Lincoln: Jacob North, 1894), 117-20.

<sup>61</sup>*Cody Cowboy* (Cody, Nebraska), 3 April 1902.

<sup>62</sup>Raymond J. Pool, "Fifty Years on the Nebraska National Forest," *Nebraska History* 34 (September 1953): 139-149, 167; Beel and Gale, 120. Pool was professor emeritus of botany at the University of Nebraska when he expanded on his address, 14 September 1952, at the golden anniversary celebration of the Nebraska National Forest for the article.

and charged to the participating ranchers.<sup>63</sup>

While federal forest lands in the Sandhills offered cattlemen access to additional range, other federal lands, those set aside for wildlife conservation, actually withdrew land from grazing and hay production. An example of gradual withdrawal took place in northeastern Cherry County. Until Fort Niobrara was partially abandoned in 20 October 1906, homesteaders heavily grazed their horses and cattle on the facility's grasslands. Although the local practices continued for a time, by 1912 circumstances changed. In 1907, William Dutcher, president of the National Association of Audubon Societies, expressed an interest in establishing a bird refuge on the site of the abandoned fort. Taking a step in that direction, the Department of the Army, at the direction of President Theodore Roosevelt, prohibited hunting and trapping at the site but continued to allow grazing. When the War Department discontinued using the fort in 1911, the development of a bird refuge began in earnest.<sup>64</sup>

The original tract of land was divided and over half was opened to settlement. Remaining acres were designated as a national wildlife preserve and enlarged through a

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<sup>63</sup>Pool, 167; *Cody Cowboy*, 31 December 1926. The tree growing activities at the Bessey division of the National Forest, on the Dismal River location, were an important source of tree saplings planted throughout the Great Plains region. Financial aid for the project was obtained from the U. S. Department of Agriculture and was authorized by the Clarke-McNary Act of 1924. Ranchers and farmers were able to order large numbers of trees to plant around their ranches and farms as windbreaks, shade, and for the protection of livestock. Rancher Tom Arnold who owned the Arnold Cattle Company in Cherry County near Nenzel received 75,000 trees between 1945 and 1950. Arnold was only one of the many county ranchers who took advantage of the availability of trees. Between 1925 and 1950 as many as 1,100,000 trees were ordered by county residents. Pool, 175; *Hooker County Herald* (Mullen, Nebraska), 17 February 1928.

<sup>64</sup>Revised copy of feature article manuscript, 30 December 1982, K. L. Drews, "Fort Niobrara—Yesterday and Today," n.p., History File, Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge Archive, Valentine, Nebraska. [hereafter Drew, Fort Niobrara manuscript].

series of Executive Orders between 1912 and 1936.<sup>65</sup> Although very limited grazing was allowed to individual ranchers, further restrictions were imposed when 10,000 acres were fenced in 1925. A special appropriation in 1931-32 sanctioned the purchase of privately owned land along the periphery of the refuge, with an additional 3,000 acres obtained when the Relocation Administration in 1936 bought out failing farmers. With new land acquisitions, the wildlife sanctuary encompassed 19,124 acres of native prairie and wooded breaks along the Niobrara River. Along with its function as a breeding ground for native and migratory birds, the refuge reintroduced bison, wapiti (Plains elk), and pronghorn sheep to browse the sloping range. In 1936, six Texas longhorns were transferred from the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge in Oklahoma. Later maintenance levels determined by the range's carrying capacity limited herds to 225 bison, 40 sheep, and 275 Texas longhorns but with no place for local cattle.<sup>66</sup>

While developing the Fort Niobrara Refuge gradually removed grazing land from ranchers' use, establishment of the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge in southeastern Cherry County was swift in taking land out of cattle production. Conservation of wildlife habitat was not a new idea for the people of Cherry County. Where these areas were located was another matter. Residents living in the vicinity of Dad's and Big Alkali Lakes

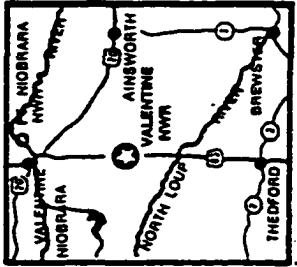
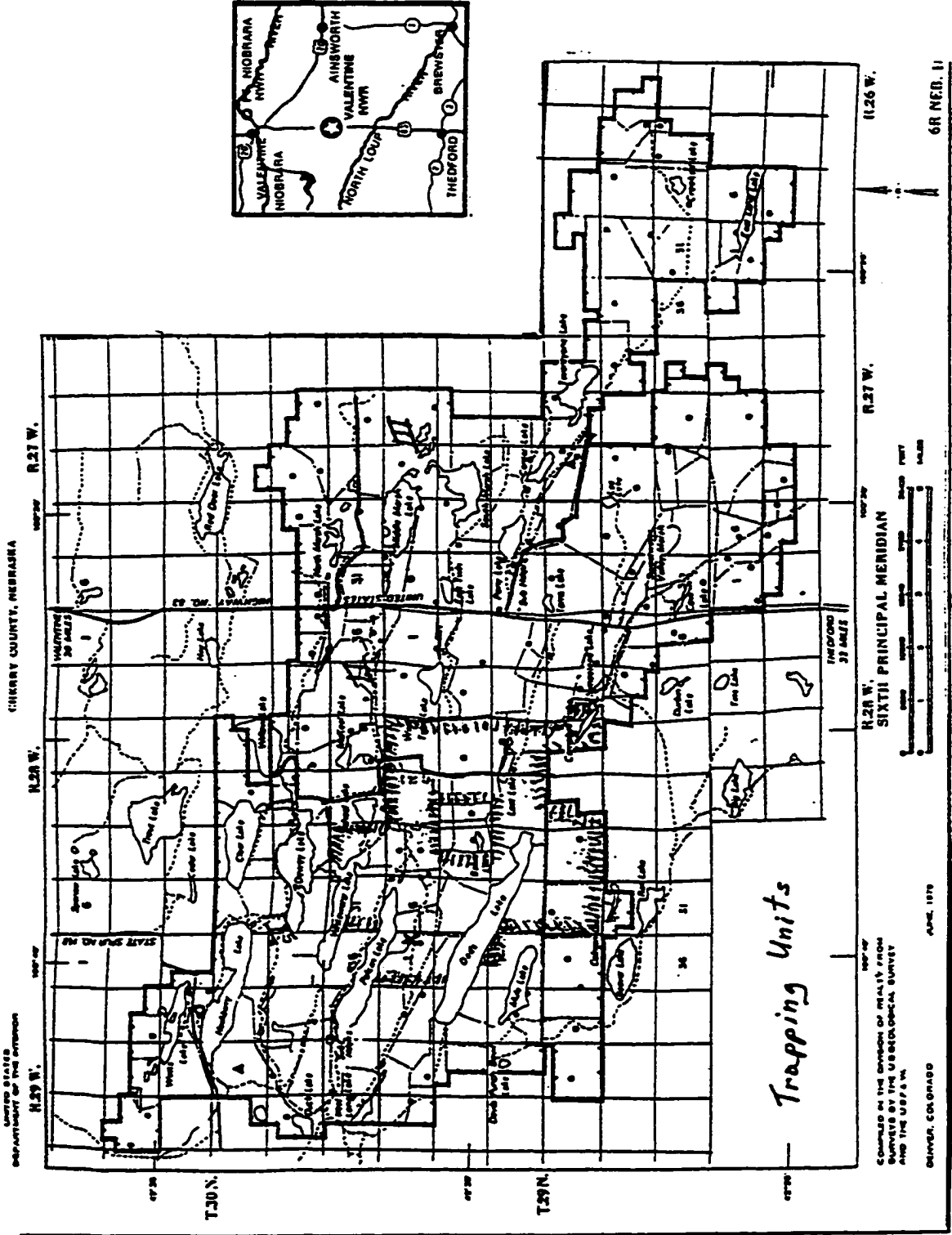
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<sup>65</sup>A fax transmittal from the General Services Administration to the fort's personnel, n.d., listed the Executive Orders that established the refuge as E.O. No. 1461-1 November 1912; E.O. No. 1642-11 November 1912; E.O. No. 3256-31 March 1920; E.O. No. 7301-21 February 1936. Also noted was that each E.O. enlarged previous acreage and the boundary of the Refuge. Most were for parcels of public land that had never been patented. However, a few were private lands which were either purchased or donated to the Refuge (1,962 acres) or purchased under the Resettlement Act (2,383 acres) and transferred to the Department of Fish and Wildlife under the authority of the Department of Interior. List of Executive Orders establishing the Fort Niobrara Wildlife Refuge, History File, Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge Archive, Valentine, Nebraska.

<sup>66</sup>K. L. Drews, Fort Niobrara manuscript, np. Executive Order 7142, 13 August 1935 "to further the purpose of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act (45 Stat. 1222)" established the Valentine Migratory Waterfowl Refuge. Copy of Executive Order, History File, Fort Niobrara Wildlife Refuge Archive.

# Valentine National Wildlife Refuge, Cherry County

## VALENTINE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE (CHERRY COUNTY, NEBRASKA)



*Trapping Units*

COMPILED BY THE DIVISION OF REVELRY FROM  
SURVEYS BY THE U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY  
AND THE U.S.F.W.

APRIL, 1979

DENVER, COLORADO

6R NEB. 11

near the mouth of Schlager Creek petitioned the Nebraska Game, Forestation, and Parks Commission in 1929 to close the lakes and establish a wildfowl refuge instead.

According to their resolution the waterfowl feeding sanctuary would draw thousands of birds that would improve the region for hunting. State officials adopted an even more far reaching scheme of their own. At the commissioners October, 1929, meeting they closed the lakes and held that their action would be a first step toward luring some of the millions in federal dollars allocated to developing wildlife refuges.<sup>67</sup> While their efforts eventually paid off, five years would pass before the federal refuge actually was authorized.

While Dad's and Alkali Lakes figure into the government plan, the extent of the project was very much larger. On May 28, 1934, Executive Order 6742 authorized the purchase of land in Cherry County. Initial land acquisitions included 64,747 acres under options, 3,003 acres condemned, and 1,435 acres by state survey accounting for the total 69, 185 acres within the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge.<sup>68</sup> Developed in a sector where only minimal native prairie grasses remained , the areas 36 natural lakes, marshes, and subirrigated meadows showed signs of distress. Exploitation by cattlemen and the forces of nature created indications of an environment in decline. Livestock had overgrazed the grassland; many small lakes and marshes had been drained to increase acres of crop and hay lands. A reduction in precipitation had completed the distress by drying up many of the wetlands that remained. When President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued an Executive Order establishing the refuge on 13 August 1935, little remained

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<sup>67</sup>"Close Big Alkali and Dad's Lake," *Outdoor Nebraska*, (October 1929): 10.

<sup>68</sup>Additional facts sheet, History File, Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge Archive.

except the barren shifting sand hills now highly susceptible to wind erosion adjacent to seared valleys.<sup>69</sup>

Until the extremes of the environmental devastation seriously threatened the area, it had been heavily populated by breeding and migrating waterfowl and upland game. Government officials estimated that through a combination of government agencies; the Fish and Wildlife Service under the Department of Interior, the Bureau of Biological Survey and New Deal programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) as well as emergency funding from the War Department to the Department of Agriculture, the habitat could somehow be restored. The nucleus of the refuge would be in the Valentine Lakes region of the county with its boundaries on Plum Creek in the east, Schlagel Creek on the north, and Goose Creek on the south, all of which had their head waters in the lake region. Gordon and Boardman's Creeks as well as the Snake River were near the western border of the refuge.<sup>70</sup>

While the goal revealed in the 1929 commissioner's meeting was at long last coming to pass, not all residents in the affected area shared equal enthusiasm. Twenty million dollars from the federal government's emergency conservation fund was allocated to acquiring the land from ranchers, sportsmen's clubs, and individuals. Some of the county's oldest and most renowned ranch families were among those who welcomed and accepted the governments' offer, an average of eight dollars an acre for their land in the

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<sup>69</sup>Revised copy of feature article manuscript, 30 December 1982, K. L. Drews, "Valentine National Wildlife Refuge," n.p., History File, Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge Archive, Valentine, Nebraska [hereafter Drews, Valentine Refuge manuscript]. The Executive Order 7142, 13 August 1935 stated the refuge was "to further the purpose of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act (45 Stat. 1222)." Copy of Executive Order, History File, Fort Niobrara Wildlife Refuge Archive.

<sup>70</sup>*Cherry County News* (Valentine, Nebraska), 19 September 1935.

area. Hanna family holdings, individual and corporate acreage, were the largest to be sold according to one official list. Records show that \$233,100 was paid to the family's ranching operations for roughly 29,200 acres.<sup>71</sup>

While many who held land in the projected area were willing sellers, others held out for better prices. To their dismay, their property was summarily condemned by government agents for which they were forced to take a lower price. Most of those who resisted the government's initial offer held only small parcels in the targeted area. Used as adjuncts to their larger spreads, their motives appeared to be geared more toward forcing a greater return than retaining land parcels essential to their future ranch operations.<sup>72</sup>

One of the last to finalize the government purchase was George Sawyer. His 9,018 acre ranch on Pelican Lake brought \$72,151. Sawyer received only \$32,581 for himself with the rest of the selling price divided between to the Federal Land Bank of Omaha, the Federal Farm Credit Corporation, and other smaller creditors.<sup>73</sup> While the sale settled debts during difficult times, Sawyer, like some of his lake country neighbors, had mixed emotions about selling his land. Although his ranching operation included property eighteen miles farther west on the Snake River, Pelican Lake was always considered the "home ranch." Beginning with a 640 acre parcel, the rancher and his family had amassed their S and S ranch property by buying out homesteaders as they

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<sup>71</sup>List of owners of land purchases for the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge, Cherry County, Nebraska, in History File, Fort Niobrara Wildlife Refuge Archive.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup>*Cherry County News*, 4 March 1937.

pulled up stakes and moved on. However, sentimentality gave way to the hard facts of reality, including increasing debt and a depression economy, and he finally sold, finalizing the property transfer in the early spring of 1937. According to family history, Sawyer and his wife Maude were frustrated and disappointed when they packed up their possessions and left Pelican Lake. Improvements on the Snake River property were inconvenient and a small, rude house and a reduced number of cattle added to their discontent.<sup>74</sup>

Even before the purchase of all the land was completed, Company 4722 of the CCC began the rehabilitation of the wildlife refuge. Two hundred young unemployed men, many from urban areas, began the job of diverting the flow of Gordon Creek into the area lakes. To return the land to its natural unrestricted state, all improvements put in by individual past owners were razed with the exception of those needed to house the headquarters. Roads to provide better access to the larger lakes, a fire tower, and over 72 miles of barbed-wire fence were installed to better manage the new refuge area. In addition the CCC crew planted 172,000 trees and shrubs for food and protection for the wildlife that soon returned to the area.<sup>75</sup> One of major changes to the area was the absence of grazing livestock. Cattle were prohibited from most of the refuge and only under special permission were ranchers allowed to mow the available grasses for hay.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>Helen Sawyer Drews, *Shadows Along Pelican Lake* (Chadron, Nebraska: Chadron State College, Media Center, 1987), 102-106 [hereafter Drews Pelican Lake]. Sawyer was born into a wealthy family and many of their personal possessions were lost to the move since their home on the Snake River had no room for the fine furniture and precious accessories like cut glass crystal and bone china that had graced their Pelican Lake home.

<sup>75</sup>K. L. Drews, Valentine Refuge, n.p.

<sup>76</sup>L. C. Beel and George Sawyer were able to secure rentals of some hayland and pasture within the refuge. H. Drews, Pelican Lake, 106.



Establishing the Valentine Refuge addressed more than problems associated with disappearing natural habitat for migrating waterfowl. The Refuge was linked to other New Deal programs to restore its wetlands. Conditions resulting from erosion and drought were successfully corrected, and better land use methods were initiated. Development and application of good management techniques, evident in the quick reversion of the Valentine Lakes area to its natural past state, reenforced the need for continued efforts in land reclamation, soil conservation and range management techniques.<sup>77</sup>

### **BRINGING AGRICULTURAL KNOWLEDGE TO THE PLAINS**

Until the 1930s, the United States government remained the only major nation without a national land-use policy. Furthermore, its record in providing information about soil conservation was considered by some as poor.<sup>78</sup> After Franklin Roosevelt took office in 1933, his pledge to promote better land use spurred new interest and attention on finding solutions for the national problem. Soil conservation programs, however, had critics as well as supporters. On the national policy-making level, two different approaches to land use and conservation in the Great Plains sought to prevent conditions that precipitated the infamous “Dust Bowl” of the 1930s. Land-use planners, most vocally represented by Lewis Gray, of the USDA Bureau of Agricultural Economics, believed breaking the sod through plowing and cultivation had been a misuse of the land.

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<sup>77</sup> Michael W. Schuyler, *The Dread of Plenty: Agricultural Relief Activities of the Federal Government in the Middle West, 1933-39* (Manhattan, Kansas: Sunflower University Press, 1989), 124-25.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 104.

Eerily familiar to the long heard complaints of the Sandhills stockmen, Gray and his associates advocated a return of grasslands to natural conditions. Reflecting this point of view, a Great Plains committee appointed by presidential order issued their recommendations in a report in 1936. Based on a three-point program that would return and restore the semi-arid Great Plains to grasslands, the report appeared to go even further in espousing the cattlemen's cause. Proposals that unbroken land remain in their natural condition while marginal land under cultivation was purchased by the government and restored to grass for grazing could only succeed if the third prong of the program, promotion of conservation measures, was also implemented.<sup>79</sup> A report on the conditions of the more encompassing western range issued that same year showed that 67 percent of the unregulated public domain had deteriorated.<sup>80</sup> In order to assure that range conditions would continue to produce once restored, creation of county committees to "enforce sound conservation practices on land still cropped" remained essential.<sup>81</sup>

Taking a different stance, the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) held that better cropping would eliminate the need to return marginal land to grass. As a response, the SCS proposed their own three-point program. As the first prong, planting of new types of crops that emphasized grasses and dryland varieties such as sorghum and legumes and restoring soil capacities were recommended. Along with these changes, the introduction of different methods of plowing, terracing, rotation of cultivation, and starting a Shelterbelt Program were promoted. The SCS's plan also called for the initiation of

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<sup>79</sup>Danbom, 227.

<sup>80</sup>*The Western Range*, Senate Document No. 199, 74th Congress, 2nd Session (Washington: GPO, 1936), 7

<sup>81</sup>Danbom, 227.

conservation districts, under local management, to facilitate adoption of the program.<sup>82</sup>

In *Born in the Country*, historian David Danbom writes that “of the New Deal’s two programmatic thrusts,” most people in the Great Plains “found that of the SCS more attractive.” Many believed the problems associated with production failures would be corrected once rain returned. According to Danbom, people “could live with the end to the opening of new lands. . . . but they bristled at the suggestion that existing farms should be returned to grass.” In effect, opposition within the Great Plains in tandem with tight budgets minimized the number of acres removed from crop production and returned to grassland range.<sup>83</sup> Other historians, however, like Frieda Knobloch, sees the work of the SCS as a benefit to western rangeland. She found that during the period of “Dust Bowl rehabilitation,” real advances were made in several areas that carried with them long standing economic advantage. To her, new areas practicing range management with direction from extension services and private and public cooperation in soil conservation districts were extremely beneficial.<sup>84</sup>

Extension work, an adjunct activity of land grant state university colleges of agriculture, offered a wide range of advice and assistance to ranchers and stock farmers. Until 1933, when Corwin M. Mead was named emergency agent for Cherry County,

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<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 228.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid.

<sup>84</sup>Knobloch, 105.

records reveal no official county extension agent stationed there.<sup>85</sup> Prior to Mead's appointment, substation superintendent Brouse and his predecessor James Cowan had functioned basically as surrogate county agent for that locale. However, once Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) programs became available across the state, a full-time position for the county was funded. Along with the administration of federal relief programs, Mead also laid the groundwork for a comprehensive educational system of extension activities. Despite a full schedule of administrative work, by 1935 the agent was able to devote one quarter of his time to extension activities. Gradually relieved from supervision of federal emergency programs, time devoted to educational activities proportionately increased.<sup>86</sup>

Because the emergency extension services proved both beneficial and informative, Cherry County farmers and some ranchers voted to investigate the possibility of establishing a permanent arrangement. On 30 September 1935 meetings held at Valentine and Merriman produced the impetus to organize the county's first Farm Bureau, through which cooperative sponsorship of extension work in the county and direction of the county agents' work would reside.<sup>87</sup> The United States Department of

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<sup>85</sup>Corwin Mead was a 1924 graduate of the College of Agriculture at the University of Nebraska. After teaching for two years, he purchased farm land in Chase County, Nebraska, where he engaged in farming until his appointment as Cherry County's agricultural agent in 1933. Mead was only 32 years of age at the time of his appointment, eleven years out of the University with experience at operating his own farm. *Who's Who in Nebraska* (Lincoln: Nebraska Press Association, 1940), 157.

<sup>86</sup>C. M. Mead, "Annual Report of County Agent: Cherry County, Nebraska, November 17, 1934 to November 16, 1935," Annual Reports of County Agents and Departments-Nebraska, Federal Cooperative Extension Service of the United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C., RG 11/4/4, University Special Collections Archive, Love Library, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, Nebraska [hereafter Mead 1934-1935]; Beel and Gale, 157; typed manuscript, Helen Drews, "History of Extension Work in Cherry County," County Extension file, Cherry County Historical Society Archives, Valentine Nebraska, 1-2.

<sup>87</sup>Mead 1934-1935, n.p.

Agriculture provided funds for county agents' wages, the state university assisted with the specialized training while the local organization could provide funding for incidental spending through county taxes or membership fees. Only after a local organization had elected its first slate of officers would the state recognize it as a legal authoritative body.<sup>88</sup>

Under these conditions, support of a strong local membership was essential, but not all Cherry County ranchers agreed with the decision. Many like cattleman Irwin Adamson of Cody believed that the claims made by the American Farm Bureau Federation did not appear to be directed to the Sandhills cattle producers' best interests. He argued that problems associated with their type of operation were vastly different from those of their cornbelt neighbors, for whom the services of the Bureau was better geared. Adamson and his supporters believed the organization offered little for the western rancher.<sup>89</sup>

However, Cherry County ranchers changed their views about the Farm Bureau when later that year the Bureau sponsored a successful 4-H calf show and cattle sale. Impressed by the results of the event, local ranchers grew more interested in the educational advantages and marketing opportunities the new organization could provide. Corwin Mead's efforts in organizing a local 4-H cattle program in 1934 silenced most cattlemen critics.<sup>90</sup> By involving young people in a variety of programs aimed at teaching

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<sup>88</sup>*Valentine Republican*, 31 January 1936

<sup>89</sup>Ibid. 24 January 1936. Adamson argued that the Farm Bureau had gone on record favoring a processing tax on cattle. As a newly elected director of the Nebraska Stockgrowers Association, he expressed the views of the state organization which also held a negative position on the entire AAA program. Ibid., *Valentine Republican*, 21 June 1935.

<sup>90</sup>C. M. Mead, "Annual Report of County Agent: Cherry County, Nebraska, November , 1935 to November , 1936," n.p. [hereafter Mead 1935-1936].

the latest innovations in livestock and range management, the youth organization brought new techniques to the home ranch level. The 4-H system reversed the traditional generational pattern of passing along knowledge and skills from older to younger ranchers. On a small and youthful scale, projects dealing with livestock nutrition and feeding regimen had the most visible impact on area ranchers. After witnessing the success of their youngsters' livestock projects, fathers and grandfathers were more inclined to adopt a new practice because of personal experience rather than from a scientist's suggestion.

Mead's educational extension work went beyond breeding and range aspects of the county's cattle industry. The extension service also provided important information and assistance in the marketing of cattle. While the marketable livestock population in the county had shown a decline in hogs, horses, and mules, cattle figures remained relatively stable in the thirties despite the depression, drought, government buy-out, and an outbreak of scabies.<sup>91</sup> Among ranchers who had integrated hog production into their cattle operation, only the largest remained after 1937. Production numbers of hogs marketed from the county fell from 38,090 in 1931 to 12,980 in 1937. Prices had reached the point where feeding hogs became unprofitable. The decline in horse and mule numbers had a very different reason. Rapid moves toward powered mechanization, tractors that powered mowers and like machinery made horsepower obsolete. Figures for the era showed a decline of over 4,000 horses in Cherry County over a seven-year period. Grass and forage unused as the equine population fell coupled with better progressive management

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<sup>91</sup>Burlington Railroad record for 1931-1937 of Livestock Population as of January 1st in counties served by the line, Kuska Collection, folder 81-B-4; H. Drew History of Extension, 3-4; Beel and Gale, 26

techniques enabled an increased number of cattle to be better produced in the county. See Table IV. The 25,605 head of cattle sold under the government purchasing program for a total of \$388,764 in 1934 actually encouraged modern business practices. Ranchers were able to cull their older and less productive stock, replacing them with better producing improved cows and bulls. Herd numbers quickly recouped through new purchases of breeding stock and a successful calving season.<sup>92</sup>

**TABLE IV**  
**Cattle Population for Cherry County, 1930-1937**

1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1936	1937
190,551	234,410	241,310	251,390	260,640	251,570	257,100

Burlington Railroad Report on Livestock in the Sandhills, 1931-37

## **SURVIVING THE THIRTIES**

During the 1930s, cattle increased steadily, at the same time human population and the number of farms and ranches in Cherry County declined. Other kinds of changes in the Sandhills environment had also taken place having a real impact on both productive capabilities and economic outcomes. While the drought conditions of the 1930s had not been quite as devastating in the Sandhills, damage to the fragile environment was nonetheless real and visible. In some cases, drought conditions added to and accelerated range deterioration initiated by past overgrazing and the destruction inflicted by ill-informed farmers.

Part of Agent Mead's work included implementing the federal government's Agricultural Conservation Program. While most other programs were directed toward farmers in the county's northern hard land area, conservation measures worked for

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<sup>92</sup>Reece, 72.

improvement of even pastures which involved participating ranchers. Lectures and demonstrations on the seeding of native grasses and legumes, such as alfalfa, as well as deferred and rotation grazing were part of the county agent's responsibility. Problems caused by continued drought and grasshopper infestation led more ranchers to look to the extension service for answers. However, necessary adjustments that would have eased ranchers' troubled pasture conditions were compounded because of other factors.

