

STOCK-RAISING, RANCHING, AND  
HOMESTEADING IN THE POWDER  
RIVER BASIN

HISTORIC CONTEXT  
STUDY

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# Abstract

This study explores the settlement and development of northeastern Wyoming, an area known as the Powder River Basin, from the removal of the Native American inhabitants in the 1870s to 1940. The focus of the investigation is ranching (both cattle and sheep) and farming activities in that time period, and especially the role of homesteading which often included both ranching and farming. In fact, homesteading itself included the taking up of the public domain by individuals under a series of land laws not limited to the 1862 Homestead Act. While there was a diversity of land use activities, including the development of small farms, the Texas system of cattle ranching early came to dominate the area, but after natural calamity and social crisis, that system gave way to small farms and ranches, and those settlers came to the area in increasing numbers. And even though sheep grazing increased dramatically, the small farms continued to grow and the practice of dry farming enabled the parts of the area that were not naturally watered or irrigable to support crop-raising activities. In the early twentieth century a revolution in agricultural technology both enhanced production and undermined the system of small farm agriculture that had once prevailed and farming activity—and farms too—continued to expand in the area. After World War I, a series of crises rooted in the larger economy and national social structure extended into this area, and by the Depression of the 1930s, which converged with a series of droughts, ranchers and farmers of all sizes were in serious trouble here. The response of the Roosevelt administration resulted in a series of changes in farming and ranching that reversed the in-migration to the area, that emphasized grazing over farming, and that relocated some

families from the smaller operations to other places. By the end of the 1930s the system of agriculture in the Powder River Basin reflected the fundamental trends in the nation of modernization which had been underway and which would continue.

# Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge cheerfully and gratefully the help I have received at many points in the preparation of this study. Assistance has come from many offices and many individuals in ways that have been both direct and indirect. While I cannot name everyone who contributed, there are some particular debts, both personal and institutional, that I want to note.

Almost every member of the committee made up of cultural resource professionals from the Bureau of Land Management and the Wyoming State Historic Preservation Office offered suggestions and raised questions, and sometimes engaged in vigorous discussions about the historic resources of the Powder River Basin. I appreciate their sustained, thoughtful, and generous attention and especially am grateful for their willingness to spend a day in the field with me examining and evaluating historic properties. The staffs at several research archives have been generous in talking with me about the project and drawing upon their intimate knowledge of the holdings of their archives and then directing me to special collections or digging out particular items that they knew about. This includes especially the archivists at the Wyoming State Archives, the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming in Laramie, the Nebraska State Historical Society, the Wyoming State Historic Preservation Office, and the staffs of the county libraries in the study area. Some of these repositories have provided images that I have used in the text. I am grateful for being able to use them and have given credit to their owners at the places where they are used. Several individuals at these institutions deserve particular thanks. Carl Hallberg of the Wyoming State Archives shared with me

the results of his own research on agriculture in the Powder River Basin and ferreted out reports on agriculture that surely I would have missed otherwise. Nancy Jennings at the Johnson County Library in Buffalo spent considerable time with me talking about the issues and resources available and kindly provided some crucial photographs that I have used in the text. In addition, Ross Hilman allowed me to use some images from his own family's collection. Mary Hopkins helped me work my way through the very substantial and complex database in the Wyoming Cultural Records Office in Laramie so that I was able to draw upon the valuable information there.

With great generosity and only a thank-you in return, Robert Righter and David Kathka read the completed study and offered a number of important suggestions and observations that have been, and will be, enormously helpful. Over the years, and quite separate from her participation in the committee that exercised oversight and consultation in this project, Judy Wolf has graciously shared with me her exceptional knowledge of historic resource management in Wyoming and has often stimulated my thinking about resource management with her thoughtful questions and suggestions. Lee Ann Swanekamp, a gifted writer and friend, has provided encouragement and support in my own striving for clarity in expression and for relevance and authenticity in content. To all of these people and institutions I am deeply grateful.

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# Purpose and Scope of the Historic Context Study

## *i. Introduction*

To drive across the broad swath of land that is generally referred to as the Powder River Basin is to experience the intersection of a complex environment and a rich history. Too often, however, the traveler passes through the area quickly, dismissing the power of the place with a reference to its emptiness and never pausing to reflect on the meaning of the scattered remnants of the past that frequently intrude on the vista. And for the people who live there, they are so common that they are often taken for granted. But the remnants are many: A windmill here. An eroded dam that once held water for livestock there. An abandoned farm with sage creeping back where a garden once grew. A gate with a cattle brand on its cross timber. Crumbling stones on the side of a hill where once a dugout provided shelter. A prosperous ranch with multiple buildings and machines neatly arranged. Fences that sometimes seem to go nowhere and to serve no purpose. An abandoned post office and school marking where a community once thrived. A shepherders' monument on another hill on the horizon. What may at first appear to be empty space, is actually filled with the marks and remains from earlier generations. It is as if pieces of a puzzle have been scattered broadly across the land and there is no guide to how the individual pieces actually fit together or even what the total picture looks like.

This study is an effort to provide at least a partial guide to the puzzle pieces and the way that they make sense in combination with each other, and the way that the puzzle

changed over the long period of time that started with the removal of the Indian inhabitants from the area and then their replacement with other groups of people who came in to make very much different kinds of lives and societies. Those lives and those societies evolved, transformed, or were replaced over the years, and the society around us in the Powder River Basin is the result. This study is thus an effort not only to understand how the pieces fit together, but to understand how we came to where we are today.

The study actually proceeds along two levels at the same time. One effort is to identify the themes and issues that have shaped one part of the history of the area—how people have used the land to produce fiber and food and make a living thereby—and for most of its history that was the dominant use of this land. The effort to explore and understand those themes has involved the development of a historical narrative. The other effort approaches the past in this area with a sensitivity to the framework used by the National Register of Historic Places. This requires attention to the physical resources in the area that have been left by the people who lived its history. But it is important to be sensitive to both levels. The National Register system and the history of an area, after all, are not separate, are not isolated from each other, and are not either one to be ignored by the person who wants to understand the past. Thus a major goal of this study is to identify points at which the historical narrative can be connected to the remnants of the past that still can be found on the ground, and provide them meaning.

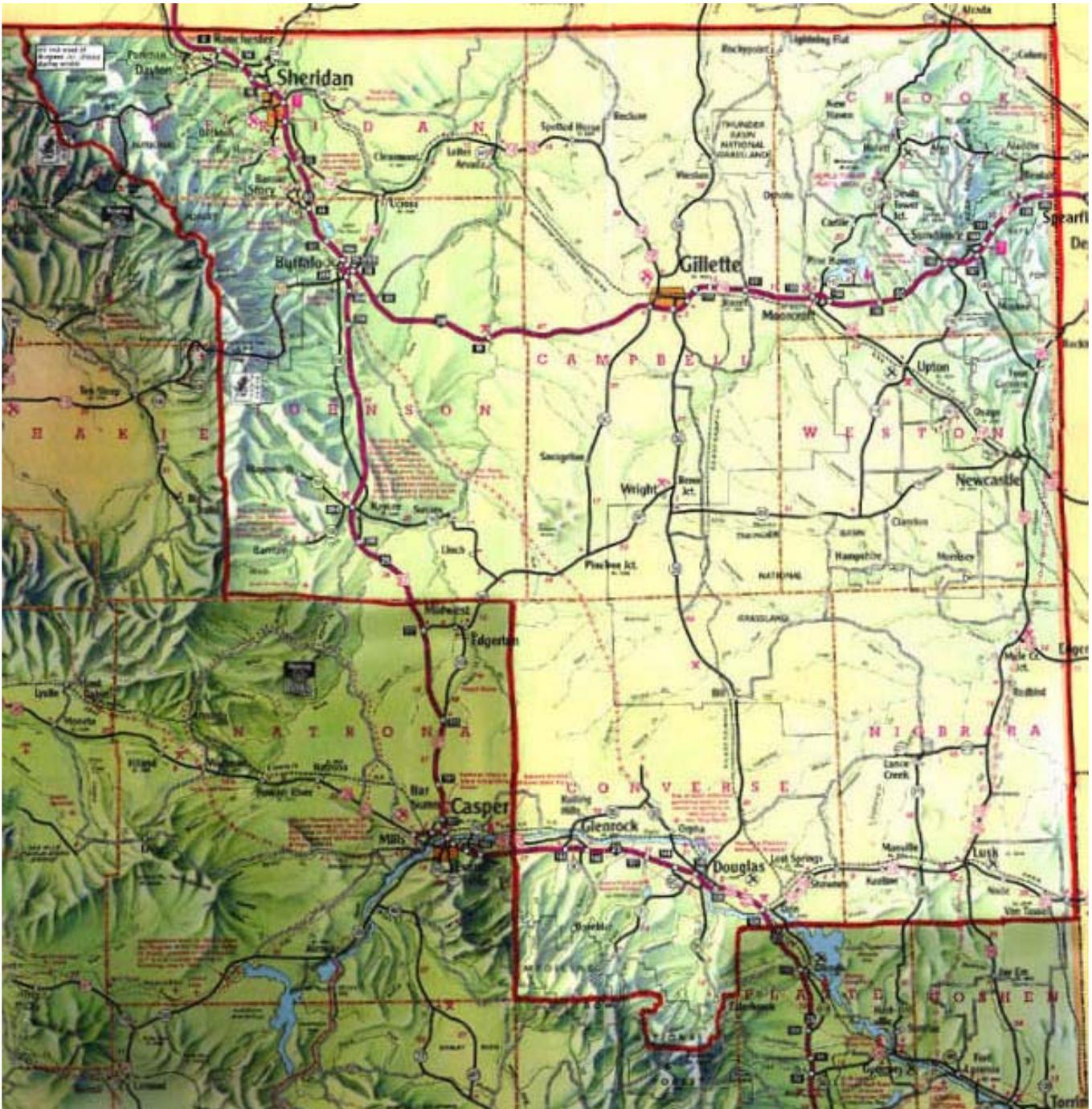
Change over time is both subtle and complex and represents much more than just ticking off a list of categories into which separate activities and developments can be reduced, inventoried, or cataloged. There is very, very little that is cut and dried in

history. There is very, very little that can just be looked up in some kind of reference. And this is especially true of articulating the historical context. Historical context is the larger set of circumstances and forces that illuminates specific events by suggesting broader patterns of which those events may be a part or to which they may even be exceptions. Historical context thus is identified by determining what else is happening at the same time and also what happened before and after—there and elsewhere. Moreover, there is seldom universal agreement on those patterns since the close analysis of each aspect of the past and then the comparison of those findings with what other historians have found often produces historical debates; this also produces growth in our knowledge.

The study area is generally defined as the Powder River Basin, although this is a large region that reaches beyond the drainage of Powder River itself. Indeed, the Tongue River, the Belle Fourche River, and the Cheyenne River flow outward from this area on the north and east while the North Platte River drains it on the south. Lying between the Black Hills on the east and the Big Horn Mountains on the west and the Laramie Range on the south, the area constitutes a broad basin in the interior bounded by mountains and high lands on the peripheries. This northeast quadrant of the state now includes seven Wyoming counties: Sheridan, Johnson, Converse, Niobrara, Weston, Crook, and Campbell, although those counties were formed individually, over time, as a result of the in-migration into the different areas, with the parts fed by mountain streams populated first and the arid or semi-arid lands without access to streams or other forms of irrigation, populated last—and depopulated first.

The focus of the study is on stock raising, ranching, and homesteading, except

that these each are broad categories of activities. In fact, homesteading is an elusive



Map of Study Area. Taken from 2004 Wyoming Official State Highway Map, Wyoming Department of Transportation, Cheyenne, Wyoming.

concept that usually includes just about any activity on the land. Few, if any, historians would restrict the identification of homesteading to filing on public land under the terms of the Homestead Act of 1862 or the Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909 or even the Stock-raising Homestead Act of 1916. Such a definition would include ranchers but exclude farmers who filed on land under the Desert Land Act of 1877, although it appears that more people in this area filed on Desert Land claims than used the 1862 law. Farmers and ranchers alike used the public domain to establish what became known as homesteads. And they were homesteads, sometimes legally and technically, and sometimes just as a cultural shorthand for starting out anew, for settling previously uncultivated land, or otherwise establishing a home on the land. The census had no category for “homesteads,” and, for that matter, the census used the single category of “farm” to include the grower of crops and the grower of livestock. Thus this study, for reasons of necessity and practicality, as well as of historical sensitivity, focuses on the people who settled on the land and followed a variety of agricultural pursuits.

Two main patterns, with one being the obverse of the other, are evident in the history of homesteading, livestock grazing, and farming in the Powder River Basin. One pattern is the migration of people into the area starting especially in the 1870s, and that in-migration continued for decades as people came to the area to settle on the land, often encouraged to do so by an evolving set of land laws and official agencies, not to mention a powerful tradition that emphasized national expansion and individual freedom. The flow of people into the area coincided with what else was going on in the nation as the push and pull forces in society and economy sometimes brought dreams up against harsh realities. At some point, with a great deal of latitude for exactness, probably in the early

1920s, that pattern was replaced by another pattern. It was not a sharp break with the past, but the trend became in the 1920s for people to start moving out of the area, or, at any rate, to move off the land and go to the city. The trend toward depopulation of the countryside was not universal in the area until the late 1930s, but by that time it was unmistakable. The pattern of out-migration had replaced the pattern of in-migration.

Within that general shift, however, other, more specific themes can be identified that are sometimes obvious and sometimes delicate, and even obscure, but they help explain the larger population flows. One is the evolution of land laws themselves, and in this evolution the laws governing the disposal of the public domain became increasingly generous and enticing from 1820 on, through the remainder of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. In the 1930s, however, the land laws were sharply reversed so as to halt the transfers of the public land to individuals and to discourage many of those who had already settled on it from remaining, sometimes even relocating them elsewhere. There is also the pattern of consolidation in agricultural activities, both stock-raising and crop-producing, although that pattern was not linear and underwent major fluctuation in the 1880s and 1890s. There is also the issue of the competition between livestock grazing and farming in the use of the land, a competition that took decades to resolve, and within the livestock growers there was another competition, between sheep and cattle, and that competition too required substantial time to work out. In addition, the shift from subsistence agriculture to commercial production and the mechanization of agriculture and the diffusion of ever increasing and more sophisticated technology proved to be powerful forces in reshaping the countryside and left a sometimes heavy mark on the land. Put together, these themes add up to essential ingredients in the process of

modernization—a central unifying concept for this study.

Modernization is a model of historical change that is more commonly drawn upon than articulated, more commonly assumed than explored. Many of the features associated with modernization in fact are so obvious that they are taken as given, as if they somehow were inevitable and pre-ordained. Those features include the varied but related innovations familiar to modern society such as the impersonalization of relationships, the erosion of traditional, local, or parochial loyalties and identities, the rise of more cosmopolitan identities, the specialization and synchronization of economic activities, and overall the growth of a national social structure that embodies a transfer of social, political, and economic authority from local to central levels which can coordinate large scale activities in a presumably rational manner. Not that modernization explains, or even adequately describes, the pattern of change, for it clearly does not since many individuals, businesses, and communities actively resisted the process of change underway. In fact, much of the story of the Powder River Basin is the story of life at the local level being overtaken, overwhelmed, and overrun by the engines of economic and social change at the national level and then how people dealt with those consequences. Sometimes it even seems as if modernization is pushing people to go one way, while their own dreams and traditions urge them to go a different direction, and that collision can be seen in the process of historical change in the Powder River Basin. It is as important to identify, understand, and document that circumstance as it is to document the “growth” or “progress” that often dominates historical description. And it is often precisely at that moment where forces intersect that the remnants of historic activities on the ground make sense, or make more or different sense.

*ii. Methodology*

This study used conventional methods of historical inquiry and analysis and began with a survey of published and unpublished literature addressing the study area and also the literature dealing with the larger historical issues pertinent to the study. Thus it was essential to read broadly. This included the popular and widely-circulated accounts of episodes like the Johnson County War, but it also included historical accounts prepared by communities and neighborhoods who have sought to preserve their history in one form or another. While sometimes those are simple chronologies that tell the experiences of individual families in the area, a careful reading can usually discern patterns of settlement, of survival, and of departure, making these histories valuable for purposes other than those for which they were prepared, as is often the case in historical research. In addition, some individuals prepared memoirs describing their own lives, or parts of their lives, in this area, and those have often been useful in trying to understand the patterns at work.

The point in the use of these local histories and memoirs is a very simple one and takes two forms. One is that local history is as rich, vibrant, and complex as state or national history if the right questions are asked. The other benefit in using these sources is that they remind us that we are not dealing with nameless, faceless people; we are studying the lives and homes and dreams and troubles of actual, sometimes identifiable men, women, and children, and the remnants of the past that we find in the Powder River Basin were left there by those people. They were also built by them.

In addition, there have been a number of cultural resource studies prepared in this area. Because it has been the focus of considerable mineral activity over the last three decades and more, a considerable body of material exists pertaining to the history of particular parts. These have been important sources, plus the Section 106 process associated with mineral development has also resulted in a large database of information in the Wyoming Cultural Records Office within the State Historic Preservation Office. That collection has helped provide important information not only about particular sites in the study area, and about what work has been done in the field, but also indicates the kinds of features that are commonly encountered. These studies and those data have been important and were valuable in the early stages of the project in identifying the themes and resources for the current project to use, as were individual National Register nominations, surveys, and context statements.

Besides the literature examining the history of the study area, both on a local and state level, it was also essential to address more broadly the relevant historical issues, and this was done by reading widely, for example, in the area of public land law, agricultural technology, modernization theory, economic history, and architectural and engineering history. By taking these issues seriously, it is possible to find better what particular developments within the study area mean, for it gives a larger context to the context itself.

It would not be accurate to say that the study progressed in linear fashion from the literature survey to focused developments within the study area, since an important part of the research process involved going back and forth between the information about what happened on the ground in this area and what was going on elsewhere or in similar

situations; this was by design and had the benefit of allowing the study to come to a closer appreciation of the particular and a more refined understanding of the general; the dialogue between the general and the particular is important and in this case proved to be informative and creative. Following the general contours of our understanding of the New Deal's agricultural program, for example, provides a better understanding of its local implementation during the 1930s; on the other hand, watching the implementation of those various programs, helps illuminate the larger picture of New Deal agriculture in the state and nation in ways that would not otherwise be possible. That dialogue between the general and the particular, in fact, possibly provides a distinguishing characteristic of the current study.

While I have cast a broad net and have pulled in a variety of resources to examine in the process of preparing this context statement, there are some repositories that are especially valuable. The local libraries in the study area proved unfailingly sensitive to preserving documents that reveal their local histories and they represent an indispensable resource. The two major archives—the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming and the Wyoming State Archives in Cheyenne—each held substantial rewards, both expected and unexpected. And not to be neglected are the published materials provided by the United States Census that helped establish patterns of change over time. This material, along with the now-open manuscript census records through the 1930 census should prove valuable to researchers in the future who seek to explore particular sites for their larger historical significance.

# Chapter 1

## Seeds of a New Social Order: 1860s and 1870s

The beginning of white settlement of the Powder River Basin represented in a way the beginning of a new period of history for this area, but it also represented the culmination of an earlier phase in which powerful forces provided a political, economic, social, and legal infrastructure that made that settlement possible and that shaped the direction and pattern future settlement would take. Those who brought cattle and sheep to graze on this land, those who embarked upon a bold adventure of staking out their own homestead in the area drained by the Powder River, and those who established trading centers to serve the agriculturists of the region were themselves followers of an earlier wave that not only subjugated and removed previous inhabitants but also lay the grid of the land survey and the law for distribution of the domain onto the topography and the sinews of transportation and communication.

### *i. Passing Through*

Although several scattered parties of individuals representing European societies had traversed the region that would become Wyoming, it was only with the fur trade that organized, systematic, and sustained white penetration of the region accelerated and became common. Even with that commercial and social expansion, however, the main

arteries of transportation and commerce remained generally to the south of the Powder River Basin, following primarily the North Platte River in the eastern half of the future state. Tellingly, this avenue proved how important waterways were in defining routes of passage through a region commonly noted for its arid plains on the one hand and its forbidding mountains on the other. Those areas lacking significant streams would be settled only after those that were well drained.

One settlement associated with the fur trade in the Powder River Basin proper provided an exception to this rule, since it was on the plains, far from the gushing streams coming from the mountains; but even this settlement was near a river. In 1834 Antonio Montero (also referred to as Mateo) established on the north bank of Powder River, about ten miles east of present Kaycee, a trading post surrounded by a stockade, about two hundred feet square made of log pickets eight or ten feet high. Montero operated this post until 1838. Although he evidently left briefly, he returned the following year for one more season as a trader. The last date at which the Portuguese Houses—so named because of Montero’s country of origin—were occupied seems to be 1839.<sup>1</sup> Even this solitary instance of white occupation of the Powder River Basin, however, is notable for its proximity to the only source of water for miles and miles—Powder River, a river at this point conspicuous for its seasonal flow, and seasonal dryness too. Like the river it drew upon, the trading post also dried up when it could no longer be sustained. The post,

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<sup>1</sup> See the discussion of Montero and the Portuguese Houses in Edgely W. Todd, “Antonio Montero,” in LeRoy R. Hafen, ed., *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West*, Vol. II (Glendale, California: The Arthur Clarke Company, 1965). This is site 48JO96 in the Wyoming Cultural Records Office Database and site information in that database is taken from Wyoming Recreation Commission, *Wyoming: A Guide to Historic Sites* (Basin, Wyoming: Big Horn Publishers, 1976), 122-123.

like so many of the early white visitors to the area, was also just passing through.

The more enduring and more powerful white impact on the landscape of the Powder River Basin derived not from the fur trade, but came as a direct offshoot of activity that was taking place to the south of the basin. The traffic along the route initially established and used by fur trade caravans increased after 1840 with emigrants bound for California, Oregon, and Utah, and the Oregon Trail carried a volume of traffic that in some years equaled or exceeded the entire population of modern Casper or Cheyenne, Wyoming, and these people brought their belongings, their livestock, and their dreams. The huge volume of traffic on that trail is significant because of its implications that reached far to the north and south of the road itself. It meant that, far from being just a lonely trail where small groups would make their way west, the trail was a major thoroughfare; as with other roadways, the more traffic that used it, the more defined a route it became and the more traffic it attracted.

And that traffic, in turn, meant that those large hordes of people had needs that could be supplied by enterprising merchants along the way, with the result that the road became lined with businesses that sold food, exchanged fresh livestock for tired, provided repairs, and offered bridges and ferries across rivers and streams thus preventing the risk of fording the waterways—all for a price. As John D. Unruh points out in his important study of this road, “by 1850 the river-crossing, postal, and repair services available from the trailside entrepreneurs were so commonplace that they were no longer viewed as traveling luxuries; like food, outfitting supplies, draft animals, and information they had come to be regarded as necessities.”<sup>2</sup> By the end of that decade, in fact, Unruh says,

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<sup>2</sup> John D. Unruh, *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi*

“rarely did the emigrant travel more than twenty-five or thirty miles without encountering at least one habitation. Usually there were more.”<sup>3</sup>

As the trail became a commercial and migration corridor, it attracted all the more travelers, and this had other implications that turned the trail into a powerful institution in the early history of Wyoming. Transportation and communication evolved along the trail. For at least a decade and a half, most of the transportation and communication between the West Coast and the populated East followed this trail. What originally amounted to an informal system of carrying messages and letters became by the 1850s a system for the commercial and public delivery of goods and messages. By 1851 the federal government contracted with private freighters for the delivery of mail, freighters who carried their cargo along this route. A series of stagecoach enterprises even emerged and by the end of the decade at least one company offered regularly scheduled service complete with meals and overnight stops along the way at the company’s roadhouses. This then evolved into the short lived Pony Express, and a quick eighteen months later the telegraph was completed along the road which, aside from putting the Pony Express out of business, made clear the permanence of the intrusion into this area by eastern society, and also made clear that the mark of that intrusion was less the number of people who stayed but the organized nature of the intrusion.

There was another development, too, that followed the massive migration through the region along the Oregon – Mormon – California Trail, and that was the impact on the native inhabitants of the region, an impact that also evolved over time. The opportunities

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*West, 1840-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 267.

<sup>3</sup> Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 298.

for misunderstanding, not to mention deliberate malevolence, between whites and Indians along the corridor where hundreds of thousands of emigrants passed, where many times that number of livestock consumed the forage, and where a multitude of businesses sprang forth, were many and serious, and those tensions increased year by year into organized hostility and conflict. By the end of the 1850s, the U.S. Army patrolled the roadway and conducted campaigns against those people they considered to be hostile to the trail and during the 1860s added to the military protection along the road to protect traffic and the telegraph.

