

Ranching in the Peace

By R. D. SYMONS, Bear Flat via Fort St. John, B.C.

UP here in the Peace River Block, the industry is in its infancy and our problems are pressing — so much so that while this country is predominantly suited to livestock raising, especially towards the mountains, it may never develop as it ought to. I say it is suited more to livestock raising than grain or other farming, due to the fact that the general terrain is rugged and broken, making road building — and roads are a prerequisite to grain farming — very difficult and very expensive. True, there are valleys of very productive soil which will grow wonderful crops (when they ripen), but at least 60-70 per cent of the area is high to medium ranges of hills broken by the inevitable coulees.

Grain farming in the valleys necessarily throws out of production this large percentage of sub-marginal land, crowding the settlers together in small and relatively isolated communities which will have to pay a very high price for schools, roads, etc.

Settlers are coming, and will probably continue to come, and one cannot but foresee the day when the PFRA will have to spend much money on establishment of community projects and try to undo the result of settlement of sub-marginal land, a repetition of the history of much of Alberta and Saskatchewan.

Ranching, however, and I mean the intelligent use of the natural range coupled with development of valleys as sources for winter-feed growing, could set up a permanent system of land use here which, while supporting a smaller population, could support that population indefinitely instead of temporarily. This would not only avoid the spending of Government money in future, but prevent a good deal of heartbreak and disappointment and be of benefit to the whole of Canada.

The eternal shifting and change over — the result of non-intelligent settling of vacant lands — from ranch to farm to productivity, to pasture to stock — from no settlement to over settlement to abandonment, which has characterized so many areas in the west should be avoided as much as possible. But it's the old story which every cattleman from the Rio Grande to the Peace knows, try and show it to the government people.

So with all the lessons of the past to guide us we in this country shall probably

make the same mistakes here, and the pity of it is that this is a new unspoiled country.

I remember when I came to Maple Creek nearly 40 years ago from England, how I thrilled to the new country and was told, "This is nothing — wait till we settle it. Wait till we have the schools, the farms, the roads, the cities, etc. (and telephone lines?)".

Well, I saw, alright — I saw some of them come and most of them go — I saw the "selfish ranchers" who had "exploited" the country pushed back by the dust-bowl makers — and I saw the PFRA doing its wonderful work of rehabilitation and invite the stock man to come back and help. Joe Wylie or Dad Jeff or Scotty Gow and dozens of others could have told them beforehand.

Well, that's one of our problems here. So we have to be prepared for more settlers, and the only way is to buy or lease our grassland and brush range, even if we are later taxed out of existence for schools, roads and what-nots we don't ask for. As F. A. (Slim) Gooding who raises good Angus cattle in the Peace River breaks says, "We've just got to own our grass nowadays or go to the wall".

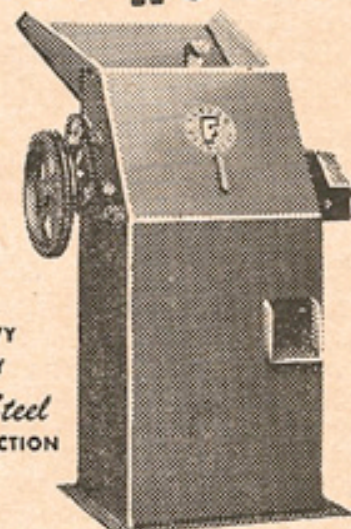
There have been suggestions that we might ask the British Columbia Government to define a grazing area here, but local co-operation is not available. "They will never settle this kind of land", is a cry familiar to the cattle country.

There are those who say this is no ranching country — this from folks who think of ranching in terms of cattle Barons with thousands of head out on the range, winter and summer, and nothing to do but round up and ship the beef.

Actually it compares favorably for climate, feed, etc., to the Cypress Hills, with the range not quite so good but the opportunity for growing winter feed much better.

It has also been said that the Government would not be interested to hear the views of a few stump ranchers who own less than a thousand head of cattle in two or three townships. My answer to that is that everything must have a beginning. We ourselves have only been here four years — we came 40 miles by

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wagon with 8 head of cattle in 1946. Now we have over 50 head and sufficient land in brome grass and hay for twice that number. That's typical of all beginnings, and I say, "Let the government give regard to security of tenure and the valleys will fill up with stockmen and there will soon be no idle acres".

The stock industry has much to learn here — range management of any sort is unknown — we ourselves are commencing a system of alternate grazing for spring, summer, fall and winter.

The sidehills back from the creeks are our most valuable asset. They provide the best winter range if and when snow holds off till Christmas or New Year's and during chinook periods later.

The short hill-grasses "green up" early in spring, and if grazed for the first half

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(or less) of the growing season, will recover very well between the time the cattle are taken off and midsummer so that they again have full coverage for winter and spring use the next season. By the time the cattle come off the side-hill spring range the grass is already long in the park areas, and before it can be grazed to any harmful extent the peavine and vetches in the poplar woods are in full growth, and will keep the stock till late September when the frosts spoil it.

We have 800 acres under fence — a river flat — within which we grow our feed — grain for green bundles, tame hay, sweet clover, etc. — and since at present we have less than 300 acres broken, and of the balance about 250 acres are river creek breaks, well-grassed with wild rye, there is an abundance of good range here to supplement the stubble and aftermath pickings. The hay has been stacked and corralled in July and the grain is usually off the fields by October 1st. So we use this as a fall range from about that date till we start to feed. There is the added advantage that between this fall range and the winter range, which rises in a series of benches just back of the buildings, we are able to conserve a great deal of grass for use just when we want the cattle near home.