According to Mead's report filed in November, 1937, range improvement was "far more complicated" than it initially appeared. Involved were the problems of economics as well as education. While overgrazing could be reduced by adhering to grazing capacities, the prevailing drought when added to the low price levels worked to undermine real progress. Local ranchers who already adopted better practices, such as deferred grazing, were hard pressed when environmental conditions disrupted their attempts at conservation. Then, with prices not rebounding, many were forced to hold back a greater proportion of their stock to wait for better prices and adding extra pressure to already stressed rangelands. With this type of vicious cycle, a combination of climate and economics were defeating good range management objectives.<sup>93</sup>

In a report issued in 1940 by the University of Nebraska College of Agriculture, the extent of the drought and overgrazing damage was made public. The outcome of a study undertaken in 1937 by agronomists A. L. Frolik and W.O. Shepherd painted a clear picture. Their intentions were "to investigate floristic composition and the economic

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<sup>93</sup>According to Agent Mead's report, available statistics showed that 66 farms and ranches participated in the phase of agricultural conservation program dealing with restoring cropland back to grass. A total of 2,886 acres reverted to native grass production. In addition, 83 rancher/farmers seeded 2,240 acres to alfalfa in 1937 with 117 seeding 2,889.3 acres to sweet clover. C. M. Mead, "Annual Report of County Agent: Cherry County, Nebraska, November, 1936 to November, 1937," 43.



importance of the vegetation,” and their work showed the need for improved range management. Selecting an area of approximately 114,000 acres in eastern Cherry County that represented typical Sandhills grazing land, the scientists hoped to show the effects of livestock carrying capacity on productivity. Their chosen site, twenty-five miles south of Valentine, included the newly established Valentine Wildlife Refuge.<sup>94</sup>

Drawing upon earlier surveys and research in the vicinity of the study area, the researchers had early data to use as a tool for comparison. P. A. Rydberg’s 1895 expedition survey included land just south of the present site while Charles Bessey’s study with his students Pound and Smith provided descriptions of the flora found on dunes and the wet and dry valleys. Pound and Clements’ ecological analysis of Sandhills’ vegetation and the comprehensive study of the entire region by Pool in 1914 also provided valuable information comparisons. The more recent studies conducted by Keim, Frolik, and Beadle on the area’s hay regions, however, remained the only specific published data “on the relative importance of the major forage species or vegetative types in the Sandhills region.”<sup>95</sup>

Frolik and Shepherd found that “considerable change” occurred among certain species of dune-type grasses when compared to reports of earlier investigators. Grasses once dominant across the hills of the region were reduced, and in some cases significantly to no more than 16 percent density in 1937. In other cases species suffered severe reduction due to the recent drought. Similar devastating reductions of species found in

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<sup>94</sup>A. L. Frolik and W. O. Shepherd, *Vegetative Composition and Grazing Capacity of a Typical Area of Nebraska Sandhill Range Land: Research Bulletin 117* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska College of Agriculture, 1940), 3.

<sup>95</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

dry meadows and valleys also appeared to be the result of the dry conditions. The wet meadows showed the least disruption<sup>96</sup>

Although pronounced changes in vegetation had taken place, Frolik and Shephard concluded that sound conservation practices would prevent further deterioration.<sup>97</sup> For the Sandhills, as well as the entire Great Plains region, “the degree and timing of practices” held the paramount importance when focused on the improvement of native vegetation. Not only did it sustain the livestock industry but it also protected the soils and watersheds to assure continued production.<sup>98</sup>

As a more compelling study of the state of the range, the report gave further support to a balanced distribution between cattle and a range’s carrying capacity. In accordance to this new way of thinking, forage plants were to be looked upon as a manufacturing unit whose productivity depended on the condition of the soil and water resources. Management of livestock, the conduit between grass and meat, took on added importance because the destructive capacity of overstocking and overgrazing threatened to destroy the environment and lead to economic distress. Ranchers and stockmen needed an intimate knowledge of grazing capacities, livestock requirements, their proper distribution, and necessary supplemental feeding for efficient production. Problems resulting from “checkered patterns of ownership of land . . . , the result of improvident land-settlement policies,” were possible to overcome. New soil and range conservation

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<sup>96</sup>Ibid., 12-20.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>98</sup>B. W. Allred, *Range Conservation Practices for the Great Plains: M.P. 410* (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Department of Agriculture, 1940), 1-2.

legislation would offer ways to relieve pressures on overused ranges.<sup>99</sup>

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Rancher's and stockmen in Cherry County who weathered the tumultuous twenties and thirties reaped the benefits through perseverance. As part of a twentieth-century melodrama, the coming and going of Kinkaiders intent on farming actually fostered the first step toward development of the modern cattle industry there. After the 1920's peak census figures, subsequent data shows the measure of population and farmstead decline. At the same time, the size of ranches and stock farms increased, reducing misuse of environmental resources and decreasing pressures exerted on the land. During the same period, the new emphasis on range management and the county's function as a living environmental laboratory for scientific survey and experimentation signaled the start of a new era for cattlegrowers. As an important factor in the transition to a modern industry, area cattlemen enthusiastically integrated new programs to guarantee continued prosperity. For many, commitment to the land came to mean more than a deed, paying taxes, or building improvements; it included an informed effort to know and practice the principles of renewal and conservation.

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<sup>99</sup>Ibid., 18.

## THE LATER YEARS

Between 1920 and 1940, development of the cattle industry in Cherry County was spurred by economic challenges, changed by modern innovation and technology, and inspired by cooperative efforts manifested through locally distinctive organizations. During the two decades when environmental adaptation took on the new mantle of conservation and scientific management, the cattle-producing community also grappled with economic uncertainties and a market in crisis. Survival depended on the ability to adjust to the modern economic criteria of ways and means and methods.

The agricultural depression of the 1920s played an important role in the modernization process in Cherry County. Expansion of ranch holdings begun earlier gained impetus as debt-ridden land owners failed and sold out. Throughout the 1920s cattle ranches continued to expand as the number of cattlemen declined. Larger spreads allowed for better and more efficient production and encouraged better conservation of Sandhills range. The short economic recovery in 1926 followed by the deeper and wider depression of the 1930s further culled the ranching community leaving the most able and capable to meet modern cattle industry challenges.

While land possession and use were essential components for the modern equation, changes in methods and kinds of livestock were possibly the most important outcome of the 1920s. Flagging markets created by depression dynamics led to new types of cattle production and clearly established the widespread adoption of the cow-calf type of operation. More in tune with consumer demand for younger, better types of beef, the forced alteration of Cherry County's cattle production gave it a forcible push into the

modern industrial world.

While ranch expansion and new types of cattle operations answered some of the problems inherent in a successful operation, other factors were even more pressing during times of economic instability. Modernization and cost-cutting measures were equally as important to the agrarian producer as they were to the urban industrialist. While Cherry County ranchers held no control over market prices, they could eventually control their overhead costs in the area of transportation and marketing. Until a system of good roads was established, cattle producers had little choice but to ship to central markets by railroad. Under these conditions rail lines and market facilities took more than their fair share from cattlemen's returns. During times of particularly low prices, the total amount some ranchers received failed to cover even the cost of transport.

Once again external factors came into play to give greater options and accessibility for cattlemen seeking new alternatives. While federal and state agencies were motivated by establishing modern access for automobile and truck transportation on a continuous highway system, local Cherry County communities were intent on developing local farm-to-market roads to enhance their own opportunities. Ranchers benefitted in a number of important ways, not the least of which was providing accessibility to places of production for corn-belt buyers in the market for feeder cattle.

With greater emphasis of production on calves, Cherry County ranchers lured livestock feeders from the cornbelt. Better roads were an important factor in bringing farmer-feeders to the rangeland where more agreeable prices would suit both producer and the buyer. Coordination through a new and modern local organization eliminated the overhead charges of other cooperative organizations. Through modern techniques of

promotion and advertising, area cattle ranchers were able to maintain control over their own production, prices, and profit.

Years of depression had been an important transitional period for the county's modern cattle economy. Structural changes and new types of organization opened new levels of adaptation as Cherry County ranchers moved toward the greater modern challenges of the second half of the twentieth century. More experienced and cautious from the economic battering, they nonetheless pushed forward toward the goal of better production and greater profitability while remaining ever conscious of their environment in the Sandhills and its limitations.

## CHAPTER SIX THE CATTLE ECONOMY IN CHERRY COUNTY, 1920-1940

Between 1920 and 1940, the cattle industry in Cherry County made important strides toward modern development. Traditions rooted in the more primitive Iberian and Celtic herding cultures gave a distinctive character to America's western livestock economy. Where once based upon innovative land-use strategies, the business of breeding and raising cattle matured into a modern economic institution anchored in private land ownership.<sup>1</sup> Charles Wood, historian of the Kansas beef industry, wrote that settled ranchers embodied the essence of the modern cattle industry. While their predecessors had taken possession of vast ranges, paid few, if any taxes, and "wasted the lives of cattle and men," the modern capitalist rancher adopted new profit enhancing technologies. At the same time, market conditions dictated adaptive responses.<sup>2</sup>

Economic growth of the modern cattle industry consisted of complex interrelated developments. Investment replaced innovation in land-use arrangements. Ranch ownership, previously in the hands of absentee wealth entrepreneurs, became the province of the "small owner." New modes of commercial production replaced ecological exploitation, and improved methods of animal husbandry developed.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, external pressures to adapt to an integrated global economy forced producers to the

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<sup>1</sup> Terry G. Jordan, *North American Cattle-Ranching Frontiers: Origins, Diffusion, and Differentiation* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Wood, *The Kansas Beef Industry* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1980), 2.

<sup>3</sup> William Robbins, *Colony and Empire: The Capitalist Transformation of the American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 72, 77. Historian Donald Worster argues that the capitalist revolution in agriculture "spawned" the cowboy and ranching traditions of the West. Donald Worster, *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 35.

“edge of change,” subjected them to “mercurial fluctuations in prices,” and made them dependent on a modern capitalist system that emphasized the efficient organization of production to maximize profit.<sup>4</sup>

Land and livestock as factors of production enmeshed in a grass-meat complex. Ranches, the place of production, were extensive forms of agriculture that required sizable and unrestricted parcels of grazing land. Moreover, the animals themselves were both the finished commodity as well as the mechanism where “the more essential capital,” western grasslands, was processed for human consumption.<sup>5</sup> Separating cattle from the land could not feasibly take place.

With cattle carrying the grasslands to market, livestock production effectively transformed nature into a marketable commodity. Since production was centered in nature, a number of natural impediments hindered quick responses to market changes. Gestation and production cycles, for example, could not be modified to respond to either lagging supply or demands. Land also presented other types of impediment. Spatially it was a fixed resource that could be neither socially created nor multiplied. In the same way, it could not be transported to a more advantageous place. At times, natural and social conditions even prohibited investors from acquiring some properties required to expand production.<sup>6</sup>

To some economic theorists, these types of impediments hinder “concentration

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<sup>4</sup>Robbins, 14, 63. Robbins views the developing character of the Plains cattle trade as “changes in capitalist property relationships.” Robbins, 70.

<sup>5</sup>Susan Archer Mann, *Agrarian Capitalism in Theory and Practice* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 52; Worster, 40.

<sup>6</sup> Mann, 28, 3.



and centralization of production.” The agrarian sector undergoes development unlike that in industry. In industry, accumulation of capital takes place independently of centralization, whereas in land-based production a different pattern emerges. As government policy dictates that land be fragmented into small subdivisions and initial private ownership confined to small parcels, acquisition of large land capital is only accomplished by “centralizing” the smaller lots under one’s control.<sup>7</sup>

In the Sandhills the process leading to centralization began when homesteaders and Kinkaiders claimed unsuitably small parcels of land in the region. Centralization took place as livestock producers invested liquid capital to accumulate sufficient land to carry out efficient livestock production. As with other capitalist industries, the process continued to expand to the limits of profitability. The process of centralization required large investment and carried great risk.

## LAND ECONOMY

Although theoretical analysis held no sway with the pragmatic cattlemen of Cherry County, patterns of development followed the classical model. By 1920 the alienation of government land had virtually been completed in the county. Little remained open to claim. As land passed into private control and then was transferred to other owners, fenced pastures replaced open-range operations and farmers’ ill-conceived farmsteads. For some of the area cattlemen, consolidation of ranch properties and expansion of herds carried a burden of indebtedness. During the prosperous times prior to

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 29. Mann is summing up Karl Kautsky’s discussion of land in *Die Agrarfrage* (1899) here and quotes from the summary of “Selected Parts of Kautsky’s *The Agrarian Question*,” translated by J. Banaji, *Economy and Society* 5 (January 1976): 2-49.

1920, many believed that despite their great expansion if market prices held and conditions remained stable little risk was involved.

By then, modern ranch organization in Cherry County had moved past the preliminary stages in its adaptation to the Sandhills environment. The transition from the preindustrial exploitation of the land to the efficient utilization of resources began to encourage adoption of improved methods of ranch and livestock management. As land values began to rise, many found it an opportune time to either buy, sell, or consolidate. Often the acquisition of more and better land required the securing of loans. Easy credit appealed to a spirit of optimistic expansion. Celebrating their prosperity, few considered the dangers of overexpansion as land values continued their upward climb in concert with profitable market returns.

During the first two decades of the twentieth century the dollar value of the physical assets on Cherry County's ranches rose spectacularly. While land prices around 1900 hovered around \$7 an acre, within a few years, the cost of good ranch land entailed a heavier investment. In 1907 when John Kime sold the home place to his daughter and son-in-law, neighbors were shocked at the price of \$20 per acre. Daughter Lizzie Kime Wolfenden later recounted how "everybody thought we were crazy" to pay so high for land. Her father "had money enough that he didn't care if he got any more than interest." Kime held the mortgage at 10 percent interest for almost 35 years and despite the fact that he "kept cutting it down," when the ranch was finally paid off, the Wolfendens had paid

more in interest than the original purchase price.<sup>8</sup>

Although the Kime ranch deal represented an unusual circumstance, land values generally did climb after 1910. According to the Census of Agriculture: 1925-Nebraska, the value of all farm land and buildings in the county rose from \$15.5 million in 1910 to \$45.2 million in 1920. Average values of land and buildings in the same period doubled from \$7.61 per acre in 1910 to \$15.18 in 1920. Generally, however, most desirable land in Cherry County was typically valued between \$18 to \$26 an acre in the decade between 1910 and 1920.<sup>9</sup> As the potential for long-term prosperity appeared limitless, speculators and other investors increasingly vied for Cherry County rangelands. In the prevailing climate of rising values, investments in Sandhills ranches could return a handsome profit in just a few years. Local newspapers regularly heralded the latest sale transactions as another testament to the expanding local economy.

Ranch owners recognized a good opportunity only too well. Some who had spent years building their ranches discovered the prospect of windfall profits too tempting to resist. Willis Barnard might well have fit that description. From his original 1885 homestead claim twenty-three miles south of Valentine, he had built his ranch near Red Deer Lake into a 6,000 acre spread by 1906. Dealing in Texas cattle, Barnard shipped out

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<sup>8</sup>Interview with Lizzie Wolfenden recorded by Donald A. Cox, May 3, 1967 in Don Cox, ed., *Settling the Nebraska Sandhills: An Oral History*, (Kirkland, Washington: Knutson Enterprises. 1996), 179; Erma Wolfenden Cooley, "Kime-Schaller;" Jack Cooley, LeRoy Wolfenden, and Erma Wolfenden Cooley, "Cyrus and Lizzie Wolfenden" in Marianne Brinda Beel and Ruth Johnson Harms, eds. *A Sandhills Century: Book II: The People: A History of the People in Cherry County* (Valentine, Nebraska: Cherry County Centennial Committee, 1985), 225, 430.

<sup>9</sup>*United States Census of Agriculture: 1925: Reports for States with Statistics For Counties and a Summary for the United States: Part I: The Northern States: Nebraska* (Washington, D. C.: GPO, 1927), 1136. In 1925, boosters of Cherry County compared land prices of between \$15 and \$25 an acre to other rural areas with similar rates of production that went for prices that ranged from \$100 to \$250 an acre. *Cody Cowboy* (Cody, Nebraska), 21 August 1925.

thousands of head of livestock during the late open-range days.<sup>10</sup>

However, more than its value as range and hayland made the area attractive. Barnard's ranch was located in an area surrounded by lakes and marshes. Because of the suitable habitat for water fowl, a great number of migrating birds found it an ideal location for feeding and breeding purposes. After 1900, there was little doubt that the Red Deer Lake region of the county was most popular with hunters, a fact that brought attention and interest in the location. Since the 1890s a group of Lincoln, Nebraska, businessmen, members of the Rudge and Guenzel Gun Club, traveled to the area for a week or two of bird hunting. Striking out from the Wood Lake area, the hunters initially camped at Rat and Beaver Creeks, later discovering that the Ballard Marsh area provided better hunting. By 1904, the Lincoln hunters had built a cabin on the east end of Red Deer Lake and officially incorporated their club in 1905 when property was purchased. Until that year, the club most likely had some type of rental or lease arrangement with the Cochran family who had purchased several small ranches, including Barnard's' original quarter section and two additional 40-acre sections near Red Deer Lake in 1900.<sup>11</sup> P. J. Hindermarsh, a charter member of the Red Deer Hunting Club, described the Cochrans as a wealthy Chicago family who had acquired the property for their son. In 1901, they added a leased school section located in the northeast corner of the Red Deer Lake that served as both the headquarters for the ranch and later the location of the separate Red

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<sup>10</sup>Beel and Harms, 284.

<sup>11</sup>Beel and Harms, 284; draft of working manuscript on Sandhills hunting clubs, Jon Farrar of *NebraskaLand Magazine* [hereafter Farrar manuscript], in author's possession, 28-29.

Deer Hunting Club's cabin.<sup>12</sup>

Although the link between the Cochrans and the hunting club remains veiled, recent speculation holds that Frederick Woods and his sons, Frank, George, and Mark, served as the bridge between Chicago and Lincoln interests. Frederick Woods had been involved in Chicago real estate before arriving in Nebraska and most likely had business ties to the Cochrans there. His sons, charter members in the Red Deer Hunting Club, may have had the benefit of their father's connections in gaining access to the land where their clubhouse was to be located. Records show that the club held perpetual rights to use of the one acre on which their cabin stood along with hunting and fishing privileges that covered the entire ranch property.<sup>13</sup>

On May 10, 1906, the Cochran ranch property was transferred to George J. Woods. Twelve days later, the title was transferred to Central Improvement and Development Corporation, later Woods Brothers Realty, of Lincoln.<sup>14</sup> Like the Cochrans, the Woods saw the ranch as serving a dual purpose. As part of their growing agricultural investments, livestock production enhanced their profitability. As a social setting, the Red Deer Ranch afforded the businessmen a wonderful natural setting to entertain personal guests and business associates. More than likely, the Woods' avid sporting interests had some bearing on their decision to purchase the ranch.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Jon Farrar typewritten notes on Section 15, Township 30, Range 27, Cherry County, Farrar manuscript, 29.

<sup>13</sup>Farrar manuscript, 30.

<sup>14</sup>According to Farrar's research, the various parcels of land in Cherry County acquired by the Cochran family were recorded under the name of Mary Trowbridge Cochran. Farrar notes; Records of Nebraska Corporations, Nebraska Secretary of State, Lincoln, Nebraska.

<sup>15</sup>Farrar manuscript, 33.

In addition to new owners, the Red Deer Ranch soon underwent other changes. With different management, the ranch shifted from running a commercial herd to breeding registered Herefords. In view of the drop in prices on commercial markets after 1906, it appeared an excellent business decision. However, other reasons other than anticipation of the shifting market may have come into play. Just as with other Cherry County ranches that would be owned by eastern investors, breeding registered livestock appeared as a more “gentlemanly” endeavor that carried status and “boasting rights” along with the assurance of profitability.<sup>16</sup>

Sale of the Red Deer Ranch offered a lucrative opportunity for all parties concerned. In the initial development of the ranch, Barnard and the other early land owners most likely profited on their sale to the Cochran who fulfilled family objectives by providing a restless son with a business opportunity. When the Woods Brothers took title in 1906, the transaction not only served as a real estate investment that was destined to grow but also catered to their personal recreational tastes.

Land values increased over the following years due to unprecedented prosperity in the agricultural sector and wartime demands for increased production. In October, 1919, Joe Leader’s 3,360-acre ranch reportedly sold for \$26 an acre. Included in the total sale price were 147 head of registered Hereford cattle. The buyer, Henry Anderson, was also part owner of a 10,000-acre ranch estate in Custer County. The addition of the

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<sup>16</sup>Lila Drybread Churchill, “Wilbur and Celia Drybread,” in Beel and Harms, 121. The Drybreads were employees of the Red Deer Ranch between 1933 and 1940 when they left to establish their own spread near the Simeon neighborhood. *Ibid.* Following the drought of 1934, Woods reorganized as the Lancaster Corporation. When they sold the ranch to cattleman Ted McGinty, on February 11, 1939, the Red Deer Ranch included 11,000 acres at the home ranch with an additional 9,000 acres on the Niobrara River, east of Valentine. At a separate sale, the Woods Brothers sold off their 1,000 purebred Hereford cattle. Record of Nebraska Corporations, Nebraska Secretary of State, Lincoln, Nebraska; Beel and Harms, 121, 284.

Leader property brought valuable rangeland into his enterprise. Adjoining Anderson's new property was the 4,000-acre Rhody ranch which sold in 1918 for \$25 an acre. One local newspaper reported that the sale represented a tripling of 1910 land values and an increase of \$1 per acre in just one year.<sup>17</sup> However, just two months later, two ranches twenty-three miles southwest of Cody went for a more modest price. The combined total of 12,760 acres for both ranches included 7,500 deeded acres and 1,112 acres of leased school land that sold for \$130,000 or between \$15-\$18 an acre. Good pastures and several large lakes made the ranch property a prime location. Moreover, improvements, reportedly "to be among the best in that part of the country," added to the properties' desirabilities.<sup>18</sup>

Consolidation of acreage into well organized and efficient ranch operations entailed different types of land tenure arrangements. While most of Cherry County's land area was under private ownership, ranchers required the flexibility of adding or withdrawing land in production as herd sizes contracted and expanded. Rental of pastures, haylands, and even entire spreads was a common business arrangement in the area. In the year 1926-27, the average rent collected was calculated at \$118 per section. At the same time, leasing fees on the same measure of land averaged \$88. Often other arrangements were secured for hay land. Most popular among the local ranchers was the shared basis of rental where both the owner and renter divided hay production.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>*Valentine Republican* (Valentine, Nebraska), 10 October 1919, 1. Evidently the newspaper lacked the information about the Kime-Wolfenden family sale in 1907.

<sup>18</sup>*Cody Cowboy* (Cody, Nebraska), 5 December 1919.

<sup>19</sup>Harold Hedges, *Economic Aspects of the Cattle Industry of the Nebraska Sandhills*, Experimental Station Bulletin 231 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska College of Agriculture, 1928), 31.

As an adjunct to ranchers' tenure arrangements, state and federal lands were also available to lease. State controlled school sections and federal land in the Niobrara National Forest and Fort Niobrara Game Preserve had their own leasing protocol. In the case of the school lands, sections 16 and 36 in each township, leasing arrangements were part of a long ongoing controversy. At first opened to purchase, those sections not sold were leased by county commissioners on a twenty-five year term. Rental was set at six percent of assessed evaluation to be paid annually. Every five years the leased land was reappraised with annual rents adjusted respectively. In 1897, the state legislature enacted the Sheldon School Land Law aimed at stopping the sale of the state lands that remained and instead established a perpetual leasing system.<sup>20</sup> Often state land sections remained under the leased control of ranchers whose deeded property surrounded the parcel.<sup>21</sup>

Federal policies for the Niobrara National Forest and the Fort Niobrara Animal Preserve placed greater restrictions on the tenants who leased government grazing land. Applicants were limited to specific numbers and types of grazing animals. When H. G. Wallingford, a rancher in the Lake Precinct of Cherry County, received certification of his requested five-year grazing permit in April, 1917, additional provisions had been added. Restricted to certain areas of the National Forest, the rancher could only graze the 250 head specified on his application. New regulations dictated that the rancher must agree "to furnish pure bred bulls of the same breeding as other permittee in the same

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<sup>20</sup>Jon A. Souder and Sally K. Fairfax, *State Trust Lands: History, Management, and Sustainable Use* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 119; "Board of Educational Lands and Funds" in *Nebraska Blue Book, 1974-1975* (Lincoln: Nebraska Legislative Council), 497. Cherry County had 240,000 acres of state school sections under lease in 1915. Addison E. Sheldon, *Land Systems and Land Policy in Nebraska* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1936), 276. In 1996, the Nebraska Unicameral finally enacted legislation for the sale of these state lands.

<sup>21</sup>Telephone interview with Cort Ewing, Cherry County School Section appraiser, April 19, 1996.



pasture.” Failure to comply would have brought cancellation of the permit.<sup>22</sup>

Subsequent permits revealed a growing number of stipulations.<sup>23</sup> During periods of unusual stress special requests could be considered. Wallingford, for example, requested temporary accommodations for additional cattle in both 1920 and 1921. As one of the county’s earliest ranchers, he had amassed property in both Nebraska and South Dakota. His home place, Cross Anchor Ranch, served as the headquarters for his multiple range operation. In addition to deeded land, the rancher had arranged for other accommodations for his cattle. Along with leased land in the forest reserve, Wallingford wintered cattle on pasture rented from Ernest Kirk, north of Cody, Nebraska. For a time, his arrangements even included rental of pastures and lots on the Valentine Experiment Station Farm.<sup>24</sup>

Temporary permits for 68 head of cattle from May 1st to November 30th, 1920, and May to November in 1921 in addition to his usual lease arrangement may have been the result of the declining market and Wallingford’s plan to avert losses.<sup>25</sup> Decisions to withhold cattle from markets had far reaching consequences. With the growing emphasis

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<sup>22</sup>Carbon copy of United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Grazing Permit issued to H.G. Wallingford, Lake Nebraska, April 28, 1917, Grazing Permits files, RG95, 6NS-95-003, Box 4, United States National Archives, Central Plains Region, Kansas City, Missouri.

<sup>23</sup>See Annual Grazing Permit for Joe Hinton, Cody, Nebraska, April 21, 1927, Grazing Permit files, Box 4. Strict regulations continued to be imposed on lease holders after the passage of the Taylor Grazing Act in 1934. See Application for Grazing Permit, Boise Lord, Simeon, Nebraska, May 16, 1940, Grazing Permits files, Box 5.

<sup>24</sup> Carbon copy of United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Grazing Permit issued to H.G. Wallingford, Lake Nebraska, May 22, 1920, April 29, 1921, Grazing Permits files, Box 4; “Wallingford-Huffman” in Beel and Harms, 411.

<sup>25</sup>Carbon copy of United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Grazing Permit issued to H.G. Wallingford, Lake Nebraska, May 22, 1920, April 29, 1921, Grazing Permits files, Box 4. The Forest Preserve had definite maximum limits on the number of head that were allowed to graze on certain pastures. Special permits were required for adding to numbers of cattle originally requested and permitted.

on proper management, range capacities and the amount of winter feed available became important factors in making the decision. Land values and rental and leasing fees were part of the increasingly complex equation of profitability.

Ranchers with full control of range and hayland that comprised their operations had some advantage. Planning and assurance of future feed supplies removed the uncertainty experienced by renters. Observers also believed that land under the control of owners was more carefully handled. However, certain disadvantages to ownership, such as taxes and interest among others, made rental or lease arrangements highly attractive. One study showed that the difference between cost associated with owned land, rentals, and leased property was wide enough to give “renters a distinct advantage.”<sup>26</sup>

Land ownership became more concentrated with fewer and more specialized operations after 1920. At the same time, the post-World War I depression in the agrarian sector strapped most livestock producers, although they generally fared better than dirt farmers. Sharp declines in market prices brought a drastic and unexpected turn of fortunes. Although prices began to improve by 1922, depression conditions in all of agriculture prevailed until 1926. Generally, slowly rising prices had a palling effect on the local cattle industry. Livestock now had a lower debt-reducing power than when loans were first contracted, and interest rates had to be paid from greatly reduced ranch incomes. Under these trying conditions local stockmen who engaged in marginal operations were soon forced out of business.<sup>27</sup> Those with the ability and foresight to make adjustments and adapt to the changing conditions provided an important

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<sup>26</sup>Hedges, 31.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 14.

contribution toward moving the industry into the modern era.