The consequences of all this activity, of the presence of the institutions and sinews of social organization from the East, became clear in the 1860s. In that decade the development along the Oregon Trail corridor reached to other parts of the future Wyoming and brought the same political, social, and economic infrastructure to the rest of the region both by extending tentacles north from the corridor and by spawning an alternative route to the south that would even replace it. One tentacle to the north would reach into the Powder River Basin.

Although fur traders had traversed the Powder River Basin in the 1830s, their presence had been wraith-like, troublesome to the natives but ephemeral. Some individuals were familiar with the area, but their knowledge was personal more than it was institutional and it was hardly susceptible to public reference. Various mountain men had sketched out maps of the vast area of which this was a part, but those maps tended to be idiosyncratic and incomplete, sometimes even wildly distorted. In 1856 a lieutenant in the U.S. Army Corps of Topographical Engineers, Gouverneur Kemble Warren, prepared to explore the area and talked with people at Fort Laramie like Jim

Baker, Joseph Jewitt, Michael Desomet, James Bordeaux, Alexander Culbertson, Colin Campbell, and Joe Merrivale, all of whom were familiar with the area, and studied the maps they drew for him.<sup>4</sup> He then took his own expedition to the northeast from Fort Laramie, to the west of the Powder River Basin, along Rawhide Creek and thence to the White River and on to the Missouri River.

Having just witnessed and complained of General Harney's attack on a Sioux band at Ash Hollow and lamenting the women and children casualties of that conflict, and reporting that "but a small portion of [the land] is susceptible of cultivation west of the ninety-seventh meridian," Warren nonetheless argued for permanent military occupation of the area and stated "that it is of the utmost importance to acquire a thorough knowledge of it without delay."<sup>5</sup> In 1857 Warren returned to the field, dividing his expedition into different parties, and this time he took the main element north from Fort Laramie to Rawhide Butte and into the Black Hills as far as Inyan Kara. Still skirting the Powder River region, Warren's expedition remained on its eastern periphery and the basin still remained largely unexplored, or at least unrecorded in institutional forms. In his report, however, Warren insisted that "the advance of the settlements is universally acknowledged to be a necessity of our national development, and is justifiable in displacing the native races on that ground alone."<sup>6</sup> The pressure mounted to gather more information about this area in ways that were at once military, political, and economic. And that information explicitly anticipated white settlement of the area.

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<sup>4</sup> William H. Goetzmann, *Army Exploration in the American West, 1803-1863* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 410.

<sup>5</sup> Goetzmann, *Army Exploration in the American West*, 411,

The information about the Powder River Basin and upon which a reasonable estimation of its prospects for agriculture could be based remained elusive and in individual memories. The mountain men, a fading cohort after the last rendezvous of 1840, were the informal repositories of that knowledge. One of those individuals was Jim Bridger, who had himself spent at least two winters (1830-1831 and 1837-1838) in the valley of Powder River. When the U.S. Army followed up on Lieutenant Warren's recommendation to explore the area and generate a permanent record of its features and peoples, the leader of the expedition, Captain William F. Raynolds called upon Bridger to serve as guide. The mission was to explore four possible wagon routes, including two northward from Fort Laramie through the Powder River country. As historian William Goetzmann notes, "it is clear that the War Department as early as 1859 was planning a network of roads that would stretch across the northern regions and open the last stronghold of the Sioux and the Blackfeet to the advance of white settlers."<sup>7</sup> The Raynolds expedition approached this region from the north and east, coming by way of Fort Pierre, Black Butte, and the Cheyenne River. They crossed Powder River on July 21. In the course of the journey, they encountered a decaying compound of buildings and Jim Bridger was able to tell Raynolds that these were the remains of the Portuguese Houses where Antonio Montero had operated his trading post two decades earlier. "They are now badly dilapidated," Raynolds wrote, "and only one side of the pickets remains standing."<sup>8</sup> Thus had the physical remnants of one of the first efforts at white habitation

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<sup>6</sup> Goetzmann, *Army Exploration in the American West*, 417.

<sup>7</sup> Goetzmann, *Army Exploration in the American West*, 418

<sup>8</sup> Bridger is quoted in Todd, "Antonio Montero," 253, and in the *Wyoming Recreation*

in the Powder River Basin begun to fade away, back into the soil on which it was built, in just a matter of two decades.

The brevity and dispersed efforts of both Warren and Reynolds to discern wagon routes through the area notwithstanding, these important expeditions reworked much of the map of the region and made significant contributions to the geological and paleontological understanding of the American West. But above all, the Reynolds Expedition, the very last of those undertaken by the army's Topographical Corps, represented more than just an isolated expedition that gathered information to be shelved. As William Goetzmann succinctly observed, the Reynolds expedition was the tip of the iceberg: "waiting in the wings as the all-important silent partners, were the settlers who would take full possession of the Continent as a result of these labors in western exploration."<sup>9</sup> In future years, the maps provided by these explorers would be the maps used by the settlers and their governmental sponsors.

While the reports of these expeditions were published only later—after the Civil War—the pressures that they represented for traversing the Powder River country did not wait. Despite the assurance offered by the U.S. government in the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1851 that the territory north of the North Platte River and east of the Big Horn Mountains would be the domain of the Sioux, the discovery of gold in western Montana proved to be a magnet that pulled some through exactly that area. In 1863 when John Bozeman and John Jacobs investigated a possible route to the gold fields that they might use to guide emigrants to Montana, they did nothing to promote the agricultural

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Commission, *Wyoming: Guide to Historic Sites*, 123.

<sup>9</sup> Goetzmann, *Army Exploration in the American West*, 426.

settlement and use of the Powder River Basin; their destination was Virginia City, their clients were miners and merchants, not farmers, and their only use for this land was to go through it as quickly as possible. On the other hand, in so doing, they unleashed forces that would ultimately lead to the establishment of a road through the area, contested though it was, the location of military outposts along it, the migration of white people through the region, and ultimately the dispossession of the Native American inhabitants who had been using the country, thus making possible the white settlement of the area.

In its origins the Bozeman Trail was neither new nor the sole product of John Bozeman's exertions. As Dr. Sherry Smith notes,

John Bozeman was not the first, path-breaking pioneer in a dark, mysterious region as he sometimes [is] portrayed. Nor was he the first to recognize the possibility of a transportation route through Powder River country and along the east face of the Big Horns. Native Americans used the route in their migrations and in following game. Fur traders and trappers were familiar with the country and followed the same basic pathways (although they did little to disseminate information about the area). By the 1850's Father DeSmet and Captain Reynolds used nearly the same route later used by Bozeman. The Captain, in fact, anticipated by several years, the Georgian's efforts.<sup>10</sup>

Nor did the Bozeman Trail last long. In 1863, Bozeman, Jacobs, and the real guide, Rafael Gallegos, attempted to take a train of emigrants through, but most turned back when threatened by Cheyenne and Sioux warriors east of present Buffalo. In 1864 they took the first full train through to Virginia City, and that summer around fifteen hundred emigrants in 450 wagons, in four different trains, followed the route and its various alternatives. And the road was used the next year and the following too, but, as

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<sup>10</sup> Sherry L. Smith, *The Bozeman Trail* ([Cheyenne:] Wyoming Recreation Commission, Historic Preservation Division, 1981), 14-15; Sherry L. Smith, "The Bozeman—Trail to Death & Glory," *Annals of Wyoming*, 55 (Spring 1983), 32-50.

historian Dr. Susan Badger Doyle notes, “After the end of 1866, the Bozeman Trail was never used again in its entirety.”<sup>11</sup> Instead, after 1866, segments of the road were used as military roads, a revealing and portentous development in itself. While the emigrants simply sought to pass through the area, the U.S. Army established posts along the road to protect the emigrants, and this was the more auspicious consequence of the Bozeman Trail. As Doyle further writes, between 1866 and 1868, “it was mainly used as a military road between the forts in Wyoming and Fort C. F. Smith.”<sup>12</sup>

Two important historical forces were at work in this. One was contained in the axiom in which new roads, by attempting to make traffic easier, wind up attracting ever more traffic, and in the process they create new demands that the new roads themselves cannot satisfy, thus pushing further the cycle of change.<sup>13</sup> This was at the root of the creation of the Bozeman Trail itself, which was an offshoot of the burgeoning Oregon – California – Mormon Trail. By extension, this same process would come into play along the Bozeman Trail itself as it also generated change in the area it traversed, bringing commerce and transportation and emigration through the area, but changing it too. In this way did the Bozeman Trail contribute to the development of the Powder River Basin.

But there was also a second aspect. The military presence along that road served not so much to protect the traffic and encourage people to travel the trail as it did to antagonize the native inhabitants, generate conflict, and stimulate the addition of more

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<sup>11</sup> Susan Badger Doyle, “[The Bozeman Trail],” in Serle L. Chapman, ed., *Promise: Bozeman’s Trail to Destiny* (Park City, Utah: Pavey Western Publishing, 2004), 149.

<sup>12</sup> Doyle, “[The Bozeman Trail],” 149.

<sup>13</sup> There is a vast body of literature on this subject, but the starting point, and perhaps also an exemplary and accessible articulation of the issue, is Lewis Mumford’s *The*

troops and forts. As Dr. Doyle cogently summarizes, “The emigrants knew that the military’s presence was necessary, but they didn’t realize that the military had actually created the situation that made their presence necessary.”<sup>14</sup> The result was, of course, the establishment of settlements along the trail, but they were military communities and they emerged at Fort Fetterman, Fort Connor (which was renamed Fort Reno), Fort Phil Kearny, and Fort C. F. Smith. These posts increased the traffic and commerce on the trail just by their need for supplies, and they presumably included significant herds of horses and mules and cattle, especially oxen or work cattle, although some beef cattle may also have been present in small numbers. The indications of this livestock and thus also the limited grazing that took place near the forts, are sparse, but there. For example, at Fort Phil Kearny, within six months of its founding, more than seven hundred head of horses, mules, and cattle had been taken from the army’s herds by Indians trying to rid themselves of the intruders.<sup>15</sup>

It is tempting to see the Bozeman Trail as being of limited social significance, as an isolated phenomenon unrelated to the future settlement and ranching and grazing activities in the Powder River Basin. Many historians connect it to, and even conflate it with, the military conflicts in the area but then even this larger focus winds up being something remote and disconnected from our larger history, including the future history of this area. There are two patterns that suggest the limits to that focus. Dr. Susan

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*Highway and the City* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc., 1964).

<sup>14</sup> Doyle, “[The Bozeman Trail],” 149.

<sup>15</sup> See the essay, “Fort Phil Kearny, Dakota Territory, 1866-1868,” on the World Wide Web at <http://www.philkearny.vcn.com/fortphilkearny.htm>.

Badger Doyle offers reminders that the Bozeman Trail, and the network of which it was part, actually evolved, that it changed over time. The road was not just a set of ruts, a path connecting two distant points, but a system of communications and transportation that reached ever further out, bringing into its thrall points previously remote or even inaccessible.<sup>16</sup> Secondly, the forces associated with the Trail unleashed additional forces that then took on a life of their own. This can be seen in the war with the Sioux that the trail stimulated. Red Cloud won that war and the forts protecting the road were destroyed, and the subsequent treaty assured the Indians that the land would remain in their hands. But the forces that were powerful were not those on the battlefield. And so powerful were they that once Red Cloud's War was over, once the U.S. government signed a new treaty with the Sioux, and once the military posts were burned and the troops were withdrawn from the area in 1868, Native Americans were victorious for a decade at the most, quite realistically less than that.

The troops may have withdrawn from the area, but the designs of white people on the land remained large. And the invisible framework for realizing those designs was under construction and was reaching a coherent formulation in the decade of the 1860s. The Civil War is not often considered to be an event of major significance in the history of Wyoming, yet the war generated profound changes in the policies and purposes of the nation that had a direct bearing on the area that would become Wyoming. With the departure of the South from the Union, and from Congress, the U.S. government rapidly enacted a series of laws that had been opposed by southerners for generations. Some of

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<sup>16</sup> Susan Badger Doyle, "The Bozeman Trail and Nineteenth-Century American Expansionism on the Northern Plains," paper presented at Western History Association Annual Meeting, October 17, 1997, St. Paul, Minnesota.

those laws encouraged the expansion of western settlement. For example, the Homestead Act of 1862 promised to farmers who would settle the public domain ownership of 160 acres if they would but settle and improve the land, remaining there for five years. That same year Congress passed and President Lincoln signed the Pacific Railroad Act, a measure which chartered the Central Pacific and Union Pacific Railroads, granted the Union Pacific a right of way for the tracks, ten alternate (in a checkerboard pattern) sections of land on each side of the right of way, forming a corridor twenty miles wide, half owned by the railroad and half by the government, loaned the railroad funds of \$16,000 to \$48,000 per mile of track depending on the topography; two years later Congress increased the land grant by a factor of a hundred percent, reduced the primacy of the loan status, and authorized the issuance of more stock. These measures, that were intended to go hand-in-hand in promoting the settlement of the West, were supplemented by additional 1862 legislation that would concentrate Indian nations onto smaller reservations. In addition, Congress created a new Department of Agriculture in the executive branch and granted to states land for creating agricultural colleges. Speaking of the 1862 laws, the eminent historian Paul W. Gates observed that “In all the history of the West, there never was such a combination of measures in one year that was so productive of growth.”<sup>17</sup> The Powder River Basin was not singled out by Congress in these measures, and it is accurate to say that the entire West was the target, but the region north of the Oregon – California – Mormon Trail in what would become eastern Wyoming felt the impact.

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<sup>17</sup> Paul W. Gates, “Public Land Issues in the United States,” *Western Historical Quarterly*, II (October 1971), 368.

That impact was at first deceptive. The construction of the railroad across the southern part of the future state, like the Overland Trail which route it generally followed, siphoned transportation and communication away from the central route that crossed the continental divide at South Pass. But it also stimulated a boom in the white population that however transitory, however, impermanent, was sufficient, when combined with the permanent military population, to give this area enough weight to be seriously considered as a separate territory, and Congress responded by creating Wyoming Territory in 1868, the territory being officially organized in the spring of the following year. By 1868 the railroad had been constructed most of the way across the future state and a series of towns dotted the tracks like beads on a string.

Yet it is important to note that it was not just the population surge that brought territorial status. It was instead exactly the transportation and communication infrastructure that had emerged in the previous decade and a half and the establishment of communities along the increasingly connected and permanent transportation links that brought the area and its peoples to the brink of the territorial status. The creation of Wyoming Territory meant, in fact, that the social overhead for economic growth that had been generated in the southern part of the territory already would soon extend to the northern part. The question was not *if*, but *when*, this development would take place. As early as 1869 the new territory was divided into five counties with Laramie, Albany, and Carbon Counties extending from the Colorado border northward to the territory's upper limit, thereby including the Powder River Basin.<sup>18</sup> The ashes of the recently destroyed forts in that area may have been still warm, but they now rested in organized counties of

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<sup>18</sup> T. A. Larson, *History of Wyoming* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978; 2<sup>nd</sup>

Wyoming Territory.

A similar process was underway to the north of the basin. The Northern Pacific Railroad had been chartered in 1864, the same year that Montana Territory was created, but its construction advanced in lurches that reflected internal financial difficulties, and it would not reach this area until the beginning of the 1880s. But the indications were clear: the expansion of the political and economic system of the eastern states to the West was proceeding vigorously and relentlessly. Like the Union Pacific, the Northern Pacific was able to sell its land grant properties, which were actually double that of the Union Pacific, to attract settlers. The population of both territories was increasing, the pressure to open additional lands was also increasing, and the Powder River Basin, like the rest of the territory of which it was a part, was changing in its perception by outsiders from that of a desolate area that mainly presented an obstacle, an area mainly to be traversed, to an area susceptible to the transplanting of American agricultural institutions and practices.

*ii. "Our Accepted Destination"*

It was as a result of this series of developments—the military activity in the area, the construction of roads and railroads, the emergence of territorial status for Wyoming, and the increasing white presence all around and into the Powder River Basin that the pressure for white settlement of the land increased. Sometimes that pressure was direct and sometimes indirect. But more and more, the pressure was not just to pass through this area, but to settle on it.

In the spring of 1866 Nelson Story was twenty-eight years old. A native of Ohio,  

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edition, revised), 75.

he had ten years earlier migrated to Kansas, and from there he later went to Denver with teams of oxen on the Platte River Road. He was in Denver when he took a train of pack horses and mules to Bannock [sometimes Bannack] City, in what would become Montana, at a time when gold mining activity was just beginning at Alder Gulch. His own fortunes climbed, evidently both by discovery of gold and also from the sale of his pack animals. He also saw some of the potential of the lands of Montana and traveled to Texas to bring back cattle. In 1866 he made his purchase near Fort Worth of about a thousand cattle, “mostly cows with calves thrown in,” and with his hired men headed them north across Indian Territory, across Kansas and then along the Oregon – California Trail across Nebraska and then to Fort Laramie. From that military outpost the cattle drive followed the main road until they turned to the north toward Fort Phil Kearny. The Sioux presence in the area was strong and their attitude bore a harsh resentment from the duplicity of the army’s ostensible willingness to negotiate with the Indians over a road through their lands at the same time that the government fully intended to construct posts along the trail whether the Indians agreed or not. Near Fort Reno the cattle drive was attacked, some of the cattle were taken away, and two cowboys were wounded. That night Story and his men, armed with repeating rifles, attacked the camp and reclaimed the cattle, but also apparently left up to thirty Sioux dead.

Advancing to the northwest, the group, temporarily delayed by the Sioux, met another formidable obstacle at Fort Phil Kearny. There, the post commander, Colonel Henry Carrington, forced the group to stop; policy required forty armed men in each party that continued and, while Story’s men were equipped with repeating rifles—a significant force multiplier in 1866—there were only twenty-five of them. They would

have to wait for another group of Bozeman Trail travelers to come along and bring their number to forty. Because this was October, there was the distinct possibility that another party might never come, so the delay at Fort Phil Kearny seemed open ended.

Accordingly, tensions mounted. Story had to corral his herd three miles from the post. Whether Story waited with the cattle in corral one week or three weeks is unclear, but when his patience was exhausted he left the area under cover of darkness and took his herd of cattle toward Fort C. F. Smith in Montana and from there to points beyond in the Yellowstone River valley.<sup>19</sup>

This cattle drive is often cited as the first entry of cattle into the Powder River Basin, and there is ample justification for that claim. Yet the significance is more symbolic than actual. In the first place, these were not the first cattle to enter the region. There already were cattle at the military posts as an element of feeding the soldiers there. One account notes that while on his march near Fort Reno, in 1865, General “Carrington encountered his first hostiles there, when they ran off the post trader’s herd in broad daylight . . . .”<sup>20</sup> That herd doubtless included cattle. Moreover, at Fort Phil Kearny, Story had to camp three miles away from the post because the post’s own herd had priority claim to the grass near the fort. And not long after Nelson Story passed by Fort Phil Kearny, the military lost a large number of cattle, horses and mules in an Indian raid; that livestock was essential to the operation of the post. Whatever else Nelson Story’s

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<sup>19</sup> The account of the Indian conflict near Fort Reno has been explicitly related in “First Cattle Trailed over County in 1866,” *Gillette News-Record*, May 20, 1963, although it is also suggested in other accounts. See also Byron Story, “The First Cattle up from Texas,” *American Cattle Producer*, November 1938, 6-7; Dee Brown, *The Fetterman Massacre* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984 [1962]), 134-138.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Murray, “Class I Historic Resource Study” prepared for Casper District of the

herd may have represented, it was not the first infusion of cattle into the area.

Moreover, one of the neglected factors in the enumeration of emigrants on the trails is the tendency of those emigrants to take with them starter herds, or at least a few head of dairy and / or beef cattle as well as sheep and poultry. The Bozeman Trail with its parties of emigrants surely included some taking livestock beyond the draft animals pulling their wagons.<sup>21</sup> Finally, it should not be forgotten that Nelson Story's herd passed through the area; Story did not pause longer than necessary and did not build his ranch in this area; that ranch would be hundreds of miles away in the area where Livingston, Montana would later emerge. Nelson Story's cattle drive did not start the cattle industry in the Powder River Basin, nor did it contribute in any material way to the development of that industry.

Yet the Nelson Story cattle drive is important. It did represent, cattle or not, one aspect of the burgeoning traffic on the Bozeman Trail, and it revealed the growing pressure from white settlers—not just speculators and prospectors in the mine fields—for establishing an agricultural presence in the lands drained ultimately by the Missouri River and its tributaries, lands that had been prohibited in one way or another before. And it reflected the linkage between the military presence, to safeguard transportation on the trail, and the civilian social order gradually transforming the area. It also carries a certain irony, yet one to be repeated in the future of the Powder River Basin, that the government forces seeking to protect and assist the settlers and travelers often generated as much enmity as actual obstacles, whether human or environmental. While the Nelson Story cattle drive did little in itself to change the Powder River Basin, one thing was clear:

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Bureau of Land Management, February 1978, 98.

After the herd of a thousand longhorns trailed across the area, it would never be the same. More would come. And then even more would come.

Of course, in the months following Story's journey through the region, the U.S. Army found itself increasingly on the defensive, often besieged, and suffered devastating defeats at the hands of the very Plains Indians they had sought to displace, and ultimately signed a treaty in which they agreed to abandon the posts along the Bozeman Trail. But the whipsaw of historical forces was both subtle and powerful. Despite the thorough defeat of the U.S. military along the Bozeman Trail, the Sioux and Cheyenne soon found themselves being pushed out of their hard-defended territory by a combination of forces, both legal and practical. Eight years after the treaty of 1868 when they defeated the Army along the Bozeman trail, and after their stunning defeat of Custer's force to the north in Montana in 1876, the pressure to move to reservations in South Dakota became even more pronounced. What the Army was unable to accomplish, the social, economic, and cultural power of the nation achieved. How that happened helps understand the social order that emerged, and the significance of the change it represented.

In more than one sense, the changes began at Fort Laramie and worked their way northward. The Treaty of Fort Laramie of 1868 was, for all appearances, a dramatic and triumphal moment for Red Cloud and the Sioux who had, over the previous several years, persisted in defending their territory against the white intruders. There were, in fact, two signings of that treaty, one when the treaty was negotiated and argued in April and May of 1868 and the other in November when Red Cloud and others came to Fort Laramie to sign; this was something that Red Cloud had promised to do only after the posts in the

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<sup>21</sup> Smith, "The Bozeman—Trail to Death & Glory," 42.

Powder River country were gone. By November they were clearly gone and he signed.

While this meant that the war was over, the implications of the document that they had signed quickly became evident. Immediately the military informed the Indians that they were no longer welcome at the remaining forts on the fringe of the area and thenceforth they needed to trade at their agency on the reservation. The Sioux were required to remove to South Dakota and the friendlies of the nation who had taken residence around Fort Laramie were organized into an escorted migration to their new home on the White Clay River near Fort Randall.<sup>22</sup> Others resisted moving, many following Red Cloud into camps along the Sweetwater River, the Tongue River, and along Powder River where they continued to pursue the life of the hunt.<sup>23</sup>

But the pressure was on. The decline of the bison population in this area, as well as elsewhere, held both economic and cultural implications for the population that had depended upon the roaming animals of the plains. In addition to the impact of western bound emigrants on the major trails across the Great Plains, and then the impact of railroads that soon followed the same transportation corridors, professional buffalo hunters moved in, killing huge numbers of buffalo for their hides, leaving the meat to rot, thus depriving the Indians of the basis of their traditional economy and food supply. Conversely, to the extent that they had become dependent upon trade, an extent which varied from group to group, to that same extent were the Indians vulnerable to the prohibition of trading at posts like Fort Fetterman and Fort Laramie. The options, day by

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<sup>22</sup> Michael Cassity, "Special Historical Report: A Social History of Fort Laramie, 1849-1890," study prepared for the Fort Laramie National Historic Site, National Park Service, August 2001, 168.

<sup>23</sup> James C. Olson, *Red Cloud and the Sioux Problem* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska

day, and year by year, dwindled constantly for the native inhabitants of the Powder River Basin. Cooperation with the whites and resistance to them both led to the same ultimate result, life on a reservation, cultural erosion, and economic privation. Given these converging pressures, what is remarkable is not that the Indians were being removed from this area, but that they held on and actually managed to control it for as long as they did. Until about 1876 or 1877, the Sioux effectively controlled the area north of the North Platte River and those who entered did so only at their forbearance.

But the tide turned and the Indian presence became increasingly tenuous as the white entries increased, especially along the south and eastern margins of the region. Some of those white intrusions were by the military. Fort Fetterman, erected in 1867, was the last fort constructed on the Bozeman Trail but was exempted from the abandonment of military posts mandated in the 1868 treaty because of its location on the south side of the North Platte. Because of its critical location, the post served as a supply base and point of embarkation for military activity in the area, and it seemed to offer some hope for protection for those white settlers who ventured forth. An area known early as “Fetterman Country” consisted of the LaBonte, LaPrele, Horseshoe, Wagon Hound, Box Elder Creeks. In 1874 a handful of ranchers, including William Daily, Clint Abraham, Joseph and Andrew Sullivan, Alex Wilson and Charles Campbell, drove cattle north from Colorado and within a year had settled on their various ranches in the Fetterman Country south of the North Platte in the future Converse County.<sup>24</sup> In

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Press, 1965), 130.