Some of the problems that are, or soon will be, pressing us all are:

Range Management and Improvement.

Except for the creeks, water is a problem here. Most of the hill range is without water. True, there are some springs, but as they do not flow from or over gravel or rock (as in the Cypress Hills), they very soon become compressed to mere quagmires by the hooves of stock. Some money spent on concrete work would pay in the long run. Mostly, however, it is going to be a question of stock dams. The careful location of these dams plus salt distribution will be a "must" in the economical use of the less desirable grazing areas whose chief use will be for midsummer grazing while the peavine is at its prime, this conserving the better areas and giving them some chance to seed.

Brush Control.

This will become a problem. I remember years ago when most of the Eagle Hills area S.W. of Battleford was good grazing. Today, what the plow has left has grown up thickly in useless brush. Our open sidehills here will go the same way if we overgraze and let the brush (willow mostly) get a head start. Fire has up to now kept them open, and judicious burning can open up a good deal more country which at present is brush (please note, **not** timber) of willow and poplar. Careful planning in co-operation with the Forest Service might produce good results. Seeding of such species as creeping Red Fescue and Brome on grazed off areas and old burns will, I believe, be one of our future activities. We have had good results on a small scale on land burnt to the subsoil by August fire.

Predators.

We suffer from two — the killer timber wolf and the bands of range horses. The higher bounty being paid now and the hope of a return of the rabbits (varying hares) as food for the wolves, plus eternal vigilance and the practice of always carrying a rifle when riding, may in

time reduce losses from wolves. Barbed wire is the only answer to the horses. All our own system of conserving our short grass sidehills by removing the cattle is upset by bands of range horses which eat the desirable grasses to the roots besides doing untold damage by trampling, especially in wet weather.

Leases.

At present the leases are too small and too expensive — we pay \$44.00 per year for 640 acres of which at least 33 per cent is useless scrub. It is classed as "agricultural land", although there are not 10 acres in one block level enough to cultivate.

We were much interested in the article from the Manyberries Station about the breeding of yearling heifers. All of which of course, applies particularly to the short grass country and (I presume) to the Hereford breed.

Here we are raising grade and cross-bred Angus, and find that it is O.K. to breed the yearlings. Of course we feed heavier here too, and that helps both the unborn calf and the cow the first winter. Then after weaning the calf and cow (now fed separately) get an abundance of such feeds as Brome, Western Rye grass, sweet clover, as well as partially ripened wheat and oat bundles. Snow is too deep for steady rustling and what the cattle pick in the chinooks is just extra for them. In bad weather we try to make up for the lack of the necessary exercise which they otherwise get by rustling, by feeding them at some distance from water and the sheds. We do not like our cattle to just "stand around" when it is 40 below, and the colder it is, the smaller and more often we feed — three times a day if really bad weather, just to keep them interested.

Perhaps a little description of the general country here might be interesting. Well, it's quite like the Cypress Hills to look at but no real "Bench" — the hills go up and then down on the other side — they are really ridges. From our place you see the mountains very plainly and they help us to gauge the weather. In that way one is reminded of the foothills country. Then large areas are typical park land reminding one of the Battle River country from Wainwright to Battleford and other parts again like Meadow Lake.

Although so far north, we are in township 85 and 510 miles north of the International Boundary; we are what the naturalists call the transition region of the Upper Austral Zone — typical northern prairie country, that is — with vegetation and bird life similar to Edmonton, Battleford, Yorkton. We have, for example, red-winged blackbirds, Vesper Sparrows and warblers among the birds, and wolf willow, prairie anemones, choke cherry, saskatoon, etc., among the plants.

There is an undoubted Boreal influence in places as well, showing our closeness to the Canadian Zone as seen in the occurrence of Canada Jays, Northern Shrikes and some of the more northerly sparrows. In particular, it is a perfect delight to hear the song of the Fox Sparrow — a bird one may know as a passing migrant along the prairies.

And still again, we see a strong southern influence on the slopes of the Peace and other rivers, an influence shown by the occurrence of cactus and sage, and here too, the sweet piping of the Borthramian sandpiper may be heard, carrying me back to the grassy uplands of the

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"old-man-on-his-back".

We have had a hard winter of real sub-zero weather, but since the middle of February the sun has been warm and we are expecting a real chinook any day now.

I hope I have given some idea of ranching in this lovely country. You will see that it involves making one's hay meadows — for there is no wild hay to speak of — making (to a large extent) one's range and pasture lands; and making (to a greater extent) one's water supply; but barring the bad luck of over-grazing and over-settlement, and by carefully preserving and making the best use of the wonderful grazing possibilities we already have, I believe the cattlemen of the Peace River Block will build something which will endure for the future.

In the matter of climate I do not wish to mislead you. True, we have long periods of cold, which means relatively long periods of feeding generally pretty steady from Christmas through March. But our advantages are that with more rainfall than Southern Alberta the growing of the feed is mostly a matter of sowing and reaping. Then again, we just don't have anything worse than a brisk snowstorm — none of the savage blizzards which sweep the open plains, and, as for the cold, our cattle went through weeks of temperatures down to 60 below, and for days not over 35 below, just in the shelter of the willow bush, and took no harm. A few nipped ears among the weanling calves, which had a corral and open-front shed has been the extent of our loss on this ranch.

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