### ADJUSTMENT TO A CHALLENGING ECONOMY

Some cattlemen in Cherry County remembered a six-year “downgrade” of cattle prices as beginning in the fall of 1919.<sup>28</sup> Most viewed the initial drop as a temporary fluctuation of market activity. Land prices remained high and sales of ranch property continued at a brisk and profitable level. Climate conditions appeared to be favoring the region since area farm and livestock producers escaped drought conditions that sorely pressed other western locations. In fact, the practice of moving cattle from neighboring states onto the county’s surplus of grasses and hay often supplemented stockmen’s income. Those cattlemen whose ranges dried up because of lack of moisture contracted with Sandhills ranchers to feed their cattle on the region’s surplus of hay and grass.<sup>29</sup>

In 1921, ranchers from Wyoming sought out Cherry County land owners in order to feed their breeding stock . In the Brownlee and Goose Creek areas hay sold that season for \$12 per ton “in the stack.” However, not all area ranchers were willing to sell, and some of the drought stricken ranchers were only able to arrange for slough grasses and rushes for winter feed.<sup>30</sup> Others, rather than to face the risk of total loss, chose to sell off

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<sup>28</sup>Typed copy, Dan Adamson published letter to the editor of the *Omaha Journal-Stockman*, 6 April 1929, Adamson file, Cherry County Historical Society Archives, Valentine, Nebraska.

<sup>29</sup>Family lore of the George W. Keller family tells of the southeastern Cherry County settler who never became a big cattleman but did summer steers for others on his land. In 1900, the VVV cattle company of northwest South Dakota shipped 4,000 head to the Wood Lake stockyard. Keller took 1,400 three-year-old steers to winter at \$5 a head. Undated article by John F. Keller, “Early History of South Cherry County (1884-1967),” Keller file, Cherry County Historical Society Archives.

<sup>30</sup>Unpublished typed manuscript, Goose Creek George or George P. Hanna, “Bulls, Bags, and Mountain Oysters or Jerns [sic] From the Sandhills: A True History and Autobiography of an Old Cow Man of the Sandhills of Nebraska,” Nebraska Cattlemen’s Association Archives, Alliance, Nebraska, 116.

their herds instead. One Newcastle, Wyoming, rancher offered to sell his “cows with calves thrown in” for \$30 a head with the guarantee that if any died while in transit he would refund the price paid for the animal. Although the cattle made it through the trip to Nebraska in fair condition, a shift in Sandhills’ weather conditions threatened the herd. A miscalculation in shipping stranded the animals on unsuitable range and early heavy snows prevented the herd from “rustling” up their own feed. Without adequate nourishment, the already drought stressed animals further declined. Rather than loose the lot, the new owner took a chance and shipped to market after only a few weeks. Despite the efforts to salvage the herd, the deal eventually resulted in a \$500 loss.<sup>31</sup>

Marketing the cattle at less than optimum time had been only one of a series of errors for the Cherry County stockman. An impulsive purchase and lack of planning had set the stage for financial losses. Under the best of circumstances, cattle coming out of the drought area ideally would have required a long period to recoup from their distressed conditions. Since weather conditions prevented a return to normal feeding rations, the stock had not even begun to be rehabilitated. As a result, they were shipped to market as an underweight and motley lot. Under different circumstances, the cattle could have made a profit for their speculator owner. However, the poor condition of the livestock and the depressed market prices were a loosing combination.

Even after prices rebounded, ranchers continued to rent and lease range to drought-stricken cattlemen. Word of the Sandhills’ dependable conditions extended well beyond the reaches of the Great Plains. In 1925, local newspapers reported that a large

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 119.

rancher from the southwest intended to bring his cattle to Cherry County to escape drought conditions on his arid range. John Neal, manager of the Arizona enterprise, the Yavapai Land and Cattle Company, accompanied the first shipment of four to five hundred head to the Sandhills. Severe drought threatened an additional ten thousand animals on the Arizona ranch. Upon inspection of the leased land south of Cody, Nebraska, Neal reportedly commented that he had seen more grass in an afternoon drive in Cherry County than he would find even under normal conditions in Arizona.<sup>32</sup>

Over the next two years, a growing number of Yavapai cattle grazed Cherry County grasses and hay. Moving from the Cole family corporation ranch on Medicine Creek, north of Cody, to the Quigley pasture on Boiling Spring to the south, the livestock continued to make news. With an additional 3,000 head pastured further south on the Calamus River, the Arizona ranch company drew public attention. When the company's local manager, Tom Watson, purchased hay from John and William Shangru later that season, a reported 1,200 head would be trailed to the haylands. Accounts also noted that approximately 1,500 head remained on the Cole ranch with an additional 1,200 pastured on the Frank Yancey spread in Todd County, South Dakota.<sup>33</sup>

With the extent of their leased operation, the Yavapai Company's active involvement during the 1926 season was no surprise. In just three days in September, 32 railroad cars were loaded out with the company's cattle destined for eastern markets. On Saturday, September 19, twenty cars loads left for Chicago while twelve more were

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<sup>32</sup>*Cody Cowboy*, 25 September 1925.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 2 October 1925; 30 October 1925; 14 May 1926.

shipped to Missouri River markets on the following Monday.<sup>34</sup> Because of well conditioned livestock and the confidence of better cattle prices, the fortunate Arizona cattle company could be assured of a profitable return. Good management practices in Cherry County had reversed the company's drought-instigated risk of failure. By relocating stock to the region and providing for suitable accommodations, ranch managers demonstrated a practiced expertise.

They had arrived at a time of improved market conditions that further encouraged their success. Over the previous five or six years, depression conditions caused an erratic market situation that unsettled the local cattle economy. Adding to the local dilemma, land values plummeted. Pastures that had been purchased earlier for near \$20 brought \$5 or less during the early 1920s and left ranchers with high debts. For some, even selling out would not satisfy their obligations. Because of the high overhead costs, cattle bought at \$28 a head in 1922, cost ten dollars a head to winter and when ready for market, failed to get prices that covered their cost.<sup>35</sup> Marketing was risky.

Decisions about whether to hold over or send cattle to market were influenced by rapidly changing conditions. During the period of downward moving prices most area ranchers appeared to be trapped in a losing game. Carrying over cattle for another season might entail higher overhead costs. At the same time, throwing cattle on a glutted market could spell financial ruin as prices fell. Recent past experience had not prepared ranchers for the prevailing conditions. However, while economic conditions during the first half of the 1920s sorely pressed ranchers in Cherry County, a significant positive change

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 24 September 1926.

<sup>35</sup>Beel and Harms, 26.

resulted as well. Many area stockmen were forced to liquidate large parts of their herds to keep on an even keel, and this helped establish a more productive and profitable business operation. It had an important effect on the entire region. Necessity required local stockmen to adopt fully the calf-yearling phase of the cattle industry. Many believed they had now found a better market environment by selling feeder cattle.

Local rancher Dan Adamson related the experiences of area cattlemen during the early 1920s. In a 1929 letter to the editors of *The Omaha Daily Journal-Stockman*, he explained how the move to a different type of livestock operation gained favor. In recounting his personal experience of 1921, Adamson told how he bought a number of “top Hereford yearlings” for \$55 per head to grass-fatten and sell the next year. The results of his speculation were hardly what he anticipated, for the \$48 he received at the Omaha market amounted to a significant loss. In order to “meet his running expenses,” cattlemen were forced to double up on their next shipments. Instead of just marketing four-year-old steers, they would also include three-year-olds. When poor prices continued to be a problem the next season, market shipments included “threes and twos.”<sup>36</sup>

Adamson explained that most of the area cattlemen were doing business this way. For some, the weight of heavy mortgage debt brought them “to the end of their rope” and they quit.<sup>37</sup> In other cases, those who managed to survive did so at a cost. In order to survive they sold everything they had to lighten the extra burden of heavy indebtedness. Left with little alternative but to restock and hope for better prices, many heeded the advice of past advocates of purebred animals and started to rebuild herds with quality

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

stocker cattle. Just as significant was the modification in the type of operation that most ranchers soon adopted. Recognizing market preferences, Cherry County stockmen transformed their range operation from grass-fattening mature animals to emphasize breeding herds and their offspring, the cow-calf mode of production. For the most part, the introduction of purebred cattle and the transition to breeding herds and calf production marked the real birth of Cherry County's modern cattle industry.<sup>38</sup>

### **MODERN CATTLE OPERATIONS AND OTHER ECONOMIC CHALLENGES**

For many Cherry County ranchers, marketing older cattle had been an expensive proposition during the early 1920s. Anticipation of profits that did not materialize led to uncertainty, confusion, and even failure. Ranchers who had built a stronger financial base and gambled on the future expanded their operations by increasing the size of their property holdings while embracing the new cow-calf mode of production. However, all were challenged to make better managerial decisions and were forced to change their attitudes. Livestock production on the Sandhills changed from a focus on exploitation of grasses and animals to one of careful use of natural resources in the breeding and raising of quality livestock. Their purpose was no longer aimed at simply maximizing their net incomes but to planning for the future.<sup>39</sup> One Omaha newspaper noted that the "carefree cowboy days" were a thing of the past. Modern business, had in fact, "invaded the

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<sup>38</sup>Beel and Harms, 121. Wilbur Drybread marked 1924 and the purchase of the J. W. Greenleaf registered herd of Herefords from Greenburg, Kansas, as the Red Deer Ranch's real beginnings.

<sup>39</sup>Rainer Schickele, "Farmers Adaptation to Income Uncertainty," *Journal of Farm Economics*, 33 (August, 1950): 362.



ranch."<sup>40</sup>

Results of scientific study and experiments offered information and knowledge that translated into effective cost-saving methods. Like soil and plant conservation, animal husbandry suggested new directions. Where cattlemen had accepted that better quality stock brought higher prices, many were not aware that they also reduced the costs of production. Herefords and Angus converted feed into meat and fat more efficiently than less well bred animals. Subsequent feeding tests throughout the cattle-producing states also revealed the cost-saving characteristics of the cow-calf operation. A series of trials calculated the amount of feed required by livestock at different stages of growth. While calves required only 64 percent as much feed per unit of gain as heavyweight cattle, yearlings consumed 75 percent as much. Once reaching medium weight, percentages increased to 87 percent. The results of the tests showed a greater efficiency in weight gain among the younger animals.<sup>41</sup>

Better breeding produced animals which matured earlier and reached a marketable weight sooner. In effect they made more effective use of smaller amounts of grass and supplemental feeds. In this way, ranchers who converted to a calf and yearling production were making more efficient use of natural resources than they had in the past. In fact, the most successful ranches had larger percentages of total capital invested in quality livestock while at the same time not always being among the largest operations.

Operating a modern, efficient ranch grew in complexity. Scientific and technical

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<sup>40</sup>*Omaha Sunday Bee*, Magazine Section, 25 July 1926, 2.

<sup>41</sup>Austin Allyn Dowell and Knute Bjorka, *Livestock Marketing* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1941), 18; Hedges, 38.

range and herd management were gaining respectability among Cherry County ranchers. Recent experience showed that in order to maintain successful operations cattlemen had to adjust to new market relationships and requirements. For many, the link became increasingly clear. Problems and decisions about investments and management were not distinct from those involved with marketing. For the successful livestock producer, they were all interconnected.

Harold Hedges of the University of Nebraska's Department of Rural Economics reenforced this reality. His 1928 report on the Sandhills cattle industry focused primarily on Cherry County. Hedges concluded that while it was most important for a successful cattle operation to maintain an efficient, economic level of production, it was just as necessary to keep production in step with market demands. Fundamental knowledge of price-making factors encouraged better planning for the marketing of stock.<sup>42</sup> Since market preferences had moved away from more mature animals to the feeding of calves and yearlings instead, Cherry County producers prepared to meet the demand.

Even as early as 1925, the change of focus from grass-fattened cattle to a new type of production restored some stability to area ranchers. The advantage of location and the close ready market of corn-belt cattle feeders gave producers a great advantage. Although calf prices had been reduced in the early twenties, by 1929 the average price had surpassed the highest levels reached in 1919.<sup>43</sup> For ranch investors, uncertainty over the past few years was replaced by new optimism. In July, 1929, Logan Musser of the

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<sup>42</sup>Hedges, 30.

<sup>43</sup>*Nebraska Agricultural Statistics: Historical Record: 1866-1954* (Lincoln: State-Federal Division of Agricultural Statistics, 1957), 155. The data is calculated for Nebraska farmers with a designation that includes the state's ranching population.

Kansas City banking family and owners of the Fawn Ranch in western Cherry County spoke about the area's cattle economy. He believed that despite the unfortunate ruin of many cattlemen during the previous agricultural depression, some positive developments had resulted. From a position of "sheer desperation," the region's cattlemen had moved forward with good results. Notably most had discarded some of their "time-worn, useless, and burdensome practices" to adopt a better way to produce cattle. As a result, ranchers operated from the vantage of greater stability as restored confidence in markets allowed for a reasonable profit. To Musser's way of thinking there existed indications for even greater possibilities.<sup>44</sup>

Other shared in the optimism. In October, 1929, John Bachelor sold 1,800 head of one and two-year-old feeder steers for \$140,000. Locally, the sale was hailed as the largest ever by one owner at the Northwestern Livestock Sale Company in Valentine. Bachelor received an average of \$77 per head, indicative of the return of good prices.<sup>45</sup>

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*"Hooker County Tribune* (Mullen, Nebraska), 26 July 1929. The Musser-Mosler Cattle Company's two ranches, the 30,000-acre Star Ranch north of Lakeside in Sheridan County and the Fawn Lake Ranch comprised of 60,000 acres in southwestern Cherry County, were examples of balanced operations. Mosler, an early merchant who came to Valentine in 1884, found his interests moving toward the cattle business. By the 1890s, he had taken up a homestead claim in Sheridan County and entered into a partnership with Charles Tully, well-known stockman of western Nebraska. In 1903, Logan Musser joined into the partnership arrangement. When Tully died in 1917, Musser and Mosler reorganized their corporation into the Musser-Mosler Company.

Musser and his family held interests in the Cherry County Fawn Lake Ranch. With a long family history in the banking business, the Musser investment most likely fueled the local lore that the ranch was financed with Kansas City money. Reputed to have several part-owners, by the time of the Mosler-Musser arrangement, the ranch appeared to be under Musser's control. Under the new coalition both ranches were operated under one management. Functionally, the ranches differed. The Star dealt solely with feeding steers while the Fawn Lake Ranch was involved in a breeding operation.

Although each ranch relied on different types of management techniques, they both depended on stock representing years of upbreeding. Only Hereford bulls had been used to propagate the Star and Fawn Lake herds. However, when prices reached an unprecedented high in 1918-19, the "cattle were sold close," depleting the herds on both ranches. Restocking the ranches became a long process with cattle added each year. Natural reproduction, a long and risk-filled process, may have been augmented by purchasing purebred stock from the growing number of breeders of registered Herefords in the county. *Omaha Sunday Bee*, Magazine Section, 25 July 1926, 2.

<sup>45</sup> Marianne Brinda Beel and Barbara Kime Gale, eds., *A Sandhill Century: Book I: A History of Cherry County, Nebraska* (Valentine, Nebraska: Cherry County Centennial Committee, 1986), 26.

P.H. Young's November 1st registered Hereford sale that same year brought in \$96,000. Heifer calves went for an average of \$47 a head while steer calves sold for \$70.50. Young's yearlings averaged \$74.25, cows brought in \$91.50 each, and those with calves \$115.25.<sup>46</sup>

Musser's enthusiasm for possible new levels of prosperity apparently was short lived. Prices for calves in 1930 dropped almost \$2 per hundredweight from the 1929 average of \$12.10. With prices at such low levels, some saw the future of their ranching business as "dark as a prospectors towel." Continuing in the downward spiral, prices plummeted to below 1909 levels. By 1934 a new low point of \$4.45 per hundredweight had been reached.<sup>47</sup> The added weight of price declines sealed the fate of those ranchers still reeling from the debt from the past depression. As Charles Wood noted, survival in the twenties hardly prepared farmers and ranchers for what they faced in the thirties.<sup>48</sup>

Generally, many ranchers strapped by previous debt faced financial ruin by 1933. Even some of the most astute ranchers were operating with the threat of total loss looming over their heads. Some, like Cherry County's Ray Sanders, realized that it would be foolhardy to hope to pay off the heavy debt. Acting with self-confidence, Sanders dissolved his family's partnership and turned back the ranch to mortgage holders. Through shrewd maneuvers, he saved everything except the land. As if starting up anew, Sanders first arranged to rent the ranch he sold and through hard work and careful planning began to recoup his losses. Others like George Hanna from the Brownlee area

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 48, 165, 169.

<sup>47</sup>*Nebraska Agricultural Statistics*, 155.

<sup>48</sup>Wood, 188.

continued to operate as usual but at a heavy cost. In 1933, even with slightly better prices, Hanna sold 242 head for \$17 apiece and found that after expenses and taxes there was no profit.<sup>49</sup>

With almost a third, or 32 percent, of Cherry County's capital invested in livestock, falling cattle prices had a powerful impact on the entire area.<sup>50</sup> While an average of \$9.40 a hundred weight was paid for cattle in 1930, that price dropped to \$4.95 two years later.<sup>51</sup> Conditions worsened in 1934 when the hay harvest was reduced by 10 to 50 percent. Even the reliable wet valleys failed to provide half of their usual crop. Despite the fact that the Sandhills area carried less cattle than their capability could support, the shortfall in hay production could have a serious effect.<sup>52</sup> Without sufficient hay for winter feeding, supplemental feeds would be required. However, few ranchers had the resources to buy the necessary supply and faced the prospect of heavy livestock losses. At the same time, selling off herds at lower than cost of production looked like the quickest way to financial ruin. Low prices compounded the disastrous shortage of roughage and a significant number of ranchers faced a no-win situation.<sup>53</sup>

Although drought conditions were evident throughout the entire county in 1934, the farmers and ranchers located on the hard land area felt the greatest impact. Sections

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<sup>49</sup>"George Hanna" in Beel and Harms, 175. A bill of sale dated 30 October 1933 showed the selling price and the number of cattle sold.

<sup>50</sup>"Basic Information for a Land Use Program, Cherry County," Table 12, Agricultural Extension Service Collection, 11/6, University of Nebraska Archives, Love library Lincoln, Nebraska.

<sup>51</sup>Beel and Gale, 165.

<sup>52</sup>Letter Val Kuska, Burlington Railroad Colonization Agent to L. O. Murdock, Alliance, Nebraska from, 3 July, 1927, Kuska Collection, MS. 1431, Box 254, folder 57 B-4, Nebraska State Historical Society. Kuska told of low ratio of cattle to carrying capacity in the Sandhills region even after a return to more prosperous times.

<sup>53</sup>Reece, 71.

located near Nenzel and the Niobrara National Forest also experienced severe conditions, illustrating the county's environmental variation. Area newspapers reporting on local conditions often noted that in Sandhills regions most cattlemen still had feed for livestock. While pastures and haylands in the northeastern portion of the county were burnt-out and lost, ranchers like those on the Three Bar Ranch in the Simeon area were able to put up 80 stacks of hay that summer.<sup>54</sup> Consequently, those who held stock in the most effected regions were eager to sell their threatened cattle at almost any cost when an emergency purchase program was initiated in July, 1934.

Earlier that summer the nation's cattle producers' problems reached crisis proportions. Falling prices had led feeders to cut the numbers of livestock shipped off to slaughter markets. As a result, between 1930 and 1934 cattle numbers in the United States increased by nearly 13 million head. Compounded by drought driven declines in grain and pasturage, the reality of starving livestock and a failing cattle industry spurred federal agencies to take emergency actions. Relief measures and supplementary production controls had already been established for hogs and grains. However, cattle had not been initially included on the government's list of basic commodities under the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933.<sup>55</sup> Pressure from stockmen's organizations forced

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<sup>54</sup>*Valentine Republican* (Valentine, Nebraska), 27 July 1934.

<sup>55</sup>Cattle were added to the list of basic commodities through an amendment of the Agricultural Adjustment Act on 7 April 1934. Added as the Jones-Connally Cattle Act, its provisions authorized \$200 million for programs designed to reduce the number of cattle on the nation's farms and ranches. An additional \$50 million was appropriated to implement the emergency purchase program. Murray R. Benedict and Oscar C. Stine, *The Agricultural Commodity Programs: Two Decades of Experience* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1956), 202. Also see D. A. FitzGerald, *Livestock Under the AAA* (Washington, D. C.: Brooking Institute, 1935), particularly Chapter Ten, "Drought and the Cattle Program," 192-216. F. E. Mollin, "Agricultural Adjustment Program as Cattle-Producers View It," *The Producer*, 15 (November 1933): 6-9. Mollin's article was taken from his address to the Institute of American Meat Packers, 24 October 1933, and discusses the problems of western cattlemen in the face of the inconsistencies of domestic allotment bills and their effect on the western cattle industry.

reconsideration of policy. Steps to bring cattle under the commodity programs were well under way when the crisis of the unusually severe drought became unmistakably apparent. Willing to respond at last, the government put extensive emergency plans into action. By July of 1934, 786 counties in twenty-one states had been designated as emergency relief areas. Of the almost 1.4 million head purchased by the government (31.4 percent of all cattle on farms in the affected counties), ten percent, those animals designated diseased or nearly starved and unfit for human consumption, were immediately slaughtered.<sup>56</sup>

The Cherry County stockmen who lost most from the drought rushed to the County Agent's office to register their livestock for the sale. One local newspaper reported that by August 17 over 1,600 hundred head of their cattle had been sold to government agents with an additional 600 scheduled to be purchased by the end of the next day.<sup>57</sup> While most ranchers in the Sandhills region did not anticipate selling their livestock, some of their estimated 200,000 to 300,000 head of livestock would have to be moved if high temperatures and dry conditions continued.<sup>58</sup> Because of the threat and lack of financial resources to contract out their cattle, some Sandhills ranchers offered their livestock for emergency sale. In more than a few cases the program gave new vigor to ranch operations as stockmen could cull their herds of older and less productive stock and redirect their efforts to more suitable production. Within weeks, drought emergency

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<sup>56</sup>"Government Buying of Drought Livestock," *American Cattle Producer*, 14 August 1934, 13. Especially high percentages of condemned livestock were in some of the western states. New Mexico had 58.1 percent of its government purchased livestock slaughtered; Utah, 32.9 percent, Texas, 25.4 percent, Arizona, 25.2 percent, Colorado, 17.1 percent, and Wyoming, 11.5 percent.

<sup>57</sup>*Valentine Republican*, 17 August 1934.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*

cattle purchases in Cherry County amounted to 25,605 head with a total \$388,764 paid to farmers and ranchers. The average price of \$15.18 per head remained far below returns seen during better times and, for many ranchers, was not enough to pay the loans against the cattle they sold. Some producers of better quality livestock even complained that classifications and appraisals at sale time seemed “downright unjust.” However, for most, the arrival of the government’s payment checks gave a real reason for celebration.<sup>59</sup>

While some animals were immediately disposed of, a greater number were shipped to regional packing houses for slaughter, processing, and distribution as relief foods for hungry Americans. On the local level, the government’s buy-out also brought other relief benefits beyond the most obvious payments to stockmen. By reducing the number of livestock dependent on reduced grass and hay provisions, the animals that remained could be adequately fed. At the same time, ranchers were able to improve their herds by quickly eliminating inferior and older animals at a better price than many expected. Although annual rainfall continued to be below usual levels, the return of near normal precipitation patterns in 1935 restored productivity to the grasslands. Coupled with the newly streamlined herds, the revitalized ranges offered reassurance.<sup>60</sup>

Ranchers who had entered into joint-feeding arrangements in 1930 resumed the practice as a hedge against market fluctuations and inadequate prices.<sup>61</sup> At the same time,

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<sup>59</sup>Reece, 72; Nellie Snyder Yost, *The Call of the Range: Nebraska: The Story of the Nebraska Stock Growers Association* (Denver: Sage Books, 1966), 250. Nebraska producers through the Nebraska Stock Growers’ Association appealed for some type of adjustment that once granted raised the top price offered from \$20 to \$24.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup>News and Feature Service, Farm and Home Division Bulletin, 21 July 1932, University of Nebraska Agricultural College Extension Service, Lincoln, Nebraska, Agricultural Extension Service Collection, Extension Notes files, RG 11/10/1, University of Nebraska Archive, Love Library, Lincoln, Nebraska.



those involved in the local marketing arrangements continued in their effort to encourage direct-sale transactions and effectively reduce high overhead costs. However, more remained to be done in order to assuage radical income variability that repeated years of depression had rendered almost unbearable.

As the number of cattle and calves on feed in the state drastically declined, Cherry County producers faced a new challenge. While 352,000 head of cattle were on grain in eastern Nebraska between 1931 and 1935, the number dropped to 228,000 within the next four years.<sup>62</sup> As the market for feeder calves and yearlings began to shrink after 1935, stockmen who were in the process of rebuilding their herds faced new competitive challenges. By 1938 the demand for feeder calves and yearlings had nearly reached its historic low point leading local ranchers to find new ways to draw attention and buyers to their livestock production.

Cattle numbers declined nationally by 11 percent during the period between 1935 and 1939,<sup>63</sup> but records for Cherry County reveal a different pattern. When the total of livestock recorded in the county fell in 1934, the number reflected the government emergency purchases as well as outshipment of cattle under regular sales agreements. Even though prices were well below the break-even level, ranchers continued to market their livestock out of necessity. During the period that drought-ravaged stockmen were clamoring for relief, livestock continued to be shipped into Cherry County. Although reduced livestock shipments to Valentine (three carloads in 1933 jumping to eight in

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<sup>62</sup>Robery M. Finley and Ralph D. Johnson, *Changes in the Cattle Feeding Industry in Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska College of Agriculture, 1963), 29, chart 7.

<sup>63</sup>Jimmy M. Skaggs, *Prime Cut: Livestock Raising and Meatpacking in the United States, 1607-1983* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1986), 144.

1934) reflected the troubled times, the addition of new cattle continued through the period.<sup>64</sup> By 1935, confidence was apparently restored when thirty-one carloads of cattle was received at the county seat. Shipments almost doubled the following year, with 61 carloads arriving in 1936.<sup>65</sup> The addition of cattle during the crisis years could represent the continuation of the practice of the contracted feeding of livestock as well as the restocking of local herds. Evidently the conditions that marked the 1930s affected different agricultural producers in a variety of ways.

During the period, some ranchers in the Sandhills were confident of enough available feed “to get by one way or another” despite the region being particularly dried out. Cattleraisers from other affected regions saw it another way. Throughout the dry years livestock from twenty other states were shipped into the Sandhills and put out to graze.<sup>66</sup> Increasing numbers of cattle on local contracted grass ranges not only saved the outsiders from financial ruin but benefited the local economy. Those area ranchers with more than enough grass assuaged some their anxieties with falling land values and weak market prices by the feeding arrangements.

However, not all Cherry County ranchers look back on the period through the same lens. Some, like those on the hard land areas, remember the time as one of

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<sup>64</sup>The number of cattle shipped in each cattle car depended upon the age and type of livestock transported. Because railroad agents only reported on categories of freight shipments and not the contents of each car, it is impossible from these figures to determine the number of head received.

<sup>65</sup>*Valentine Republican*, 5 January 1934, 4 January 1935, 10 January 1936, 8 January 1937. Since Valentine represented only one of several depots along the C&NW route through the county, the figures submitted by station agent A. L. Palling for the years 1933-1936 represent only a portion of the number of cattle coming into Cherry County during the period. Since Valentine was also the trade center for the hard land areas of the northeastern sector of the county, the small shipments during 1933 and 1934 would not be representative of the number added to the entire county.