<sup>24</sup> George H. Cross, “The First Cattle Ranches,” *Quarterly Bulletin of the Wyoming Historical Department*, August 15, 1924. A typescript of this article can be found in the Wyoming State Archives, Wyoming Works Projects Administration, Federal Writers’

addition, but about the same time, John Hunton, who had been sutler at Fort Laramie, set up his S O Ranch on Box Elder Creek and Al Ayres and George Powell were busy on LaPrele Creek. In some instances it appears that they were wintering their cattle in those drainages, but established ranches would soon follow. And within a few years—by 1877—there had emerged more ranches along the drainages in this area.<sup>25</sup>

If the mere existence of Fort Fetterman served as a magnet to prospective settlers and ranchers in the southern part of the study area, the intrusion of a major force under the command of George A. Custer into the Black Hills in 1874 provoked even more interest—and increased the pressure for settlement in that area. In an effort to confirm or dispel rumors of abundant gold deposits in the Black Hills, Colonel Custer led a reconnaissance in force of some ten companies of cavalry, two companies of infantry, a battery of Gatling guns and a Rodman gun, and a military band, along with scientists, engineers, prospectors, and newspaper reporters to explore that region. Long held not only as legally and officially owned by the Sioux but also as sacred to them, the Black Hills were never again *terra incognita* in any sense. As William Goetzmann notes, “Custer had almost singlehandedly begun a gold rush.”<sup>26</sup>

A second expedition the next year under geologist Walter P. Jenney likewise assayed the northeastern corner of Wyoming Territory and the neighboring area of South

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Project Collection, File 1386, Cheyenne, Wyoming. This collection will subsequently be cited as WPA Collections.

<sup>25</sup> John LeeRoy Waller, “Economic History and Settlement of Converse County,” *Annals of Wyoming*, 6 (April 1930), 291-294, and the continuation of the article in *Annals of Wyoming*, 7 (July 1930), 330-337.

<sup>26</sup> William Goetzmann, *Exploration and Empire: The Explorer and the Scientist in the Winning of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1966), 419-

Dakota and confirmed the reports of gold in the area. The subsequent gold rush into the Black Hills, in turn, precipitated other forms of activity nearby in the communities that sprang up to serve the miners and in the nearby lands that held potential for pastures and farms. One response to the pressure for taking possession of the Black Hills was an offer by the United States government to purchase the land from the Sioux. When the Indians declined the offer, the government responded in 1875 by ordering Indians who were not on the reservation to move there by the first of the year 1876. This order applied not just to the Black Hills but to the whole area north of Fort Laramie, through the Powder River Basin, and into Montana.

And so the pressure ratcheted up again for the Native American inhabitants to clear this area, and it was this order that then led to the famous, and infamous, military expeditions of 1876. This brought additional military activity in the Powder River Basin, and also new military establishments. In 1876 the army returned to the Bozeman Trail and built Cantonment Reno where it crossed Powder River. This post was soon renamed Fort McKinney and was almost as quickly moved farther north. In 1878 Fort McKinney, near the Dry Fork of Powder River, was abandoned and the new Fort McKinney was constructed on a broad terrace at the foot of the Big Horns near Clear Creek. Aside from the usual military implications of an army post, there were other consequences of special importance to understanding the emergence of grazing activities, ranching, and settlements.

The fort had hardly begun official operation when emigrants began to gather about the new post. Some years later, Johnson County resident Mrs. D. S. Sonnesberger

recalled her own experience as one of those emigrants. Her husband had traveled separately to the new fort in August 1878 and the next month she and their three single sons, a married son and his wife, another man, and “a night herder” arrived at Fort McKinney. The fort, she said “was just being located at the eastern base of the Big Horn Mountains, and feeling that our only safety depended largely upon being near a government post, McKinney was our accepted destination.”<sup>27</sup> And destination it truly was, not just a way station. Her husband was busy building a log cabin on Shell Creek. Moreover, and more significantly, they were not alone. Mrs. Sonnesberger noted that three families had arrived ahead of them. One of those families had arrived the previous May and she calculated that Mr. T. J. Foster of Buffalo, “turned the first sod that was ever broken for agricultural purposes within the boundary lines of Johnson County.”<sup>28</sup> Moreover, her family and others stopped at the store run by the Trabling brothers on the old Bozeman Trail just at the edge of the military reservation.

Something in the way of organized society was emerging. In fact, a separate county of Wyoming Territory had been created in 1875, but actual organization of the county required five hundred signatures on a petition and there were not that many residents, or at least not that many white residents, at the time so the county remained unorganized. After the establishment of the new Fort McKinney, however, the population increased, the new county was organized in 1879, and it was at that time

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<sup>27</sup> Mrs. D. S. Sonnesberger, “Reminiscences of the Early Settlement of Johnson County,” 1. This account was recorded by Ida McPherrren from Harry Babcock, grandson of Mrs. Sonnesberger. Typescript located in WPA Collections, File 1262. See also, D. W. Greenburg, “Johnson County, Wyoming,” *The Midwest Review* (July 1925).

<sup>28</sup> Sonnesberger, “Reminiscences of the Early Settlement of Johnson County,” 4.

renamed Johnson.<sup>29</sup>

Yet more people were coming into the area even at points distant from Fort McKinney. Directly to the north, O. P. Hanna settled on Little Goose Creek in 1878 and planted a crop of oats that he harvested in the fall of that year.<sup>30</sup> To the south, Moreton and Richard Frewen established in 1878 their ranch near the location of old Fort Reno. When the Frewens purchased the 76 ranch from Tim Foley on the Sweetwater River the next year, “the first big herd of cattle was driven onto Powder River.”<sup>31</sup> Farther south and east, Jim Davis herded a band of sheep, evidently the first such band, near Muskrat Canyon in the Rawhide Buttes area in 1878.<sup>32</sup> Closer to the Black Hills, ranches were emerging like the Ship Wheel Ranch of Bartlett Richards in 1879 and the D Ranch of Bud and Tobe Driskill immediately west of Devils Tower.<sup>33</sup> A German immigrant, Albert Hogg, built a cabin in what would become Sundance in 1879 and other families settled nearby shortly afterwards. As early as 1876 Alex Moorcroft built a cabin on land that would in the future hold the town of Beulah in Crook County (although legally

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<sup>29</sup> Howard B. Lott, “Much Early History of Wyoming Centers in Johnson County” typescript, 2. WPA Collections, File 1262. Mrs. Charles S. Baker, “Early History of Johnson County,” paper read before the History & Art Club, December 6, 1915, WPA Collections, File 788.

<sup>30</sup> Minnie M. Williamson, “Pioneer Farming” handwritten manuscript, May 18, 1939, WPA Collections, File 1468.

<sup>31</sup> Helena Huntington Smith, *The War on Powder River: The History of an Insurrection* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966; reprint from McGraw-Hill edition), 8-9.

<sup>32</sup> “Sheep,” *Douglas Enterprise*, April 3, 1928.

<sup>33</sup> Margaret Dillinger Bowden, *1916: Wyoming, Here We Come!* (Gillette, Wyoming: privately printed by James H. Bowden and Jessie Outka, 2002), 39-40.

created in 1875, Crook County was not actually organized until 1885).<sup>34</sup>

The transformation of the 1870s in which Indian people were replaced with white people as dominant inhabitants, in which an agricultural society replaced a nomadic hunter society, was transforming the social landscape of the northeastern quarter of Wyoming. That new social order was taking shape on the edges of the vast country drained in the south by the North Platte River, in the north by the Tongue River and Powder River, and on the east by the Belle Fourche and Cheyenne Rivers, but it was also advancing into its interior, bringing to an area that a decade earlier was a sanctuary, albeit sometimes contested, for a vastly different life.

But it was not just people who were coming into this country. Those people who came to the area brought with them the institutions, technologies, cultures, and economies of the East and they were, in the process, creating a political and economic infrastructure that would shape the development of this area. The seeds of organized society were being planted in the Powder River Basin.

First of all, these people who lived often far from each other and certainly distant from the centers of commerce in the nation, were not completely isolated. There was, of course, the old Bozeman Trail that was subsequently used as a military and emigrant road, and as a transportation corridor in later years. In 1877 a stage line began to operate between Rock Creek on the Union Pacific Railroad to the south and Fort Custer, near Hardin, Montana in the north, and this line would serve as a critical connecting line between the Northern Pacific and the Union Pacific. And along this route other communities would spring up: Buffalo in 1879, Big Horn shortly afterwards, Dayton in

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<sup>34</sup> Myrtle M. Champ, "Early Settlers," typescript, 52-53, WPA Collections, File 1265.

1881, and Sheridan soon after that.<sup>35</sup> Regular mail deliveries began along this route and as early as 1877, when Mrs. Sonnesberger described her family's new home near Fort McKinney, she was quick to note that mail came to them at the fort.<sup>36</sup> Far to the east, the Cheyenne – Black Hills Stage Line also went north, but this line went to Rawhide Butte and points north in the Black Hills area with various changes in the route over the following decade.<sup>37</sup> And where the roads went, so too did the telegraph, so that a web of communications and transportation, albeit often inchoate and imperfect, was being overlaid on the land.

So too was the web of political authority emerging in the northeastern corner of the territory. Wyoming's original five counties were each tall columns on the map, of varying width and uniform height. What the official map boundaries concealed was that most of the development on the ground was taking place in the southern extremes of each county, but as that development began to emerge in the northern parts, those portions broke away and formed new counties. By 1885 Johnson and Crook Counties had been formed, but they were substantially larger than the modern counties of those names. Johnson County included not only modern Johnson and Sheridan Counties, but also the eastern portions of Big Horn, Washakie, and Hot Springs Counties while Crook County included modern Crook, Weston and Campbell Counties. In coming years the process would be repeated as the counties divided into multiple separate units, each division

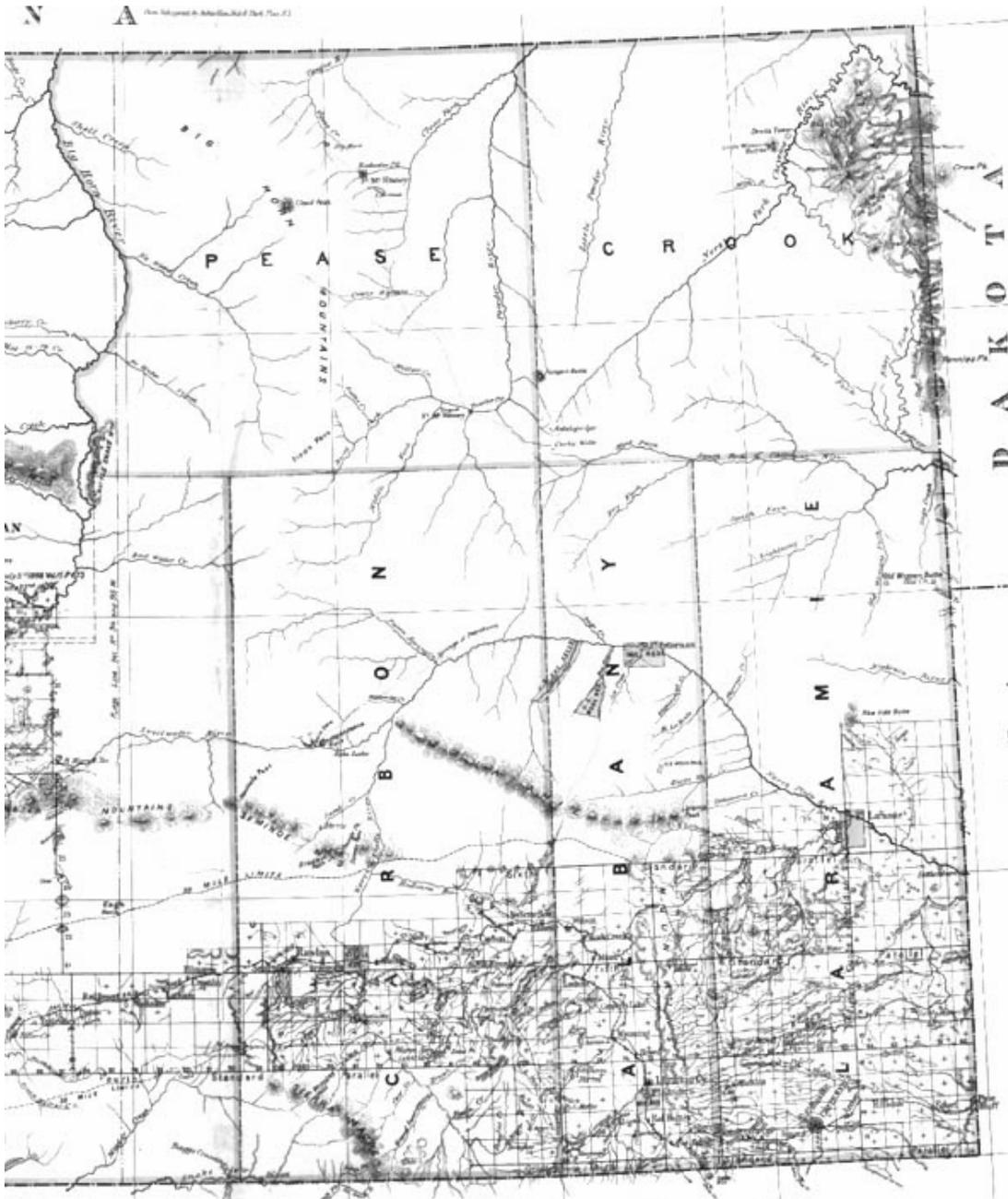
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<sup>35</sup> Edith Manley Chappell, "Rock Creek to Custer Station," typescript, WPA Collections, File 1259.

<sup>36</sup> Sonnesberger, "Reminiscences of the Early Settlement of Johnson County," 4.

<sup>37</sup> Robert Murray, "Class I Historic Resource Study" Prepared for Casper District of the Bureau of Land Management, February 1978, 147.

reflecting not only the population growth within the interior of each county but also the extension and expansion of the sinews of political and commercial organization to



Detail from U.S. Department of Interior, Wyoming Territory (1879). Note county borders in northeast and surveying activity in south. Source: Wyoming State Archives, Online Map Collection, [http://wyoarchives.state.wy.us/mapphotos/mapb\\_1879.jpg](http://wyoarchives.state.wy.us/mapphotos/mapb_1879.jpg)

previously isolated areas. Converse and Niobrara Counties were still, at that time, parts of Laramie and Albany Counties, and their creation would reflect a new wave of immigration and development. Because of the configuration of the counties in 1880, it is impossible to determine how many people lived in this quadrant of the territory that year, but one fact is plain: the number was growing each year. People were moving onto the public domain of the United States and laying claim to that land in one way or another, sometimes formally and sometimes otherwise.

Which fact then pointed up the wrinkle in the system. Very little of the land had been surveyed. By 1880, only one seventh of the land in the state had been subject to systematic survey,<sup>38</sup> and that portion was heavily concentrated in the south, for example along the corridor of the Union Pacific, where both settlement and communities had been concentrated in the early territorial years. Until 1877 the only land office had been in Cheyenne and the new land office opened that year was in Evanston. But the shift was to the north. The next office in Wyoming Territory for the United States General Land Office, the administrator of the public domain, would open in 1888. And it would open in Buffalo. But a system existed by which private individuals were able to convert parts of the public domain to their own personal property and even to use greater parts of the public domain that they were not able to lay claim to.

The net effect of this infrastructure that had emerged in the Powder River Basin was first to reflect the development that had taken place already, some of it gradual and some of it remarkably sudden. But that infrastructure did more than reflect what had already taken place. It also was a system that allowed and sanctioned this private

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<sup>38</sup> T. A. Larson, *History of Wyoming*, 173.

development. But there was more even than that, for this system that had emerged also encouraged and promoted and invited further settlement, and it encouraged a particular pattern.

### *iii. Public Domain, National Birthright*

The disposal of the public domain and its ownership and use by private individuals and companies has long formed one of the critical problems of American history, for this process has contributed to not just the growth of the nation but also the particular patterns of economic, social, and political activity that make up much of the history of the West. In Wyoming Territory in the 1880s, the public domain was transformed, and so was life in that territory, and that can be seen with special clarity in the northeastern quadrant of the territory and future state.

In its history, the issue of the disposal of the public domain generally was characterized by a tension between two conflicting courses. One option was simply the sale of land to private individuals, a course of action that benefited people who could afford to buy the land, and especially those speculators who could purchase vast tracts of land, hold on to them until the pressure for settlement increased their value dramatically, and sell them at inflated prices to reap a huge profit. One advantage to this approach was that the government treasury would gain additional revenue from the sales, although hardly the amount that the speculators would acquire. The disadvantage, especially in the eyes of those like Thomas Jefferson and his successors in the nineteenth century who

formed what became known as a general land reform movement, was that the American people would have to pay a premium price to gain access to land that belonged to the entire nation, while a privileged elite would be able to rake off the profit in the transaction without expending any actual labor as a productive force on the land.

This criticism led to the other course of action in disposing of the public domain. This approach was based in philosophy and history, and in both Thomas Jefferson stood as the most articulate advocate. With his considered reverence for agriculture as the most productive calling and farmers as the most virtuous part of society, and his regard for “those who labor in the earth” as even “the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people,” and also as the philosopher of democracy, Jefferson sought at almost all cost to provide a system where individuals would be able to be free and independent producers, and a critical element of that freedom was ownership of their own land, or conversely, not being beholden to others for access to land. Jefferson famously articulated the convergence of agrarianism and democracy when he wrote that “the small land holders are the most precious part of a state.”<sup>39</sup>

His idea was not that recipients of these parcels of the public domain would become rich on their own property, but that they would be able to survive, to subsist in freedom, and to prosper morally and politically, if not always financially. Jefferson’s own proposal was to grant every adult in the nation fifty acres if they did not already own

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<sup>39</sup> See Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 20-22; and Garrett W. Sheldon, *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 72-77. Although addressing the issue of freehold democracy less directly, the discussion of the framework for settlement of the public domain and the “release of energy” in James Willard Hurst, *Law and the Conditions of Freedom in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967) is indispensable.

that much, and in that way to provide for the economic conditions of freedom, or as it was often termed, “freehold democracy.” This becomes directly and explicitly relevant to the Powder River Basin since that was part of the territory that Jefferson acquired in 1803, thereby effectively doubling the size the of nation, and his motivation in securing that land lay in large part in assuring, as he said in his first inaugural, that the United States possessed “a chosen country, with room enough for our descendants to the thousandth and thousandth generation.”<sup>40</sup> In this way the acquisition by the United States of the land drained by Powder River and its allied streams in the region can be understood as an effort by the formulator of the notion of freehold democracy to address the economic conditions of freedom and thereby to guarantee the future of the republic.

After the enactment of legislation in 1800 to provide for the sale of public land in a Jeffersonian system of easy credit, a measure that Roy Robbins, historian of U.S. land policy, called “one of the most important measures in the history of the public domain,”<sup>41</sup> the debate continued, pressures mounted, and western lands beckoned. One pressure was to raise the price for the sale of public land so as to increase federal revenues; this would also deter the movement of the population west, an ardent fear in some quarters, especially in the American South. An obviously conflicting pressure was to facilitate movement west and to grant free land to people on the frontier. It was in response to the western movement, then framed largely in terms of movement beyond the Appalachians, that brought about the Land Act of 1820. This measure removed credit as a system of

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<sup>40</sup> Jefferson, First Inaugural Address, in Henry Steele Commager, ed., *Documents of American History*, Seventh Edition (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1963), 187.

<sup>41</sup> Roy M. Robbins, *Our Landed Heritage: The Public Domain, 1776-1936* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), 18.

purchasing land since it was often used by land speculators to increase the territory they would try to monopolize, reduced the price of land to \$1.25 an acre and permitted it to be purchased in lots as small as eighty acres.<sup>42</sup>

Meanwhile, those people known as “squatters” who settled on the public land were subject to being ejected and brutally treated, and the best lands were being held by large, well-funded speculators who bought and then withheld from development millions of acres known as “speculators’ deserts.” Ultimately resolution came in the Preemption Act of 1841, a measure that would account for a significant portion of the land claims filed in the future. That measure finally removed the curse of prosecution for settling on unsurveyed public land by legalizing it as “preemption” and permitting claims to be filed after improvements had been made. As Roy Robbins notes, the new law also articulated the idea that settlement of western land was more important than generating revenue from the land, thereby making clear (1) that “Congress intended that the domain should not fall into the hands of those who already had enough land,” (2) that the settlement should be undertaken by small farmers, and thus by the greatest number of Americans, and (3) that settlers should be allowed sufficient time to accumulate the funds necessary to purchase the land from the government. It was, as Robbins summarizes, “a victory of pioneer America over the more established eastern order of society.”<sup>43</sup>

The measure did not, however, completely resolve the issue. Instead it heightened the pressures. The West increased in population in the years after 1841, with the Oregon – California – Mormon Trails symbolizing the exodus underway. This

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<sup>42</sup> Paul Wallace Gates, “Land Policy,” in Howard R. Lamar, ed., *The Reader’s Encyclopedia of the American West* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers), 639.

increased the pressure for a more liberal policy, one becoming associated with the concept of free homesteads, at the same time that it generated fears in the East and South for reasons that were at once political and economic and that also touched on the growing issue of slavery. When the next major land policy was enacted, it was in 1862 and only after the South had seceded and was no longer present to block the legislation.

The Homestead Act represented Abraham Lincoln's endorsement of the Jeffersonian dream of small farmers owning their own land with the aid of the nation, and that was only natural since Lincoln was the second presidential nominee of a party built on the principles of Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men. This measure promised 160 acres of land to any person who would settle on it and develop it for five years, and now with no cost except for some nominal processing charges. For others, those who chose not to settle and develop—speculators, timber companies, and others—the land was still for sale. This seemed to be the culmination of the Jeffersonian prospect, yet it really did not deter speculation in land, and the amount available for homesteading actually paled in contrast to the amount being made available to the railroads as land grants at the same time. Nonetheless, it was now possible for an individual to claim 160 acres of surveyed lands under the provisions of the Homestead Act. And, as historian Paul Wallace Gates argued, “The Homestead Act breathed the spirit of the West, with its optimism, its courage, its generosity and its willingness to do hard work . . . .”<sup>44</sup> While settlers could exercise their rights under both the Homestead Act and the Preemption Act, thus allowing 160 acres under each measure, they could not do so at the same time since residence on

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<sup>43</sup> Robbins, *Our Landed Heritage*, 91.

<sup>44</sup> Paul Wallace Gates, *History of Public Land Law Development* (Washington, D.C.:

the claimed land was a requirement for each.

And this measure was then augmented in 1873 by the Timber Culture Act and in 1877 by the Desert Land Act. The first of these measures sought “to encourage the growth of timber on the western prairies” and offered 40 acres of land to the person who would plant and protect that amount of timber; it also rewarded homesteaders who cultivated one acre of trees on their land for two years by giving them their patents after they had been on their land for three years instead of five.<sup>45</sup> The second law, the Desert Land Act, permitted settlers to purchase 640 acres of land for a nominal amount, provided the land would be irrigated within three years of filing; title would be transferred when proof of irrigation was submitted within the three-year period.<sup>46</sup>

The package of laws together covered a variety of eventualities and certainly worked to open the lands of the West, including the vast portion of the public in and around the Powder River Basin, to settlement. Future actions would show that abuses would take place on the part of many different people and that the limits on landholdings were sometimes too small for commercial operation, and other shortcomings would be evident as well. That fact notwithstanding, though, probably the final judgment of these laws is that offered by their closest student, Paul Wallace Gates. Gates concluded, despite the defects in the legislation, “census figures show that actual farm makers in the new West were acquiring ownership of land, and it is clear that the Homestead Act was a major factor in achieving that objective.” He also noted that the law “contributed more

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Government Printing Office, 1968), 394.

<sup>45</sup> Robbins, *Our Landed Heritage*, 218. Five years later the provision was amended so that only ten acres of trees were required instead of forty.

than anything else to making the area to which it applied a region in which small owner-operated farms existed as well as large cattle ranches.”<sup>47</sup> Certainly this package of laws offering prospective homesteaders the opportunity to acquire a portion of the public domain for their own use was crucial to the settlement of the Powder River Basin.

In a relatively short time, with significant developments mainly in the 1860s and 1870s, a framework had been constructed that would not only make possible but encourage the white settlement of the land north of the North Platte River and between the Big Horn Mountains and the Black Hills. Previous intrusions of both individuals and organized forays had gathered information about the area, had charted roads through the area, and had mounted pressure on the native inhabitants to leave. Increasingly people were looking to this area not just as a place to cross, an area to pass through, but as a place to relocate. And as they made their plans to settle in the area they carried with them the legal apparatus of laws allowing for the transfer of ownership from the public domain to the individuals themselves.