<sup>66</sup>Interview with Leonard Everett Ericksen, Mullen, Nebraska, 1957, in Cox, 134.

insurmountable challenge and despair. For others located in the larger Sandhills region, drought like a prairie fire, amounted to another episode that was part of living in the region. Some experienced a significant reduction in grass production while others were hardly effected at all.

For the small rancher who still held past debts, however, the drop in prices had a dramatic effect. Donald Cox who acted as an enumerator in several southern Cherry County Sandhills precincts for the 1930 census noted that almost all of the places canvased operated on mortgaged land and carried heavy stock loans. Under the burden of high interest debt, any drop in cattle prices would effect their ability to make their stiff payments. In many cases, people owed more on their stock than their sale would bring, and even selling some animals would place a greater debt burden on the livestock that remained. Compounding the problems, as Cox explained, was additional pressure to produce better quality livestock.<sup>67</sup>

Plummeting land value added to financial problems. See Table V. Mortgages made on land when at its higher value still demanded the same rate of payment despite drastic devaluation. Low market returns and falling land prices both worked against the confidence of many small ranchers.

**TABLE V**  
**AVERAGE VALUE PER ACRE OF LAND**  
**IN CHERRY COUNTY 1910-1935**

1910	1920	1925	1930	1935
\$7.61	\$15.18	\$8.87	\$8.65	\$6.09

United States Department of Commerce, *United States Census*, 13th -16th; *United States Census of Agriculture*, 1925, 1935

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 185.

Census statistics show that by 1935 land values had fallen below 1910 levels. Cherry County's local property assessments followed a similar trend. Assessed valuation on land in Cherry County fell by almost one-third between 1920 and 1930; in the next three years an additional one third-decline occurred.<sup>68</sup> The total value for all farm property and improvements fell from \$15,278,258 in 1932 to \$10,655,905 by the next year. Grazing land saw the greatest reversals as cattle values dipped proportionately. Livestock taxed as personal property accounted for a \$1.4 million drop in assessed value despite a 14,735 increase in cattle numbers.<sup>69</sup> Falling values continued on into 1936 when the county's property assessment showed another significant drop of three-quarters of a million dollars. Once again cattle valuation accounted for the greatest loss, dropping by \$350,000. Keeping in line with the downward trend, land values plummeted another \$218,000 as well.<sup>70</sup> Because of the low prices for livestock, rangeland had lost its value. Local residents could recall that during the 1930s some sections of land could be obtained for \$1 an acre. They also remembered that often these sections proved the hardest to purchase since they had no money to spend.<sup>71</sup>

Those with an existing mortgage were paying inflated interest and principal payments on land that no longer retained its mortgaged value. In cases where the burden of debt outweighed any future possibilities, the sale of property represented an even greater loss. In 1935, the *Valentine Republican* published 6,384 advertisements for the

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<sup>68</sup>"Land Valuation" chart, average assessed valuation per acre of improved real estate 1880-1910 and of lands and improvements 1920-1933 in Sheldon, 338.

<sup>69</sup>*Valentine Republican*, 31 July 1933.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, 31 July 1936.

<sup>71</sup>Interview of Lloyd Hamilton, n.d., in Cox., 162.

sale of land, while delinquent tax lists overshadowed that number.<sup>72</sup> Even as late as 1938, land could be purchased for as low as \$2.50 per acre under certain conditions.<sup>73</sup>

While farmers and small ranchers were victims of low cattle prices and falling land values, the more economically stable larger ranchers found some advantage. L.C. Beel of the Duck Bar Ranch saw the 1930s as a time when many cattlemen were “badly bent but not broken.” According to Beel even though he was broke, he never let his banker in on the information. Like others he held to a range philosophy that “a man wasn’t sure he was a cattleman until he had gone broke several times.”<sup>74</sup> Despite his talk of shaky finances, Beel was able to expand his holdings during the Depression. Frugal management allowed the stockman to control 50,000 acres of range and hayland through purchase, leases, and rentals.<sup>75</sup>

Beel like others bought some of his new property from banks, loan facilities and insurance companies anxious to divest their land holdings. Frequently the institutions had acquired the land as a result of loan foreclosure and with little or no interest in entering the cattle business were most often anxious sellers. Earl Monahan, one of the area’s largest ranchers, obtained valuable range and hayland through buying foreclosed land. Actively pursuing additional property from the beginning of the family ranching operation in the late nineteenth century, the Monahan family spread into three adjoining counties. Buying out departing farmers and small ranchers, multiple purchases were

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<sup>72</sup>Delinquent Tax List, 1935 chart for all precincts in Cherry County in Sheldon, 341.

<sup>73</sup>Bud Ganser reported that his father bought land at \$2.50 an acre from the Bank of Johnstown when it was going out of business in 1938. Beel and Harms, 170.

<sup>74</sup>Quoted in *ibid.*, 27.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, 42.

recorded for most years of operation.

In 1931, Monahan acquired a tract, the Griffith Flat, in Cherry County to add to his already extensive holdings in the area. Only the year before, in February as well as in March, 1930, other property in the county had been deeded to the rancher. One of the tracts was obtained through the Bill and Cline Loan Company of Lincoln, Nebraska, which had foreclosed on the Dan. R. Weldon property.<sup>76</sup>

Monahan saw buying foreclosed property from insurance companies or lending institutions had certain advantages. In 1932, he negotiated for a large tract of available property that extended from the South Forks in Cherry County down to the Middle Loup River and on into Hooker County. Monahan and his wife Marie made the trip to St. Louis to personally conduct the business with Central States Insurance Company officials. Although received most graciously, Monahan was sure that no one had ever before called at their office with an interest in Sandhills land. In the rancher's view, the insurance officials had no intention of letting him "get away." Moreover, it soon became apparent to the rancher that the company was "land poor, not collecting any rent—only paying taxes" and very anxious to sell. Monahan later wrote that because of insightful information, his "intended offer shrunk and the purchase was made at a very satisfactory

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<sup>76</sup>Earl H. Monahan with Robert Howard, *Sandhill Horizon: A Story of the Monahan Ranch and Other History of the Area* (Alliance, Nebraska: Rader's Place, 1987), 93.

figure.”<sup>77</sup> Throughout the 1930s, Monahan continued to expand his land holdings.<sup>78</sup>

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By 1940 attrition had greatly reduced the number of 160- and- 640 -acre tracts found in Cherry County. All that still were intact were located around towns and villages or the hard ground region on the northern tableland. Many ranches in the western two-thirds of the county occupied vast areas of land. Most were sized between 20 to 80 sections or more.<sup>79</sup> Much of the expansion had taken place during the 1920s and 1930s. The return of prosperity and the building war fever had affected the national economy and advanced commodity prices across the board. Average prices for cattle by 1940 were approaching levels not seen since the 1920s.

Both the small and large ranchers who survived two decades of economic challenges had not been held hostage by the external forces. Responding to market demands, they altered their modes of operations and transformed the character of their operation. Many, acting as the true capitalists they were, took advantage of opportunities

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<sup>77</sup>Ibid., 94.

<sup>78</sup>Monahan, although possibly the most successful, was only one of the large prosperous Sandhills ranchers in the 1930s. In Cherry County, while farmers in the northeastern flat land region suffered the losses from failed crops and starving livestock, ranchers in the Sandhills region had a different experience. Environment, type of agricultural activity, and different kind of operational organization were important factors in their relative success. In the Sandhills, the impact of the Great Depression and the drought years varied greatly from the generalized picture of life on the Great Plains during those trying times. Throughout the Plains states, even among those reportedly most devastated by economic and environmental crisis, communities and areas that even prospered could be found. Gordon M. Bakken’s study of Norwood, North Dakota in Grand Forks County in the Red River Valley region of that state is one of those other areas. He shows that instead of a community demoralized and succumbing to the pressures of economic failure, vibrant individuals who were “making it” and often realizing growing success. Gordon Morris Bakken, *Surviving the North Dakota Depression* (Pasadena, California: Wood and Jones Printers, 1992), 137pp.

<sup>79</sup>Beel and Gale, 27.

to expand and broaden their range of business as well. At the same time, they embraced technological advances and techniques to introduce efficient means of production to their enterprise. Such important strides in responding to market dynamics contributed to their transition to a modern industry.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### ROADS TO MARKET, 1920-1940

Between 1920 and 1940 agricultural producers faced economic uncertainty. While general depression characterized the situation in the 1930s, the previous decade of the twenties saw urban society prospering while farmers and stockmen were wracked by declining markets and unstable prices. Agriculture's general inability to adapt rapidly to changing market conditions combined with government policies to increase production led to inevitable crisis.<sup>1</sup> While the entire agrarian sector suffered through years of declining profits and increasing debt, livestock producers generally fared better than the dirt farmer. For western ranchers, the push toward financial permanency entailed replacing outmoded techniques of ranch management with the sound "rules of business." Basic to the cattlemen's perception was a new understanding of their livestock interests. Cattle were long-term investments which would only bring dividends with the evolution of modern development.

For cattlemen in regions like the Sandhills, this meant moving away from the practice of fattening mature animals and focusing attention upon the greater production of younger and better quality livestock for the farmer-feeder market in the corn-belt region. As a new emphasis, refocusing the methods of operating a ranch business opened the way to a greater influence in the marketing process. With more emphasis on the breeding phase of production, ranchers exerted greater control over the types and quality of

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<sup>1</sup>Charles L. Wood, *The Kansas Beef Industry* (Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1980), 193. Wood wrote that the surpluses in agricultural production after World War I had been in part the result of natural conditions inherent in the agrarian industry. Herbert Hoover as head of the Food Administration had been wrong in pushing for greater production after the end of the war. In addition, he was slow in correcting his error when recovery in Europe was not as slow as he had predicted.

animals they produced. At the same time, ranchers with “good working knowledge of price-making factors” would have the flexibility to meet market demands.

Problems associated with marketing of livestock become most obvious after 1916. Some things were beyond anyone’s control. Historian Charles Wood noted that “agricultural producers did not blame the abnormal conditions of war, the droughts, or diseased crops and stock.”<sup>2</sup> Instead, they placed the problem with a marketing system that put their financial well-being into the hands of businessmen and their agencies. Many believed that “adjustments were needed somewhere, and the marketing process seemed the best place to start.”<sup>3</sup>

Wartime inflation of marketing costs had “failed to retreat as rapidly as stock prices.” According to Wood, this central factor became the “fountainhead of discontent” for cattle producers.<sup>4</sup> Transportation and terminal market conditions received increasing criticism. State and national livestock organizations mounted efforts to address issues with some success. On the local level, producers also looked for ways to eliminate high transaction costs in order to increase their returns. Freight rates and livestock commission fees were viewed as inescapable drains on ranchers’ profitable returns, so eliminating or just reducing these costs would be a benefit to all, particularly the small producer.

Acceptance of truck transportation introduced a number of savings. Costs in shipping rates, time, and convenience were substantially improved through a revolutionary new way to bring animals to market. An even more significant result was

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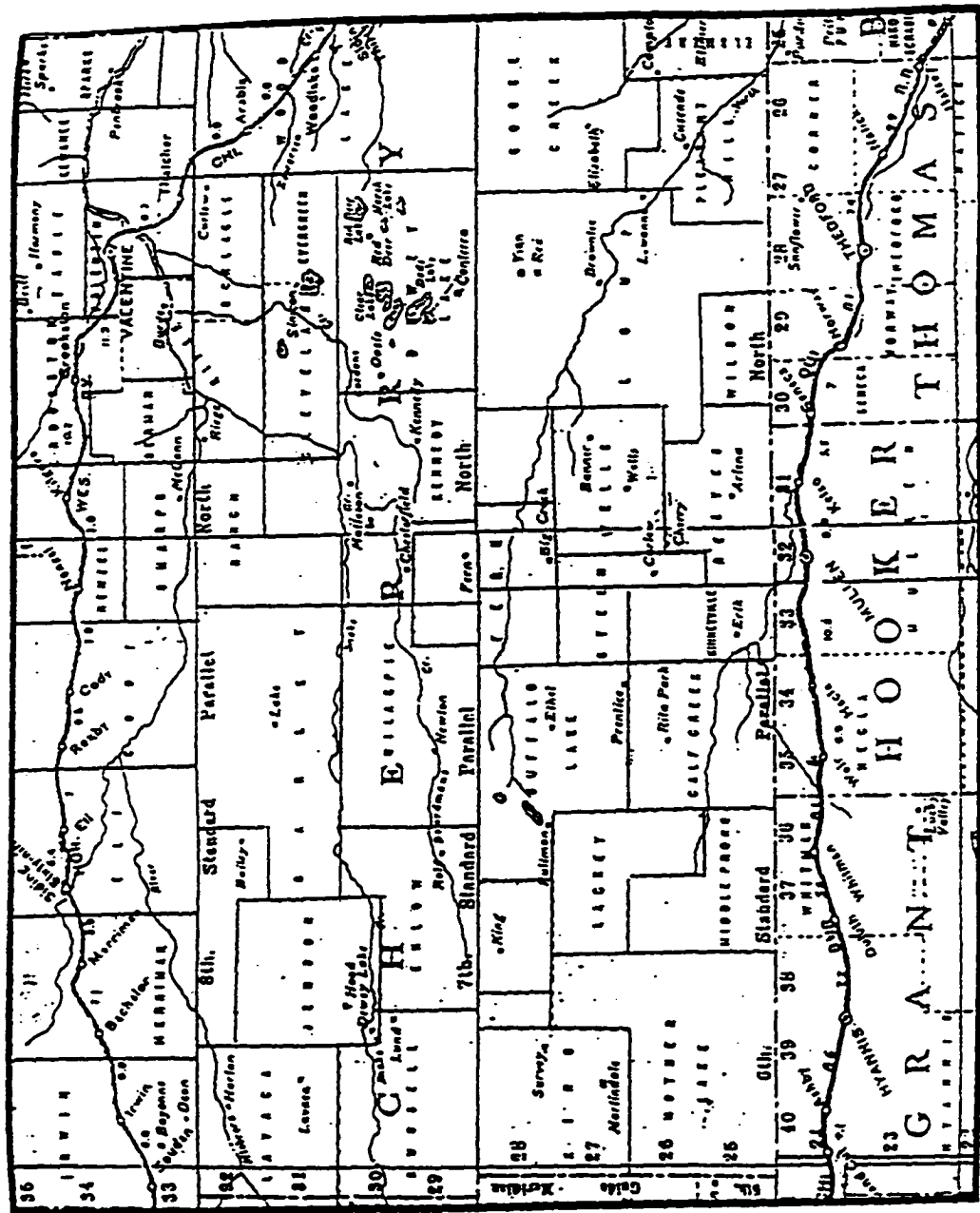
<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 159-60.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 160.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 255.

# 1915 Nebraska State Railroad Commission Map

## Cherry County and Vicinity



the way motorized transportation encouraged the decentralization of markets. By breaking the stranglehold of terminal centers as the only way to profitable marketing, livestock producers gained new kinds of control. By the 1930s, trucks had become the dominant means of transport to a wider network of markets, many within the local range.

Many local marketing facilities grew out of the movement for alternative means to marketing. During the 1920s, the widespread attraction to cooperative efforts brought a new kind of confidence to regional producers. In the Sandhills a different type of cooperation set the stage for innovations in the sales and distribution of cattle. For hard-strapped producers it was a movement toward cooperative marketing; first, by community efforts to build access to markets by better roads and highways, and second by the promotion of collective self-interest through new marketing techniques and eliminating some of the high overhead costs. The day of the individualistic cattleman had given way to the community of businessmen-ranchers who placed a significant amount of control of the marketing process into the hands of the county's livestock producers.

## **RAILROADS**

Until the 1920s railroads had monopolized the shipment of cattle to eastern markets in Cherry County. Two lines, the Chicago and North Western (C&NW) that ran through the northern sector of Cherry County and the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy (CB&Q) with a route adjacent to the county's southern boarder, provided the only access to central livestock markets. Since rail expansion into western Nebraska had determined points of trade, installation of shipping facilities had given life to rural towns and villages. As centers of agricultural services, they often attracted livestock buyers and

commission men ready to make a good buy. However, not all of the locations developed equally in economic importance or in the volume of cattle traffic. Some on the C&NW route like Wood Lake, the oldest townsite in the county, did gain significance as a trade center/shipping point for area cattle. Towns farther west, Valentine, Cody, and Merriman, gained even greater significance due to their proximity to many ranches.<sup>5</sup> Some towns like Crookston, Kilgore, and Nenzel became focal points of trade for farmers on the hard-tableland to the north and for ranching interests within their range.<sup>6</sup> Cody, designated as the end of the C&NW division and a crew change location, became a railroad boom town. As a terminal site two local freights, one from Chadron and the other from Long Pine, would lay over “every night on the side track.” With depot agents on duty around-the-clock and the 24-hour telegraph service, Cody became an important locus of the flow of information, passengers, and freight. In addition, stockyard facilities provided an accumulation point for thousands of heads of livestock shipped out from there every year.<sup>7</sup>

Local claims of being the heaviest shipping point on the C&NW line were borne out in 1921. While Bell Fourche, South Dakota, had been the leading point of cattle

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<sup>5</sup>Charles S. Reece, *An Early History of Cherry County*, 1945 rpt. (Valentine, Nebraska: Plains Trading Company, 1992), 84, 118.

<sup>6</sup>An article in the Crookston newspaper gives an accurate description of the type of towns and villages that sprang up along the railroad. The author noted that Crookston was the gateway to the Rosebud country, being five miles from the county line. North of the town was described as corn-growing country, while to the south “fine grazing land” for all types of livestock predominated. *Crookston Herald* (Crookston, Nebraska), 5 March 1915.

<sup>7</sup>Marguerite Wobig, *Cody, Nebraska, 1886-1986* (np, 1986), 3; Reece, 150. One Valentine newspaper published the editor’s report of a visit to Cody in 1898. Robert Good mentioned that Cody, “essentially a stockman’s town” was once only a part of a tree claim held by M. H. Hopkins. Good also notes that besides the large trade in ranching, “considerable Indian money is deposited in the coffers of the Cody merchants every month, as they are only four miles from the reservation.” He went on to describe Crackdown, Kilgore, Nenzel, Cody, Merriman, and Eli as a region of the best stock range and that the towns were “a sextette of small places, but in each you will find men who are making money.” *Valentine Democrat* (Valentine, Nebraska), 7 April 1898.

shipments during the early twentieth century, by 1920 Cody had surpassed that town's volume. In that year a total of 839 carloads of cattle were loaded at the northcentral Cherry County point destined for the South Omaha market.<sup>8</sup> Despite a reduction in prices that one source calculated as being almost \$500 less per carload of cattle, area ranchers had surpassed the previous year's total shipments by 118 cars.<sup>9</sup>

However, other towns in Cherry County made the same claim. Cattlemen loyal to shipping from Merriman, west of Cody, instigated a debate over which location had the heavier livestock traffic. Located in the western reaches of the county, Merriman had good reason to make the claim. It served a region of desirable rangeland that had been the domain of some of the Sandhills' biggest cattle outfits during the open-range era. However, inquiry in 1921 by loyal Cody factions to the C&NW agent, Will Huffback, revealed that Merriman's 595 total cattle shipment carloads was far fewer than those shipped from Cody.<sup>10</sup>

Ranchers in the southern half of the large county chose to ship on the CB&Q just over the county line in Thomas, Hooker, and Grant counties. Originally restricted to

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<sup>8</sup>Carload capacity was determined by weight rather than the number of head of animals livestock cars could hold. Forty-foot long cars carried 22,000 lbs. of livestock; for example, 35 head of 600 lb. steers calves or 18 to 20 1200 lb. cows. Ranchers often shipped their dry cows, older bulls, calves that were not doing well, or cattle with cancer eye to central markets for sale to packers as "canners" or to rendering facilities. Letter, Mary Schroeder, Valentine, Nebraska, to author, 8 August 1998.

<sup>9</sup>*Cody Cowboy* (Cody, Nebraska), 5 November 1920; 14 January 1921. Omaha was the second largest market in the United States for stocker and feeder classes of cattle. Wood, 263.

<sup>10</sup>*Cody Cowboy*, 14 January 1921. During the 1930s the number of carloads forwarded to market was drastically reduced. In 1933, 296 cars of cattle were shipped from Valentine. The following year the number jumped to 518 which reflected the movement of cattle bought by the government's emergency purchases. *Valentine Republican* 5 January 1934; 4 January 1935. However, reports for 1935 showed a severe drop in cattle shipments, down to a new low of 166 carloads. A local newspaper reported the reduction was due to the conditions of the farming country north and east of the town which was "practically stripped of cattle there being no feed for them." The next year, an increase of 35 additional incoming cars signaled the start of recovery. *Valentine Republican*, 10 January 1936; 3 January 1937.

erecting stock pens and loading chutes at county seats, the rail line eventually built at or near almost every town it served. In this way, most Sandhills towns located along the route harbored hopes of becoming important shipping points for area producers. Along the southern border of Cherry County, a total of 110 pens were available to receive stock. If all were filled to capacity at the same time, 220 carloads of cattle could be shipped to eastern markets.<sup>11</sup> While not all the livestock could be attributed to Cherry County ranches, a sizable majority were.

In the center of the county ranchers had a choice of which line to use. Some like Jake Kime remained committed to shipping on the C&NW. In order to get his cattle to the railroad, a grueling cattle drive of 41 miles to Nenzel was required. At other times when he had business at the county seat, he trailed cattle to Valentine, a distance of 75 miles. Some of Kime's neighbors made a different choice and used the facilities of the Burlington line.<sup>12</sup> Like Kime, the Metzger and Sault ranches shared "distinction of being the furthest as possible from a railroad." Their decisions usually amounted to a "toss-up."<sup>13</sup>

Without alternative means of transportation, ranchers were forced to rely solely on railroads for access to markets. Distance became a crucial factor in driving cattle to shipping points. For those like Kime, getting to the railhead was a three and a half day

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<sup>11</sup>*Burlington Bulletin: No. 25: Stock Cars and Livestock Traffic* (LaGrange, Illinois: Burlington Route Historical Society, 1992), 12, 32-5. Of the seven shipping points on the Burlington that bordered Cherry County, Whitman, in Grant County, had the largest facility. Thirty-three pens were installed there with a capacity of 60 cars. *Ibid.*, 35. The local newspaper reported that in September of 1899 between 15,000 and 18,000 head of stock had been shipped to the South Omaha market. Based on this amount of traffic, the small town held high aspirations of becoming one of the largest shipping points on the rail line. *Whitman Sun* (Whitman, Nebraska), 15 September 1899.

<sup>12</sup>Robert M. Howard, "Hello There" in *Nebraska Cattleman* 23 (May 1967): 13.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

commitment of time and arrival at the railroad's stock pens did not always mean the rancher and his drovers' job was over. During the peak time of the shipping season, facilities were often filled to capacity and the shortage of sufficient livestock cars to transport caused other delays. Local cattle shippers often voiced their discontent. Deplorable stockyard conditions added to inadequate provisions for the number of stock using the facility. Most often ranchers chided the railroads for their lack of concern or efforts to improve the situation. One particularly relevant Cherry County editorial asked how railroad officials would respond if they were forced to conduct business under similar types of conditions. Previous complaints to the company resulted in only token gestures of improvements, and the editor saw the lack of serious efforts for improvement as a failure to provide for the producing customers.<sup>14</sup>

Competent rail agents in charge of depot facilities could often alleviate some of the problems. Shippers favored those agents with better organizational skills who made serious attempts to accommodate ranchers and their livestock.<sup>15</sup> At Hyannis in Grant County, Burlington agent H. E. Wolf remembered that when he first took the position in 1923, the annual average of 450 cars transported cattle most often to the Omaha market.

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<sup>14</sup>*Cody Cowboy*, 28 August 1925. The editorial focused on the problem of trying to handle cattle in a unlighted facility that also had been previously occupied by hogs. Besides the mud, when the area had been cleaned out "from time to time" no attempt to maintain a level surface had been made. Those areas that had been scraped the most were now lower than their surroundings creating an even greater problem. The editor reported that when it rained, water accumulated in these "wallows" which filled up and then ran into the pens and "certainly makes a nice mess."

<sup>15</sup>Letter, N. E. Kivesst, Division Freight Agent to L. O. Murdock, Alliance, Nebraska superintendent of the Burlington Railroad, 14 July 1926; 15 July 1926. Val Kuska, Burlington Railroad Immigration Agent Collection, MS, 1431, folder 81-B-4, Nebraska State Historical Society. The letters refer to agent Mr. Phillippi and the fact that in the Thedford-Brownlee area "better ranchmen" were "not very pleased with the agent's conduct and attitude" at the stockyard facilities. The letter dated 15 July 1926 refers to the inadequate facilities at the Thedford stockyards and the lack of support once cattle arrived at the station and also mentions the shortcomings of the railroad agent there. These kind of problems were not exclusive to the CB&Q line. Cherry County ranchers from Brownlee had requested better accommodations at Wood Lake from the Chicago and NorthWestern as well..



Hyannis was always an important shipping point, and ranchers in the its trade area benefited from Wolf's business skills. Because of his excellent reputation and important industry connections, the location was favored with "preferred treatment in cars for cattle loading."<sup>16</sup> Arrangements under the direction of the agent had more worth than mere convenience. Cattle made to wait for the arrival of cars for transport often suffered a significant shrinkage, loss of weight and flesh, which effected returns. With speedy delivery to terminal markets, cattle in better condition sold for higher prices.

Regardless of accommodations, the return of better prices after mid-decade encouraged active shipping seasons. Between July 1 and November 15, 1927, a total of 512 carloads left from the 20 holding pens in Hyannis en route to eastern cattle markets. At other rail points along the CB&Q an equally encouraging number of carloads were shipped. When added together, shipments from Seneca in Thomas County, Mullen and Hecla in Hooker County, and those from Hyannis, Whitman and Ashby in Grant County resulted in a total of 2,011 carloads. From all indications an impressive movement of cattle from the north-central Sandhills to eastern markets exemplified the wealth and health of the region's cattle economy.<sup>17</sup>

In 1927 Mullen experienced its heaviest season to date. Interestingly, improvements to the facility there soon took place. Whether the improved traffic motivated railroad company efforts remained a matter of speculation. However, ranchers

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<sup>16</sup>H. E. Wolf, "Cattle Shipping Years at Old Hyannis" *Nebraska Cattleman* 26 (June 1970): 42.

<sup>17</sup>Seneca's totals were 116 cars, Mullen's 476, and Hecla's 191. Whitman recorded 474 carloads for the 1927 season while Ashby's shipments amounted to 242. These numbers do not represent merely Cherry County totals but are to be seen as regional numbers since cattle from the southern counties are included. There is no way to differentiate the number of cattle from each county. *Hooker County Tribune* (Mullen, Nebraska), 16 December 1927.

welcomed the greater convenience. Pens were improved and expanded, and by 1929 additional sidetracks had been installed and the stockyard was moved.<sup>18</sup>

Better terminal facilities offered some improvement although trains continued to arrive late which created a good deal of discontent. Struggling to control restless livestock while waiting as others were loaded into hot box cars compounded the ranchers and cowboys tiring job.<sup>19</sup> Other problems associated with the shipping process occurred while livestock were en route. One of the regulations for the transportation of livestock held the carrier liable under certain conditions. While owners stood all losses for animals lost to natural causes, in many instances negligence on the part of the carrier placed responsibility with the railroad company. Proof of good condition during the loading time of transport amounted to “prima facie evidence against the carrier” if livestock were delivered to their destination in poor condition or dead.<sup>20</sup> Overcrowding, poor scheduling, and improper handling were frequent complaints. Under these circumstances, an adequate number of stockcars to transport from local terminals took on a greater significance.