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<sup>46</sup> Robbins, *Our Landed Heritage*, 219.

<sup>47</sup> Paul Wallace Gates, “Land Policy,” in Howard R. Lamar, ed., *The Reader’s Encyclopedia of the American West* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers), 639.

## Chapter 2

# The Rise of a Ranching Kingdom in the 1870s and 1880s

### *i. Land, Water, and the Arcadian Promise*

In 1878 Territorial Governor Hoyt reported to the Secretary of the Interior that he had just returned from a trip to the Powder River country at the base of the Big Horn Mountains. “What an Arcadia was here, waiting for and only needing the herdsman and his flocks to make it complete,” the governor reported. “On my way back from there I was met by several little parties of adventurous pioneers exploring for good locations with the intention of taking in herds of cattle next spring. To say the least, such a region cannot long remain unoccupied.”<sup>1</sup> The next year, in late winter, that anticipated occupation had not been realized and Governor Hoyt remarked on both the absence of cattle and the abiding promise of the land: “From old Fort Reno on the upper waters of the Powder and 90 miles beyond Fort Fetterman northward to the Montana boundary (over 100 miles) and from the Black Hills on the east to the Indian reservation and National Park on the west, I did not see and could not hear of a single herd of cattle. . . .

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<sup>1</sup> Annual Report of the Governor of Wyoming Territory, 1878, as quoted in Jim Hicks, “Glowing Picture of Big Horns Detailed for Early Day Settlers,” *Buffalo Bulletin*, August 21, 1958.

On Crazy Woman, Powder, Lodge Pole, Clear Creek and Piney are meadows of surprising richness and almost endless succession.”<sup>2</sup> It is clear that in the late 1870s the promise of the region was still to be realized, and it is also clear that the promise for these lands was huge and that the land (and also the governor) was beckoning the settler, especially the rancher. The land was open, the roads led there, and the tools for taking up the public domain were available.

As if in response to the governor’s urging, the public domain was being settled. While Governor Hoyt had not seen any cattle in his trip of 1879, just two years later he observed that the same area was now home to “scarcely less than 75,000 head of cattle.”<sup>3</sup> And the previous year, 1881, Hoyt noticed the proliferation of farms in that area and Hoyt commented that fine crops were being grown in Johnson County and, even more remarkable, they were being grown without irrigation.<sup>4</sup> In extremely short order, it appeared that the farms and the ranches were not only growing, but were already on a collision course. In fact, in 1881 Hoyt was concerned that the cattle ranches were growing so large and becoming so aggressive that he feared they were taking up all of the land “bordering on the waterways” and urged action to prevent that from happening so that the small farmers would also be able to “benefit from the lands of Wyoming.”<sup>5</sup> Hoyt’s fears were not misplaced, but his desire for action fell wanting and the ranches

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<sup>2</sup> *Cheyenne Sun*, March 4, 1879.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Henry Tanner, “The Disposal of the Public Domain in Johnson County, Wyoming, 1869-1890,” Master’s thesis, University of Wyoming, 1967, 59.

<sup>4</sup> Tanner, “The Disposal of the Public Domain in Johnson County,” 4, quoting Hoyt’s report for 1880.

<sup>5</sup> Tanner quotes Hoyt’s report for 1881, in “The Disposal of the Public Domain in

grew, and quickly came to dominate the broad area of the Powder River Basin in the mid-1880s.

Exactly how the transformation of the area from one characterized as a place where farmers and homesteaders grew abundant crops to one where ranchers prevailed and were forcing out the farmers took place has not been examined closely. A comprehensive study of the pattern of settlement remains to be performed but there are indications of what that study would reveal. In the first place it is clear that much of the initial land filings were on or near streams. While that element is widely understood and bears up to historical examination, there is another element that has been questioned far too little. Many accounts attribute the pattern of land claims in this area, and, by extension, also their failure, to the provisions of the Homestead Act of 1862. The land had to be claimed in maximum parcels of 160 acres, the argument runs, and this amount was far too small for successful farming or ranching, and since the land was not susceptible to farming anyway, the Homestead Act simply forced ranchers into surreptitious, even illegal, actions to claim the land necessary for their enterprises. The Homestead Act thus, while well-intentioned, bears the burden of calamity for both farmers and ranchers in this area, and that calamity stretched out over a period of more than half a century.

A cursory review of land claims confirms that the initial claims included or were adjacent to drainages so that the water resources could be controlled, either for crops or as water for livestock. In fact, many of those early claims explicitly refer to the stream that flows through the claim. Further, this reference to natural features is in the place of

using the surveyed grid of townships and sections, and portions thereof. The earliest filings, in other words, took place before the land was surveyed. The first land surveys in the study area appear to have been conducted in 1880 and focused on the nascent communities, with the outlying lands being surveyed over the next several years—or later. This meant that some of the best land—that which was occupied and claimed first—is described in the initial filings by reference to metes and bounds involving a fixed point and then compass readings and measurements. Indeed, this suggests that the presence of a metes and bounds description can itself be a method in helping to date an occupied property relative to others in the area. Consider the case of one person reported to be the first land claimant, at least in the western portion of the Powder River Basin, one John H. Smith on January 17, 1878 near the old Trabing store and post office. The description of Smith's claim reads as follows:

Set a stake at the foot of a big lone cottonwood tree on the north bank of Crazy Woman creek at the point where the south branch intersects the main stream and about three miles above the crossing of the main McKinney road; from the . . . stake 1 run W [west] 16 deg. N [north] 20 chs. [chains] thence N 16 deg. E [east] 20 chs. thence E 16 degrees S 80 chs, thence N 16 degrees 220 chs. thence E 16 deg S 20 chs, thence n 16 degrees E 40 chs, E 16 deg. S 20 chs, N 16 deg. 40 chs. W 16 deg n 20 chs, S 16 deg W 40 chs, W 16 deg N 40 chs, N 20 chs, S 16 deg W 20 chs, W 16 deg N 100 chs to place of beginning, covering 640 acres, Set stake at every turn, of course.<sup>6</sup>

This property description did not use the grid, because the grid was not yet available.

The significance of that fact rests in the requirement of the Homestead Act that it could only be used on lands that had been surveyed. The earliest claims to land in this area, claims where metes and bounds were used to define the boundaries, claims that

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<sup>6</sup> Ida McPherrren, "First Homestead Entry in This Section," WPA Collections, File 378.

overwhelmingly were situated on watercourses, those claims were not subject to the 160 acre limits of the Homestead Act.

There is, in fact, one study that, while not comprehensive, confirms exactly this. A master's thesis in history prepared by Francis Henry Tanner at the University of Wyoming in 1967 compiled a list of land claimants in Johnson County (as it is configured in modern times) to determine the location and date and authorization for the claimants. While Tanner's results can not be generalized to the rest of the study area, the information he gathered does shed light on the settlement pattern. Tanner pored over the Johnson County land records (not the records of the Buffalo Land Office) and compiled information about each transaction between 1884 and 1890. This represented a total of 64,615.88 acres and 213 separate land patents. One striking conclusion Tanner reached was that the Homestead Act of 1862 actually represented a small number of the patents issued in this period (they would be much more important in the twentieth century, he suggests, although his analysis did not extend that far). Only eighteen patents were issued, for 2,805.11 acres (just over four percent of the land patented), under the Homestead Act. On the other hand 112 patents were issued for 46,399.27 under the Desert Land Act of 1877. Another seventy-six patents were issued on 13,657.59 acres under the provisions of the 1820 law.<sup>7</sup> These two measures combined accounted for ninety-three percent of the land patents issued in Johnson County in that period.

The 1820 land sales law, as amended by the Preemption Act of 1840, had been the basic law for the transfer of public land to private hands before the Homestead Act, had applied to land that was unsurveyed, and although it also had limits of 160 acres

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<sup>7</sup> Tanner, "The Disposal of the Public Domain in Johnson County, Wyoming," 110, 118-

those limits changed over time with different amendments to the law so that the limits depended on the filing date; plus, this law permitted the land also to be purchased. (In Johnson County, the *average* claim under the 1820 law was around 180 acres, indicating that there were some claims that were substantially larger.) The 1877 Desert Land Act, on the other hand, allowed for easy acquisition of land to be irrigated, and certainly the land taken early in Johnson County was susceptible to irrigation. Tanner calculated the numbers of claimants on land through which streams flowed, 116 of the total 204 patents, and another fifty-eight were close enough that they could have been easily irrigated.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the presence of nearby water was a prerequisite to filing under the Desert Land Act, and that act, as Tanner makes clear was definitive of early settlement: “It was under the provisions of this act that Johnson County was truly settled.”<sup>9</sup> While these people may have established homesteads in the broad sense of the word, they were not establishing Homesteads as a legal proposition under the Homestead Act. The Desert Land Act allowed for a maximum claim of 640 acres, and Tanner found in Johnson County that the average claim under its provisions was 425.865 acres. This 426-acre average size, or even the 640-acre maximum size, may still have been too small for farming or ranching, but that is a question that requires different analysis. Indeed, since these early claims were on watered land, and not just the dry benchlands well above the drainages, the question becomes that much more complex, with more distinctions to be made. But what this information indicates is that the success and failure of ranching and

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<sup>8</sup> Tanner, “The Disposal of the Public Domain in Johnson County,” 113.

<sup>9</sup> Tanner, “The Disposal of the Public Domain in Johnson County,” 119.

farming in this area is not an issue to be casually addressed, and that it is dangerous to attribute that success or failure, or even the tension between ranchers and farmers, exclusively to the provisions of the Homestead Act of 1862.

*ii. The System of Cattle Ranching*

Into that system of land laws moved the cattle ranchers, and they too had their own system. The vast, open plains of the Powder River Basin inspired the visions of cattle ranchers, and sometimes inspired them with visions of the future that were unrealistic. The post-Civil War cattle industry itself had many facets and it took on different complexions and structures in different places. What became known as the “Texas system” of cattle production, however, was the system that found its way to Wyoming generally in the 1870s and to the Powder River Basin in the 1880s, and that system was itself responsible for the path the history of the area took.

There were, after all, cattle in Wyoming earlier. Captain Philip St. George Cooke had noted at Fort Laramie in 1845 before it became a military post, that “they have domestic cattle.”<sup>10</sup> Certainly by 1854 cattle were being herded near Fort Laramie, at that time by Alex Majors; that year Majors claimed that he wintered cattle in that area, although he explicitly noted that “We did not turn the cattle out without sending some

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<sup>10</sup> St. George Cooke, *Scenes and Adventures in the Army: or Romance of Military Life* (Philadelphia, Lindsay & Blakiston, 1857), 335.

herders along with them.”<sup>11</sup> By 1867 John Hunton reported that there were only a few cattle ranches in existence, and these were located not far from Fort Laramie.<sup>12</sup> The early ranches were small in comparison to the huge herds that would later emerge, evidently several hundred head at the most, although Majors claims that at one time his cattle numbered in the thousands, and they seem to have been constantly tended by the herders.

The Texas system changed that. Despite its position of prominence in the folklore of the West as an industry that spontaneously took off with the discovery of free-ranging longhorns after the Civil War, the grazing and production of cattle in Texas was a product of an evolution of three and a half centuries from the Greater Antilles to the several outposts on the mainland of North America that in turn contributed to the evolution of distinctive practices and cultures. The branch of the industry that took root in Texas was one of these discrete patterns, and historian / geographer Terry Jordan has traced that evolution and summarized the Texas system so:

The resultant Texas system of ranching clearly displayed the cultural inputs of both Carolina and Tamaulipas. From both sources came the essential trait of the Texas system: the subtropical practice of allowing cattle to care for themselves year-round in stationary pastures on the free range, without supplementary feeding or protection. Through such self-maintenance, the herds should not merely survive, but reach a grass-fattened maturity, ready for market. The humid subtropical prairies, canebrakes, and salt marshes of coastal Texas and Louisiana were even better suited to this careless system than had been the Andalusian marshes, yielding a still more profound neglect of the livestock.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Letter From Alex. Majors in Edinburgh, Scotland, to Cheyenne *Sun*, May 1, 1884. The letter is dated April 15, 1884.

<sup>12</sup> Typed recollection by John Hunton, dated March 1926, and Hunton, “Early Settlement of the Laramie River Valley,” located in Wyoming State Archives and in the Fort Laramie National Historic Site library files.

<sup>13</sup> Terry G. Jordan, *North American Cattle-Ranching Frontiers: Origins, Diffusion, and Differentiation* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 210.

This was more than just a system of raising cattle, though. As Jordan makes clear, there were definite cultural implications to the Texas system, borrowing as it did from both Mexican and Carolina sources. Of those borrowed elements, however, the Mexican influence was restricted largely to equestrian skills and equipment such as roping, the horned saddle, hemp or maguey ropes and some of the loanwords long associated with cattle herding, like lariat, corral, and remuda. This limitation Jordan traces to “a virulent and enduring prejudice against Mexicans” among Anglo-Texans in the early 1830s. Indeed, one element of that culture that was rejected was the Hispanic practice of raising sheep in conjunction with cattle, a practice Jordan says “was so resoundingly rejected by Anglo-Texan cattlemen that an anti-sheep bias became a hallmark of the Texas system.”<sup>14</sup>

In contrast, the Carolina influence was pronounced, and Jordan offers a lengthy list of components that were transferred by Carolina-origin coastal southern herders into Texas and that became critical components of the Texas system. These Carolina and Jamaica influences include:

- Vocabulary including dogie, pen, cowboy
- The use of “poor-white” herders
- “The custom of only two roundups, held in the spring and fall”
- The routine calf castration
- The practice of bulldogging (animal wrestling)
- Absentee entrepreneurs investing in open-range cattle operations

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<sup>14</sup> Jordan, *North American Cattle-Ranching Frontiers*, 210-211.

- Production for beef, rather than just hides and tallow
- Marketing by long overland drives “of grass-fattened cull steers”
- Brands based on block letters and numerals

One critical element that Jordan identified with the Texas system that comes from its Carolina origins would be important in the Powder River Basin: “the pervasive neglect of livestock in Texas, including the practice of stationary pasturing, without any attempt to reserve special winter ranges.”<sup>15</sup>

The transfer of this system from Texas (where in the 1860s it shifted from the coastal areas to the central and northern parts of the state) to Wyoming and the Powder River Basin was dramatic in its swiftness. The stories of the cattle drives north from Texas to the cow towns in Kansas from which they were shipped to market are the stuff of legend. They are also components of a huge migration. Again, Terry Jordan speaks not only to the larger context of this process but also to its significance: “In all, over five million Texas cattle were reportedly driven north between 1866 and 1884, involving the largest short-term geographical shift of domestic herd animals in the history of the world.”<sup>16</sup>

Nelson Story’s cattle drive of 1866 certainly represented an early part of this migration, and it went through the Powder River Basin and on into Montana, but there were others as well. Most of those in the early post-Civil War years that went to Wyoming went to the southeast corner of the territory. Between 1868 and 1871 about fifty ranches with almost ninety thousand head of cattle had been established in the area

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<sup>15</sup> Jordan, *North American Cattle-Ranching Frontiers*, 213.

bounded by the Union Pacific and the North Platte River. Many of these were small ranches, with as few as forty head of cattle, but some were huge with nine, twelve, thirteen, even fifteen thousand head. And the number was growing constantly. Dr. Silas Reed, who was first Surveyor General of Wyoming Territory, surveyed the cattle and sheep industry and concluded that the experience with livestock proved “that it will subsist through the winter upon the summer-cured grasses as they stand on the ground without shelter or other care than for the herdsmen to guard them from separating and wandering off,” and he concluded, “There is abundance of room for many times as much more.”<sup>17</sup>

The cattle increased and they began to expand, slowly, along the south bank of the North Platte and slowly, and gradually, across the river into the lands that were being vacated by the Sioux after 1877. Like the opening of a gate, however, thousands of cattle were driven into the Powder River Basin at the end of the 1870s and in the early 1880s. The *Cheyenne Sun* reported in 1880 that one observer “states that the stockmen in and about North Platte last fall began to seek larger ranges for their cattle and turned their eyes toward northeastern Wyoming.” The newspaper continued, “Last fall, several of the heavy cattlemen of the North Platte region commenced prospecting for new ranges on Crazy Woman, Goose Creek and other streams. Stern and Patterson have secured a range northwest of Freuen [Frewen brothers]; Barton and Dillon and Nichols, Beach and Co. ranges on the Powder River country. Barton and Dillon will put on 10,000 cattle, and

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<sup>16</sup> Jordan, *North American Cattle-Ranching Frontiers*, 222.

<sup>17</sup> Silas Reed, “Stock Raising on the Plains, 1870-1871,” *Annals of Wyoming*, 17 (January 1945), 56. This article is a reprint of the report of Reed, who was Surveyor General of Wyoming Territory at the time that these numbers were gathered.

other somewhat lesser numbers.”<sup>18</sup>

The cattle were clearly coming in larger numbers than could be accounted for only by the expansion of the ranches in southeast Wyoming. They were coming directly from Texas. The trails north from Texas had moved progressively westward in the post Civil War years from their initial destination point of Sedalia, Missouri, to a series of towns in Kansas long the railroad.<sup>19</sup> The Great Western Trail, also known as the Great West Trail, crossed the Red River separating modern western Oklahoma from Texas in the late 1870s and proceeded north across what was at that time Indian Territory, and into Kansas. At Dodge City, the trail divided, with one branch, known as the Texas Trail, heading northwest across the corner of Colorado and entering Wyoming Territory below Pine Bluffs and then moving north, across the North Platte and through the Powder River Basin and into Montana. The other branch went north from Dodge City to Ogallala, Nebraska and from there to the Black Hills, with one branch going to the west of the Black Hills and another going to the east. The branch that went west of the Black Hills, of course, fed the Powder River cattle industry and even rejoined the Texas Trail.

And within the northeastern corner of Wyoming, the cattle trails developed as something of a tree with multiple branches, each spawning more branches, until the cattle reached their final destinations. One of those branches, an offshoot of the Texas Trail,

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<sup>18</sup> *Cheyenne Sun*, March 6, 1880

<sup>19</sup> The number that actually reached Sedalia was small enough that it made little impact on the community; of course the number reaching northern destinations grew as the cattle industry grew and the western drives into and through Kansas represented significantly larger numbers. See the study of social change and economic transformation in Sedalia and the county in Missouri of which it was a part, Michael Cassity, *Defending a Way of Life: An American Community in the Nineteenth Century* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1989).

was described by one ranching family in the Lusk area, as passing “through Orin, this side of the main Platte crossing, almost straight north, passing through a break or opening in a tableland, forming two buttes, between which the road continued for about six miles to the Cheyenne river. This it crossed and followed the course of Black Thunder and took off to the Belle Fourche and so on into Montana.”<sup>20</sup>

It should be remembered, however, that the cattle trails were not permanent pathways along a specific, well-marked and defined route. They meandered and the cattle spread out, and weather and human development and interaction caused variations from one year to the next. Even herds that followed earlier herds on the same trail had to deviate significantly just because they needed fresh grass. One local study in the 1930s of cattle trails in the area, put it succinctly: “Cattle trails are more difficult to trace than emigrant and freight roads. They sought fixed market points in shifting ways, avoiding natural obstacles, of course, but mainly [were] led by the need of good grass and adequate water.”<sup>21</sup> Often the cattlemen of the Powder River Basin would themselves head down the trail to purchase the cattle before they arrived in Wyoming so that they would have first selection of cattle, a fact which makes it plain that not all cattle held specific destinations when they left Texas and that they were going to be marketed to eager buyers once they arrived. Those cattlemen in the area north of the North Platte seem especially to have traveled south to intercept the herds, as E. S. Osgood makes clear in his study of the cattle business: “Wyoming stockmen were down on the trail in 1879 buying up herds as they came in from the south, for their new ranges along the Powder,

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<sup>20</sup> “Cattle Trails in Northern and Eastern Wyoming,” anonymous typescript, quoting a Mrs. Wilson of Lusk, WPA Collections, File 1259.

Tongue, and upper Cheyenne.”<sup>22</sup>

But the cattle were not just driven by trail northward through Indian Territory and Kansas. The westward expansion of railroads by the late 1870s provided an alternative system. In 1879 Bud and Tobe Driskill, for example, began to ship their cattle in herds of three thousand by railroad from Texas to Orin Junction, at which point they herded them to their D Ranch at the western edge of the Black Hills.<sup>23</sup> This, in fact, seems to have become a common practice, and in 1936, M. de Ricqles, while writing in detail to describe the cattle business on the Keeline Ranch south of Gillette, wrote that the Texas cattle “would be bought and shipped north to Orin junction by the thousands.”<sup>24</sup> It appears that in that process the cattle would be shipped first to Cheyenne, and from there they would be transported to Orin Junction.

The ranches that purchased the immigrant cattle, then grazed and fattened them, and finally took them to market, immediately became a hot investment opportunity as the frontier West merged with the capitalist East. The popularity of cattle as an investment opportunity increased in the 1870s and by the end of the decade had attracted world-wide

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<sup>21</sup> “Cattle Trails in Northern and Eastern Wyoming,” 2.

<sup>22</sup> E. S. Osgood, *The Day of the Cattleman, a Study of the Northern Range, 1845-1890* (Minneapolis, The University of Minnesota Press, 1929), 86. See also, Gertrude Knollenberg, Tipperary, Wyoming, “History of the Wyoming Cattle Industry,” a research paper written for Colin B. Goodykoontz, University of Colorado, in the WPA Collections, File 407, 12. This paper was subsequently published in *The Cattleman*, March 1938.

<sup>23</sup> Bowden, *1916: Wyoming, Here We Come!* 40.

<sup>24</sup> The Douglas *Budget*, February 6, 1936, quotes de Ricqles, from an article that had been recently published in a recent issue of the Denver *Record-Stockman*, but its source was not identified.

attention and Wyoming, and especially the Powder River country with its late developing ranches, became the focus of many investors. In 1881 James S. Brisbin published his wide-selling (and reprinted) book, *The Beef Bonanza: or, How to Get Rich on the Plains*. As Lewis Atherton noted in his important study of the cattle industry, Brisbin's book is more valuable for reflecting the economic vehemence of the time than in stimulating it.<sup>25</sup> Certainly it reflected the acquisitive passions of the Gilded Age and it demonstrated a noticeable lack of prudent, careful assessment of any investment opportunity. Brisbin helped people estimate how big a fortune they would make and how easy it would be to reap a harvest in cash. In fact, one advertiser in Brisbin's book offered potential investors the path for such investments by encouraging them to put money into his own cattle corporation. David Sherwood, of Connecticut, modestly stated the prospectus for his company so: "The profits are enormous. There is no business like it in the world, and the whole secret of it is, it costs nothing to feed the cattle. They grow without eating your money. They literally raise themselves."<sup>26</sup> With logic like that, money poured into the Powder River cattle industry and huge ranches emerged on the plains with vast, sprawling ranches that could be pinpointed on a globe, ranches that held so many cattle that they could not be accurately counted, their owners often at distant points on the same globe.

The cattle boom was actually psychological as well as economic. It was a frenzy. The frenzy was sustained by the rapid payment of handsome dividends, although those

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<sup>25</sup> Lewis Atherton: *The Cattle Kings* (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1961), 25-26.

<sup>26</sup> See the reprint edition, James S. Brisbin, *The Beef Bonanza: or, How to Get Rich on the Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959).

dividends tended to come out of the capital investment itself, sometimes with the immediate sale of livestock that had been purchased in excess of the number announced. Other methods of calculation, not subject to rigorous examination, such as different systems for figuring costs and earnings, made the industry look even more profitable to those who had invested or were about to invest. The value of the herds themselves were sometimes inflated and the numbers of cattle owned were far from verifiable. And each year, from 1881 to 1884, the numbers of companies increased, as did their holdings.<sup>27</sup>

The corporations were sometimes chartered in Europe and sometimes in Wyoming, and sometimes in other states. Moreton and Richard Frewen were perhaps some of the most visible of the British investors. After establishing their 76 Ranch, and building their headquarters near Powder River, they increased their herds dramatically, and, actually, the Frewens were able to pay off half their initial investment by sales of the following year.<sup>28</sup> S. A. Sturgis owned and promoted the Bridle Bit and S&G Ranches which merged to form the Union Cattle Company, and he, according to other ranches in the Cheyenne River valley, “being an Englishman promoted most of the great undertaking through English banks and was in England some of the time himself.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> The closest study of the British investment in the cattle industry was done by W. Turrentine Jackson in two publications: Jackson, “British Interests in the Range Cattle Industry,” in Maurice Frink, ed., *When Grass Was King: Contributions to the Western Range Cattle Industry Study* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 1956), and Jackson, *The Enterprising Scot: Investors in the American West after 1873* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1968). Another pertinent study actually was done of ranching in Texas, though many of the same concepts apply to the industry as it was practiced broadly and with application to Wyoming. See Richard Graham, “The Investment Boom in British-Texan Cattle Companies,” *Business History Review*, XXXIV (1960), 421-445.

<sup>28</sup> Helena Huntington Smith, *The War on Powder River* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 9.

There were other British and Scottish firms too, but there were also U.S. corporations. The Powder River Live Stock Company (not to be confused with the Frewens' Powder River Cattle Company), was incorporated in Colorado with a capitalization of \$140,000 in 1882. The fortunes of that company can be traced, as the value of company stock increased to \$270,000 the next year and to \$400,000 in 1884.<sup>30</sup> In 1881 the Standard Cattle Company was organized by a group from Boston with its operations focused on the Belle Fourche country near Moorcroft.<sup>31</sup> All across the area between the Black Hills and the Big Horn Mountains, south to the North Platte River, people from far away owned cattle they had never seen, and those cattle grazed land owned by someone else. And on this basis, they were expecting to get rich.

The immediate result was the stocking of the ranges of the Powder River with vast numbers of cattle. Within just a few years there were thousands, then tens of thousands, and then even hundreds of thousands of cattle. There was a multitude of small ranches with small numbers of cattle, but the big ranches held the bulk of the cattle and these ranches were defined simply by the size of their herds. They were huge. The Frewen Ranch was almost incomprehensibly large and so were others. The 101 Ranch, owned by the Standard Cattle Company out of Boston, operated on the Belle Fourche northwest of Moorcroft and grazed about 35,000 head of cattle, and some estimates put the number for the 101 as high as 60,000 head of cattle, and they branded 11,000 calves

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<sup>29</sup> "Old Horse Ranches," WPA Collections, File 378.

<sup>30</sup> Agnes Wright Spring, "Powder River Live Stock Company," *Colorado Magazine*, 28 (January 1951), 32-36.

<sup>31</sup> Annette Heglar, "Wyoming Ranches" typescript, WPA Collections, File 394.

in 1885.<sup>32</sup> The Sturgis and Goodell Ranch, the Bridle Bit, was located in the Cheyenne River valley, and this ranch grazed a herd of 93,000 cattle at its peak.<sup>33</sup> The Driskills' D Ranch with its 30,000 head operated between the Belle Fourche and the Box Elder Creek that was located in Montana. The other two Driskills, Jesse Lincoln Driskill and Dallas Driskill developed their T Cross T Ranch with 36,000 head.<sup>34</sup>

It is impossible to know exactly how many cattle were in the Powder River Basin at the peak of the cattle boom in the 1880s, and there is reason to believe that some of the owners themselves did not have a clear idea of how many they owned, but it is doubtless a huge number. Helena Huntington Smith quotes foreman Ad Spaugh's estimate that there had been 400,000 head of cattle at the Cheyenne River roundup in 1884 and quotes Oscar H. Flagg's 1892 number of 181,000 cattle in the Powder River roundup also in 1884. Evidently the Frewens branded 9,000 calves that year, a number that would represent but a fraction of the total herd of 80,000 cattle.<sup>35</sup> None of these numbers is reliable, but they do indicate that the cattle were present in vast numbers north of the North Platte and between the Big Horn Mountains and the Black Hills.

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<sup>32</sup> Annette Heglar, "Wyoming Ranches;" Carl Plattner, "101 Cattle Ranch," handwritten manuscript including interview with Clint Wells, a long-time cattle rancher in Crook County, March 25, 1940, WPA Collections, File 1267.

<sup>33</sup> Olaf B. Kongsli, "The History of Grazing: First Herds and Ranches in Weston County and Area," typescript, WPA Collections, File 1358.

<sup>34</sup> Margaret Dillinger Bowden, *1916: Wyoming, Here We Come!* (Gillette, Wyoming: privately printed by James H. Bowden and Jessie Outka, 2002), 40-41.

<sup>35</sup> Smith, *The War on Powder River*, 17-18. See also the numbers provided by O. H. Flagg, "A Review of the Cattle Business in Johnson County, Wyoming since 1882 and the Causes that Led to the Recent Invasion," 7. This document is a typescript of a series of articles that originally appeared in the Buffalo *Bulletin* in 1892, and is found in the J. Elmer Brock Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

The territory these herds grazed was equally vast. Under the notion of “accustomed range,” the ranches would usually “claim,” if only by announcing, an area as their own range, but that claim was huge and would extend for miles and miles and into multiple drainages. In the Clearmont area, C. H. Grinnell became ranch manager for George Holdridge’s Wrench Ranch that in 1880 “ran herds on an immense range along the Tongue River, Goose, Badger, Dutch, and Hanging Woman Creeks.”<sup>36</sup> Tobe and Bud Driskill, at the same time, “claimed the range from the Belle Fourche River north to Box Elder in Montana and east from the Black Hills to the Little Powder River, a distance of about 60 miles by 30 miles.”<sup>37</sup> Of course these claims to range land were observed or respected only out of courtesy or fear, not as a legal holding.

By virtue of size alone the ranches operated according to the precepts of the Texas system and other elements confirmed the importation of that system along with the cattle. Perhaps central to the system was the notion, effectively articulated by the promoters of the fantasies of easy riches on the hoof, that the cattle “literally raise themselves.” They were, to use the terminology of the day, simply “turned loose” on the range. H. G. Williams, who had worked as a cowboy for the Swan Ranch and then moved to Johnson County and the Sheridan area, recalled that he was, in 1878, “in charge of the first bunch of cattle ever turned loose in northern Wyoming.”<sup>38</sup> T. N. Mathews, according to the

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<sup>36</sup> Clearmont Historical Group, *Backward Glance: Ulm, Leiter, Ucross, Clearmont, A Century of History* (Buffalo, Wyoming: The Office, n.d.), 7.

<sup>37</sup> Bowden, *1916: Wyoming, Here We Come!* 40.

<sup>38</sup> Ida McPherran transcript of “Tales of Other Days: H. G. Williams of Tacoma a Real Wyoming Pioneer,” taken from *Sheridan Post*, October 18, 1910; typescript is in WPA Collections, File 394.

account by Nora Neely of the T7 ranch in southern Campbell County, trailed his cattle from Texas in 1881, and then “The cattle were turned loose on the Belle Fourche, somewhere near Thunder Basin.” Likewise, another ranch, the Six-Half Circle, introduced its cattle on Bacon Creek in 1881. “They turned their cattle loose that spring and did not see them again all winter.”<sup>39</sup> The story of the release of the cattle to range broadly on the plains is a familiar one and forms a recurring pattern. M. de Ricqles recalled that “it was steer country and thousands upon thousands of Texas, Arizona and New Mexico 2-year-old steers were turned loose there to run (out side) for two or more years and were marketed largely at Chicago as fat range cattle.”<sup>40</sup> And they would range broadly. One person recalled that the 101 ranch near Moorcroft had its cattle spread all over the basin, “and roundup crews frequently found their stock scattered as far as from Edgemont, South Dakota to Sheridan, Wyoming.”<sup>41</sup>

And that open range and untended grazing was the essence of the Texas system. It was an unfenced pasture that reached far beyond the curvature of the earth, bounded only by mountains and rivers. It was even a system of land use that operated independently of the niceties of land ownership. Often the ranchers would file on property where they would build their ranch headquarters, and they would employ various means to enlarge their deeded property. Tobe Driskill proved up on his original claim, and that claim was enlarged by other members of the family filing on adjacent parcels. Even so, the land that the Driskills used, and effectively claimed for their cattle, a rectangle of sixty miles by thirty miles, far exceeded the land they actually owned. And

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<sup>39</sup> Nora Neely, “The T7 and Other ranches,” typescript, WPA Collections, File 1194.

<sup>40</sup> Douglas *Budget*, February 6, 1936.

this was the common practice, and fences were, it sometimes seemed, not to be found. H. G. Williams had worked as a cowboy on the Swan Ranch near Chugwater and then moved north, to the Crazy Woman area not far from Fort McKinney in 1878 and 1879, where the ranch sold beef to the fort, and he recalled that “when I came to Wyoming there was not a fence from the North Platte to as far north as you would want to go . . . The west was then an open country all the way through, with here and there an occasional ranch.”<sup>42</sup> A. P. Dow, an early rancher and farmer north of Sheridan recalled that “Men planned on making this territory the greatest cattle haven in the world. There were to be no fences, the cattle were to be known by their brand, only, and the country with its unfenced limits, was to be known as ‘the Cattle Country—that and nothing more.’”<sup>43</sup> Future governor and senator John B. Kendrick, who first came up the trail with cattle from Texas in 1879 and who returned to Wyoming permanently in 1884, described the system thus:

The first occupation of the northern ranges was made wholly upon government domain and the grazing of the territory proceeded for almost a quarter of a century on what was known as free grass. The occupation of the territory was gradually extended, each ranch moving farther beyond the limits where there had previously been, for untold centuries, nothing in the way of livestock, with wild game and roving bands of Indians the only inhabitants. . . .<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Bowden, *1916: Wyoming, Here We Come!* 37.

<sup>42</sup> *Sheridan Post*, October 18, 1910.

<sup>43</sup> Untitled typed statement by A. P. Dow, as recorded by Ida McPherrren, probably 1941, in WPA Collections, File 1469.

<sup>44</sup> Kendrick was quoted, without identifying the source, in Frederic S. Hultz, “Wyoming Livestock Production,” typed manuscript in WPA Collections, File 377. Hultz was professor of animal husbandry at the University of Wyoming at the time that he prepared this in 1937, and is almost certain to have published this paper in one of the professional academic or livestock production journals.

The ranch infrastructure for the management of these cattle was but slight; their management came in the field and it came at the hallmark institution of the Texas system, the roundup. The roundups themselves came twice a year, the spring roundup that focused especially on the branding of calves and the fall roundup, the beef roundup, for the separation and shipping of steers ready for market, although at both times calves would be separated according to their owners, as determined by the brand of the cow to which the calf was attached, and branded.

This was not a casual affair. Organized by the Wyoming Stock Growers Association, the territory was divided into districts and a foreman would be named for each district; that foreman, acting as a quasi-legal regulator, would make the decisions and settle the disputes and finally give permission for the various ranchers to take their cattle away. The district boundaries for each roundup were published in the local press. For the 1884 spring and fall roundups, for example, the state was divided into thirty-one districts defined by drainages and other natural features, including these:

District 14:

Commence at the mouth of Sand Creek, June 1<sup>st</sup> Work up Cheyenne river, Horsehead, Alum Springs, Cottonwood, Robber's Roost, Alkali and the Cheyenne river to the old AU7 ranch and down Beaver Creek. Fall round-up to commence October 15. Tom Trawcek, foreman, J. Howard Ford, assistant foreman.

District No. 15

Commence May 15<sup>th</sup> at head of Sages Creek; thence to O W ranch, down Old Woman to mouth; thence up Lance Creek to head; thence to head of Harney Creek, down Harney Creek to mouth, working Twenty Mile; thence across to Walker Creek; work to Bea. Sage Creek, Old Woman Creek, up Lance Creek to head; Harney Creek, to beaver dams on Lightning Creek; thence to Cow Creek; thence down Snyder Creek to mouth; thence up Lodge Pole to head; thence down Black Thunder to Cheyenne river; thence up Cheyenne river to mouth of Antelope and

tributaries to head; thence down Cheyenne river, working it and tributaries to mouth of Antelope; then work Dry Creek, Box Creek and head of Lightning Creek. Fall round-up to commence October 15<sup>th</sup>. A. A. Spaugh, Foreman; Curtis Spaugh, assistant Foreman, to mouth of Black Thunder. Lee Moore, Foreman; J. B. Moore, assistant foreman, from the mouth of Black Thunder to the end of round-up.

District No. 16:

Begin work on May 10<sup>th</sup> at Matthews' ranch on the Belle Fourche; thence up the Belle Fourche to Pumpkin Buttes; thence down Cavayo and down the Belle Fourche and tributaries to Devil's Tower, thence up Donkey Creek; thence to head of Little Powder; thence down Wild Cat to mouth of Horse Creek, working Little Powder and Horse Creek; thence work Cotton and down Little Powder, working its tributaries to its mouth. Fall round-up to begin October 1<sup>st</sup>. John Winterling foreman, Clinton Graham, assistant foreman."

District No. 17.

The Tongue river round-up will meet at Frank Owen's ranch on Smith Creek, and will commence work on Monday, the 19<sup>th</sup> of May. It will work down the north side of Tongue river and all its tributaries on the north side to the mouth of Hanging Woman; thence up Hanging Woman to its head; thence down Badger Creek to its mouth including Deer Creek; thence up the south side of Tongue river to the mountains, including Wolf, Soldier, Little and Big Goose Creeks; thence down Meade Creek and Prairie Dog; thence up Dutch Creek and its tributaries to the divide; thence move to Powder River, working from Montana line to mouth of Clear Creek to form a junction with Crazy Woman round-up; thence both round-ups will work Clear Creek and Piney to their heads. Fall round-up to commence on October 1<sup>st</sup>. H. G. Williams, foreman; Charles Carter assistant foreman.

District No. 18.

The Powder river round-up will meet at the head of the North Fork of Powder River and will commence work on the 26<sup>th</sup> of May. It will work on then down the north fork of Powder and up middle fork to Peter's and Alston's ranch; thence up Buffalo creek and through the pastures to Cedar mountain; then the round-up will wait at the head of south fork for two days for the wagon from round-up No. 6; thence down South Fork of Powder river to its mouth; thence down Powder river to the mouth of Salt creek; thence up Salt creek to its head; thence to the head of Meadow Creek, working it and passing to the head of Dry Fork of Powder river; thence down Dry Fork to its mouth; thence down Powder River to the mouth of Crazy Woman, working all tributaries of said streams. Fall round-up to begin October 5<sup>th</sup>. O. Morgareidge, foreman; P. DuFran, assistant foreman.

## District No. 19

The Crazy Woman round-up will meet at the head of the south fork of Crazy Woman and will commence work on the 26<sup>th</sup> day of Mar. It will work down the south fork to the mouth of Beaver Creek; thence to the Nine Mile, working; thence to south fork and down to middle fork; thence down middle fork to Smith's fence; thence up north fork of Crazy Woman; thence to Kelly Creek and from Kelly Creek to Six Mile ranch; thence to Red Hills corral, and from there to Buffalo Wallows; thence to the crossing on Crazy Woman and down Crazy Woman to its mouth; thence down Powder River to the mouth of Clear Creek; will form a junction there with the northern round-up and will work Clear Creek, Piney, and other tributaries as one round-up. Fall round-up to begin October 5<sup>th</sup>. Henry Clay Covington, foreman; J. E. Graub, assistant.

Given the amount of territory covered and the number of cattle involved, the roundups could easily last two or three months. Rather than a permanent, central location, the roundup camps would be on the move, starting high in the drainages and working their way down, so evidence of these big roundups could be scattered over a broad area. Oscar Flagg recalled the roundup of 1883 in which he and others gathered on Crazy Woman Creek. He said that the roundup consisted of fourteen hundred head of horses, four hundred men and twenty-seven wagons. "For two miles along the river the wagons were camped, in order to afford room for the different bunches of horses to graze without becoming mixed."<sup>45</sup> Edward Burnett, however, in later years recalled one particular prize camping area used by the roundups, and that site had been used previously by General Crook in June 1876. At that site, Burnett recalled that "Old wagon tires and camp kettles were still lying about."<sup>46</sup> A clue as to the kind of location sought

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<sup>45</sup> Flagg, "A Review of the Cattle Business in Johnson County, Wyoming since 1882 and the Causes that Led to the Recent Invasion," 2.

<sup>46</sup> Edward Burnett, untitled article, *Sheridan Press*, May 16, 1927, copied in typescript,

out for the roundup camps was offered by Thomas Richardson who had been a cowboy with the Union Cattle Company: “When the roundup camps moved, it was a wonderful sight. The great herds of cattle and cavvys of horses spread out over the prairie for miles. The roundup cooks jumped in their wagons and raced each other for the best camping



Cattle roundup near Merino (now Upton). This mealtime photograph, evidently taken in September 1896, could have been taken in earlier years too, although the open range system of ranching and roundups would not last far into the twentieth century. Note the teepees or pyramid tents used by the cowboys. Photo: Wyoming Stock Growers Association Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie.

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grounds. They wanted to get under trees near to the water as possible.”<sup>47</sup>

If the roundup suggests a tight system of organization with its careful demarcation of drainages and directions and identifying the foremen and his assistants, this was probably the only part of the cattle boom open range ranching operation where discipline and organization prevailed. The cattle ranged broadly, traveling over the entire countryside, without monitoring during the winter. The tallies were estimates and sometimes could hardly be called that. The sometimes-used system of keeping count of the cattle on the ledgers only, providing what was called a “book count,” was open to gross miscalculation or even misrepresentation. Indeed, some sales and purchases of cattle were completely transacted without the parties counting the heads of the cattle, not to mention coming to agreement on the actual headcount. As one study of the system concludes, “Cattle were bought sight-unseen and on the “book-count” of the seller. The book-count was a poor system of estimate. If so many cows under a certain brand had been turned on the range, it was assumed they had remained there without death loss and that each had produced a calf.”<sup>48</sup> Surely it was a rare case, but it did happen, that when cattle were sold, especially to an unsuspecting buyer, someone perhaps new to the cattle business, maybe even new to the United States, cattle would be sold repeatedly. While Moreton Frewen protested against the rumors that he had purchased Tim Foley’s herd of cattle twice—they having been taken around a hill and then driven back into the ranch—O. P. Hanna recalled that the Frewens “were upright honest men but very inexperienced.

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<sup>47</sup> “The Life Notes of Thomas Richardson: Cowboy Days with the Old Union Cattle Company,” typescript in WPA Collections, File 394. It should be noted that the term Richardson used to indicate the strings of horses that were used to work the cattle, cavvys, though not so often used as the similar term, remuda, was straight from the Texas system; Spanish in its origins before corrupted, the cavvyyard was once a common term on the roundup in Texas. See Jordan, *North American Cattle-Ranching Frontiers*, 233.

They took up land and bought cattle. The cowboys would bring a bunch of cattle, sell them to Frewen Bros., turn them out in the hills, drive in the same cattle and sell them again.”<sup>49</sup>

The roundup does reveal, however, an element that was not necessarily a part of the Texas system, and that even took that system further in its development. This was the relationship of the ranchers, and the cattle industry, to the government. While the complaint of government interference in the economy is a familiar one, and even an honored and important principle in many quarters, and is frequently voiced in Wyoming where the spirit of frontier individualism is a central part of the state’s heritage, the largest cattle ranchers took quite the opposite stance and sought active involvement of the state government in their affairs, and vice versa. Historian W. Turrentine Jackson analyzed the relationship between the Wyoming Stock Growers Association and the government of Wyoming and concluded that the WSGA exercised such influence over the territorial legislature and the territorial governor (appointed by the President), that “the organization was generally considered the *de facto* territorial government.”<sup>50</sup> The legislature passed and the governor signed legislation, for example, that required county commissioners to appoint detectives to investigate violation of the laws governing branding and ownership of cattle, and theft too, but the detectives had to be appointed

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<sup>48</sup> Hultz, “Wyoming Livestock Production,” 5.

<sup>49</sup> Sheridan *Press*, May 16, 1937, typescript in WPA collections, File 405.

<sup>50</sup> W. Turrentine Jackson, “The Wyoming Stock Growers’ Association Political Power in Wyoming Territory 1873-1890,” *Annals of Wyoming*, 20 (January 1948), 62. The same article had been published previously in the national professional history journal, *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, vol. 33.

from a list of people approved by the cattle organization in that county.<sup>51</sup>

The same was true in the appointment of livestock veterinarians in the counties who was to investigate infectious livestock diseases. Having already secured measures that permitted its organization to govern the roundups, in 1884 the WSGA secured a measure that prohibited branding of calves on the range before the commencement of the general roundup, which it controlled. This effectively meant that an individual could not brand his or her own cattle until the organization had a chance to review, and possibly also brand, the calves.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, the same law provided that all mavericks were to be branded by the association and then sold at auction to the highest bidder, with the association receiving the revenue. Plus, the law also spelled out membership requirements for the WSGA, and the total package was such, to quote Professor Jackson, that the organization “was thus to become a quasi-official institution with legal control over the stock industry and the power to enforce its will.”

The point is not that this activity was illegal, for clearly it was not; the laws explicitly sanctioned the influence of the WSGA. And it is not that the ranchers of the WSGA can be singled out for special attention, for the railroad on both the state and national level certainly exercised as much influence (and the conflict between the two provides a classic example of the operation of producer-oriented interest group political influence). The point is rather that the activities of the WSGA, which included powerful members from the Powder River Basin, in seeking and securing the heavy hand of government in the cattle industry, actually laid an important precedent for future

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<sup>51</sup> Jackson, “Wyoming Stock Growers’ Association,” 67.

instances in which individuals and other parts of society sought protection by the same government.

The system of ranching on the open range was a system. It was, obviously, a system of production, but it was more than that. It was organized. It had its hierarchy, its institutions, its customs, and its enforcement mechanism. And it was not just an economic system but also a political system, even a social system, in which relationships between those within the ranching industry had defined relationships, and these extended to and impacted people outside the system as well. The “lords” and the “barons” were conspicuous in this system and in certain ways it met their needs well, but it was the system itself as well as the individuals, that laid claim to the land and wanted to define the system of agriculture that used it.

*iii. Diversity and Division in the Cattle Kingdom*

The presence of the cattle kings and the small ranchers and farmers in the same area amounted to a formula that generated tension between the aspirations of a Jeffersonian dream alongside expectations of kings of the range, and that tension had an explosive potential. In fact, one of the consequences of this power and the exercise of that power in the interest of the largest cattle ranches was the alienation of other ranchers and the deepening of social tensions. Indeed, much of the interest and focus of the WSGA was directed at the small ranchers who were a thorn in the side of the corporate

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<sup>52</sup> Jackson, “Wyoming Stock Growers’ Association,” 69-70.

ranches. By treating small ranchers as the equivalent of rustlers, they lost some of the legitimacy that could potentially have come to the group as a defender of a broader public interest. By their heavy-handed treatment of others in the cattle industry and by regarding them as less than legitimate practitioners of their common trade, the WSGA actually weakened them all. What this suggests is that the many cattle ranchers in the Powder River Basin were not united as a cohesive group. In fact the class and social divisions were enormous.

Those divisions cut multiple ways. The corporations that owned ranches from headquarters in distant places, whether it was Connecticut, London, Colorado Springs, Missouri or elsewhere, had little in common with the ranchers who filed on claims and built up their holdings through sweat equity, and resentments emerged. The local ill will toward those outside operations may have been based in prejudice for anything not local, but a certain amount of it was based on the experience—and lack thereof—on the part of the outsiders. At the T7 Ranch in modern southern Campbell County, the prevailing sentiment was summed up in these words: “Most of the big outfits, of that time, were owned by Eastern or English companies. Their managers, sent out from the East, hardly knew a cow from a buffalo. The foremen would put them to wrangling horses or at some such work where they would be out of the way. A great many of them were remittance men.”<sup>53</sup> The remittance men, sons of nobility exiled by their families to the United States where they would be out of *their* way, attracted some of the most pointed resentment and the stories of English “lords” encountering the proud but rough ranch hands are legion. Oscar H. “Jack” Flagg recalled the presence of people he called “barons” at a roundup,

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<sup>53</sup> Neely, “The T7 and Other Ranches,” 2.

where “Englishmen in knee breeches, accompanied by their general managers, buggy bosses and valets, rode around with an air of lordliness which was ridiculous.”<sup>54</sup> Ed Salisbury, who had been a cook on various roundups, related a story of his own experience with one such “lord.”

I was cook for an outfit that was owned by the sons of an English lord. Their foreman was an American and was under contract to the two Britishers for a term of three years. One day the foreman was talking to me when the Englishmen rode up and dismounted. I went on about my work because I knew that the Englishmen had come to talk to the foreman, but I was in hearing distance and I heard one of the Britons say to the foreman, “You will have to bow when you meet us.”

The foreman replied, “I don’t bow to any man.”

“But we are the sons of English lords.”

“Well, sons of lords and sons of bitches are all the same in this country.”

The Englishmen paid him three years’ salary and fired him.<sup>55</sup>

While there was some amount of cultural diversity on the plains, that diversity was often accompanied by acrimony and tension. How much ethnic diversity actually existed is hard to gauge. The English and Scots probably were the largest minority in this otherwise native-born American industry in the 1880s. There may have been some from Texas who were of Hispanic ancestry, and perhaps even from Mexico too, but their numbers were apparently small. Neri Wood rode as a cowboy for the Durbin Brothers and then for Willis Spear, in Sheridan County. He recalled that “Most of the cowboys who came up from Texas were just plain American citizens but the Texas cowboy had his origin in the day when Texas was part of Mexico and originally of Spanish descent. I

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<sup>54</sup> Flagg, “A Review of the Cattle Business in Johnson County,” 6.