When the Nebraska Railway Commission approved a rate reduction in 1924, lines doing business in the state lobbied to eliminate one of their costlier responsibilities. Although the action appeared a concession to livestock breeders who had long clamored for relief from high shipping rates, the push toward the reduction originated with the lines. Rates were ordered cut in half with \$7.00 the new minimum charge per shipment,

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<sup>18</sup>Mabel Cox and Claudia Tompkins, *Hooker County, Nebraska: The First 100 Years, 1889-1989* (Dallas, Texas: Curtis Media, 1990) 12.

<sup>19</sup>Schroeder Letter, to author.

<sup>20</sup>Arthur C. Davenport, *The American Live Stock Market: How It Functions* (Chicago: Drover Journal, 1922), 23.

but the suggestion for lower rates came with a hidden cost. As a condition to the cut in freight charges, the railway companies sought changes in the provisions regarding their liability for injured or dead animals while in transport. In exchange for lower rates, liability would be waived. Nebraska railroad commissioners, in appreciation of a stockman's plight due to the loss of animals while in transit, moved in favor of the producers. They ruled that waivers to the unlimited liability of common carriers would never take place. Instead, they forced the rate cut without lifting the responsibility for damaged freight from the transporters.<sup>21</sup>

Livestock losses while en route to market had always been an important consideration for cattle producers. Without compensation for animals injured or lost, many producers would fail to recover even the cost of production when marketing their herds. Although railroad companies appeared to address the need for better and safer transport of livestock, shippers lived with the realization that a certain percentage of losses were to be expected. Experience had proven that under the best conditions, animals in less than good condition carried the greatest risk during transport.

Statistics revealed that an "abnormally high percentage" of dead or crippled cattle arrived at terminal markets during the drought year of 1934. Despite the weakened condition of stock, it still remained the railroad's responsibility to provide adequate and safe transportation. Overcrowding of stockcars and lack of timely delivery were most often cited as the cause for losses, problems easily solved through better railroad management. Through organization, planning, and better record keeping, sufficient

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<sup>21</sup>*Cody Cowboy*, 29 May 1924.

numbers of cars could be provided to avoid overcrowding. More attention to scheduling and careful monitoring of the location of livestock carriers would assure prompt travel and reduce stress on animals en route. It was not unheard of that carloads of stock were forgotten on some sidetrack for more than a day. Government legislation stipulated timely rest stops at adequately equipped locations to guarantee the humane treatment for stock.<sup>22</sup> Yet despite the efforts to reduce the numbers of damaged livestock, complete elimination of losses in transit proved an impossible ideal. Even the bruising of animals effected prices received and could render an animal unsalable. One study made in the mid-1930s showed losses of animals in transit amounted to approximately \$12 million annually.<sup>23</sup>

The study sponsored by the National Live Stock Loss Prevention Board attempted to give evidence of the handling and treatment of stock while in transit. The board amounted to a cooperative effort of railroad, packing house, stockyard, and livestock association officials. Significantly absent, however, was representation of motor carrier organizations or trucking firms whose spectacularly expanding business in the transport of livestock to markets seriously affected the railroads' "bottom line." Data was comprised of statistics compiled at four terminal market stockyards in the Missouri Valley: Kansas City, St. Joseph, Omaha, and Sioux City. Results showed that although truck and rail losses had declined by 1937, losses recorded for all classes of beef

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<sup>22</sup>H. R. Smith, *Reduction of Losses in Marketing Livestock: 1937 Report to the National Live Stock Loss Prevention Board*, 3-4, Kuska Collection, folder 81-B-5-B.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

producing animals transported by rail appeared significantly lower.<sup>24</sup>

Long experience in keeping statistical data served the rail lines' purposes well. In comparison, the fledgling trucking industry had much to learn. Transporting agricultural produce by truck gained widespread interest in the 1920s. At the beginning of the decade almost ten percent of all farm production volume reached markets on motorized carriers. However, only three percent of all truck shipments hauled livestock. In production areas, poor roads prohibited a greater acceptance, and until technological advances in the accommodation and performance of trucks were made, most livestock were still carried to market on trains. Although by 1930 the situation had changed significantly, the recently organized association of motor carriers, like the Nebraska Motor Carriers Association, was more intent on building membership and securing favorable transportation legislation than in seeking out all accumulative records on the extent of shipping. Lack of feedback and data from unaffiliated and independent truckers challenged the accuracy of most analysis.<sup>25</sup>

According to the available data, the loss prevention study for the period between 1935 and 1937 showed the numbers of cattle received by either rail or truck as fairly equal. Each recorded a volume of approximately two million head of cattle, but differences began to appear in 1936. Records showed 2.56 million head arrived by truck while only 1.75 million were carried by train. However, numbers reversed the next year, 1937, when rail accounted for the transport of 2 million head in contrast to the 1.8 million

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>25</sup>Wood, 259.

brought by truck.<sup>26</sup> By the end of the interwar period, 66 percent of all livestock shipments to the sixty-seven major markets in the nation had taken the over-the-road route.<sup>27</sup>

The see-saw effect of strong competition was also evident in the transport of calves, but the resulting totals had a different outcome. Here, the same records for 1934 revealed the impact of truck transportation on the railroad industry. Since the volume in 1934 reflected the effects of drought on the entire industry, total numbers were inflated. Ratios of rail to truck transport, nevertheless, provide insight into the preferred means of transportation. That year, a greater number of calves, 611,853, arrived at central markets aboard railroads compared to the 404,571 shipped by truck. When the number of livestock returned to within a normal range, figures revealed that while rail transport of calves remained stable at the 200,000 range, trucks were gaining in popularity. In 1935 and 1936, trucks carried 349,000 and 398,000 head respectively.<sup>28</sup> Although decreases in total numbers carried by rail could also be explained by alternative marketing techniques, such as direct sales, the report revealed an important transition. The struggle for traffic between rail and motorized carriers had reached full proportion. Livestock producers who

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<sup>26</sup>Smith, 4. Results showed that in the nation's twenty-five larger markets an 8 percent decrease in the number of dead and crippled animals was recorded for all livestock transported by rail between 1936 and 1937. During the same period, there was a 9 percent decrease in the number of deaths and 17 percent fewer animals were crippled when transported by truck.

<sup>27</sup>Wood, 259.

<sup>28</sup>Smith, 4.

chose terminal markets had another alternative for getting their animals to market.<sup>29</sup> For some the preferential rates and treatment accorded to the larger shippers by railways gave them no choice, but for the small producer, the convenience and time saving economies made all the difference.<sup>30</sup>

In regions where greater development of roads and highways had taken place, the shift to truck transportation occurred with relative ease. In the Sandhills, building the transportation infrastructure was a big challenge. Until a system of better roads was constructed, shippers were left with no other option except the railroads. Although railroad officials recognized the necessity for modern internal improvements, they also saw a need to protect their lucrative business.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, cattlemen in Cherry County benefited greatly from reductions in rail shipping rates in the mid-twenties as well as the improved shipping accommodations at local rail facilities. Efforts to improve facilities in order to provide better service in the 1920s gave way to political struggles by the mid-1930s as trucks made significant inroads into the livestock freighting business.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>By 1938, the effects of truck competition which translated to reduced traffic and revenues and increased costs had a great impact on the nation's railroads. Since 1920, 17,417 miles of rail and 20,000 local stations had been abandoned. Rail companies complained of what they saw as unfair advantages being given to motor carriers and aviation as well as other modes of transportation. Memorandum, "The Transportation Situation" 19 November, 1938, 1, 6, Kuska Collection, folder SC1/5.41.1b.

<sup>30</sup>Wood, 258.

<sup>31</sup>Letter, Val Kuska, Burlington Railroad Immigration Agent, to W. K. St. Helen, Ovitt, Nebraska, 30 August 1911, Kuska Collection, Box 254, folder 57-B-4.

<sup>32</sup>In 1935, cattle producers' organizations advised support for the Congressional passage of the Huddelson bill which exempted motor carriers from rate regulation and not the Eastman bill, (H. R. 5262), which had already passed the Senate, since the rate-making section of the later would result in motor vehicle rates being increased if enacted. Charles E. Blaine, "Traffic and Transportation," *American Cattle Producer*, 17 (July 1935): 20-21.

## **SURFACED ROADS**

Cherry County's first automobile was purchased in 1906 by Valentine jeweler O. W. Morey. Within three years a significant number of autos in the area warranted the opening of the first garage with Fred Raubch acting as mechanic. Area ranchers were not far behind in participating in the new motorized revolution. C.G. Fink recounted how in 1914 his Ford touring car brought excitement to his rural Elsmere community. Like the rest of Nebraska, Cherry County residents began to see the automobile as the general means of personal transportation and by 1920 shared the distinction with its southern neighbor, Thomas County, of owning the largest percentage of cars per capita in the state.<sup>33</sup>

However, traversing the roadless Sandhills added a different kind of adventure to motoring. In the large, sparsely populated Cherry County, motorized transportation had more than social and recreational value. The three-or-four day trip by team and wagon from Valentine to the county's southern border could now be completed in one, saving time on trips to trade centers for groceries and supplies. By the 1920s most hauling from town to ranch was done by motorized vehicles and horse drawn wagons were rapidly becoming relics of the past.<sup>34</sup> Although the new means of transportation was widely accepted, travel by auto or truck was not without its problems. Road conditions, despite efforts to improve them, still created scenarios of risk, adventure, and innovation. Local residents often recalled all-night trips over forbidding dunes and being stuck in the sand

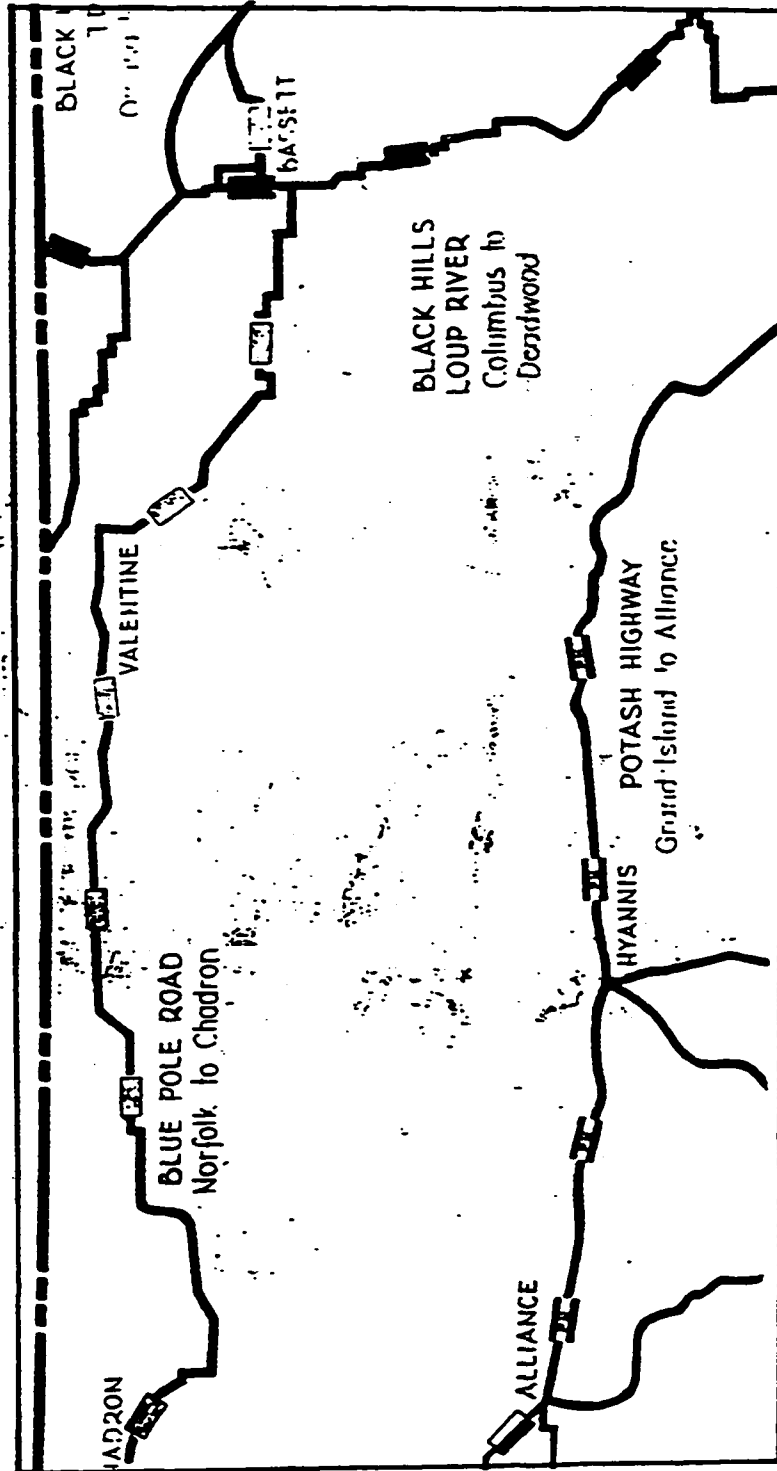
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<sup>33</sup>Robert Howard, "Hello There (C.G. Fink)" *Nebraska Cattleman* 10 (July 1954): 26; Clinton Warne, "The Acceptance of the Automobile in Nebraska," *Nebraska History*, 37 (September 1956): 224.

<sup>34</sup> Reece, 55.



Major Roads In and Adjacent To Cherry County, ca. 1919



at any time of day. In some cases, memories of numerous times when it became necessary to push vehicles up slippery water logged hills led the more enterprising to carrying strips of carpet to put under front wheels to facilitate a climb.<sup>35</sup>

Beyond the prospect of better mobility, improved roads and bridges in the Sandhills region had a wide range of implications. Businesspeople in the small towns and villages saw a new era of opportunity as improved access promised greater prosperity. Rural populations anticipated new kinds of social relationships while agricultural producers considered improved roads important links to markets. During the 1920s towns along the C&NW and the Burlington vied with one another for expansion of proposed highway routes that would give access beyond the county confines. While the railroad had provided the initial impetus for town building, paved roads were the key to greater development through the linkage of trade territories.

Prior to 1920, communities filed applications with the Nebraska highway advisory board to have trails that passed near their location included in the state system of roads. Quality and maintenance of the roads lay with the local community, and so expenditures were a primary concern for county administration. Personal property, poll taxes, and eventually motor vehicle fees provided revenue for the building and upkeep of the rural roads. Some, like the Black Hills Stage Trail, or "Rosebud Trail," had long been important trade outlets. Others, like the Grant Highway, zig-zagged across the northern part of Cherry County connecting towns and rural communities. The Blue Pole Highway

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<sup>35</sup>Gussie Osborne, "One Never Knows, Does One?," typed copy of speech presented to Mullen (Nebraska) Toastmistress Club, 22 October 1974, 12, Cherry County Historical Society Archives, Valentine, Nebraska. Osborne tells of family and personal reminiscences of life in the Sandhills which included her family's solution to getting their auto stuck in the sand. The Osbornes carried along strips of carpet that when placed under the wheels provided traction for climbing sandy hills.

that ran northwest out of Wood Lake and eventually crossed the Niobrara River was expanded west along a straightened route of the older Grant Highway.<sup>36</sup> Said to take a path of least resistance first across the hard land in the northern sector of the county above Crookston and then on to Cody and Eli, the Blue Pole was rerouted to the south after 1920 when it was designated as part of Nebraska Highway 20. However, actual construction on the graveled highway was not completed until the late 1930s.<sup>37</sup>

Congress enacted the Federal Aid Road Act in 1916 to establish a system of state highways funded by federal and state matching funds. According to its provisions, a standardized state highway system would pass through each county seat and would connect to highways in adjoining states. Farm to market roads centering on the county seat would also provide an important incentive to local support. The following year, 1917, the Nebraska legislature passed H. R. 722 that accepted the federal act and put into effect a tax levy to raise the matching funds.<sup>38</sup> While early legislation increased the state's authority over local road administrators, it was not until 1919 that federal aid was provided.<sup>39</sup> Later, the amended Highway Act of 1921 offered additional aid, allocated on the basis of 7 percent of the state's total of certified road mileage. In Nebraska, certified

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<sup>36</sup>*Soils of Nebraska As Road Material and Naming, Routing, Marking of Nebraska Highways*, Report of the Nebraska State Highway Advisory Board, 1919, 5-6; Map "Early Roads and Means of Transportation" in Marianne Beel and Barbara Kime Gale, eds., *Sandhills Century: Book I: A History of Cherry County, Nebraska* (Valentine, Nebraska: Cherry County Centennial Committee, 1986), 261.

<sup>37</sup>Beel and Gale, 221. The *Valentine Republican* reported that on 18 September 1931 work had only just begun on grading at Crookston in the eastern sector of the county. Later the same newspaper reported on the official opening of the highway, 18 November 1932, although bids to finish Route 20 between the Nenzel area and Eli were submitted after 1939. *Valentine Republican*, 18 November 1932; Beel and Gale, 258.

<sup>38</sup>Mary Cochran Grimes, "Establishing Nebraska's Highway System, 1915-1934," *Nebraska History*, 73 (Winter 1992): 160.

<sup>39</sup>Clinton Warne, "Some Effects of the Introduction of the Automobile on Highways and Land Values in Nebraska," *Nebraska History*, 38 (March 1957): 44-7.

mileage of 80,272 limited aid to 5,619 miles. Because of the restricted number of federally designated miles, money went to the building and improvement of “post roads” that connected county seats.

Only one designated road passed through Cherry County. On an east-west route, the road through Valentine lacked linkage with counties that bordered to the south. In May, 1925, the county board of commissioners petitioned the state’s highway board to include three proposed roads, two to the south and one to the north, Mullen-Valentine, Valentine-Ainsworth, and Merriman-Martin, South Dakota, in the federally funded system.<sup>40</sup> While Nebraska officials considered this proposal, an error in the original certification of Nebraska roads for allocation of the 7 percent funds<sup>41</sup> necessitated denial for a state road between Nebraska and South Dakota.<sup>42</sup> Almost three years later, still no decision had resolved the Merriman road to South Dakota although work had begun on the county’s other requests.<sup>43</sup>

The need for a road in the Merriman vicinity could be well understood. County roads would always remain problematic in regard to their travel worthiness and

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<sup>40</sup>A resolution of the Cherry County Board of Commissioners sent to Nebraska Department of Public Works, signed by Arthur Bowring 13 May 1925 and certified by County Clerk E. B. Foster 24 August 1925 seeking the inclusion of three additional roads in Cherry County into the state and federal highway system. As of that date, only one road in Cherry County was designated as part of the system. Arthur Bowring Papers, Arthur Bowring Historical Park Archives, Merriman, Nebraska.

<sup>41</sup>According to provisions outlined in the 1921 Federal-Aid Highway Act, each state could select its most important existing highways on which to expend federal money. However, the total mileage selected could not exceed seven percent of the total mileage in a state as certified under the Highway Act of 1916. This became known as the Seven Percent System. Under the new act, 5,619 miles of roads in Nebraska were eligible for federal funding. George E. Koster, *Nebraska Department of Roads: A Story of Highway Development in Nebraska* (Lincoln: Nebraska Department of Roads, 1997), 30.

<sup>42</sup>Letter, R. L. Cochran, in reply to a letter seeking road funding from the Nebraska State Engineer, Department of Public Works, to O. N. Hetle, South Dakota State Engineer, 6 June, 1925, Bowring Papers.

<sup>43</sup>*Hooker County Tribune* (Mullen, Nebraska), 6 January 1928.

maintenance in contrast to the better engineered state and national highway systems. Roads in poor condition had an adverse effect on area businesses which depended on accessibility to customers. Companies like the Walrath and Sherwood Lumber Company, Eli, Nebraska, could blame their business reversals over the past year on the bad roads between Eli and the northern portion of its trade area in South Dakota. In a letter to the company's main office in Omaha, the personnel in Eli wrote that only a "Ford that is in good condition to pull this hill" could reach their place of business. On the other hand, any "old tin car" could navigate up the hills south of Cody and Merriman. In other words, only those who drove a powerful new automobile could conveniently get to them. The poor condition of the roads into Eli had led to a loss of business to the small village. According to the staff at Eli, "ROADS are the only thing keeping people from coming" to the lumber company.<sup>44</sup>

Funding of roads during the early 1920s was a political issue.<sup>45</sup> By 1925, however, it had become clear that without additional revenue federal dollars would be lost. A proposed two-cents per gallon gasoline tax aroused rural opposition until Arthur Bowring, a former county commissioner, rancher, a state legislator from Cherry County, offered a compromise bill to the state legislature in 1929. With the additional state

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<sup>44</sup> Letter, Joe Spindler et al., Retail Department, Walrath & Sherwood Lumber Co., Eli, Nebraska to C. E. Walrath, President, Walrath & Sherwood Lumber Co., Omaha, Nebraska, 18 June, 1924, Bowring Papers.

<sup>45</sup> A special session of the state legislature in 1922 passed a resolution against continuation of the federal aid to roads because the matching funds provision of the federal act was financed through property taxes and politicians were seeking to lower taxes. However, it has been suggested that the Nebraska legislature actually sought to restore self-determination to the state regarding needs and methods of road development. Although Nebraska did not pull out completely from the federal program, a reduction in amount of federal aid was the result of the legislators' decision. In 1925 a two-cents per gallon tax was imposed that was earmarked for the construction and maintenance of roads. An estimated \$3 million would be collected annually with \$2 million of that amount going to the payment of matching funds. Koster, 31.

monies and the revenue from the new gasoline tax added to county coffers, Cherry County was in an improved financial position for road work. <sup>46</sup> Bowring's bill provided a means to build and improve farm-to-market roads. Counties would receive one-fourth of the gasoline tax revenue based on the number of motor powered vehicles registered in their county. In this way, local county roads would benefit as well as the state highway system. Both populated urban areas as well as rural counties appeared to be satisfied with the new scheme. With revenue from the gasoline tax replacing property taxes originally used to finance construction, many residents believed that those who used the roads the most would carry the greater expense for their improvements.<sup>47</sup> The benefits from the new accessibility would be shared by all county residents. Additional roads that were well maintained would facilitate intercounty relationships and enhance towns that served trade centers along the road's route.

While Highway 20 followed a course approximately parallel to the C&NW railroad, the tier of counties bordering Cherry County on the south were served by the Potash Highway, later State Highway 2. Development of this road between Alliance and Grand Island became a necessity. The Sandhills potash industry gave every indication of being capable of replacing European supplies cutoff by wartime restrictions. Although European potash production resumed after 1919, interest in the road continued for the benefit of the state's western population. Just as Highway 20 would parallel the C&NW, State Highway 2 followed the CB&Q in its east-west course.<sup>48</sup> Although the roads were

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<sup>46</sup>Grimes, 168-69.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.; Nebraska Good Roads Association, "Highway News Letter," May, 1924, Bowring Papers.

<sup>48</sup>*Soils of Nebraska*, 6.

designated as highways, before improvement they were rutted lanes across the hilly terrain. Throughout the decade of the thirties community and state efforts were directed toward improving roads and providing better access. Local newspapers reported any hint of progress -- surveying, grading and ultimately gravel surfacing the highways. Community interest ran high in all efforts to accomplish the state's long overdue goal of establishing a system of good roads.<sup>49</sup>

During the early 1930s, both state and federal engineers debated the course of new roads and the best types of surface materials. Newspapers reported local concerns over how well roads were constructed since the county's future appeared to be directly influenced by the quality and durability of the new highways. The section of Route 20 between Wood Lake and Doty Corner in the northern sector of eastern Cherry County drew particular attention in the fall of 1931. How well the laying of the sand-oil surface proceeded would influence construction of the rest of the proposed route. Diverse topography and soil structures posed serious problems for engineers and contractors alike.<sup>50</sup> Completion of the Bryan Bridge spanning the Niobrara River 2.3 miles southeast of Valentine provided access into Cherry County from the east.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>*Sunday Journal and Star* (Lincoln, Nebraska), 27 January 1935.

<sup>50</sup>*Valentine Republican*, 1 September 1931.

<sup>51</sup>Bryan Bridge was named in honor of Charles Wayland Bryan, governor at the time of its construction. The structure not only provided access into Cherry County along Highway 20 but also brought the county some renown. Designed by Josef Sorkin, an engineer trained at the University of Nebraska and a bridge designer for the Nebraska Department of Roads and Bridges, the structure was built at a cost of \$55,564 in 1932. Because of the "semi-continuity" of the structure and sub-soil being mostly sand, extraordinary precautions had to be taken with its construction. Judged the "most Beautiful Steel Bridge of 1932" for Class C bridges (under \$250,000 in cost), the Bryan Bridge was later, in 1988, officially listed in the National Register of Historic Places. In 1993 the Nebraska Division of the Federal Highway Administration reported that the Bryan Bridge was "the only arched, cantilevered, deck-truss bridge, pin-connected at its center" found in the United States. Unpublished manuscript, "Bryan Bridge," George E. Koster, Nebraska State Department of Roads, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1-5.

As work continued on the east-west route across the Sandhills, proposed highways linking the north to the south posed another type of problem. Towns along the C&NW in the northern sector of the county were linked to their trade areas to the north and south by inadequate trails-turned-roads. There were no rail lines to follow. Access to larger towns, like North Platte to the south of the Sandhills region, required a long and often arduous rail journey to either Alliance to the west or Norfolk to the east and then a transfer to other lines to back track to the Platte River center. The new highway program held out the hope of alleviating the time consuming inconvenience. Great enthusiasm revolved around the prospect of regional linkage by the Great Plains Highway being constructed from Laredo, Texas to Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada. An association of state and community leaders from those Great Plains states through which the highway would pass coordinated the highway program. Selection of highway sites occupied most of their attention. Towns and villages in the proposed path vied with one another to lure the route to their location. Since Valentine had already been designated as a major point through which the highway would run in Nebraska, towns to the south along the CB&Q route engaged in vigorous competition to be selected as the link to the Cherry County seat.

Being located on a major north-south route in the central section of the state held the promise of local prosperity due in part to expansion of trade areas. After several years of struggle, Mullen in Hooker County was finally selected as the best route. The initial survey and grading of the state route between Mullen and Valentine and the success of a petition to the CB&Q for a crossing there had provided enough advantage over rival towns. Throughout the fray, Cherry County officials had maintained a stance of



impartiality, confident that wherever the route was located it would ultimately benefit all of their county.<sup>52</sup>

When proposals for the Mullen-Valentine road were first entertained in Hooker County in 1918, ranchers in southern Cherry County had been included in all discussions. Later in a similar way, during the mid-1920s business owners and ranchers in the vicinity of Valentine came to a consensus for supporting construction of a link to the proposed highway, south out of the county seat. After pushing out of Valentine and crossing the Niobrara River, the route would wind through the Schlagel Creek, Simeon, and Kennedy precincts ultimately meeting with the part of the road being constructed out of Mullen.<sup>53</sup>

Little progress on the highway was made during the next several years, and in 1933 the Sandhills phase of the project was put on hold. Nebraska state engineer Robert (Roy) Cochran explained the cause for the delay was that the hundreds of millions of dollars needed to resume road construction were held up in Congress and it was unknown when the allotment for road work would be released.<sup>54</sup> Within two years the Mullen-Valentine route, which never received official federal approval, was finally scrapped. Because the proposed path would traverse the wetland area that had been chosen for the Valentine National Wildlife Preserve, an alternative route for a north-south highway was ultimately selected. Evidence of the highly touted Great Plains Highway through Cherry County amounted to merely a rough graded road that followed Schlagel Creek, passing the Beel Ranch as it wound its way to Mullen. Spurs to the Brownlee and Thedford areas

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<sup>52</sup>*Hooker County Tribune*, 12 August 1927, 6 January 1928.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 6 January, 1928.