<sup>55</sup> Edward Burnett, typed transcript of article in *Sheridan Press*, May 16, 1927.

worked from 1875 to 1920 as a cowboy but I met up with a very small percentage of cowboys of Mexican or Spanish extraction. I would say that the cowboy that came to Wyoming from Texas was just an ordinary Texas cowpoke who had learned how to handle cattle from Mexican-Spanish cousins south of the Rio Grande.”<sup>56</sup> What is significant here is that even without the substantial presence of a Hispanic population on the ranches, their influence remained noticeable, and appreciable, in the Texas system of ranching.

And on at least one occasion some of the strands of the cultural rivers flowing into the Powder River Basin came together. Carol Smith was in the party of surveyors in early Johnson County and he recalled an incident, which provided an elaborate, though grisly, symbolism of the changes underway and suggested the cultural contours of the time and place. He recalled that in the summer of 1882 he was on the 76 Ranch of the Frewens.

In those early days the buffalo bulls were in the habit of invading the herds of cattle which had recently been turned loose upon the open range in the Powder River area. Needless to say these buffalo bulls caused a great deal of annoyance in the herds and a great deal of worry to the cattle owners. A number of English sportsmen and hunters were usually to be found at the “76” ranch. During the previous year they had shipped in a small Mexican fighting bull and they had equipped its horns with sharp, steel spikes. As a matter of sport as well as of necessity this little bull was turned loose whenever a buffalo bull came into sight on the “76” range. . . . I saw an encounter between this Mexican bull and a huge buffalo bull. The Mexican animal was out-weighted about two pounds to one but he had science. He had mastered the art of side-stepping and other maneuvers which we see in the prize-ring. The buffalo bull sought to over-power his small antagonist but without avail. The little animal ducked and side-stepped and by means of the steel bayonets on his horns in a very short time disemboweled the buffalo bull and the fight was at an

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<sup>56</sup> Ida McPherran, “History of Grazing: Early Ranches in Northern Wyoming,” typed transcript, WPA Collections, File 394.

end.<sup>57</sup>

There, in Johnson County, not far from Powder River, where Native Americans had been supreme a decade earlier, British nobility and other English sportsmen watched a Mexican bull fight a bison bull in its home range where Texas cattle now grazed on a ranch worked by Texan and other cowboys.

The greatest tensions in the ranches, however, seem to have been rooted in class divisions more than ethnicity in the 1880s. The disparity between the fortunes of the huge ranches and the small ranches was always evident and there were constant reminders. There was the tension between the big ranchers and the small ranchers over grazing land, branding, inspections, and especially over ownership of mavericks, and there seems to have been little love lost on either part when they came into contact. It seems that the largest ranchers were always suspicious of their neighbors with small herds who were in a prime position to increase their herds by subtracting them from their neighbors who had so many they could not count them anyway. Soon the WSGA proposed that no person who actually owned cattle of his own be employed as a cowboy on a ranch. Oscar Flagg recalled his own experience: "I was blackballed and not allowed to work for any of the outfits because I had bought cattle and taken up government land."<sup>58</sup> In a country where people put together jobs and incomes as best they could, this had a chilling effect on the small rancher and certainly did nothing to increase the amity between the classes.

There was also the tension between the ranchers and the cowboys they did not

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<sup>57</sup> Sheridan *Press*, May 16, 1937; a typescript of this newspaper article, untitled, can be found in McPherran, "History of Grazing: Early Ranches in Northern Wyoming," 48.

blackball. Part of this had to do with the conditions of employment. The cowboys were useful during times of roundup, and those roundups could last for months, and the cowboy could often keep busy during the summer months, and even a little into the fall. But when the ranches turned loose their cattle to forage for themselves after the fall roundup, they also turned loose their cowboys to do the same. Thomas Richardson worked as a cowboy for the Union Cattle Company. He had dreamed of being a cowboy, but the reality proved a little different from the romance he had attached to it. Winter brought out the stark contours of that reality. As he said, “When we returned to headquarters, the fall work being about over, I called for my time, only the oldest hands were kept on thru the winter.” He was not one of the oldest hands. He was like the other cowboys. Richardson said that when the cowboy “drew his time in the fall, he usually hit for the nearest town and gambled away his money in one night. I have heard many a one tell what a tough time he had to get thru the winter, often living on one meal a day, or less and picking up a few odd chores to eke out an existence.” In the case of Richardson, the conclusion was clear: “after two years on the roundups, I decided that I had enough and I wanted to join a surveying crew on the new line that was going thru.”<sup>59</sup>

Moreover, relations with the employers were sometimes tense, the owner looking upon his own employees not as colleagues in a common endeavor, or with the respect due for someone who often knew the trade better than the boss himself, but as a potential enemy who might steal away cattle at the first opportunity. It did not help that the ranch owner would often use his employees to file “dummy” claims on land, usually choice

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<sup>58</sup> Flagg, “A Review of the Cattle Business in Johnson County,” 15.

<sup>59</sup> “The Life Notes of Thomas Richardson: Cowboy Days with the Old Union Cattle

land with live water, so that the land could be handed over to the owner once patented. The problem was that under some of the land laws, only one filing would be possible for an individual; the cowboy's dream of independence had been bargained away for a mess of pottage.

The real sign of the differences in classes, however, came in the way they lived. The various buildings and other features associated with the ranches of the early 1880s provide testimony to those differences, although in the vast majority of cases they no longer exist. In some instances, however, we have descriptions of them either during the time of their use in this cattle boom or as they were seen by later generations. Most ranches, of course, were very modest structurally. This is itself a reflection of the humble circumstances of most of the ranchers, people for whom the possibility of free land was an important factor in choosing the location. It is also a reflection of the fact that they were starting from scratch, not acquiring existing structures and then adding on. Finally, the lack of structures at the ranches derives from the nature of the Texas system of ranching. As John B. Kendrick said, "Necessarily the method of ranching during the period of free grass was widely different from that of today. There was almost an entire absence of any kind of enclosures, and the equipment of the largest ranches was limited, as a rule, to cabins built of logs and to corrals scattered here and there over the range for convenience of breeding. The investment in such improvements was limited, even in the largest scale of ranch operations, to a few hundreds of dollars."<sup>60</sup>

Many of the first dwellings seem to have sprung from the earth, almost literally.

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Company," WPA Collections, File 394.

<sup>60</sup> Kendrick quoted in Hultz, "Wyoming Livestock Production."

Sod was the immediately available building material and the price was right while the construction was performed by the rancher. John Hunton, who had been a trader at Fort Laramie, built a sod house on Box Elder Creek in future Converse County probably in 1877, and this structure, like the vast majority of its contemporaries would have gone unrecorded and unremarked had the sod house not ultimately become the property of J. M. Carey, and the sod house was known as having been in the location of the bunkhouse at Careyhurst.<sup>61</sup> In the same category of buildings would be the dugouts, a group which likewise is often undocumented. Often the structures fell somewhere between, being partially recessed into a hillock with the sod removed in bricks to build the remainder of the walls, or using stone or logs for those walls. On the 101 Ranch, John Winterling had started his operation with a dugout on Little Powder River in 1882.<sup>62</sup>

More enduring were the ranches that used log construction. That also, however, included a broad range of properties, some tiny and unassuming and others almost palatial in size and ornamentation. In the 1930s an unidentified worker in the WPA

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<sup>61</sup> In his diaries, Hunton himself made no mention of the building of this dwelling, and sometimes referred to his "Box Elder Ranch." L. G. (Pat) Flannery, ed., *John Hunton's Diary, Vol. II, 1876-1877* (Lingle, Wyoming: Guide-Review, 1958), 210. Bill Hooker once worked as a bullwhacker for Hunton and had occasion to visit Hunton's various properties including the Box Elder Ranch and also Hunton's cabin on LaPrele Creek, a ranch that Hunton referred to as his "Milk Ranch," and Hooker describes visiting some of these dwellings many years later in 1921 in his memoir, William Francis Hooker, *The Bullwhacker: Adventures of a Frontier Freighter* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988; reprint of the 1988 World Book Company edition), 46-47. See also, for the connection with Careyhurst, Mary A. Skelton, "The First Garden," handwritten manuscript, April 20, 1939, in WPA Collections, File 1386.

<sup>62</sup> Jesse E. Spielman delivered a paper to the Campbell County Historical Society on June 1, 1954 which was extensively quoted in the *Gillette News-Record*, May 20, 1963; evidently Spielman had reviewed survey record field notes which "reveal a dugout on the Little Powder River in 1882 owned by John Winterling of the 101."

Writer's Project compiled information on some early dwellings of people loosely termed "homesteaders" in Johnson County and concluded that this particular group had been built around 1880, and generally were made, "of round logs of about 12 inches in diameter," and "were held together by notching the corners, then fastened with spikes or wood pins." The roof tended to be composed of sod "about 8 inches thick, the two that is left in the county today has sage brush on roof, which seems to grows as good as though it was on the prairie." And "rock fire places was built for heat and small cook stoves for cooking."<sup>63</sup> Probably the majority of the ranch buildings were constructed of logs and they tended, in these early years, to be small. For example, Daniel Hilman's D Bar H Ranch near Sheridan was established in 1881 and in 1883 Hilman and his wife moved into "a two-room log house," that was expanded only ten years later.<sup>64</sup>

Rock was an important building material and it is important to note that there were other structures in addition to the dwelling itself that were critical parts of the ranch. Consider the Ship Wheel Ranch southwest of Devil's Tower on the Belle Fourche. The Ship Wheel was a substantial operation with much of its construction using logs. Interestingly, however, the most enduring part of the Ship Wheel was the well, a feature that is too often neglected since it is so frequently out of sight, is eminently utilitarian, and is often deteriorated or filled. Yet the well was one of the first parts of the construction of any ranch. In the 1930s one person visited the remains of the Ship Wheel and reported this:

This well was dug back in 81 or 82 and now the walls are as even

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<sup>63</sup> "Homesteaders Cabins" unsigned, handwritten manuscript, WPA Collections, File 1258.

<sup>64</sup> "St. Louis Man Buys Famous Hilman Ranch," *Sheridan Press*, January 16, 1938.

and curved with not a stone missing, as when the cowboys tilted the old wooden bucket and drank from the overflowing rim; then poured the dripping contents into the trough for his tired horse. The pitch pine timbers making an eight foot square around the top of the well were held together by rusty square nails in the mitered corners. These timbers were much decayed in places but not broken. The well had no water and is not very deep. Nearby are the mounds of rock that had been the foundation for the rock chimneys that stood at each end of the old log house, and a little farther away was a hole, all that remained of the old cellar.<sup>65</sup>

The assortment of related buildings on the ranches may have been larger than



OW Ranch, near Hat Creek, 1883, showing bunkhouse. Note construction features, including hewed logs and piece-sur-piece joining of logs. Note also musical instruments and boxers. Photo: Wyoming Stock Growers Association Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie.

<sup>65</sup> Annette Heglar, "Wyoming Ranches," WPA Collections, File 394.

Senator Kendrick recalled, at least in some instances. Obviously the 76 Ranch had various service buildings near the castle, even if the bunkhouse was placed at safe

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Remington & Armstrong's Ranch on Powder River below Clear Creek, Wyoming Territory. An L-shaped structure, the building was possibly added onto shortly after it was first constructed. Photo: Oscar Pfeiffer Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie.

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remove. John Winterling established his 101 Ranch near (future) Moorcroft in 1881 and he erected a complex of buildings that survived into the end of the twentieth century, and perhaps still can be seen. One account in 2002 suggests that the ranch has survived to the present and indicated that the original U shape configuration of the ranch buildings can still be discerned. That description, which also draws upon childhood memories from the

vicinity, itemizes the arrangement and use of each building: “At the top of the U was a large, one-story house. To the right of the house were an arsenal, a commissary and a bunkhouse. Across the yard were the barn, machine shed, blacksmith shop and hen house.”<sup>66</sup> The ranch buildings had obvious utilitarian functions, but it is worth noticing that few of the ranches of the early 1880s practiced extensive hay storage. Barns were common, but whether they were equipped to store large amounts of hay is seldom specified, although in at least one instance a major hay barn was constructed, and this was probably true in a few other cases as well. Providing feed for the cattle in the winter was not an essential element of the ranching kingdom that emerged in the Powder River Basin.

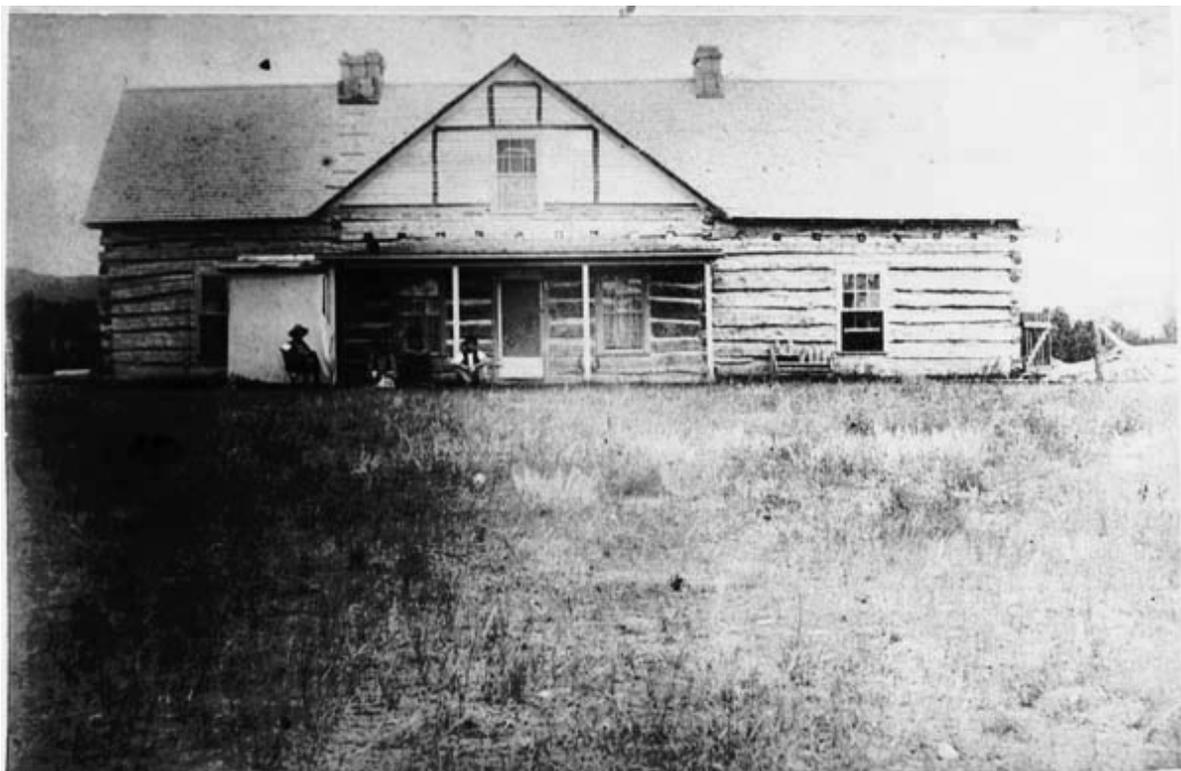
The ranches showed some diversity and they were not limited to simple log buildings. And when they were, they were often altered within a few years to make them more comfortable. But some started out grand. The showcase of them all in the earliest years was probably the Frewen Brothers Ranch, or as it was also known, the Powder River Cattle Company, and also as the 76 Ranch. It was even known as Frewen Castle.<sup>67</sup> If the inquirer is expecting to find a castle like in the moors of Scotland or on the banks of the Thames, disappointment is sure to follow. This was a castle, though, relative to the other domiciles that were erected in the area.

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<sup>66</sup> Bowden, *1916: Wyoming, Here We Come!* 37.

<sup>67</sup> Technically, the ranch had previously been known as the Big Horn Rancho Company, owned by Richard and Moreton Frewen, until 1882 when it was reorganized as the Powder River Cattle Company, Ltd. See the Moreton Frewen Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie.

The main house at Frewen Castle was almost always described as a two-story log building, although photographs indicate that it was probably a story and a half. It appears to have been a cross-gabled structure, made of cottonwood logs in the first story and with truss-style infill in the gables. The downstairs had five large rooms including a large kitchen and an equally large dining room, two bedrooms, and another office that Charles Schultz, who described the building in the 1930s, speculated was an office or library. The upstairs included three bedrooms, one serving as the cook's quarters. Fireplaces were located in each room and the dining room, which measured thirty by forty feet, appears to have doubled as a ballroom for the elegant socials that were held there. It even



Frewen Castle. Photo: Moreton Frewen Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

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had a balcony at one end where the musicians would play. Although the building's

elevations were constructed of cottonwood logs, up to the eaves and gables, the interior included hardwood floors and a rosewood stairway that had been imported from England and that was topped with an imported walnut railing. This was not the only building at the ranch, and there appear to have been some other, unidentified service buildings nearby. But Schultz makes clear one other related structure was present, and the relationship of that building to the main building cluster was also clear: “The bunk house was near the river. Two men are still living in Johnson County who rode for this outfit and lived at the bunk house.”<sup>68</sup>

As is often the case, the architectural significance of the building offers only a partial understanding of the significance of the Frewen Castle and other ranch buildings that would follow in the future. The greater significance is the social history of the building, or conversely, what it tells about the social history of the area. The Frewens entertained at this ranch both more frequently and on a scale vastly different from the other ranchers and cowboys—and farmers—in the Powder River Basin. Frequent guests came from England, and the Frewens would employ locals to guide them and their guests on hunts, like the bear hunt that they hired O. P. Hanna to take them on in July 1880.<sup>69</sup> As with other visitors coming into the area, these people would often travel the Union Pacific to Rock River, at which point they would head north to the Powder River country. In addition, that road carried significant freight to the Frewen Castle. Whether rumor or fact, there is reason to believe Charles Schultz’s statement that “Some people say that a

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<sup>68</sup> Charles Schultz, “The 76 Castle” *Wyoming Educational Bulletin* (April 1934), 4.

<sup>69</sup> O. P. Hanna, quoted in Ida McPherrren, “History of Grazing,” typescript, November 15-28, 1940 in WPA Collections, File 394; McPherrren cites an untitled article in *Sheridan Press*, May 16, 1937.

great deal of champagne was freighted to the Castle.” The elegance of the entertainment at the Christmas ball held by the Frewens in 1881 was probably unmatched. Schultz relates that “people for eighty miles around were invited and relay horses were taken from the ranch and left at various places for the convenience of the guests who came long distances.” Alas, the men far outnumbered the women at the ball, just because of the preponderance of males in the local population. And the band probably conformed to the party’s demographics: “Mr. Moeller came from Buffalo to play the piano for this dance. He was assisted by others who had mouth harps.”<sup>70</sup> Presumably on other occasions the “orchestra” on the balcony was better equipped.

The buildings of the 76 ranch and Frewen Castle, of course, are no longer present. After the departure of Moreton Frewen in 1886 and the dissolution of the ranch in 1889, the Frewen castle became the property of the 76 Ranch manager Fred Hesse, but it was well into the twentieth century before the elaborate building succumbed to the forces of destruction. Again, Charles Schultz: “Homesteaders tore down the Castle and took the logs.”<sup>71</sup> It may have been quite simply that the homesteaders who dismantled the Frewen Castle were simply exercising careful economy, finding resources ready at hand that they could recycle in their own endeavors. It may be, too, that some of them savored the irony of appropriating for use in their own humble abodes the materials from a castle that had once symbolized enormous power, status, wealth and international eminence. For just as the castle was emblematic of the ranching kingdom of the Powder River Basin, it also

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<sup>70</sup> Schultz, “The 76 Castle,” 4.

<sup>71</sup> Schultz, “The 76 Castle,” 4.

betokened the class divisions in that kingdom. Likewise its subsequent demise equally represented the beginning of a social transformation in that kingdom.

## Chapter 3

# Social Crisis and Agricultural Transformation in the 1880s and 1890s

The Powder River Basin was filled with cattle by the middle of the 1880s, but people were also moving in increasing numbers. Roads criss-crossed the area, railroads were being planned, communities were emerging to serve the ranching, and sometimes mining, industries in their neighborhoods, and the signs of organized society seemed to be evident in many places, especially at the foot of the mountains and along the streams. On the other hand, Charles Guernsey, who was ranching in Niobrara County at the time, attempted to purchase a life insurance policy in the 1880s from a company back east. Guernsey recalled that he “gave my address as Hat Creek, Territory of Wyoming, and when the papers got up to the company headquarters in Hartford Conn., they were returned to me with statements they did not issue insurance to parties living in the uncivilized parts of the U.S.”<sup>1</sup> It may have been a cattle kingdom complete with lords and absentee owners, but it still lacked some of the elements of a modern social order. Those changes were underway, however, and soon, after Wyoming had become a state, Guernsey was able to apply once again, and this time the company issued him an insurance policy.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles A. Guernsey, *Wyoming Cowboy Days* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1936), 34.

Powerful forces operating in the decade and a half preceding the turn of the century reshaped the social structure, the economy, and the landscape of Wyoming Territory, and, after 1890, the state of Wyoming. The Powder River Basin was not exempt from these forces, and in fact that area showed their power and consequences with special clarity and even drama. If land use had been revolutionized in the decade following the removal of the Native Americans, the transformation would continue in the next dozen or so years as well.

*i. The Cattle Kingdom in Crisis*

The initial impetus for change was a convergence of natural and human forces, or, to be more precise, a collision between the limits of nature and the expectations of the organized economy that had emerged in the area. One delicate way to articulate this collision is as a “maladjustment” of the system of ranching brought up the plains from Texas to the plains of the Powder River Basin, although the maladjustment certainly extended far beyond the perimeters of the study area. The Texas system of ranching—and the culture and social organization it supported—was in crisis. As Terry Jordan formulated the problem, “Derived from a wet, even marshy coastal land of lush, tall grasses, Texas ranching proved ill-suited to cope with semi-aridity. The system died of cold and drought.”<sup>2</sup> Jordan notes that there had been signs warning of the dangers—such as a declining calf-yield that became worse as the cattle moved north as well as the tolls

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<sup>2</sup> Terry G. Jordan, *North American Cattle-Ranching Frontiers: Origins, Diffusion, and*

taken by the severe winter of 1871-1872. The calf yield may or may not have been evident in the Powder River country, but where the livestock tallies themselves were so loose that entire herds were just approximated, it is doubtful if the northeast Wyoming ranchers perceived subtle decreases. As to the experience of the winter of 1871-1872, the ranchers of southeast Wyoming may have learned something from it, but north of the North Platte, the influx of cattle—and ranchers—had come at the end of that decade and at the beginning of the next so that they may well have been completely unaware of that problem. And, indeed, this actually made the problem worse for the ranching system came suddenly and dramatically to the northeast quadrant of Wyoming. Jordan, speaking more broadly, assesses the situation in terms that apply most dramatically to this part of Wyoming, and perhaps into Montana as well: “Had the Anglo-Texan system advanced northward gradually, a learning and readaptive process might have taken place, but [the ranches’] diffusion was explosive, coinciding with an interlude of relative warmth and wetness on the interior plains. They and their risk-capital sponsors learned nothing. The foolhardy subtropical methods persisted.”<sup>3</sup>

Not only was the system of cattle ranching applied in this area not suited for the climate, but in a curious way it even worsened the problem by its social features. The practice of ranching on “open range” or “free grass,” as it turned out, proved to be an invitation, an encouragement, to overstock the area. So long as there were no precise borders, so long as the vast plains from Sheridan to Devils Tower and from there down to Lusk and over to Douglas was wide open, the plains invited more and more cattle. Not only did the ranchers who grazed tens of thousands of cattle on the plains not know how

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*Differentiation* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 237.

many cattle were out there, they also did not know the actual carrying capacity of the land. The plains may have seemed to reach infinitely in every direction, but there were real limits. Frank Lusk discovered those limits. He discovered what has since been termed “The Tragedy of the Commons.” This concept, developed most articulately and popularly in 1968 by Garrett Hardin, juxtaposes unlimited human expectations with limited natural resources. On a commons that is open to all, Hardin argued, the tendency is for each person who uses it for grazing livestock to seek to increase the number of animals grazing so that the yield will also grow. But when that happens, everybody suffers, not just the excessive livestock using the commons.

Therein is the tragedy. Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit—in a world that is limited. Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all.<sup>4</sup>

If, for example, a given area can support only five hundred cattle and a hundred more are added, the loss will be felt not just by the hundred additional cattle, but by all of them. The concept is literally relevant to the Powder River Basin grazing system of the 1880s. Frank Lusk watched exactly this process in the fall of 1885 when “one man, in spite of protests of everybody who was running cattle in that section, turned about 8900 head of big Texas steers loose, right on top of us. He only gathered about 1700 of these steers, but it increased the losses of everybody who had cattle on the same range, enormously.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jordan, *North American Cattle-Ranching Frontiers*, 237.