<sup>54</sup>*Cherry County News* (Valentine, Nebraska), 3 June 1933.

improved passage though the sandy hills to some degree. In 1936 construction of Highway 83 (from the South Dakota border to Valentine) was nearing completion and later construction of a portion of Highway 83 began, north from Thomas County. Development of the Route 20, southeast of Bryan Bridge, had been graded and graveled almost as far as the Ballard Marsh just outside the wildlife refuge when construction was abandoned in 1942 once again.<sup>55</sup> Despite the mixed conditions of the county's arterial routes, both Highways 20 and 83 did provide greater access to markets and communities.

While cooperation in building the state system of highways gained local attention, Cherry County residents also placed emphasis on their county's internal road system. Interior roads were always a problem. In 1914, James Cowen, superintendent of the University of Nebraska's agricultural substation in Cherry County, described a trip into the Sandhills. His visit to the Bachelor Ranch entailed a harrowing ride from Valentine, an "uphill trip over long stretches of deeply rutted sand in which the tires sank to the wheel rims." Cowen also mentioned the number of gates that separated pastures every two miles along the route. Required first to be opened and then shut once he passed through, he had lost count "somewhere along in the forties."<sup>56</sup>

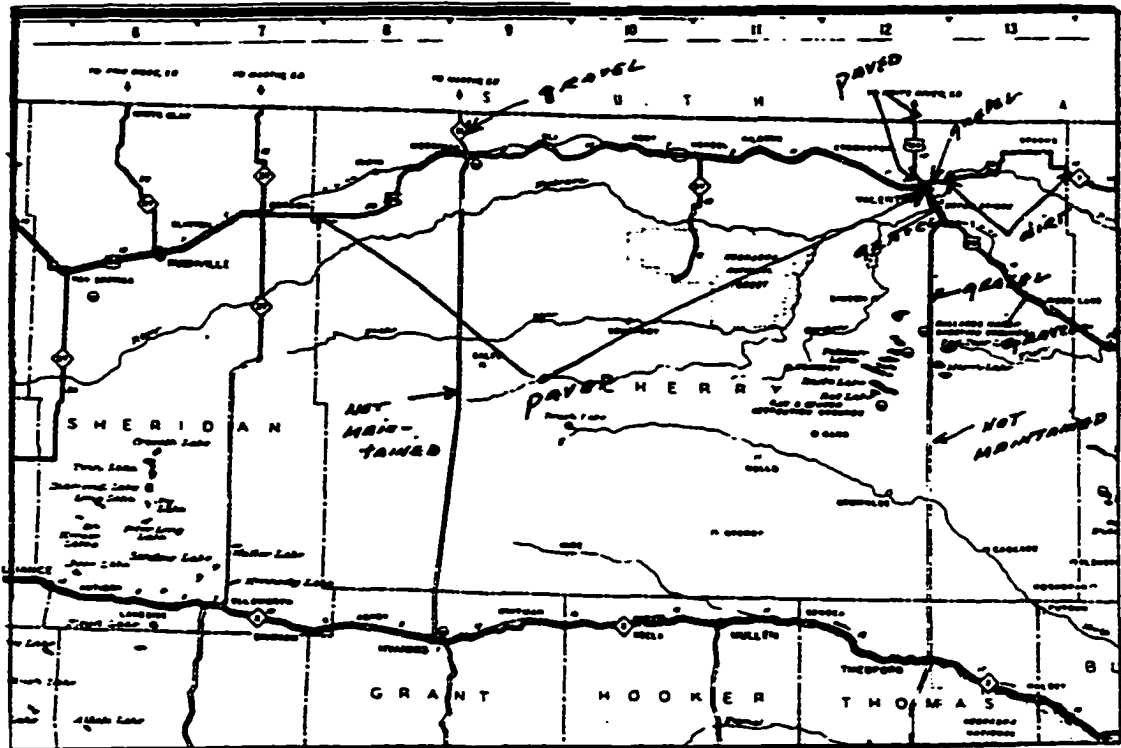
Environmental factors, such as topography, drainage, and soft and shifting soils, complicated both the building and maintenance of roads. Most existing ways through the area were actually the remnants of old trails trampled and compacted by millions of migrating bison and the western cattle that followed. Typically, they ran a crooked course

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 1 August 1935, 14 August 1936; Beel and Gale, 42-43; Map of Cherry County highways, 1940, Nebraska Department of Roads.

<sup>56</sup>James Cowen, "Substation Notes" *Crookston Herald*, 2 January 1914.

# Amended Highway Map of Cherry County, 1940



that rarely coincided with section lines. Most took a course through valleys and crossed “hills at the lowest and narrowest points.”<sup>57</sup>

In many places grading was not possible. Except for the limited areas that could support a more permanent surface, most roads across the loose and sifting sand were susceptible to wind action. For the most part they were merely stabilized by mixtures of manure, hay, alkali mud, and cinders. Unlike roads over the dunes, those that crossed valleys, both wet and dry, required little work to maintain due to the heavier soils. In most instances, marshes and other wetland areas were avoided at all costs.<sup>58</sup> Because of the natural obstacles, the notion that the shortest distance between two points was a straight line appeared to be an impossible abstraction in the Sandhills region.

Along with natural conditions the influence of social factors determined the direction and conditions of roads. Although railroads had decided the relative placement of towns, access between rangeland and villages or towns followed time-honored routes. Since most people chose to settle on drier, flatland areas, paths connecting neighborhoods of ranches were better maintained. Even with constant attention, the roads never improved beyond a mixed combination of hayed and low-land trails, occasional gravel grade, or the modern innovation of an oil surfaced strip.<sup>59</sup>

Ranchers were responsible for the good condition of roads that passed by and to their particular spread. However, most situations amounted to some type of cooperative

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<sup>57</sup>G. E. Condra, “The Soil Road Materials of Nebraska,” in *Soils of Nebraska*, 32, 29. Traveling along the winding roads entailed opening and closing the many gates that allowed passage from one fenced pasture or range to another.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>59</sup> Robert Howard, “Hello There” (Jake Kime), *Nebraska Cattleman* 23 (May 1967):58.

effort. During the late 1930s, rancher Fred Beman often graded the entire stretch of road that ran by his family's home ranches in the Schlagel Creek neighborhood to the graded road some considered a segment of the proposed Great Plains Highway. Using implements like the "fresno" to grade and smooth the road into a passable condition, Beman would hitch them up to his team, later a tractor, and spend the better part of a day fixing the road.<sup>60</sup> Road maintenance work often required the most attention during the busiest times for area ranchers. Keeping roads passable had important social implications, and when decisions involved a choice between remaining committed to the ranch business at hand or road work, the welfare and care of the livestock most often won out.

Each county precinct named a local road overseer who assessed the condition of area roads and trails. When conditions warranted, the county road commissioner was informed of a problem and repairs were authorized with county reimbursement. County payments for road work appeared in the published minutes of the monthly county commissioner meetings. Rancher-overseers like L. C. Beel kept careful records of their expenditures of time and money for the repair of roads.<sup>61</sup> Most often the bills they submitted were for small amounts since innovative and pragmatic ranchers always found the most efficient and least complicated way to complete road maintenance. At times, commissioners would receive letters from ranchers offering to do the work themselves for

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<sup>60</sup>Telephone interview with Mary Beman Schroeder, 18 February 1997. Fresnoes were an important implement in highway construction. The fresno scraper was a device invented in 1885 used for the construction of roads, primarily for grading. According to Oliver Johnson in a 1985 interview with George Koster, Nebraska Department of Roads, grading was done by hand labor and horses early on. Each of the 20 to 25 laborers drove a four-horse team which pulled a fresno to scoop up the soil into a load that the horse would then pull up to the grade where it was dumped and spread out. With the use of the fresno, moving 100 cubic yards of dirt per day became the norm. In the 1920s tractors replaced teams of horses which increased efficiency. However, teams of horses were still used in road grading in Cherry County throughout the decade. Koster, 29.

<sup>61</sup>Telephone interview with Marianne Beel, Valentine, Nebraska, 6 October 1996.

the cost of supplies. It appeared that there were instances when more than patience was required to have your road fixed.<sup>62</sup>

Cherry County Commissioner Arthur Bowring received a great deal of correspondence dealing with roads. In addition to his civic responsibilities, Bowring also ranched a sizable spread outside of Merriman, Nebraska.<sup>63</sup> By 1923 his personal holdings amounted to his original 160 acre homestead, an additional 4760.38 acres purchased in Nebraska, 320 acres in Bennett County South Dakota, and leases on 3680 acres in both states.<sup>64</sup> As an office holder in the Nebraska Good Roads Association, Bowring had considerable influence, and he worked tirelessly for the betterment of local roads. Yet years after his death the road leading to his ranch remained as it always had been, a winding and dusty Sandhills trail. Left in its original condition, the road stood as a testament to Bowring's true character. In spite of his efforts toward the paving of good roads, he never sought favors for his own special interests.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Letter, J. A. Saults to Arthur Bowring, informing him of the condition of two sand passes near the Enlow place that were in bad shape, 30 May 1920; letter, H.G. Wallingford to County Commissioner Arthur Bowring offering to repair road if county would supply the planks, 28 February 1920, Bowring Papers.

<sup>63</sup>Son of an early railroader who settled in the region during the 1880s, Arthur Bowring filed his first claim in Cherry County near Merriman soon after his twenty-first birthday, 29 April 1894. His commitment to public service began early in his adult life beginning with the first of five terms in the state legislature in 1895. At the county level, the rancher also contributed to the public welfare by his involvement first as a road overseer for District 10 in 1901, justice of the peace beginning in 1902, and his long service as a county commissioner starting in 1904. Besides a number of other positions on state and local commissions, Bowring served as acting county highway commissioner as well as holding office in the Nebraska Good Roads Association during the 1920s and 1930s. Sandra Mann, ms. "Sandhills and Senators: The Bowring Bar 99 Saga" for the Nebraska Game and Parks Foundation, 1986, 3-4, 18, Bowring Ranch Archives.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 9-11. According to the ranch's financial statement, land was valued at over \$10 an acre. Livestock, which carried a mortgage of \$21,187, included 248 steers and heifers, 12 bulls, 391 cows, 150 calves, and 40 horses. Bowring's father had brought Shorthorn cattle from their home in Iowa when initially settling in Nebraska. Arthur Bowring continued with the breed until 1928 when the first Hereford bulls were added to the herd. Primarily engaged in managing a commercial herd, the rancher soon turned to specialized breeding when his wife Eve began to dabble in certified purebreds during the 1930s. Bowring's financial statements that included inventories for mortgage purposes were available to Mann for her compilation of the figures.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 29.

The local Cherry County Good Road and Community Club, organized in 1914, held goals similar to those of the state organization. Valentine newspapers clamored for improved roadways and applauded new community action. Area businesses instigated the local movement, perhaps initially intent on gaining improved Valentine streets. Their efforts put into motion a county-wide program that enlisted town and rural interests.<sup>66</sup> At the first meeting, August 4, 1919, the civic group urged the appointment of a paid highway commissioner to organize and coordinate the county's efforts. Bowring looked like an ideal candidate for the position if the job had ever materialized. The rancher did serve in the capacity of the acting road commissioner, fielding problems with finances, equipment, and personnel.

Another important duty involved the motivation of county residents. Until increased revenue from gasoline taxes surpassed the amount of property taxes used for road programs, the support of county citizens was of paramount importance. As long as property tax dollars were used for road construction and improvements, rural state legislators and their constituents were suspicious of any large expenditures. Many farmers and ranchers believed that the system worked only for the benefit of urban locales and did not address the rural problem of the lack of farm-to-market roads. Working to enlist support became one of the local association's major activities. Bowring helped enlist influential representatives from each rural neighborhood who were charged with "stirring up" positive interest.<sup>67</sup>

Stockmen, as a rule, usually favored any improvement that would facilitate their

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<sup>66</sup>*Valentine Republican*, 25 July 1919.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, 5 September 1919; Grimes, 168.

work and improve their way of doing business. Even small adjustments met public approval as when stock lanes running north from the Cody stockyard to the hay flats were completed. The only practical purpose for the improvement was providing a better arrangement for stockmen in the marketing of their cattle, yet the entire community considered the new arrangement as a “priceless” addition.<sup>68</sup> In the same spirit, the promise of good roads looked like a golden opportunity, if the job could be done. The county’s ranching community was not hard to convince; they rallied around the movement for better and more easily maintained roads.

Ranchers and farmers projected their support for the new endeavor in a number of ways. The most visible cooperation could be seen in their willingness to surrender the right-of-way through their privately-held property. Some of the more enthusiastic even expressed a willingness to contribute their time for all phases of the process.<sup>69</sup> They even accrued other expense besides the offer of time. Intrusion into the environment carried a heavy cost. New road beds not only bisected some ranches, taking away hard won private property, but also disrupted livestock habits that could effect weight gains and general animal health.<sup>70</sup>

Henry Quible’s ranch near Merriman was bisected twice by highway construction. The first time took place in the mid-twenties when construction of Route 20 required right-of-way through his property. Quible donated the land to the state in exchange for the drainage of a swamp at the eastern end of a valley he needed for the production of

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<sup>68</sup>*Cody Cowboy*, 6 August 1920.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 4 September 1925.

<sup>70</sup>*Hooker County Tribune*, 12 August 1927.



hay. A family history told how after a year hay was harvested where, in years past, family members had fished. Later in 1940, when blacktop replaced gravel from Merriman to Nenzel, construction of the rerouted highway crossed the ranch once again a few yards south of the old gravel road.<sup>71</sup>

### **MODERN TRANSPORTATION**

In sparsely populated Cherry County, motorized transportation had more than social and recreational value. Automobiles had a practical use as well. The three-or-four day trip by team and wagon from Valentine to the county's southern border could be completed by car in a day. Soon after World War I, trucks became an important addition to ranch operations, introducing a time and labor savings economy. Moreover, autos and trucks allowed for expansion into cost-cutting areas and furthered the process of modern industry development.

During the period of heightened highway and interior roads construction, an increasing number of automobiles and trucks were registered to Cherry County residents. Sales of new automobiles remained fairly steady throughout the years of economic crisis and even in 1934 new car sales were growing. C. M. Miller of the Miller Brothers' Chevrolet Dealership in Valentine reported that as of June 20, 1934 they had sold only seven fewer autos than sales totals for the entire previous year. Although considered as most likely unusual, the situation in Cherry County reflected a renewed statewide trend of

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<sup>71</sup>Marianne Brinda Beel and Ruth Johnson Harms, eds. *A Sandhills Century, Book II, The People: A History of the People in Cherry County* (Valentine, Nebraska: Cherry County Centennial Committee, 1985), 333.

increasing automobile ownership.<sup>72</sup>

The number of registered autos in Cherry County remained fairly consistent between 1931 and 1940, hovering around the 2,000 mark. However, significant increases were recorded in the number of trucks operated in the county throughout the 1930s. By 1940, a total of 747 commercial, farm, and local trucks were registered in the county. Farm trucks showed the greatest increases and accounted for 524 of the 1940 total. Official records reveal that after 1937 the total of registered commercial trucks remained steady, averaging 205 over the next three years.<sup>73</sup> Registration records reflected the county's widespread acceptance of modern transportation for personal use, but only suggest the significance of its relevance to the county's economic structure.

As early as 1936 the Chicago and NorthWestern Railroad felt the impact of the new mode of transportation on the movement of goods and livestock. In his yearly report, Valentine's C&NW's station agent, A. L. Palling, noted that the shortfall in freight shipments into and out of the station in 1935 reflected the "growing competition of trucks."<sup>74</sup> Ranch hands and cattlemen who turned their trucking adventure into a paying proposition began to haul cattle first within a limited local radius. Within a short time, local truckers began to make longer hauls to surrounding market centers.

Livestock shippers operating out of Valentine, such as Tiny Beahr and Harley

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<sup>72</sup>*Valentine Republican*, 23 June 1934.

<sup>73</sup>State of Nebraska, *Twenty-fourth Biennial Report of the Department of Roads and Irrigation: 1941-1942*. For registration purposes, trucks were designated as all vehicles equipped or used to carry anything other than passengers. Further delineation classified local trucks as those used within the limits of a municipality or within a radius of five miles while commercial trucks were those used for commercial purposes including common contract and private carriers. Farm trucks were those owned by farmers or ranchers used to haul their own produce or supplies. State of Nebraska, Department of Roads and Irrigation: Bureau of Roads and Bridges, Bulletin 3, nd.

<sup>74</sup>*Valentine Republican*, 10 January 1936.

Hanson, carried on a lucrative trucking business. Leo Cotant, the son of ranchers in the southern portion of the county, hauled cattle out of Cody for several years as well.<sup>75</sup> With the large number of animals within accessible distance to the town, it was no surprise that Cotant had some heavy competition from other truckers based at Cody. Still, the growing interest of important local ranchers who saw the convenience of truck transportation as an improvement for their operations offered enough business for all. By the mid-1930s, truckers like Lee Osterman began hauling cattle to the Sioux City and Omaha stockyards in his 1934 Chevrolet Straight Rig truck with a 14' bed. Although not as commodious as later models would be, Osterman was able to accomplish the task more quickly and cheaper than any railroad could.<sup>76</sup>

Early independent truckers had no precedents with which to base their schedule of fees. Most took the easiest route by discovering rail rates by any "devious" method they could and simply charging less.<sup>77</sup> When the federal agency administering the National Recovery Act of 1933 issued a directive that all truck operators could charge rates that equaled their services, unfortunately it had failed to designate a cost for those services, opening the door to confusion. In the same way, the Nebraska State Railway Commission also failed to adopt standards set by national experts experienced in setting rates. By 1941, according to the Nebraska Motor Carriers Association, a satisfactory, but long overdue, statewide rate structure was ready to be put into place. Standardized rates would

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<sup>75</sup>Schroeder letter to author. Leo Cotant returned to ranch work on the Carver Ranch after a few years and remained employed there for the next nineteen years. However, Cotant eventually took to the roads once again and established a shipping company, once again headquartered at Cody. Beel and Harms, 99.

<sup>76</sup>Schroeder letter.

<sup>77</sup>Charles E. Hall, "The Highway Tariff Bureau, Omaha, Has and Is Doing an Outstanding Job for Certified Livestock Haulers," *Midwestern Truckers and Shippers*, 3 (July-August 1942): 5.

establish limits to the free-wheeling pricing levels of independent livestock haulers who provided stockmen with an important transportation alternative.

Although shipping by truck had given Cherry County ranchers a cost-saving alternative, slow road and highway development restricted greater acceptance of the cheaper and time-saving transportation. For many, driving cattle to concentration points on rail lines remained the only way. Solutions to the higher cost and inconvenience of rail transportation came when a scheme developed to load trucks at points along the highway. Although this half-way measure still entailed driving cattle long distances, it brought benefits. Some, like the Beels and their neighbors, joined together to buy an install a weighing scale for their communal use. Located at the most centrally located Beel Ranch, the addition eliminated the long trailing process to Wood Lake for weighing and transport. With neighborhood weighing facilities available to local ranchers, trucks could use the better oiled spur road, 16-B, to load cattle for rapid transport. Since livestock were weighed at the point of shipment, none of the problems associated with shrinkage lowered ranchers' returns. Beel and his cohorts not only reduced stress for the animal and added work for their own part, they also instituted a cost-saving arrangement while providing a time-saving service for buyers who purchased cattle by "private treaty."<sup>78</sup>

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As members of the larger community, ranchers sought links to the modern world.

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<sup>78</sup>Beel and Gale, 241.

As entrepreneurs, they shared a vested interest in finding ways to implement a more efficient and profitable operation. Better roads provided both. Surfaced roads offered better access and the possibilities that a new form of transportation could ameliorate some of their hidden costs and drains on their returns from production. Shipping fees, when added to commission costs, and vacillating prices claimed a major portion of projected profits.<sup>79</sup> For Arthur Bowring and those who shared his view, the expense of building and graveling good roads through Cherry County was money well spent. Good permanent roads were an “investment—not an expense.”<sup>80</sup>

Beyond the obvious increase in mobility, more and better roads loosened the railroad’s stranglehold on area producers. As shipping by truck gained greater acceptance on the rural scene, livestock shippers began to see possibilities of truck and trailer transport for their marketing purposes. Beginning in 1920, the number of truck shipments increased. Most who were near to railroads continued to rely on their services but for a growing number of smaller and more distant producers who usually marketed less than a car load, truck transport introduced an important cost-saving alternative. Many cattlemen in Cherry County, regardless of size of operation, welcomed the new shipping arrangement. Growing in acceptance, by the early 1940s, 36-foot livestock trucks had

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<sup>79</sup>Bowring letter to the *Omaha World-Herald*, 1927 quoted in Mann, 15.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid. Letter from the Office of the State Engineer to the members of the Cherry County Board of Commissioners and Supervisors describing bills introduced in the state legislature concerning the financial arrangement for the construction of state highways, 6 February, 1919; Press release to all newspapers in the State of Nebraska issued by the Nebraska Department of Public Works, George B. Johnson, Secretary and State Engineer, 19 January 1922 that answers criticism of the state’s efforts.. Mr. Johnson specifically addresses Bowring’s questions as to the excessive costs of the state’s work; Bowring Papers; Wardner G. Scott, “Nebraska Public Highways,” *Nebraska History*, 26 (July-September 1945): 166.

become a usual sight along the highways that crossed the county.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup>Wood, 259, 262; Reece, 55.

## CHAPTER EIGHT WAYS TO MARKET 1920-1940

Development of hard surfaced, all weather roads and more efficient motor trucks accelerated the decentralization of livestock markets between 1920 and 1940. Locational advantages that gave dominance to rail terminal livestock centers were reduced as small, localized sales agencies gained in importance. Communication through printed and radio reports of market conditions allowed growing numbers of producers to buy and sell on a regional and local basis. The shift away from central market centers gave impetus to new kinds of marketing arrangements and encouraged a greater acceptance of direct marketing. Taking place during a period of economic depression and slow recovery, the new techniques insured better returns to the primary producers.<sup>1</sup>

Savings in costs, time, and distance were only some of the factors that made shipping by truck an attractive alternative. Although the exact differential between rail and truck transport rates varied with distance and numbers, other cost saving elements were more obvious. With a greater flexibility in regard to scheduling shipments, producers were better able to exert some control over costly and unfavorable conditions. More often than not, using the services of local truckers rather than the railroad eliminated the delays and shrinkage associated with overcrowded stockyards and insufficient numbers of stock cars. With the development of the system of highways and roads, trucks often offered speedier and more direct delivery to either central markets or corn-belt feeders. As improved models of trucks offered faster, safer, and larger

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<sup>1</sup>Charles L. Wood, *The Kansas Beef Industry* (Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1980), 260; Austin Allyn Dowell and Knute Bjorka, *Livestock Marketing* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1941), 5-9.

capacities, more of the larger rail shippers began to find shipment by truck had advantages.

Greater accessibility through improved roads and more efficient cars and trucks had an important impact on the way area ranchers marketed their livestock. Local stockmen formed organizations that modified older practices to meet their modern needs, and made great strides toward wresting control over the marketing of their production. Held victim to the external market forces and hidden costs that strained their operations, they sought relief from low prices and high rates. Market returns that did not even cover the cost of production threatened their very survival. Through a modification of the prevailing marketing system, ranchers attempted to restore self-confidence and profits. From different types of cooperative efforts among local and regional producers, a new social and economic interdependency emerged.<sup>2</sup>

During the early phase of Cherry County's modern cattle industry, livestock buyers from central market centers were always part of the shipping scene. Most often they bought several small lots of livestock from local producers accumulating a full car load before shipment to central markets. Cattle purchases were sometimes on a pre-ordered arrangement whereby commission agencies or packing firms ordered specific quantities or types of animals. Although cattlemen did not receive the higher prices offered at the central market, selling to traders at local shipping points eliminated the cost of transportation and the uncertainty of what prices they would receive. Another important consideration was that they were paid immediately rather than weeks later due

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<sup>2</sup>*Cody Cowboy* (Cody, Nebraska), 6 November 1924.



to the need to process and deliver payments from central market transactions.

Beginning around 1900, a small number of corn-belt farmers began to come into the county to buy cattle for their feedlot operations. Fluctuations in the numbers of cattle and price levels at central markets created the nuisance of instability to their way of thinking.<sup>3</sup> Most western Iowa and eastern Nebraska feeders, however, continued to buy livestock at Missouri River markets while those who sought to buy directly remained loyal to their Sandhills sources.<sup>4</sup> As herds became larger, the number of market buyers and dealers who actually purchased the greater numbers of stock at local shipping points decreased. The only real option for small producers was to consign shipments themselves directly to Omaha, Sioux City, and Chicago markets.<sup>5</sup> Without sufficient stock to fill a car and the special preferential rates that large producers often could arrange, the smaller stockmen were hard pressed to see a good profit. In order to cut at least part of the huge overhead, they combined their cattle in order to fill one or more car loads and save some of the cost.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Perhaps the most significant issue in the livestock industry, most often cattle and hogs, is that of periodic cycles of animal numbers and the corresponding price levels. Livestock cycles in the United States have been documented since the systematic collection of data began. Agricultural economists have derived several theoretical conclusions as to the causes of the cyclical nature of livestock production that range from the supply of corn or the gestation periods of animals to responsibility being assigned to producers themselves. Cycles have been shown to average nine to twelve years with an expansion period of six to eight years and a decline of from three to ten years. Expansion is seen to be more regular due to biological factors and is easily initiated by holding back heifer calves for breeding. During the period between 1896 to 1938, three cycles occurred, 1896-1912, 1912-1928, 1928-1938. William H. Lesser, *Marketing Livestock and Meat* (New York: Food Products Press, 1993), 187-94.

<sup>4</sup>See James W. Whitaker, *Feedlot Empire: Beef Cattle Feeding in Illinois and Iowa, 1840-1900*, Replica Ed. (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1975) 55-73.

<sup>5</sup>Charles S. Reece, *An Early History of Cherry County*, 1945 rpt. (Valentine, Nebraska: Plains Trading Company, 1992), 76.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

## COOPERATIVE ORGANIZATION

In some areas, the outgrowth of the casual combined shipping arrangement was the organization of cooperative shipping associations. Gaining in popularity about 1924, many of the associations were based on a loose corporate structure.<sup>7</sup> Capital stock issued to participating members paid patronage dividends on a regular basis.<sup>8</sup> While the small dividends represented the rewards of cooperation, shipping associations eliminated one level of economic drain on the small rancher. Commission firms served in the capacity as middlemen who arranged for yard facilities, sorted animals, and dealt with buyers when producers consigned livestock to their firms. Some like the John Clay Commission Company, with one its facilities on the Omaha market and which was favored by Sandhills livestock men, did a lucrative business.<sup>9</sup>

However, the services were not without costs or problems. Many livestock producers considered meat packers to be the most serious obstacle to fair marketing practices, but commission men were deemed accountable as well.<sup>10</sup> Allegations of price fixing, monopoly, and collusion had long swirled around meat packers' relationships to central market facilities. Livestock producers as well as federal legislators hoped that passage of the Packers and Stockyards Act in 1921 would alleviate some of the problems

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<sup>7</sup>Shipping associations were recognized as a marketing institution since 1883. By the 1920s most of the nation's 1,547 associations could be found in rural Iowa, Minnesota, and Illinois. Because the majority of farmers' shipping groups were located in heavy hog producing states, it can be surmised that most shipping associations were devoted to that livestock trade. *Cody Cowboy*, 6 November 1924.