<sup>4</sup> Garret Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” *Science*, 162 (1968), 1243-1248.

<sup>5</sup> Frank S. Lusk, “My Association with Wyoming,” *Quarterly Bulletin of the Wyoming Historical Department*, August 15, 1924, 16.

The range was becoming overstocked, seriously so. Put the overstocking together with a climate that was not suited to the practice of turning the cattle loose for the winter to fend for themselves, and disaster was only a matter of time, waiting for a winter to hit hard. The winter of 1884-1885 had been hard, but it was followed by a mild winter in 1885-1886. By almost all accounts, the substantial loss of cattle that winter were due to winter intensifying the problems of overgrazing on the range by reducing the already scarce food and water even more. In the spring of 1886, when Frank Lusk saw what had happened to his own herd—and the herds of his neighbors—others also saw serious problems in the ranching system. Writing in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Frank Wilkeson described the scenes of livestock devastation on the northern plains in the spring of 1886: "They have died of hunger; they have perished of thirst, when the icy breath of winter closed the streams; they have died of starvation by the tens of thousands during the season when cold storms sweep out of the North and course over the plains, burying the grass under snow."<sup>6</sup> This was, it needs to be remembered, a mild winter. Allowing that "mild" in northern Wyoming is a relative concept when applied to winter, there were areas that were not directly hit by the serious storms of that winter, and even in those areas the lesson should have been clear in the spring of 1886. Perhaps the problem was clear, but in that case, what to do about it? As more than one rancher in history has told others of how that business is different from others, it is not possible just to quit, like the person who runs a factory can close the doors and stop the wheels of industry from turning. There are thousands of live animals out there that the rancher

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<sup>6</sup> Frank Wilkeson, "Cattle Raising on the Plains," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 72 (April 1886), 788-793.

must live with, or die with.

At any rate, despite the huge numbers of cattle being grazed, itself a factor that some confused with the success of the system, it is clear that the ranching system was fragile, was filled with weaknesses, was incapable of sustaining itself into the future for very long, and, by some lights, was in its last throes even at the moment the winter of 1886-1887 hit. And the range itself was in poor shape going into the winter. According to Frederic Hultz, a professor of animal husbandry in the University of Wyoming in the 1930s and who analyzed the Wyoming ranching industry of the 1880s, “The spring and summer of 1886 were exceptionally dry. Range forage did not develop.”<sup>7</sup> In 1942 T. A. Larson, then a young assistant professor at the university of Wyoming, concurred with that assessment, noting that the summer of 1886 was “abnormally dry and warm” and that the total rainfall for three months of summer was about two and a half inches, compared with the normal of over five inches.<sup>8</sup> The natural forces on the range made the cattle grazing for the coming winter more vulnerable than ever.

The winter storms came, but the snow was often mixed with rain in November; that meant that when the temperature dropped afterwards, it formed a blanket of ice over the grass. And the weather remained bitterly cold, by some accounts hovering well below zero from the end of November to the end of February. And it continued to snow. William Peter Ricketts, a cowboy on the Half Circle L Ranch, which received its mail from Sundance, recalled that “the snow, some ten inches deep, was in layers and like ice

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<sup>7</sup> Frederic S. Hultz, “Wyoming Livestock Production,” typed manuscript, p. 5, in WPA Collections, File 377.

<sup>8</sup> Alfred Larson, “The Winter of 1886-87 in Wyoming, *Annals of Wyoming*, 14 (January 1942), 6.

packed in an ice house.”<sup>9</sup> The winter would be long and it would be difficult.

The deadly contours of the winter can be measured only approximately, but the account of the cowboy Ricketts suggests something of human dimensions of the experience. Ricketts recalled that “Frost in the air was so dense that pine trees across the valley one-half mile away could not be seen. All gulches and creek channels were leveled with snow, all grass covered and only the sage brush in sight. Life at the Half Circle L ranch got very monotonous before spring.” How the cowboys at the ranch fared in that situation was a tedium interrupted only by the ghastly scene outside: “We had wood and warmth, and grub to eat, but our hearts went out to the bawling, drifting and starving cattle. Both day and night the cries for food were heard, but we were powerless to help them.” The ranch hands themselves, cooped up together for months, quickly got on each others’ nerves with their individual habits and irritating behaviors, lack of new conversation, running out of cigarettes, memorizing the printing on every published item at hand, stories being retold endlessly, one person talking in his sleep, another, a compulsive gambler in the crew, betting on everything that happened and did not happen, and another, Dutch Joe, struggling, when he could, “to the top of a nearby hill [to] view the much cherished and snow-buried homestead he would someday own,” and all of them becoming increasingly irritable. Ricketts complained of the cook who was especially cranky, “so much so that I often had it in my mind to hit him over his head with a mallet and put him in an icepack until spring.”<sup>10</sup>

The coming of spring with the chinooks of 1887, however, brought little relief.

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<sup>9</sup> William Peter Ricketts, “The Winter of ‘86—A Tough One,” typed manuscript, November 9, 1935, WPA Collections, File 1194.

Over the winter speculation had focused on how devastating the losses would be, with predictions of around eighty-five percent losses common. William Ricketts described his venturing out onto the plains:

After getting out and riding a few days, seeing a yearling or two or big steer dead behind most any kind of a windbreak—say a cutbank, a fallen tree, brush or rock piles, I was convinced my estimate of the loss was about right. . . . Two years previous to this time the Half Circle L owners had put on a lot of two-year-old Texas steers. They were the big-horned coast kind, and were now fours or perhaps some fives. That I saw of these alive were mere shadows. Their bodies thin and out of proportion to their monstrous horns and big heavy bush on their tails.<sup>11</sup>

Richard Pfister had just come from Junction City, Kansas with his family, and he saw the consequences of the winter in similar terms: “On June 4, 1887, we arrived at my brother’s ranch, now known as the old Wood ranch, south of Lusk. As we came up Rawhide Creek the water was so full of dead cattle from the hard winter of 1886-87 that it was hard to get a decent drink of water.”<sup>12</sup> The precise losses are as elusive figures as the precise numbers of cattle that had been on the range. Agnes Wright Spring reported that the Colorado-based Powder River Live Stock Company grazed 24,000 cattle in the spring of 1886 but in the spring of 1887 could only gather eight thousand, a loss of two-thirds of the entire herd.<sup>13</sup> Over the broader area ranging from Montana and Dakota down through Wyoming and across the plains southward to Texas, Terry Jordan

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<sup>10</sup> Ricketts, “The Winter of ‘86—A Tough One,” 2-4.

<sup>11</sup> Ricketts, “The Winter of ‘86—A Tough One,” 6.

<sup>12</sup> Historical Committee of the Robber’s Roost Historical Society, *Pioneering on the Cheyenne River* (Lusk, Wyoming: The Lusk Herald, 1947; reprinted 1956), 80-81.

<sup>13</sup> Agnes Wright Spring, “Powder River Live Stock Company,” *Colorado Magazine*, 28 (January 1951), 32-36.

estimated the losses as ranging from as much as sixty to even one hundred per cent.<sup>14</sup>

Some believed that the cattle had just drifted out of the country and were not to be seen, and, in fact, some Wyoming cattle from the Powder River country did roam down to the Sidney Bridge in Nebraska, but more commonly that idea was proven false at the roundups of 1887, and the reality sank in.

Multiply the raw nerves and the tension in the Half Circle L bunkhouse a hundred or a thousand times. Multiply the appalling encounters with dead animals when the snow melted tens of thousands of times. Multiply the dismal roundups, multiply the arguments over how many cattle there were, multiply the pondering over what went wrong, multiply the distressed contemplation of the future, and the enormity of the crisis became clear. On one level the lesson was that the Texas system of cattle ranching, which had enough problems on its own turf, did not work in the Powder River Basin and it could not be made to work. On another level the lesson had to do with the futility of trying to force nature to adjust to the objectives and priorities of the marketplace. However viewed, though, something would have to change.

One change was undeniable. If the cattle herds were being drastically thinned, so too were the cattle companies. Some of the huge cattle companies with absentee owners now found their assets—often little more than the cattle on the hoof—virtually liquidated and the companies themselves followed suit, although this reduction took place over several years. Plus, the market for feeder cattle in the Midwest slackened dramatically in 1887 because of a poor corn crop and the cash so desperately needed by the ranches was not there. As Frederick Hultz summarized the situation, “The western cattleman was

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<sup>14</sup> Jordan, *North American Cattle-Ranching Frontiers*, 238.

broke and most of the big outfits never recovered from the blows of 1886-1887.”<sup>15</sup> In the 1950s Thelma Gatchell Condit wrote a history of ranching and related activity in the Hole in the Wall country, and she summarized the situation thus: “The former (big cowman) now had two alternatives, either liquidate his holdings and leave or reorganize his outfit to meet the changing time, which meant buying and fencing land and feeding in winter. Some stayed and some left. In 1886 the Frewens went broke. In 1889 the Bar C closed out and sold what was left to the NH outfit. Sir Horace [Plunkett] carried on until some time after 1890 when he, too, sold out and returned to Ireland where family responsibilities and other big financial ventures were becoming pressing.”<sup>16</sup> In southern Campbell County, one study of ranching observed that “The greater number of the large companies never replaced their cattle, and, after a few years, smaller outfits began to come in to the country.”<sup>17</sup> This was not the end of the open range, but it was the beginning of the end.

## *ii. Agrarian Ascendancy*

A new order began to emerge in this area in the wake of the devastation suffered by the open range herds. One part of this new order was the adoption of different

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<sup>15</sup> Hultz, “Wyoming Livestock Production,” 5.

<sup>16</sup> Thelma Gatchell Condit, “The Hole-in-the-Wall, Part IV,” *Annals of Wyoming*, 29 (April 1957), 65.

<sup>17</sup> Nora Neely, “The T7 and Other Ranches,” 3, typescript in WPA Collections, File 1194.

methods of ranching from those characteristic of the previously dominant Texas system. Another element was the loosening of the stranglehold that the big ranchers and the Wyoming Stock Growers Association had on the country. Yet another part of the new order was the infusion of new settlers, sometimes people who aspired to become ranchers, sometimes people who just wanted to farm as they and their families had for generations elsewhere, and sometimes people with other, more personal, ambitions. These developments, in turn, generated other challenges that had to be addressed—by the ranchers, and by others.

It is a mistake to view the winter of 1886-1887 as the abrupt closing of one era and the opening of another. Historical change tends to be incremental and is almost always much more subtle than it is dramatic, and this set of historical changes was both gradual and complex. While the calamity of the winter can effectively symbolize larger changes, the economic, political, and social dimensions of the alterations in land use often became just strikingly more evident after the big “die-out” of 1886-1887. Aside from the rapid depletion of the herds on the overstocked range, many of the most important, even fundamental, changes were much more gradual. Some had been evident even before the severe winter of 1886-1887. One set of changes had to do with practical aspects of cattle ranching itself, and with the way that the ranching industry managed its cattle, and these changes left their own marks on the ground. Cattle ranching in the Powder River Basin increasingly substituted a management system that used a more careful, or attentive, herding of cattle for the old reckless, casual “turning loose” of stock and then the gathering of them in when they were to be marketed. In 1885 Territorial Governor F. E. Warren had noticed some of these newer practices—and, as one of the

territory's most prominent cattlemen, he was in a position to take note—when he reported that “to take better care of their stock many cattlemen have begun to keep smaller herds and to fence them in. Thus providing some improvement over the worst features of the open range notably the lack of open water in winter when probably four times as many cattle die for want of water as for want of food.”<sup>18</sup>

Warren had artificially narrowed his assessment of “the worst features of the open range,” but he did see that some kind of reduction in herds and provision of access to water was necessary. And in 1888 the *Sheridan Enterprise* offered a sunny assessment of the ranching industry, but also qualified that by reference to “such changes and modifications” that might be necessary. And it noted one change in particular: “an important reform necessary and now practiced by some is the provision of feed for the stock to be used during severe winter weather and so put up as to form shelter for the suffering animals.”<sup>19</sup> More and more ranchers were cutting hay—not to say, actually growing it, but often cutting it where it was to be found—so that it could be stored and then fed to the cattle in the winter when forage was either limited or nonexistent.

There are, of course, multiple ways of reading the changes of the latter part of the 1880s. Historian Daniel Belgrad ably summarizes the process when he notes that “the cultural hegemony that stabilized cattle ranching as an ecological mode in northeast Wyoming in the early 1880s eroded in the second half of the decade.”<sup>20</sup> What is

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<sup>18</sup> F. E. Warren, *Annual Report of the Governor, Wyoming Territory, 1885*, 69.

<sup>19</sup> *Sheridan Enterprise*, January 14, 1888; this untitled article was copied as part of Ida McPherran, “History of Grazing Part, IV,” WPA Collections, File 1469.

especially valuable about that assessment is Belgrad's use of the concept of hegemony, important in historical analysis elsewhere in the United States, to suggest the exercise of power, and then the demise of that power, through political, economic, social, and cultural mechanisms. In other words, when the system of ranching shifted in the late 1880s, the course of history in the area also shifted.<sup>21</sup>

The open range still existed, but it was being modified, and the modifications reflected a closer appreciation of the resources that were available. There is a certain irony here, however. As it turns out, the two major adjustments in ranching that took place—putting up fences, and putting up hay—held serious implications not only for the ranching business but for all agriculture in the area, including all forms of livestock and crop production, and, for that matter, for the basic issue of just making a life in the area. The irony is that while the shift in ranching to the use of fences and to putting up hay for the winter may have brought modest but much needed prudence and care to the ranching system, the acknowledgment that grass, land, and water were not, after all, infinite, also intensified competition for those limited resources.

That competition was abetted by the erosion of the political power held by the largest ranchers. The Wyoming Stock Growers Association had been the most powerful organization in the territory, with the occasional exception of the Union Pacific Railroad, and when those two collided it was usually the WSGA that prevailed. That organization

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<sup>20</sup> Daniel Belgrad, "'Power's Larger Meaning': The Johnson County War as Political Violence in an Environmental Context," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 33 (Summer 2002), 159-177.

<sup>21</sup> Despite the "environmental" or "ecological" framework that Belgrad uses to structure his analysis, the main contours of his approach are associated with modernization theory, and are already familiar to many working in the field of agricultural history.

had directed not only the activities of the ranching industry, but had even directed the operation of the territorial government in the interests of the ranchers who were its members. After the ranching crisis of the middle 1880s, however, that power slipped away. The membership declined. Having reached a peak of about four hundred members throughout the territory in 1884, the membership plummeted to 183 in 1887 or 1888.<sup>22</sup> As the membership dwindled, so too did the organization's muscle. If the WSGA had ever had a claim to be the representative of a broad cross section of Wyoming ranchers, that claim faded with the reduction in its membership rolls. And its power in the territory was trimmed. The territory established its own Board of Livestock Commissioners, although it did so on terms generally acceptable to the WSGA. And a new law no longer authorized counties to pay rewards for the arrest of stock thieves and authorized the governor to appoint a state veterinarian without the approval of the WSGA.<sup>23</sup> These measures were modest, and some question remains as to how substantive they were and how much of a difference they actually made, but even the change in appearance, the reluctance to engage in the self-conceit and disdain for others that had been characteristic of the WSGA in earlier years, along with the opposition of a

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<sup>22</sup> Hultz, "Wyoming Livestock Production," 9. Hultz's figures are probably correct or very close. Some of the membership lists exist and are contained in the Wyoming Stock Growers Association Papers in the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming, but their use is complicated by two factors. Some members lived and ranched outside Wyoming, and, indeed, for a while the organization was a regional body as much as it was a state institution. Also, while post office of each member's residence is listed, and while it might theoretically be possible to identify how many and which members operated in the Powder River Basin, the residence for many is simply indicated as Cheyenne; a great many of the members also maintained residence in the state capital, spent time at the Cheyenne Club, and were otherwise domiciled in Cheyenne as much as they were on their own ranches.

<sup>23</sup> W. Turrentine Jackson, "The Wyoming Stock Growers' Association Political Power in

territorial governor to their regime, all represented a significant departure, even if it was sometimes symbolic.

The combination of the elimination of some of the largest ranches from the area, the reduction or liquidation of herds by others, and the diminishing of the political clout of the large ranchers created a situation in which newcomers could enter with more confidence and sometimes were even encouraged. While studies have not been comprehensive either in time period covered or in geography included, the available evidence suggests that toward the end of the 1880s there was a surge in land entry claims. The claims had been increasing earlier, and given the time lag between filing a claim and then receiving the patent, it is not surprising that in the one county studied (modern Johnson County), almost half (46.3 percent) of the land patented between 1884 and 1890 was patented in the one calendar year of 1890. A slightly lower amount (forty-five percent) had been patented the year before, meaning that more than ninety percent of the land patented in Johnson County before 1891 was patented in those two years and that the curve was continuing to climb.<sup>24</sup> By virtually every account, the population of the area was increasing and the dramatic ingress was reflected in the claims at the land offices. And the public domain was being divided up and transferred into private hands and a new system of agriculture was emerging—a system that ran counter to the basis of the system of cattle grazing that had prevailed.

The ranches that were emerging tended to be small, were often clustered near one another, and tended to be located along the drainages. Along Stockade Beaver Creek,

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Wyoming Territory 1873-1890," *Annals of Wyoming*, 20 (January 1948), 80-81.

<sup>24</sup> Francis Henry Tanner, "The Disposal of the Public Domain in Johnson County,

forty miles below Sundance, small ranches cropped up, with some of the ranchers changing their location after residing for a short while and finding better locations, usually farther down the same drainage, as they became available.<sup>25</sup> Mary Capps, a descendant of one of the 1883 settler families, describes one family that came from Quebec, “spent the first winter in a dugout that had been home for the stocktender at Beaver Station” and then their children took up homesteads “a few miles up the valley.” Likewise in the same drainage, Thomas Richardson described accompanying his father and “there we set about building up a ranch.”<sup>26</sup> On the western side of the basin, John A. Tisdale, who had previously worked as a foreman on Theodore Roosevelt’s ranch on the Little Missouri, moved to Wyoming and filed a claim about 1889 on land on the Red Fork of Powder River, along with his wife and four children.<sup>27</sup> In 1888 Jacob Zumbrunnen from Iowa filed on land twenty-five miles northeast of Lusk, “the first land to be taken up in that locality for miles around,” and the next year moved his family to the new ranch he was building.<sup>28</sup> It is possible to pick up histories of the communities and neighborhoods in this region and find a surge of settlement in the late 1880s and early 1890s.

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Wyoming, 1869-1890,” Master’s thesis, University of Wyoming, 1967, 111.

<sup>25</sup> Mary Capps, “Early Ranches on Stockade Beaver Creek,” *Annals of Wyoming*, 68 (Autumn 1996), 42-44.

<sup>26</sup> “The Life Notes of Thomas Richardson: Cowboy Days with the Old Union Cattle Company” 2, typescript in WPA Collections, File 394.

<sup>27</sup> Powder River Heritage Committee, *Our Powder River Heritage* (Cheyenne: Frontier Printing, Inc., 1982), 281.

<sup>28</sup> Historical Committee of the Robber’s Roost Historical Society, *Pioneering on the Cheyenne River* (Lusk, Wyoming: The Lusk Herald, 1947; reprinted 1956), 79.

Several distinct patterns are evident in that settlement. One is that in many cases these were families that were finding places to begin a new home; they were not speculators, they were not corporations, they were not bachelor cowboys staking claims for others—although there are examples of each of these groups in any time period. But these were people who intended to stay and perhaps to lay claim to their part of the Jeffersonian dream of an independent life. Another pattern is that while many of them ranched, they also engaged in other activities too. The area was becoming the home of a diversified form of agriculture, not the monoculture of the cattle rancher. There were farms aplenty in the region. And just as the ranches were increasingly raising some forage for their cattle, so too were farmers often raising some livestock. These farmers had not waited until after the winter of 1887 to enter, but after that date they were coming in larger numbers, just like everybody else. As early as 1880 that farming activity was evident, and not just someone with a large garden. Edward Burnett recalled that in that year he rode to the post office of Creighton to vote on the question of whether Johnson County should separate from Carbon County, and from the top of a hill between Lake Desmet and the Piney Valley, he looked down “upon a field where men were cradling and binding wheat and oats. . . . This was the first scene of civilization I had seen in this land, the first crop I ever saw in Wyoming. It was a pretty fair crop of about 50 bushels to the acre and was being harvested by Chris Hepp and Simeon (‘Cinnamon’) Brown.”<sup>29</sup>

Farming was being undertaken in substantial parts of the Powder River country, and also farther south in the drainage of the North Platte in Converse County. In 1887

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<sup>29</sup> “Interview with Edward Burnett Recalls Historic Occurrences; Many Interesting Events are Remembered by Buffalo Man,” typescript taken from *Sheridan Press*, May, 16, 1937, in WPA Collections, File 394.

Bill Barlow's *Budget* in that county published a letter from a subscriber boasting of the recent crops that were harvested—both grass and grain: “Never in the history of our farming experience has crops of grain and grass yielded so well. There are no less than 3 new double story barns being built which is a sure indication that they are needed. It is a pleasure to see the shadows chase the sunshine across fields of ripening grain.”<sup>30</sup>

Barlow's newspaper was sensitive to these farming developments and may have reported more than other parts of the area, but probably the area near the North Platte developed farming on a greater scale earlier than other parts. In 1889 the same paper reported that “two farmers,” identified as Brenning and McFarland, had cut fifteen tons of millet on “their ranch on LaPrele.”<sup>31</sup> As early as 1878 O. P. Hanna on Little Goose Creek planted a crop of oats and in the fall threshed it out with a flail. In the next few years that vicinity began also to grow crops of wheat and a flour mill was erected at the mouth of Wolf Creek Canyon in future Sheridan County.<sup>32</sup> Almost everywhere farmers were busy working the land and reaping the harvests, and they were being encouraged in virtually every corner of the area. Early in the 1880s, in Crook County, the Nefsy brothers planted a crop of three acres of buckwheat plus growing other small grains and a

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<sup>30</sup> *Bill Barlow's Budget*, August 10, 1887. Typescript of letter in WPA Collections, File 1399. The letter writer also lamented, presumably facetiously, that, “Of course in a new farming country where there are no distilleries to utilize this grain, a great deal will be wasted by being made into bread.”

<sup>31</sup> *Bill Barlow's Budget*, October 9, 1889, typescript of article located in WPA Collections, File 1399.

<sup>32</sup> Minnie M. Williamson, Sheridan, Wyoming. May 17, 1939, “Agriculture in Sheridan county” handwritten manuscript, WPA Collections, File 1468.

healthy crop of red potatoes.<sup>33</sup> The farmers were establishing themselves in this land.

And many of them diversified their own operations, so that they grew a variety of crops and also some livestock. That combination, in fact, saved some from the ravages of drought. Richard Pfister related that his father homesteaded land southeast of Lusk in 1887 and that “We had a pretty hard struggle for a while, for the country was beginning to settle up and many were trying to farm. In 1889 we had a real drought and most of these farmers had to leave, but the few who did stay mixed their farming with stockraising and that is all that saved them.”<sup>34</sup> For some, it was more than a matter of diversifying; it was a matter of changing. In 1885 the first foreman at Careyhurst was one Martin Conwell, also known as Sailor Jack, a well known-cowboy in the area. Yet Sailor Jack “planted the first garden and raised a crop of potatoes,” a phenomenon one writer used to show a larger point: “This illustrates how a cowpuncher was turned into a first class farmer.”<sup>35</sup>

What is clear from these disparate accounts is that while the small farmers and ranchers were not always prospering—they remained vulnerable to the extremities of weather in the vast range between the Black Hills and the Big Horns—the system of small farms and ranches was flourishing as it had never before here. All they needed, as ever, was water. Of course, that was almost all that anybody needed. But the small operators, unlike the big ranchers, were in a position to address that need through

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<sup>33</sup> Carl Plattner, “Farming in Crook County,” typescript; there is a separate, but related note to the Plattner manuscript, in the same file, WPA Collections, File 1265.

<sup>34</sup> Historical Committee of the Robber’s Roost Historical Society, *Pioneering on the Cheyenne River*, 80.

<sup>35</sup> Dan W. Greenburg, “Converse County’s Magnificent Resources,” *The Midwest*

intensive agricultural practices. It was much simpler to provide water for fifty or a hundred head of cattle and a farm than it was to water thousands of head of cattle. And given that cattle were ordinarily perceived as having to graze within six or eight miles of water, small holdings had an advantage over the large ranchers who, even if they wintered their cattle on fenced range where they could be fed, still summered them on the open range, and the water issue became especially acute at that time of year.<sup>36</sup> While there was a subtext in that valuation of water for ranching that suggested that the carrying capacity of the range could not be computed simply in terms of square miles, the immediate implication had to do with the necessity of developing water resources.