<sup>8</sup>Nebraska Farmers Union booklet, "The Farmers Union: What it is and What it is Doing" (1928), 6, Kuska Collection, MS. 1431, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska.

<sup>9</sup>Reprint, Jack Moreland "Hello There" *Nebraska Cattleman* (February 1962), in Franklin C. Jackson, *Echoes From The Sandhills* (Lincoln, Nebraska: World Services, 1977), xi.

<sup>10</sup>Wood, 160.

by bringing stockyard and marketing agencies under federal control,<sup>11</sup> but marketing charges continued to remain high as commission rates were not affected by the legislation. Disillusioned and discontent, increasing numbers of producers looked for alternatives to the traditional marketing system.

Some found an alternative selling scheme available at Omaha's central livestock market. A commission agency, owned and operated by the Farmers Union of Nebraska, purchased a membership on the Omaha Livestock Exchange to handle the sale of hogs, cattle, and sheep on April 2, 1917.<sup>12</sup> Open for use by its members, the operation expanded within three months to the St. Joseph, Missouri, and Sioux City, Iowa, terminal centers. Legislation passed in the early 1920s that revised the way the facility did business opened participation with the commission firm to Farmers Union (FU) members from other states. Under the revised provisions, shippers from other farm organizations could participate as well. All producers who took advantage of the cooperative commission firm signed a joint-operating contract. In doing so they became members of only the cooperative sales enterprise while retaining their previous affiliation. Reports on membership showed that in addition to Nebraska livestock producers, participants from other farm organizations signed the contracts. However, within the state only producers with FU affiliation entered into agreements with the commission house.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>"Meat for the Multitude," *The National Provisioner*, I, (4 July 1981): 178. Packers were described as being not displeased with the fact that the act transferred the regulatory powers of the Federal Trade Commission as applied to the livestock and meat industry to the Secretary of Agriculture. The *National Provisioner* functions as an organ for the meat packing industry.

<sup>12</sup>Theodore Saloutos and John D. Hicks, *Twentieth Century Populism: Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West 1900-1939* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1951), 241.

<sup>13</sup>Nebraska Farmers Union booklet, "The Farmers Union: What It Is and What It is Doing," (1928), 6-7.

While commercial and FU commission firms charged identical rates, stockmen who did business with the cooperative organization received a dividend at the end of the business year. A percentage of the commission collected was reimbursed. For many, the patronage dividend became the margin between success and failure. Participants received an average return that ranged between 40 and 50 percent of the year's total commissions paid.<sup>14</sup> Records for Omaha, Nebraska, show that participants in the FU Livestock Commission there received an even higher average dividend of 61.65 percent during the period 1922-1926.<sup>15</sup>

Since in Nebraska only FU members signed the contract, the impact of patronage dividends on a county's economy was linked to the number and size of FU locals organized there. Although records are incomplete for Cherry County, membership numbers and the location of FU locals reveal participation and agreement with the union's ideals. As the number of farmers decreased so did the number of FU members. In 1925, only 218 members of the FU were active in the county's local organization.<sup>16</sup> Two years later, membership fell to 163. Each subsequent year revealed a progressively falling membership as the county's farming population gave way to ranching and economic

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 7.

<sup>15</sup>United States, Federal Trade Commission, *Cooperative Marketing*, 1975 Arno Press reprint, Senate Document, 95, 70th Congress, 1st Session (Washington, D. C.: GPO, 1928), 596.

<sup>16</sup>*Nebraska Union Farmer* (Omaha, Nebraska), 23 December 1925. The question of why ranchers were less inclined to join the Farmers Union organization remains unanswered. In western South Dakota, reportedly a significant number of ranchers were enthusiastic members who took advantage of the organization's marketing facilities. One possible reason might be found in the ability of Farmers Union organizers in western Nebraska to stimulate greater interest. Without further in depth investigation the question remains open.

depression took its toll.<sup>17</sup> Only .9 percent of Nebraska's 18,020 dues paying membership in 1927 were from Cherry County. By 1932, the remaining stockholders in Cherry County's local Farmers Union Co-Operative Association voted to close their store and grain elevator operation.<sup>18</sup> Grain receipts at the elevator, predominantly corn, had been greatly reduced. Competition from other facilities and the increasing practice by area stock-farmers of feeding their livestock part of their harvested crops greatly reduced business. Voluntary bankruptcy proved to be the only way to reconcile mounting financial obligations in the pressing economic times. By that time, almost all of the county's ranchers and farmers who belonged had dropped their membership due to poor dividend returns.<sup>19</sup>

Although incomplete records make it impossible to determine who, if any, took advantage of the services of one of the FU's livestock commission agencies, Cherry County ranchers must have been aware that of the claim that the organization's commission operations afforded better financial opportunity. In 1925, FU officials had spoken at the Nebraska Livestock Growers Association annual May meeting. Their appeal had addressed the positive new direction producers had launched. They saw the

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<sup>17</sup>Membership in the Farmers Union actually increased during the Depression of the 1930s except in those areas hardest hit, such as Texas, Kansas, eastern Colorado, and parts of Nebraska. Since the Nebraska Sandhills region was spared from the devastating effects of the drought of the 1930s, the decrease in membership in that region was most likely the result of the declining farmer population and ranchers' greater acceptance of other organizations. John A. Crampton, *The National Farmers Union: Ideology of a Pressure Group* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 60.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 3. Farmers Union of Nebraska membership record for Cherry County, 1926-1936, Nebraska Farmers Union records, Lincoln, Nebraska. Cherry County was in District #1 that included 22 counties in western Nebraska until 1932 when three counties were transferred to District #2. In 1927 Cherry County's union membership lagged behind Custer, 376, Box Butte, 342, and Cheyenne, 207. Farmers Union of Nebraska membership record, "Cherry County," Farmers Union of Nebraska headquarters, Lincoln, Nebraska.

<sup>19</sup>*Cherry County News* (Valentine, Nebraska), 4 February 1932; *Valentine Republican* (Valentine, Nebraska), 27 January 1933.

new emphasis on calf and yearling production delivering a severe blow to large producers. Small producers had taken a new position in their struggle to gain influence. From the FU position, ranchers could add to their security by choosing to market their livestock through the FU cooperative commission agencies at Omaha and Sioux City.<sup>20</sup>

Cooperative marketing had distinct advantages for small producers. Historically they had been overshadowed and manipulated at central market facilities which gave preference to the large producers. According to union promoters, small cattle producers, like the nation's dirt farmers, originally possessed the wealth of production. However, under conditions of poor price levels and the vagaries of transportation and commission rates, they now faced a disquieting and disruptive set of circumstances. With the prevailing market conditions, small ranchers and farmers become victims of a price and income structure that favored the large and the powerful. In order to meet the new challenges successfully, a union of agricultural producers offered a real solution. Through a cooperative system, strength and power would grow out of a combined effort. By participation and the sharing of returns, the profitability of production would be restored.<sup>21</sup>

Mainstream conservative agricultural organizations such as the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) also took measures to relieve the expenses of livestock marketing. Encouraged by the early successes of their grain marketing committee, a conference of livestock interests met on October 8, 1920, from which the Marketing

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<sup>20</sup>*Nebraska Union Farmer*, 10 June 1925.

<sup>21</sup>Statement of the Farmers Union Livestock Commission and the Farmers Union Livestock Credit Association, Sioux City, Iowa, 1932, n. p., Kuska Collection, MS. 1431, Nebraska State Historical Society..

Committee of Fifteen was formed. Eager to bring about some resolution to problems some ranchers faced, one of the committee's earliest ideas went so far as to suggest that packers release advance information on purchases as well as prices as a guide for producers.<sup>22</sup> The answer to more effective marketing, however, was finally found in an appeal for cooperative efforts that drew the AFBF in that direction. Ultimately their final plans involved projecting their organization and influence into the livestock cooperative field. Acting in direct competition with the FU, the inevitable clash between the two ideologically divergent organizations was not long in coming.<sup>23</sup> Because the FU already had made considerable headway in establishing cooperative marketing facilities, they were opposed to the AFBF's determination to dominate the entire cooperative livestock marketing business. When the FU refused suggestions of merger of its commission houses with those affiliated with the Bureau's new efforts, competition and struggle reached serious proportions until the organizations became reconciled to the fact there was room for both.<sup>24</sup>

Out of the Marketing Committee of Fifteen's final report grew the basis for the Farm Bureau's newly organized National Livestock Producers' Association. Essential to the operation of the new cooperative marketing scheme, it served as the overhead

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<sup>22</sup>"Meat for the Multitude," 175.

<sup>23</sup>See Crampton. The Farmers Union held that the American Farm Bureau had long been bolstered with public funds due to its close relationship with the Extension Service. The FU saw the AFBF as working in the interest of "big business," and was intent on preventing farmers from building their own organization. According to FU rhetoric, the Farm Bureau did not operate "real co-ops." Dale Kramer, *The Truth About the Farm Bureau* (Denver: Vital Facts Press, 1945), 5-6, 9; Bruce E. Field, in his article, "The Price of Dissent," noted that "In the 1930s and early 1940s, the National Farmers Union had criticized an unholy alliance between business and government" that contributed to the demise of American family farmers. This would explain that more than a competitive spirit motivated the union's disdain with the Farm Bureau. Bruce E. Fields, "The Price of Dissent: The Iowa Farmers Union and the Early Cold War, 1945-1954," *Annals of Iowa*, 55 (Winter 1996): 7.

<sup>24</sup>Saloutos, 304-6.

organization for a system of commission houses located at principal livestock terminal centers.<sup>25</sup> While the producers' association did not function as a marketing agency itself, its aims were to assist its members in getting the best prices that prevailing conditions of supply and demand could allow. By seeing that charges were as small as possible, livestock sellers would benefit doubly.<sup>26</sup> In 1923, the AFBF suggested to all its affiliated members a formula for contractual agreements between separate county Farm Bureau organizations and a cooperative marketing organization.<sup>27</sup>

For the ranching community in Cherry County, neither the FU or the AFBF appeared to have the right solution. Answers to their marketing problems were more easily addressed on the local level. With a small FU membership, no more than a few Cherry County ranchers availed themselves of the union's cooperative commission firm. Then, too, lack of an organized Farm Bureau body in the county until 1934 may have prevented a wide acceptance of that organization's cooperative marketing efforts.<sup>28</sup> According to one local history, by 1936 marketing was finally offered through the county extension program and its affiliation with the AFBF. Reportedly, the need was evident

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<sup>25</sup>Orville Merton Kile, *The Farm Bureau Through Three Decades* (Baltimore: Waverly Press, 1948), 88.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>27</sup>*American Farm Bureau Weekly News Letter* (Chicago, Illinois), 14 June 1923.

<sup>28</sup>See chapter 5 for the cooperative arrangement between the Farm Bureau on the national level, the local organization, and the state's extension service administered through the state university. In Nebraska, state law provided that a local organization was to be known as the "County Farm Bureau" and function not as an incorporated organization but as a legally recognized body only after its officers were elected. Each county organization could chose to affiliate and support the state and national federations by yearly election. Cherry County's Farm Bureau voted to affiliate with the Nebraska Farm Bureau Federation and the American Farm Bureau Federation at the October 18, 1936, directors meeting. *Valentine Republican*, 31 January 1936; C. M. Mead, "Annual Report of County Agent: Cherry County, Nebraska, November 10, 1936 to November 20, 1937," Annual Reports of County Agents and Departments-Nebraska, Federal Cooperative Extension Service of the United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C., RG 11/4/4, University Special Collections Archive, Love Library, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, Nebraska, 39.



since a large volume of cattle was shipped the following year. In 1937, total rail shipments amounted to 2,624 carloads of cattle on the C&NW and 1,500 on the Burlington.<sup>29</sup> While the Cherry County agent's annual report to the United States Department of Agriculture made no mention of local participation in the Bureau's cooperative marketing efforts, some of the area ranchers most likely took advantage of the new opportunity.<sup>30</sup> Large ranchers, for the most part, continued to use the commercial commission houses to handle their cattle, while those with smaller operations took steps to eliminate heavy reliance on central markets altogether. The lateness of the Bureau's cooperative movement into Cherry County meant some stockmen sought to arrange for their own types of marketing schemes.

## LOCAL MARKET ORGANIZATION

As ranchers moved away from raising older slaughter cattle to a calf-yearling operation, new marketing arrangements had to be found. Attracting buyers from cornbelt feeders involved different types of strategies than selling mature animals to packers at central markets. Farmers in the midwestern cornbelt states often could not produce enough cattle to utilize the surplus grain they now produced. Early experiences at buying direct from western ranches had not always been a profitable experience as far as time and money were concerned. The few head they were able to buy did not always warrant

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<sup>29</sup>Marianne Brinda Beel and Ruth Johnson Harms, eds. *A Sandhills Century: Book II: The People: A History of the People in Cherry County* (Valentine, Nebraska: Cherry County Centennial Committee, 1985), 157.

<sup>30</sup> Mead, n.p.

the expense of the trip.<sup>31</sup>

While in the past direct-buying had not always resulted in sufficient numbers of available cattle, central markets were filling the void. Commission traders and dealers at terminal locations would buy carloads of mixed cattle coming directly off the range to sell to farmers who now regularly sought stockers or feeders who looked like good producers of beef. Sorting cattle according to size, color, and weight, livestock commission house personnel facilitated transactions for those selling at central markets.<sup>32</sup> As more cattle coming off the range filled the feeders' requirements, the feeder and stocker market grew.

The central market system of handling stockers and feeders was not without critics. Sellers believed they were at the mercy of commission men and yard traders whose interests were not always with getting ranchers the best price. Growing decentralization of the meat packing industry, the building and extension of a system of hard surfaced roads, and the increased use of motorized transportation encouraged the organization of different kinds of markets.<sup>33</sup> Low price levels and other marketing costs provided livestock producers with the motivation to assert their control over the sale of their livestock, and they concluded that through local enterprise excessive overhead costs inherent in central market transactions could be successfully eliminated and profits redirected into the hands of producers.

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<sup>31</sup>Dowell and Bjorka, 74.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 76.

<sup>33</sup>Gerald Engelman and Betty Sue Pence, "Livestock Auction Markets in the United States," *Agricultural Marketing Service*, Report 223 (1958), 5.

One of the earliest attempts to restore local control and reduce costs was the public auction. Although some growth in this type of endeavor had taken place predominantly in the corn-belt and Great Plains regions in the early 1900s, it was not until the 1930s that a significant increase took place. The first livestock auction market in Nebraska opened in 1912 with six more established by 1920. That grew to a total of fifteen auction markets by 1930.<sup>34</sup> Within the next seven years, the number of livestock auction market facilities jumped to a total of 98, reflecting the desperate economic situation that challenged area stockmen.<sup>35</sup>

Auctions represented one of the oldest forms of sales and marketing of livestock. Particularly favored by registered-stock breeders, frequent ads in all the local newspapers announced private sales and auctions of their pure bred bulls and cows.<sup>36</sup> Most often they attracted local buyers in the market who sought to restock their herds with a few good bulls and cows or ranchers who hoped to add a number of calves to their operation. While essential to the growth and development of a regional cattle economy, the local private auction had no place in the marketing structure of the commercial herd.

During the bleak economy of the early 1920s, a few innovative ranchers took the concept of the private auction to another level. On September 30, 1922, area ranchers shipped 1,000 head of fancy feeders to an auction sale during the closing days of the

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Engelman and Pence, 5, 2; C. G. Randell and L. B. Mann, *Livestock Auction Sales in the United States*, Farm Credit Administration, Bulletin No. 35 (Washington, D. C.: GPO, 1939), v-vi.

<sup>36</sup>*Cody Cowboy*, 1 November 1923. A news article reported on one sale held at the Belsky Hereford Ranch near Eli that fall. Mentioning the large crowd that attended this particular sale date, the piece adds that the Belsky herd was fast becoming recognized as the best in the state and had cost a vast amount of money to establish. Local stockmen made many of the purchases, with E. M. Prouse, Superintendent of the local experimental station, "a strong contender for the good females."

Nebraska Livestock Exposition held in Norfolk. Widely publicized, the sale drew buyers from Iowa, South Dakota, and eastern Nebraska. With high expectations, Cherry County cattlemen used every maneuver to cut overhead costs; they even provided their own hay and did "their own yard work" so as to assure the highest profit. According to both eyewitnesses and Norfolk newspaper reports, the bidding on the cattle was the quickest two and a half hours anyone had ever experienced in that part of the state. F. H. Young, representing a number of participating Cherry County cattlemen, declared the sale a tremendous success. He reported all were especially pleased with the prices that were said to have ranged between \$7.25 and \$7.70/hwt.<sup>37</sup>

For many of the stockmen, the sale represented "one of the greatest days they ever participated in."<sup>38</sup> Buyers, at the same time, had found prices higher than they anticipated but conceded that the cattle were the best produced in western Nebraska and "probably the best quality of livestock ever offered for feeding purposes."<sup>39</sup> Enthusiasm and interest in Sandhills' cattle ran so high that about thirty stock buyers, unsuccessful in acquiring

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<sup>37</sup>Reece, 76; *Norfolk Daily News* (Norfolk, Nebraska), 30 September 1922. The groups of cattlemen were actually locally organized into rural neighborhood or purebred stock organizations which functioned as shipping associations as well as promoters of particular breeds. One of the earliest was the Northwestern Nebraska Stock Growers Association formed in late 1889 in the lake country that took in the southwestern quarter of Cherry County. The association's thirty-three members collectively held over 5,000 head of cattle. Dr. A. J. Plummer acted as the first president with other prominent ranchers in the area such as C. G. Abbott and George Haney as members. W. D. Aeschbacher, "Development of Cattle Raising in the Sandhills," *Nebraska History* 28 (January-March 1947): 47. Smaller more localized organizations like the Bear Creek Stock Growers' Association of Eli, Nebraska, operated along the same principles as the earlier group and was active in preventing rustling. Very often, published association notices advertised the payment of rewards for information leading to the arrest and conviction of parties stealing livestock that carried the brand of its members. Handbill of the Bear Creek Stock Growers' Association of Eli, Nebraska, Charles Larsen, President, n.d. Arthur Bowring Papers, Arthur Bowring Ranch Historical Park Archives, Merriman, Nebraska.

<sup>38</sup>*Norfolk Daily News*, 30 September 1922.

<sup>39</sup>*Norfolk Daily News*, 2 October 1922. Charles Reece participated in the operation of the first sale at Norfolk and noted that he was in the safe office when a banker from a nearby town phoned his office and ordered the "boys down here" to bid on the good livestock he had just inspected. Reece, 76.

the number of head they required, departed immediately for Cherry County to buy additional cattle. The *Norfolk Daily News* reported that some of these later purchases were among the several train loads of cattle that passed through two days later en route to the Omaha or Sioux City stockyards.<sup>40</sup>

Considerable savings resulted from the scheme since shipping to more distant markets would have meant higher freight rates and at least two commission fees. Promoters in Norfolk were also pleased with results from this, their first district livestock show, and quickly announced intentions to repeat the sale the following year. Now convinced of the value of bringing buyers and sellers closer to the place of production, they held every hope that the subsequent event would draw even more buyers. Most Cherry County ranchers welcomed the plan to continue the sales and after the next year's good results, hoped it would become a permanent feature. Many believed that the reputation of Sandhills cattle had lured the large number of buyers.<sup>41</sup> The successes of Norfolk's sales motivated other communities and individuals to initiate similar arrangements at other towns along other railroads' routes to benefit their communities and local cattle producers.<sup>42</sup>

After repeated successes at Norfolk,<sup>43</sup> stockmen in Cherry County began to think in terms closer to their home ranges. In a move to better serve area ranchers, another type of facility took shape. Ben Bachelor and a group of associates established and operated an

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<sup>40</sup>*Norfolk Daily News*, 2 October 1922.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup>Reece, 77.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*

auction barn at Valentine. The new facility proved a boon for local producers. Since most of the livestock came from within the immediate area, advertisements in all Cherry County newspapers appeared weekly. Although sale days often served as a social occasion, buying and selling of improved stock was serious business for local ranchers. Adding to the spirited auctions, order buyers, authorized by corn-belt feeders to purchase specific types of animals, yard traders hoping to obtain the type of stock in demand at the central market, and even some packers were some of the most active bidders.<sup>44</sup> Ranchers who consigned their stock to the auction house paid a commission charge most often based on gross sales. Under certain conditions, charges were computed on a per head basis with an additional charge on the percentage of gross sales.<sup>45</sup>

Although doing business at the livestock auction was not without cost, advantages outweighed any payment of charges. Unlike the procedure at terminal markets where individual ranchers or commission men carried on transactions by "private treaty," at the auctions, sales were conducted through public bidding. Under the practiced eye of the auctioneer, lively, though silent, competition assured producers the best possible price for their livestock.

As livestock prices steadily declined and transportation and marketing expenses at central livestock markets became a greater part of the gross value received, the Cherry County auction facility grew in importance. By 1933, a highly developed and well-organized corporation, the Northwestern Livestock Sales Company, served the needs of area ranchers. Only the year before, ranchmen and the Merriman Chamber of Commerce

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<sup>44</sup>*Valentine Republican*, 22 September 1933.

<sup>45</sup>Randell and Mann, vi.

convinced the auction company to build a yard and sale pavilion at their location. The new facility would be identical to the company's establishment in Valentine with a yard that included 54 pens able to accommodate several car loads of livestock and a heated pavilion with a 500 person capacity.<sup>46</sup> Within a year both facilities of the Northwestern Livestock Sales Company were doing a good business with large numbers of buyers attending both sales.<sup>47</sup>

Ben Bachelor remained an officer of the corporation and managed the facility until 1935. Investors in the venture changed over the years, but despite the profitability of the venture, he sold his interests to Harry Schosser and J. B. Hendricks who took over the facility and operated it under the new name, the Nebraska Auction Company. After the death of Schosser in 1939, E. C. Pestel entered into the partnership, selling his interest in 1944 to Adolph Nollett while Hendricks transferred his half ownership to Bob Carr the following year.<sup>48</sup>

Although ownership arrangements changed over the life span of the local enterprise, its importance to the regional cattle economy was never underestimated. Bachelor's early investment appeared to have anticipated a growing trend toward these types of market operations years before they had become familiar on the cattle country landscape. While national development of auction facilities had grown slowly during the

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<sup>46</sup>*Valentine Republican*, 29 July 1932.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 29 October 1933. Sales at each location were held on different days which enabled the management to employ one set of auction personnel.

<sup>48</sup>Lovell Miles, "Northwestern Livestock Sales Company," in Marianne Brinda Beel and Barbara Kime Gale, eds., *A Sandhill Century: Book I: A History of Cherry County, Nebraska* (Valentine, Nebraska: Cherry County Centennial Committee, 1986), 172. Nollett began at the auction barn as an order buyer; that is, he acted as an agent for buyers who could not be present at the sale. Lovell Nollett Miles, "Nollett Family," in Beel and Harms, 298.

1920s, the following decade saw a rapid increase. Declining prices had ranchers intent on reducing marketing expenses and lessening risks by selling closer to home.<sup>49</sup> In 1937, livestock auctions operated at 1,345 locations with 68 percent in the North Central region of the country. Facilities in Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska accounted for 685 of the national total. Much of the growth in the western United States had occurred after 1935, the year Bachelor sold out.<sup>50</sup>

### LOCAL COOPERATIVE ORGANIZATIONS

During the bleak days of lower market prices in the 1920s, some Cherry County ranchers introduced schemes that kept the marketing of their livestock in their own hands. Central market facilities and public auctions answered some of the needs of local ranchers, and many local producers shipped to Omaha, Sioux City, and Chicago, and came out as well as market conditions warranted. At the same time, many of these same producers used the services of the auction facility for both buying and selling of livestock. Each provided a useful and necessary service, but were not without certain drawbacks. Some believed that at local public auctions the lack of stronger competition led to lower returns, and central livestock centers often exerted extreme control over market dynamics.<sup>51</sup>

In order to avoid what they considered to be unfavorable outcomes, a group of

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<sup>49</sup>Randell and Mann, 6.

<sup>50</sup>Engelman and Pence, 7-8.

<sup>51</sup>Letter, Arthur Bowring to the editor of the *Omaha World-Herald*, n.d., in response to the March, 1927, article (one in a series) by J. L. Marco, criticizing the practices of local ranchers' activities on livestock central markets, quoted in Sandra Mann, ms. "Sandhills and Senators: The Bowring Bar 99 Saga" for the Nebraska Game and Parks Foundation, 1986, 15-16, Arthur Bowring Ranch Historical Park.



local ranchers launched efforts to increase interest and convenience in different forms of “direct buying.” They began with the premise that greater emphasis should be placed on promoting the area which, in turn, would bring more buyers from the cornbelt areas. During the early 1920s, one group of ranchers in the Brownlee area of Cherry County took up the challenge. They contacted officials of the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad (CB&Q) to suggest that a special car be run from Omaha to Seneca to carry cattle buyers into their Sandhills area. Upon arriving at the Thomas County depot, prospective buyers would be taken on an auto tour of area ranches by delegations of ranchers. After a good deal of local planning, the scheme was accomplished. During the summer, before haying got underway, a group of area stockmen escorted prospective cattle buyers from one location to another. In between scheduled meals, the entourage of forty cars looped from Seneca into Cherry County stopping at prearranged points to view and inspect stock. After an outdoor luncheon at the Robert S. Lee Ranch at Brownlee, the group headed southeast to visit others on a selected route that eventually wound its way to the North Loup Valley and the CB&Q station at Halsey in neighboring Blaine County.<sup>52</sup> As an initial step toward cementing business relationships, the organizers felt confident their plan had worked.

During this same period, an article in the *Cody Cowboy* appeared to signal a new direction for ranchers in the north central region of the county. The article reported the formation of an innovative loose confederation between Colorado livestock organizations and cornbelt farmer/feeders from Iowa for the purpose of selling and buying Colorado

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<sup>52</sup>John Keller, *Omaha World-Herald* article, n.d., Cherry County Historical Society Archives, Valentine, Nebraska.

cattle. Coordinated by the extension departments of both states as an experiment in marketing, the sale proved a great success. Thousands of head of Herefords were sold by the North Park Colorado cattle growers association to Iowa farmers who traveled west for the sale.<sup>53</sup>

Although no reference to the Colorado-Iowa sales scheme was ever mentioned, a group of Cherry County ranchers shortly thereafter improvised a similar scheme on a smaller scale. As if taking their cue from the Colorado experiment, local stockmen devised their own marketing plan. Meeting at Cody in the summer of 1924, they formed a Breeder to Feeder Association to stimulate a home market for their Sandhills cattle. In an effort to solicit buyers to come to the area, the association proposed to advertise “throughout the feeding section of eastern Nebraska and western Iowa.” Participating cattlemen believed that by bringing more feeders to the place of cattle production, they could exert some control and set their own prices. Better advertising would also inform buyers about availability and thereby prevent buyers arriving where no stock was available.<sup>54</sup> Within only a few months, the new organization appeared to be on the right track. In mid-September the association reported the sale of 240 head of two-year-old steers to W. S. Hanna, a feeder from LuVerne, Iowa.<sup>55</sup>

Area ranchers were forming new attitudes about the role of their organizational efforts in serving their economic needs. Traditionally, local and state livestock associations policed the local industry through activities such as brand inspections.

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<sup>53</sup>*Cody Cowboy*, 4 October 1923.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 17 July 1924.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 18 September 1924.

Organizations such as the Nebraska Stock Growers' Association (NSGA) had been primarily established in response to rustlers and roundups and prevention of one man's "ill-gotten gains" from another man's property. Along with authority to inspect brands at terminal markets, the NSGA also lobbied for and against state legislation that reflected on the state's cattle industry.<sup>56</sup> While voicing concern and even protest over some issues, the association had no authority to remedy some of the pressing economic issues. Other organizations like breeders' associations or associations of local ranchers such as Bear Creek Stock Growers' Association of the Eli area promoted and protected their livestock interests but were not prepared to function as marketing agencies.<sup>57</sup>

While the newly established Breeders to Feeders organization also envisioned protection and promotion of the county's cattle trade, its primary focus entailed the profitable marketing of its members' livestock. Only the year before local newspapers announced that "Sand Hill calves were making friends throughout the Corn Belt" because of the quality and future performance feeders desired.<sup>58</sup> Ranchers in their new association took a pragmatic stance. They placed a growing emphasis on promotions to build on that relationship.

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<sup>56</sup>Statewide brand recording began on 1 July 1899. Until then each county had the responsibility of keeping records on the identifying marks of ownership of ranchers who either resided there or grazed their cattle in the area. The Nebraska Secretary of State's office had the responsibility of reviewing applications and dispensed the distinctive markings of ownership to applicants. Inspection of brands resided with the Nebraska Stock Growers' Association which organized in 1900. In 1941 the state legislature formed the Nebraska Brand Committee to take over the inspection of cattle and investigation of missing or stolen cattle. Pamphlet "The Nebraska Brand Committee: To Better Serve the Cattle Industry" (Alliance, Nebraska: Nebraska Brand Committee, n.d.), n.p.

<sup>57</sup>*Nebraska Cattleman*, Centennial Issue, 44 (May 1988): 10-11; List of Bear Creek Stock Growers' Association, of Eli, Nebraska members, *Bowring Papers*. While the Nebraska Stockgrowers' Association had assumed the function of inspecting brands at the point of sales as a hedge against rustlers, local stock associations also guarded against rustlers. Notices of rewards amounting to thousands of dollars for the arrest and conviction of rustlers often appeared in local newspapers. *Cody Cowboy*, 21 August 1925.

<sup>58</sup>*Cody Cowboy*, 9 August 1923.

Through the development of advertising in farm journals and through hand bills, the association promoted the thousands of highly bred cattle located throughout the county. In a move to create an amenable selling environment, the members organized a system that reduced confusion about the location of ranches and the best way to them. Ranchers who joined with the Breeders to Feeders often took on the role of guides and provided transportation to and from the available stock.<sup>59</sup> In an environment with no distinguishing landmarks other than sand dunes that looked deceptively alike, they hoped to keep buyers in the best frame of mind rather than deal with disgruntled farmers who had become lost on their expansive ranges.

From the beginning of the new arrangements, a brisk business in the direct-sale of livestock took place.<sup>60</sup> But within two years prices began to improve, and some area ranchers returned to selling at central markets where they believed they could get better prices. In turn, the number of livestock available for direct-buying decreased resulting in increasingly fewer buyers coming to the dunes country. Then the whole outlook of the cattle industry changed in June, 1929. Cattle prices started on a cataclysmic three-year slump and meat processors reduced their production as meat prices fell 53 percent between 1929 and 1932 in response to lower meat consumption.<sup>61</sup>

During the early 1930s, ranchers shifted their primary concerns from reducing marketing costs to selling enough livestock to meet their obligations. Local auction

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<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, 21 August 1924.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, 10 September 1926.

<sup>61</sup>John T. Schlebecker, *Cattle Raising on the Plains, 1900-1961* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 119.

arrangements grew in number and importance while cooperatives lost some influence. In Cherry County, one local organization of ranchers instigated auction sales at area shipping points. The Sandhills Stockgrowers' Association built stockyards and sales facilities at Wood Lake in 1932. Their organization already operated similar yards at Cody, also on the Chicago and NorthWestern rail line, as well as at Hyannis and Lakeside, located on the CB&Q. In order to stimulate interest and sales, they advertised through the press and on radio broadcast stations as far east as Chicago.<sup>62</sup> Local organization was necessary to fill the gap left by the lack of cooperation between the FU and the AFBF. From the start their growth in the livestock business had been hampered due to the collusive forces of railroads and meat packing firms. Their business in cattle dealt with primarily small lots of livestock, and it became the tendency of producers to "dump their inferior animals on the agencies." Since neither organization dominated livestock marketing, both proved inconsequential in effecting prices or moving a large amount of livestock.<sup>63</sup>

Although the government buy-out relieved the pressures of surplus production, the slow rise in prices kept Cherry County stockmen in search for other cost-cutting tactics. Direct buying through the public auction and the Breeders to Feeders Association had offered certain alternatives in the 1920s, but some area stockmen still continued to question these new ideas. They questioned whether higher profits could be achieved through reduced commission charges and relatively little cost for transportation when

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<sup>62</sup>*Valentine Republican*, 5 August 1932. H. F. Slaughter who managed the Association believed the "real cattle feeders" were attracted to their facilities.

<sup>63</sup>Wood, 269-70.

prices were often \$1 lower.<sup>64</sup> They had to be convinced. Many who questioned remained committed to distant terminal centers. They tended to be the larger ranch operations which retained a significant influence on markets.

A new effort at the direct marketing of livestock eventually gained widespread support in the late 1930s. In a scheme, strikingly similar to the earlier Breeders to Feeders, a new coalition of community leaders and local ranchers formed the nucleus of the initial organization, the Sandhills Feeder Cattle Association. Invited by the Valentine Chamber of Commerce, almost 150 cattlemen from throughout the Sandhills region attended the first organizational meeting. Those who were present represented raisers of commercial herds of over 35,000 head of cattle. Begun at the instigation of former Governor Sam McKelvie, others like Tom Arnold of Nenzel, R. S. Ross of Gordon, and George Christopher of Valentine from whom McKelvie had purchased his Cherry County ranch, believed the organization offered a real opportunity to area ranchers.<sup>65</sup> All were committed to promoting Sandhills cattle. Their idea centered on raising the interests of combelt feeders who had been accustomed to being offered only lesser quality cattle.

Recent national conditions pushed McKelvie into action. When eastern housewives launched a nationwide "buyers's strike" to protest the high cost of beef in 1937, their message resounded loud and clear throughout the industry.<sup>66</sup> Shock waves from the consumers' revolt reverberated from meat processor to livestock producer. In the early weeks of August 1937, feeders sold at eight to nine dollars per hundredweight; by

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<sup>64</sup>Wood, 273.

<sup>65</sup>*Merriman Monitor* (Merriman, Nebraska), 21 April 1938.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

October the price had dropped to just six. Even so, McKelvie and his neighboring Cherry County producers held to their convictions that their cattle were worth more. They also realized that there was little they could do under the present system; the remedy would not be found in complaining about conditions but in finding a better way.<sup>67</sup>

McKelvie offered a solution to the problem. He reportedly told those assembled: “Dammit, gentlemen, we’ve got the best cattle in the country. Let’s blow our own horn. We’ve got to let everybody know that this is God’s Own Cow Country.”<sup>68</sup> Inspired by the spirit of the past governor’s sentiments, both large and small cattlemen warmed to the prospect. Enthusiasm became evident as discussion turned to the importance of implementing a campaign of publicity that stressed the fact that Sandhills cattle fed better than most others and therefore would make more profit for the cornbelt feeder. Suggestions of how to promote the region’s livestock ranged from direct mail circulars to personal guided tours of area ranches.<sup>69</sup> After discussion, each member prepared a list of the cattle he wished to sell. Along with the description of livestock for sale, ranchers included their name, brand, location, and distance from the nearest shipping point.

A bulletin, published by the group and mailed out to 8,000 parties involved with the feeding or marketing of cattle, listed the information the participating members provided. Because of the maze-like topography and sparsely populated rural character of the county, not to mention the condition of interior roads that were still little more than

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<sup>67</sup>*Sandhills Feeder Cattle* (Valentine, Nebraska), July 1947, n.p.

<sup>68</sup>Bruce H. Nicoll and Ken R. Keller, *Sam McKelvie, Son of the Soil: Sketches of a Self-Reliant American Who Cheerfully Fought His Own Battles* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Johnsen Publishing, 1954), 154.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*

cow trails, the new association introduced a system to locate participating ranches. The bulletin's most valuable recommendation was that prospective buyers get directions or even a personal guide to ranches at the gas stations along the highway designated as Association offices. For those buyers more adventurous, the bulletin offered the location of each ranch described in numbers of miles and general direction from either towns or major roads. As a marketing tool, the bulletin proved a priceless addition. The expense of printing and mailing paid through the small membership fee required of all members paid untold dividends.<sup>70</sup>

By far the most important outcome of the 1938 organizational meetings of the Sandhills Feeder Cattle Association had little to do with the ways and means of advertising. Promotion of Sandhills cattle as a superior marketable product rather than an emphasis on individual herds became the Association's primary goal.<sup>71</sup> McKelvie, when elected as the first president, pledged his committed efforts toward achieving that end. Members believed he could lead the Association to success and his impressive wide range of influence did give the new organization its guiding force.<sup>72</sup> Together with a board of fifteen directors, six of whom were Cherry County's leading cattle producers,<sup>73</sup> McKelvie launched the effort to solidify Sandhills ranchers into a cohesive group of

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<sup>70</sup>Reece, 77.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Nicoll and Keller, 153. McKelvie held past elected offices, served on President Herbert Hoover's farm board, was editor of the *Nebraska Farmer*, and was seated on several livestock organization boards including the National Hereford Association.

<sup>73</sup>*Merriman Monitor*, 26 May 1938. Among the fifteen directors appointed at that time were a number of Cherry County's most influential ranchers. Essie Davis and Earl Monahan with ranges in the county's southwestern sector, D. J. Cole from Merriman, Harold Harms of Wood Lake, Don E. Hanna from Brownlee and Tom Arnold of Nenzel were elected by their peers.



producers.<sup>74</sup>

By producing and promoting the best types of beef-producing animals to the nation's markets, a strong demand for Sandhills cattle would result. Consumers would come to associate the regionally-produced livestock with a highly desirable quality of meat only by vigorous efforts to make the facts known. From his experienced vantage, McKelvie had faith that the scheme could work. Those who stood beside him placed trust in the past governor's opinions. According to his supporters, his expertise was based on his ability to "analyze the problem, plan a solution, and get support for it." To them, McKelvie's ideas energized the new organization.<sup>75</sup>

Essentially the organization functioned as a clearing house, acting as a conduit between seller and buyer. All types of "existing methods" for selling livestock were welcomed; agents from central markets or sale rings, order buyers, and direct purchases were all encouraged. Ranchers, as sellers, set their own prices and concluded their own sales. Considering their new role as providing a service, members believed that their real purpose was to help buyers conveniently locate the livestock they desired with minimum expense and loss.<sup>76</sup>

Initial results surprised even proponents who described the outcome as "almost electric." Although the reports of the number of buyers and the total amount of sales were lost in a fire years later, records that remained revealed that after the end of the first year

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<sup>74</sup>The initial meeting was held on 21 May 1938 for the purpose of adopting the bylaws that defined the organization. According to published reports the preamble of the bylaws stated that the purpose of the organization was to advertise, popularize, and improve the quality of Sandhills cattle. The organizers believed by adhering to a code of ethics they would establish a good relationship based on cooperation and friendship between buyers and sellers.

<sup>75</sup>Nicoll and Keller, 153.

<sup>76</sup>Sandhills Feeder Cattle, n.p.

membership rose. The appeal of this new merchandising tool stemmed from the fact that ranchers conducted their own sales transactions, arranging prices and terms. Timely direct mailings as well as advertising in farm and market publications brought a steady flow of prospective customers that encouraged even the most pessimistic of the ranchers to join the ranks.

The vigorous promotion of Sandhills cattle had far reaching consequences. Provisions for associate memberships allowed businessmen and others who owned no livestock to support the regional organization. Some like John Keller who was at the first organizational meeting continued to pay his yearly dues even after he retired from ranching and moved to Valentine. It made no difference to him whether he “owned a critter or not,” the Association was a boon for the entire Sandhills community.<sup>77</sup> Another important result was the quality of livestock. Increased buyer interest instigated a competitive spirit among ranchers to raise better quality animals than their neighbors. Not only was the reputation of regional producers elevated but getting premium market prices became the usual occurrence.<sup>78</sup> While open to all Sandhills stockmen, the organization’s officers and directors during its early years were dominated by those from Cherry County.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup>Keller article.

<sup>78</sup>Nicoll and Keller, 155.

<sup>79</sup>Letterhead of Sandhills Feeder Cattle Producers, Home Office Valentine, Nebraska, dated 1 August 1945. All of the organization’s officeholders represented Cherry County while six of the eighteen directors listed Cherry County residences with three others located in areas close to those towns bordering the county. Ranchers often used the closest village or town as their mailing address while residing at their home ranches many miles away.

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Important factors in the transition to a modern cattle economy in Cherry County involved adjustments in the ways and means of marketing livestock. Through the adoption of more efficient truck transportation, area ranchers were keeping in step with the national trend. First they needed roads and highways to accommodate the vehicles. Taking part in building the systems of throughways had other social agendas for the most part, but the cost saving value for local ranchers cannot be overlooked. Greater accessibility to the area had far reaching effects. Better transportation encouraged and greatly facilitated the travel of buyers in the market for feeder cattle. In turn, greater access allowed them to arrange privately for cost-effective shipment of their purchases. In this way, the effort to develop better roads cannot be divorced from the cooperative efforts of Sandhills ranchers to control the marketing of their cattle.

In the decades between 1920 and 1940, livestock producers in Cherry County adjusted marketing strategies to fit their type of production closely. Organizations that revived community auctions and direct buying sales reduced transportation and commission costs. By the integration of all phases of the production process into local management, from establishing a quality breeding herd to the sale of calves and yearlings, ranchers retained an unprecedented measure of control over their profitability. Local efforts during the period took giant strides toward development of the modern cattle industry in Nebraska's Sandhills and Cherry County. Moreover, it reasserted capitalist development in Nebraska's Sandhills region.

## CONCLUSION

In 1951, a report issued by the U. S. Census Bureau showed that Cherry County led the country in the production of cattle in 1949. One hundred thousand head of cattle and calves sold for \$13.2 million. That figure bested the county's record breaking production set four years before, when sales levels reached \$7.8 million. Cattle numbers had increased from 237,888 reported in 1945 to 268,589 in 1950, and farm (ranch) values jumped by a startling \$33,722. The trend toward larger land holdings and fewer operations continued as the average acreage in farms increased by over 1,000 acres while their number decreased by 176.<sup>1</sup>

Many of the increases could be explained by post-World War II economics while at the same time, the continued exodus of Cherry County's rural population might be attributed to the lure of post-war urban opportunity. The community of Cherry County ranchers were "riding high in the saddle" as the 1950 Census figures clearly showed and were primed for innovations and improvements that the second half of the twentieth century would bring. Crossbreeding, artificial insemination, and the introduction of "exotic" breeds would give ranchers other choices for improving production. Irrigation and holistic resource management would stimulate new controversies over the best ways to conserve the environment. The builder of the county's modern livestock economy could not have imagined the results of their long and arduous efforts.

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<sup>1</sup>*Omaha World-Herald* (Omaha, Nebraska), 14 May 1951.

Cherry County's modern cattle industry developed in response to economic dynamics and legislated policy filtered through the lens of a distinctive environment. Throughout the process of change, continuity of the relationship of grass and animals remained the overriding constant. It colored shifting perceptions about the economic framework of a region, the role and intervention of government, the preservation and conservation of natural resources, and the impact of market forces.

The Sandhills is a place of contrasts where the harshness of semi-aridity promotes the fragile balance of its natural resources; a place once deemed as worthless and inhospitable that came to be noted for its quality cattle production. Federal legislation that opened the region to settlement also provided a lucrative market for open-range cattle ranchers. Seizing what amounted to a short-term opportunity, the legendary cattlemen symbolically staked out their new productive ranges.

While the myth of the open-range most often characterized the cattlemen as free wheeling individualists, their success only came with the price of limited dependence on government policies, indirect subsidies, and reliance on cooperative efforts. In the same way, land speculators and, later, some unscrupulous ranchers bent the letter of the law to serve their own economic purposes. For these so-called entrepreneurs, inappropriate land laws and government's policies became the tools with which to carve out new profit.

When unfettered access to the public range was threatened by growing waves of farm settlement, challenge gave way to struggle. Despite successful manipulation of existing policies, open-range cattlemen attacked existing land laws as restrictive. At the same time, settlers who were farmers saw cheap land as opportunity. Inevitable political

organization added insult to injury by instituting county taxation and greater regulation. Both cut deeply into open-range profitability. When settlement and political intrusion made further inroads, some ranchers, in keeping with the opportunistic ideology of the open-range, simply moved on to “greener pastures.”

For the newcomers intent upon tilling the soil, other types of problems appeared to dictate their fate. Farming the sub-marginal land had always carried a poor risk. Policies tailored to promote agricultural production spelled eventual failure in the Sandhills environment for most immigrant farmers. Only those who forsook the plow to take up the branding iron succeeded in the Sandhills environment.

Cherry County’s modern livestock economy, then, grew out of these roots embedded in government policy. However, shifting perceptions and types of government intervention brought different responses and degrees of willing attitudes. Where open-range cattlemen found advantage through manipulation of existing legislation, modern development was nurtured by both local, state, and federal policy decisions and legislation. Nuances of an ideological shift turned to fact as stockmen and their organizational supports began to petition for favorable legislation. In this way, early open-range ranchers, as progenitors of the county’s modern cattle economy, established the precedent for the interdependency between policy, land, and prosperity.

Gaining control of the grassland ranges and their natural resources remained the primary consideration. Struggles over land use and the expansion of markets foreshadowed the greater conflicts associated with the building process in the twentieth century. Passage of the customized, but ill-conceived, Kinkaid Act in 1904 offered

unsuspected benefits. Designed to accelerate farm settlement into the Sandhills region, the expanded homestead of 640 acres was too large for cropping and too small for livestock given the limitations of the environment. While a failure in realizing its expressed purposes, the Kinkaid Act opened the way for greater ranch expansion and centralization of livestock production. As farm claims failed and defeated land owners moved out, ranchers gained deeded access to a region environmentally suited for their use. Ranchers moved quickly to consolidate smaller land holdings into larger spreads with sufficient natural resources for expanded livestock herds, greater efficiencies, and profit potential.

By 1920, few parcels of public lands remained unclaimed. Cherry County reached its peak population that year. While it was tempting to assume that increased numbers of people corresponded to increased number of farmsteads or ranches either claimed or deeded, most of the increase was to the county's towns and villages. New settlers had been drawn there to supply growing support services attendant to the county's expanding cattle economy. Rural numbers showed a different pattern. The size of farm/ranches had grown while the number of agricultural producers declined. From the small family-centered operation to the corporately-held large spreads, the consolidation of livestock production came to dominate the local economy. As ranchers gained greater control over land and resources, important changes to how the land was used ushered in a new phase of cattle production. In the same way that the open-range period served as a prelude to the modern cattle industry and the Kinkaid Act era initiated the way to structural development, the next two decades between 1920 and 1940 thrust Cherry County

ranchers into the rationally-organized modern cattle industry.

Spurred by the crisis of repeated periods of depression and a decade long drought, livestock producers adopted new methods to build a working relationship with a changing market economy. The post-World War I agricultural depression posed a serious problem for those who had borrowed in order to expand their control over land and livestock. Deflated markets created a crisis in meeting obligations, forcing the most overextended to sell out to cut their losses. Those who withstood the challenge had done so through flexible responses and ability to adapt. By the mid-1920s, ranchers in Cherry County had entered into a period of greater change. Modifications to the types and quality of livestock they produced put Cherry County cattlemen in line with market trends. In this way, while consolidation of operations provided modern structure and organization, specialized production put emphasis on meeting changing consumer demands. In an attempt to incorporate new efficiencies of production, ranchers became increasingly open to the opinions and recommendations of professional experts. Initial attempts at scientific ranch management and conservation were proposed through state and federal educational programs. They aimed at increasing output and encouraging ranchers in the effective use of resources that would lead to greater profitability.

Shifts in types of livestock production and better use of resources went a long way toward insulating the stockmen from the most severe ravages of the next economic crisis. While developments in the late 1920s inspired an optimistic outlook, the general depression of the thirties reintroduced economic and environmental challenges. The drought that accompanied the economic crisis wreaked havoc throughout the Great



Plains. Environmental conditions in the Sandhills prevented widespread devastation. Methods of resource conservation initiated in the 1920s took on a new importance as government policy shifted direction and sought to maintain productivity rather than stimulating greater production. New Deal agencies mounted efforts to regulate range management and production by linking relief funds to conservation and production programs. While some Cherry County ranchers grudgingly bore the government's intrusion, others believed that local efforts could find a way through the crisis.

For them, the reduction of overhead and transaction costs represented a possible solution. One possibility involved reducing shipping costs. Trucks offered a real alternative made more readily available through better roads and highways. Improved land transportation also led to the creation of local organizations to promote systematic marketing apart from the central market facilities. The move toward decentralization of public marketplaces renewed interest in increasing the direct-sale of cattle. The private treaty method of buying and selling livestock was not a new idea. Local marketing ventures had succeeded in the past, and the local auction facility had a proven record of profitable operation. Still, the new marketing scheme offered more.

Although the new organization was partly a vehicle for the advertising of livestock, its primary focus rested in the promotion of the Sandhills region and its modern production of valuable high quality animals. When Sam McKelvie and a cadre of Cherry County ranchers met to organize the Sandhills' Feeder Cattle Producers in 1938, they set the stage for change in Cherry County's modern cattle industry. Even though initially formed to meet external competition and market pressures, the organization moved

beyond importance as merely a promotional tool. In the challenging year that followed, the group added their voice to the renewed call for sounder land policies, better methods of conservation, and a stabilized price formula. As important factors to the modern structuring of the county's cattle economy,<sup>2</sup> Cherry County ranchers had initiated a mechanism that would serve them well in future decades. Challenges of wartime demands, post-war prosperity, and later long-term struggles in a new era of organizational relationships and pressures would be met with the benefits derived from the work of far-sighted ranchers in the thirties. Yet in their search for modern solutions, they reasserted the interdependency of natural environment, social organization, and individual innovation that had been the essence of the development of the county's modern cattle industry.

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An historical marker on Highway 20 memorializes pioneer rancher E. S. Newman. The plaque, located at the site of Newman's open-range ranch, 10 miles east and five miles south of Gordon in present-day Cherry County, commemorates the establishment of the ranch in 1877. When the marker was dedicated on October 26, 1961, some of the fifty people in attendance included some of the ranch's early-day cowboys. All that remained of the original ranch and its headquarters, however, was a shed and one corral. The property, owned at the time by Harry Hugen, still produces lush grasses nourished by a vast supply of underground water, now protected by better range

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<sup>2</sup>*Omaha World-Herald*, 23 May 1948.

management techniques. The landscape still resplendent with jewel-like lakes and sheltering hills and brakes is dotted with carefully bred livestock. While a plaque with a 150-word inscription may hardly seem a fitting testimony to a regions' historic past, the hills and the cattle and the glorious grass of Cherry County speak volumes.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Editorial, *Nebraska Cattleman*, 1 December 1961.

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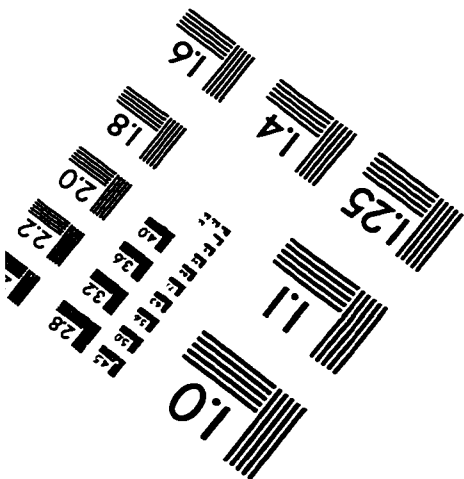
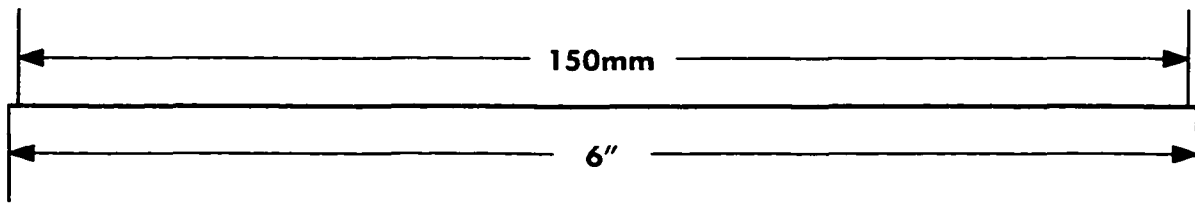
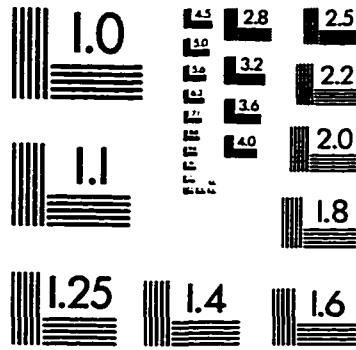
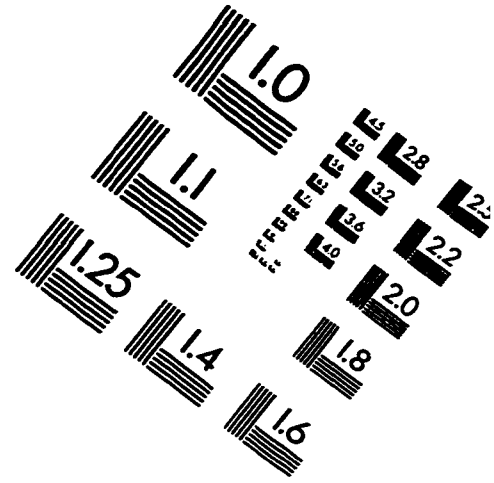
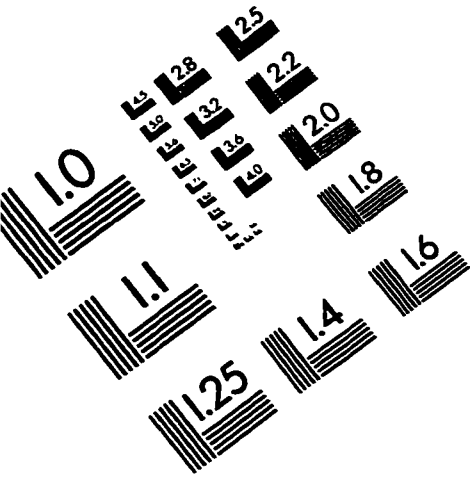
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