From the beginning of settlement it is clear that people were practicing some form of irrigation and they did so increasingly as the settlement took place. Such development of water was necessary as a practical matter, and for many who settled the land, it was even legally mandated. Those people who claimed lands under the provisions of the Desert Land Act of 1877 were required to irrigate the land within three years of filing. Irrigation was well under way as part and parcel of the settlement process. John Hunton in Converse County was reputed to have “cut the first irrigation ditch using the old fashioned triangle and plumb bob to survey the same,” and that ditch continued in use well into the twentieth century.<sup>37</sup> (It should also be noted that the actual rights to the water that Hunton used in his ditch were not legally claimed by him at that time; J. W. Carey and R. W. Carey, who ultimately acquired the Hunton property, took up the first

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*Review*, VII (August 1926), 10-12.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph Nimmo, *Report in Regard to the Range and Ranch Cattle Business of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1885), 20.

water rights in that part of the North Platte valley, and specifically on Box Elder Creek in 1876.) Near Sheridan, Oliver Perry Hanna's initial settlement on Little Goose Creek in 1878 came after Hanna made a three-month trip to Cheyenne for a plow and seeds. "With his plow he cultivated the first field and dug the first irrigation ditch."<sup>38</sup> The tributary of Little Goose that he drew from was thenceforward known as Hanna Creek. Sometimes two neighbors would jointly develop an irrigation system as did D. Athorp and Daniel Rogers on Piney Creek, proving up on their water rights by 1884.<sup>39</sup> In virtually every drainage small irrigation projects appeared. Robert Murray in 1978 compiled a partial list of some of these efforts that included:

- Alexander Moorcroft on Sand Creek in 1877, ten acres
- U.S. Army at Fort McKinney on Clear Creek, one hundred seventeen acres, 1878
- Manlius T. Redman, twenty-seven acres on Clear Creek, 1878
- Christian Hepp, 1879 on Little Piney Creek, eight acres
- ----- Terrill, Prairie Dog Ditch, twenty-five acres, 1879
- C. A. Farwell, twenty-five acres, Cruse Creek

As Murray further notes, "By the end of the year 1884, there were 10,186 acres of irrigated land watered by Clear Fork." Closer to the Black Hills, Murray reported that "On Stockade Beaver Creek, the Smith and Freel Ditch irrigated 125 acres in 1882 and

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<sup>37</sup> D. W. Greenburg, "Converse County's Magnificent Resources," 10.

<sup>38</sup> Minnie M. Williamson, "Pioneer Farming" handwritten manuscript, in WPA Collections, File 1468.

<sup>39</sup> Clearmont Historical Group, *Backward Glance: Ulm, Leiter, Ucross, Clearmont, A Century of History*, 11-13.

the Sweet, Hanson and Davis ditch 20 acres that same year. By the fall of 1889, 1373 acres were irrigated on Stockade Beaver.<sup>40</sup> Of course the larger operations also laid claim to land and the waters, and they developed their own irrigation systems. The Pratt and Ferris Cattle Company had secured water rights and had begun irrigation of its Big Red, Little Red, and Big Corral ranches as early as 1884.<sup>41</sup> Irrigation was emerging almost everywhere there was a stream to be tapped.

The expansion of systems of irrigation and of claims on water suggested that people were settling broadly on the land in the area and they were placing the land in production, in one way or another. A diversified system of production was taking root in the valleys of northeast Wyoming. In 1892 *Bill Barlow's Budget* praised the agricultural progress of the previous few years in the fields drained by (and fed by) the waters of the North Platte in Converse County:

. . . Experience has shown that wheat, oats, barley, rye flax, potatoes, sugar beets, turnips, rutabagas, lettuce, peas, carrots, alfalfa, millet, buckwheat and early onions can be raised successfully in the Platte Valley, wherever water can be put on the soil. Wheat withstands drouth better than oats. Cabbage and celery require more water than corn or beets. Potatoes irrigated 3 times will generally produce a larger crop, though poorer quality than those irrigated twice. One irrigation will often make a good crop of potatoes.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, the active growing of turnips and rutabagas and lettuce and carrots and peas and celery involved a kind of farming that was not susceptible to vast agricultural operations and reflected the small, family farms that were springing up everywhere.

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<sup>40</sup> Robert Murray, "Class I Historic Resource Study," prepared for Casper District of the Bureau of Land Management, February 1978, 143-144.

<sup>41</sup> Clearmont Historical Group, *Backward Glance: Ulm, Leiter, Ucross, Clearmont, A Century of History*, 9.

Writing about the same time in Johnson County, Oscar Flagg described the change that had taken place in that county. Anyone who had been in Johnson County in 1882 or 1883 would not recognize it, Flagg said.

The whole country is completely metamorphosed; where formerly the traveler could ride in any direction for days almost, without seeing a fence or a farm, he now finds them every few miles. Fine hay meadows and fields of waving grain have taken the place of sage brush flats and barren hill sides. The mournful howl of the coyote and wolf have been succeeded by the far sweeter sounds of the ranchman's song and the prattle of children. Small herds of horses, cattle and sheep have taken the place of the large herds of the barons, that have been forced to leave the county on account of the curtailing of the ranges by the fences and farms of the farmers.<sup>43</sup>

The trend at the end of the 1880s and early 1890s was toward the prevalence of the farmers and ranchers who owned small herds of livestock, who farmed land by hand, and thus also in small measure, and who often were fulfilling their requirements under the Desert Land Act by irrigating the land. It seemed that a new day was dawning for the farmers, and they even received official sanction and encouragement from the state government. In 1887 Governor Moonlight explicitly encouraged farmers in the territory and announced that “the first great important demand . . . is in the way of population of farmers, practical, everyday farmers, who will put their hands to the plow and not look back.”<sup>44</sup> Aside from the fact that this was an utterance probably unthinkable previously, it also reflected the growing presence, legitimacy, and political power of the farmers in

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<sup>42</sup> *Bill Barlow's Budget*, February 10, 1892, typescript in WPA Collections, File 1399.

<sup>43</sup> O. H. Flagg, “A Review of the Cattle Business in Johnson County, Wyoming since 1882 and the Causes that Led to the Recent Invasion,” 35-36, in Elmer Brock Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Moonlight, *Report: Governor of Wyoming to the Secretary of the Interior*,

the territory, including in the Powder River Basin.

*iii. Agriculture and Social Struggle*

This taking up of land—and water—did not go unnoticed by the big ranchers, for these farmers and small ranchers—and those who undertook both farming and ranching on a family basis—were in the way of those big ranchers who sought access to both land and water for their cattle. If there had been tension before the winter of 1886-1887, the chinooks that ended that killing episode did not thaw the social tensions that had built up over the use of the land. Those tensions increased.

One of the signs of that tension was that it was being constantly discussed; even when people undertook the effort to defuse it or deny its existence, they were confirming how powerful it weighed on their minds. The influx of homesteaders (loosely termed since few were actually using the terms of the Homestead Act), was noticeable everywhere and welcomed by many, but rancher nervousness prompted others to assuage their fears. In 1888 the *Sheridan Enterprise* preached to its readers that a form of peaceful coexistence between the ranching kingdom and the farmers' commonweal was quite possible:

The range business rests upon a solid foundation. Allowing for a steady flow of homesteaders to every part of the west which is available for cultivation, there will yet remain immense areas of territory absolutely useless except for the grass. A portion of this may eventually be subjected to a system of irrigation. By far the greater part will be known as an arid belt for many ages so far as human knowledge can now foresee.

Wherever grass grows stock will be found, because the growth of the country will demand the utilization of all resources. Hence the range business is destined to an indefinite existence, with such changes and modifications as the increase of population shall make necessary. In some localities it will cease to exist, in others it will be circumscribed, while in some sections it will undergo little change for a long time to come.<sup>45</sup>

The problem with that formulation was that it assumed, once again, and despite the experiences of the previous two years to the contrary, that infinite resources existed, that there were enough for all, and that everybody would just use different lands because they were suited for different purposes, an assumption that proved not always to be the case.

The fundamental problems remained. The huge ranches were not so numerous but those that remained were big enough. And even if they started to harvest hay and store it for the winter, they still relied on the open range for summer grazing. Theoretically it would have been possible for the large ranches to simply purchase great portions of the range for their exclusive use, but the bust of the cattle industry after 1887 meant that they were unable to generate that kind of capital even if they were so inclined. And they usually were not inclined toward such purchases, and that meant they followed other channels in their determination of range and also, and more particularly, the ownership of the progeny of their herds. In their calculations, free grass remained preferable to expensive grass, so they remained fixed on the idea of grazing the public domain.

Where they had once relied on the quaint, but never legally sanctioned, system of “accustomed range” in defining where they grazed, that partitioning of the plains depended upon a tacit gentlemen’s agreement between a handful of potential users; the

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<sup>45</sup> Sheridan *Enterprise*, January 14, 1888; typescript of article in WPA Collections, File

number of potential users, however, was climbing dramatically as independent operators put their own cattle onto the range. At one time the unbranded cattle in any “accustomed range” simply and conveniently belonged to the ranch that had established its presence on that range, but that practice crumbled as the number of small herds on the range multiplied. Closer examination was then required to see which cow an unbranded calf was attached to. The brand of the cow then determined the brand of the calf, a system which made sense but left significant latitude in identifying the mother cow. That latitude, moreover, was complicated by the fact that the independent operators practiced more intensive cattle management of their small herds than the large ranchers could ever hope for. They were thus in a stronger position to claim ownership of the mavericks. The advantage held by their smaller counterparts—and competitors—on the range was not lost on the large ranches, and small irritations festered into wholesale grievances. The cattle companies countered by paying their cowboys bonuses for branding as many of the mavericks as they could. What this means is that while the Johnson County War is generally associated with the armed conflict of 1892, the war was going on, on a daily, practical basis, for several years before.

Part of the issue had to do with fences. Robert Frost to the contrary, good fences do not always make good neighbors. There is intriguing evidence that some of the generalizations about fences need to be qualified. While it is commonly accepted that fences were absent, the true situation is more complex, and even Senator Kendrick chose his words carefully: “There was almost an entire absence of any kind of enclosures . . .

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The Bridle Bit Ranch of Sturgis and Goodell, part of the Union Cattle Company, actually did build fence, and a lot of it. Charles Guernsey, whose ranch was located immediately south of the Bridle Bit recalled that “The company built a strong barb-wire fence some sixty miles in length, enclosing a pasturage for bulls in winter and breeding stock in other seasons,” but he also recalled that there were problems with the fence,

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<sup>46</sup> Kendrick, quoted in Hultz, “Wyoming Livestock Production,” 4.

<sup>47</sup> Historical Committee of the Robber’s Roost Historical Society, *Pioneering on the Cheyenne River* (Lusk, Wyoming: The Lusk *Herald*, 1947; reprinted 1956), 82.

<sup>48</sup> “The Life Notes of Thomas Richardson: Cowboy Days with the Old Union Cattle Company.”

problems that in retrospect seem obvious enough: “from the first it proved an expensive and far from practical investment. It became necessary from the start to keep outfits in the field the year round repairing breaks in the fence caused by buffalo, traveling along, going in one panel and out the next, for the sole purpose apparently of scratching their noses on the barbed wire.”<sup>49</sup> In fact, Territorial Governor F. E. Warren reported in 1885 that “to take better care of their stock many cattlemen have begun to keep smaller herds and to fence them in. Thus providing some improvement over the worst features of the open range notably the lack of open water in winter when probably four times as many cattle die for want of water as for want of food.”<sup>50</sup> The fences were creeping in as early as the first half of the 1880s.

But increasingly they were not just the drift fences and the fences to separate the breeding stock from the range stock. There were also other fences emerging too in the same territory. When A. P. Dow settled on Dutch Creek fifteen miles from Sheridan, he could boast that “I had the whole country in between to myself. Thousands of cattle roamed this unchartered [sic] territory and I bought a few head myself which I run under fence and separate from my neighbor’s stock.” Realizing the implications of this fence, Dow quickly added, “That is why I am here to tell the tale.”<sup>51</sup> The fence was a tool of the range that both kept cattle out and kept cattle in, and the virtues of this device were to be hotly argued.

The fences not only divided one part of the herd from another, or one person’s

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<sup>49</sup> Guernsey, *Wyoming Cowboy Days*, 25.

<sup>50</sup> Warren, *Annual Report of the Governor, 1885*, 69.

<sup>51</sup> Untitled typed statement by A. P. Dow, recorded by Ida McPherran, WPA Collections,

holdings from those of another, but they also divided one kind of ranching from another. They clearly separated the open range ranching of the Texas system from a fenced-in, Midwestern, system of ranching. And they separated the ranchers who espoused the notion of “free grass” for their own taking from the others who saw patented land as their own protection. And they separated the large ranchers from the farmer or homesteader with crops and a small number of cattle, and from the small ranchers who, like A. P. Dow, found that the only protection from the large ranchers was to fence in their own cattle.

Increasingly, however, in the 1880s, the issue of fencing grew larger and took on new contours. Where the small rancher or farmer might build a fence to keep the large herds from using their grass—or grain or vegetable crops—for feed, the large ranchers were building fences to separate their herds from the others and to preserve access to choice range and water. As Maurice Frink wrote in his 1956 history of the cattle industry, “the cattleman, who had first looked upon the coming of the wire fence as an unmitigated evil, was beginning to adapt the evil to his own uses.” Complaints poured in to the General Land Office “from those aggrieved or oppressed by being cut off from range or water by the fences of the big outfits.”<sup>52</sup> While there were justifications and exceptions, the main pattern according to Frink was “the big companies were fencing great areas that did not belong to them, and thus were depriving others of the use of land to which they had equal rights. The ‘little man’ was usually in no position to assert these

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File 1469.

<sup>52</sup> Maurice Frink, *When Grass Was King: Contributions to the Western Range Cattle Industry Study* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 1956), 87. See also, Paul Wallace Gates, *History of Public Land Law Development* (Washington, D.C.: Government

rights against a powerful and sometimes aggressive ‘big man.’”<sup>53</sup> After the election of Grover Cleveland in 1884, the General Land Office began systematic enforcement of the land laws, forcing many of the fences to come down, although the end of the Cleveland administration in 1889 also saw the resumption of a tacit lenity in fencing policy.<sup>54</sup> Fencing was, of course, a double-edged tool, one whose virtues depended on which side of it the observer was standing. Every fence kept someone’s property in and another’s out, and far from making good neighbors, fences were but one more element providing an opportunity for friction in this increasingly tense environment.

In this situation where WSGA members were being challenged on every front, where a continuing stream of small ranchers and farmers were taking up the land and water that had been part of “their” open range in recent times, where the fences of the small ranchers were keeping out their livestock while their own fences on the public land were being ordered dismantled by the government, the Wyoming Stock Growers Association responded by tightening its control. The enforcement of the 1884 Maverick Law was a chief instrument of that control. Nonmembers of the association were expelled from the roundups, a move that prevented them from gathering their own stock. Along with the parallel exclusion of blacklisting individuals to prevent their employment as cowboys, these two measures created a situation in which, as Daniel Belgrad observes, small ranchers and others were “effectively . . . drummed out of the range cattle

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Printing Office, 1968), 466-468.

<sup>53</sup> Frink, *When Grass Was King*, 87.

<sup>54</sup> T. A. Larson, *History of Wyoming* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, revised), 179-182.

industry.”<sup>55</sup> In 1888 the laws were strengthened in favor of the WSGA, and new legislation was even passed over the veto of Governor Moonlight. The creation of the Wyoming Livestock Commission in that legislation, far from threatening the organization, represented, in the words of W. Turrentine Jackson, “the greatest achievement of the association in this legislative session and revealed that the stock growers continued to exert some political influence.”<sup>56</sup>

There is an important point made about the tightening of control by the WSGA in the late 1880s that has been developed especially by Daniel Belgrad. Belgrad argues that the practice of mavericking—branding unmarked calves as your own—had, by this point, become synonymous with rustling, and rustling charges filed by the stock detectives increased. Convictions, however, did not increase because of popular support for the small rancher and farmer. Historian Belgrad suggests there was a chasm between law and practice by this time and one case in particular demonstrates how wide that chasm was: “After Jack Cooper was acquitted of a rustling charge for mavericking in 1886, the general sentiment in Johnson County was that the Maverick Law was unenforceable, if not unconstitutional.”<sup>57</sup>

Land use was inextricably mixed in with a fabric of other tensions that were social and economic so that the net effect was a class division. According to Daniel Belgrad, who has studied this most prominently, there is some evidence that the large companies imposed new rules in the second half of the 1880s that sharply circumscribed the

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<sup>55</sup> Belgrad, “Power’s Larger Meaning,” 173.

<sup>56</sup> Jackson, “The Wyoming Stock Growers’ Association Political Power in Wyoming Territory 1873-1890,” 80.

freedoms the cowboys had been accustomed to exercising, including preventing them from carrying firearms, from gambling, and from running their own horses or cattle on the range, plus their wages were cut. The much vaunted open hospitality of the range where itinerants were welcomed at the meal table of neighboring ranches was replaced with the cash-nexus, each cowboy being charged fifty cents per meal. In addition, the large companies began to contract roundup activities to other ranches, a practice that meant the layoff of more cowboys. When the blacklist was expanded to prohibit the employment of cowboys who were also owners of cattle, the pressure, and the tension, ratcheted up.<sup>58</sup> If the intention was, at long last, to teach the cowboys and small ranchers and farmers to bow, it did not achieve its result. In fact, these measures only fed the cycle more. The cowboys who no longer had a job turned in the obvious direction. They filed claims on parcels of land and started their own small ranches.

In November 1891, after attacks on several of the blacklisted “rustlers” the independent small ranchers of Johnson County organized an association of their own in Buffalo, the Northern Wyoming Farmers’ and Stock Growers’ Association. That meeting, according to Helena Huntington Smith, “was a very large meeting, attended by virtually every citizen east of the Big Horns with the exception of [Nate] Champion and Ross Gilbertson, who had not made the fifty-mile trip to town.”<sup>59</sup> Of their various purposes and actions, one of the more important was the group’s announcement of their intention to hold their own roundup starting May 1, thus preempting the WSGA roundup

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<sup>57</sup> Belgrad, “Power’s Larger Meaning,” 174.

<sup>58</sup> Belgrad, “Power’s Larger Meaning,” 175.

<sup>59</sup> Helena Huntington Smith, *The War on Powder River: The History of an Insurrection*

that would begin June 1. In response to this, an army of “invaders” traveled north from Casper in April 1892 with a list of men whom they planned to eliminate and thus was begun the Johnson County War—officially now an armed conflict.

The fighting war was short-lived. The army of invaders found two men on their list—Nate Champion and Nick Ray—at the KC Ranch and, after a protracted stand off, succeeded in killing them and then proceeded on toward Buffalo. Their movement, however, was detected, alarms were sounded, and an opposing armed force gathered. The invaders took refuge at the TA Ranch and found themselves under siege as the farmers and ranchers surrounded them. Although the invaders were near defeat after the three-day siege, they were in effect rescued when troops from Fort McKinney arrived to place them under arrest and take them into custody. Ultimately transferred to Cheyenne, the trial of the invaders never took place and the invaders went their own separate ways, thus ending the war in an inconclusive fashion with the different sides each proclaiming victory. The farmers and small ranchers felt victorious, and had reason for doing so, because they had humbled the cattle kings and preserved their own agrarian pattern. The big cattle ranchers were able to claim some measure of success, but only because they were able to escape punishment for their unsuccessful invasion.

It is ironic that because of interest in the Johnson County War, some structures have been preserved that shed light on grazing, homesteading, farming, and land use issues of the 1880s and 1890s. The TA Ranch itself has been preserved, although the ranch continued as a working ranch over the next century and more. The small cabin used by Ray and Champion no longer exists but photographs of the related KC Ranch during its period of historic significance remain.<sup>60</sup> The value of these “war” artifacts lies

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TA Ranch, south of Buffalo. Photo: Richard Collier, Wyoming State Historic Preservation Office.

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especially in their use in understanding ranch buildings from a time when the basic

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<sup>60</sup> See, for example, the photographs included in Smith, *The War on Powder River*, facing

pattern of agriculture was taking shape in northeastern Wyoming.

The TA Ranch Historic District complex (48J097) includes three buildings that date from 1882 when the ranch was begun, and those buildings represented the common, and minimal, structures on a ranch of that early settlement period. The barn, the house, and the root cellar satisfied the elementary needs of the ranch. The ranch house was a simple rectangular one-story building made of logs on stone foundations. The National Register nomination for the ranch notes that these logs, however, were cut by circular saw, which is a distinctive element and obviously suggests that the builders were not as limited in the resources available for construction as were other ranch builders who constructed the buildings themselves using an axe, or even a cross-cut saw. The barn, while large enough, was not a huge modern barn, but a modest one and one-half story structure built of a mix of vertical wood planks, board and batten, and logs. Although the barn's bullet holes and gun ports from the 1892 siege attract the most interest at the ranch, the barn was a simple, utilitarian structure appropriate for a Texas system ranch with stalls for horses and space for tack and accessories. It was not designed for storage of feed for cattle. The root cellar was actually large (about twenty-five by thirty-five feet) which indicates the amount of food stored in it. As is often the case with root cellars, the entrance is on the east instead of the south or west where summer heat build up is maximal or in the north where winter entry is difficult.

It should also be noted that the TA Ranch barn has been added onto and more buildings have been added to the complex, especially in the early twentieth century, for this indicates that the ranch evolved in the coming years. Not only was the landscape

being changed with the arrival of more settlers who built their own ranches and farms, but the existing ranches also changed to reflect the evolution of agricultural practices and land uses. In the aftermath of the Johnson County War, the prevailing trends increased in momentum and geographic extent. Agriculture was diversified and often combined farming and livestock production, ranches worked smaller herds, and the small, family-operated farm or homestead (loosely construed) flourished. As with other physical remnants of farming and ranching in this area, the period of historic significance reaches broadly and the way in which the buildings changed over time reflects that larger pattern of historic change.

The Johnson County War is one of the most studied, argued, and romanticized events in the history of northeast Wyoming, and its history continues to hold potential for the inquiring historian and its lessons and stories continue to feed the mills of popular and scholarly history alike. But the significance of the episode for the current study have to do with the origins of the war in issues of land use, and in the cultural conflict surrounding that land use, and then also in the consequences of the war's outcome also for land use. In that regard the war may be understood as an important event, if not a pivotal moment, in the demise of the control of the range by the largest ranchers, and thus also, in the demise of the Texas system of ranching. Despite the power that they held in the roundups and despite the power they held in the state government in Cheyenne, the ranchers' dominion was being fenced in as surely as the small ranchers and farmers were expanding their own presence and influence in the area.

Moreover, it was not just the ranchers and the system of ranching that was dealt a blow. One of the central trends evident in the national economy and social structure, that

associated with the pattern of change known as modernization, was also directly challenged in this area. The pattern of modernization is so widely assumed, and so often framed in terms of inevitability, that its elements are frequently taken for granted. But modernization generally includes the process in which economic activities become increasingly specialized (as in the monoculture of the ranches and the horse-related activities of the workers on the ranches), in which authority and power becomes increasingly centralized into fewer hands, in which local and community loyalties and identities yield to more sharply circumscribed economic identities, and in which relationships between individuals become increasingly impersonal and separated by layers of intermediaries. And in the Johnson County War it is possible to see small ranchers and farmers and townspeople uniting together in common cause against a centralized, specialized, impersonal system of ranching that had one time prevailed, and which was challenged, even to the point of armed conflict. The challenge was not entirely successful, of course, and the local forces were ultimately trumped by the power of the state and federal governments that abetted the modernization process.<sup>61</sup> But the issues raised by modernization—the specialization, centralization, mechanization, market-orientation—would continue to frame the discussion over the nature, purpose, and control of the grazing and farming land in this area for decades to come.

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<sup>61</sup> For probably two generations of professional scholarship, historians have examined the process of modernization closely and have critically explored its implications. For another example in which the process of modernization was challenged and set back on the local level, see Michael Cassity, “Modernization and Social Crisis: The Knights of Labor and a Midwest Community 1885-1886,” *Journal of American History*, 66 (June



## **Chapter 4**

### **Bucking the Trend: Agrarian Growth, 1890-1910**

The United States at the end of the nineteenth century remained very much an agricultural society with the vast majority of Americans living and working on the farm or ranch or in the nearby villages (those towns with under 2500 residents) that served the rural population. And Wyoming, achieving statehood only in 1890, was even more rural and agricultural than the rest of the nation. Moreover, in Wyoming, although mines also emerged around Cambria and Sheridan, the northeast corner was even more agricultural than other parts of the state, with the nascent forms of industry and mining especially concentrated along the path of the Union Pacific railroad along the southern part of the state. In addition, this section of the state in the last decade of the nineteenth and first decade of the twentieth centuries was remarkably diversified in its agriculture, and during those two decades the farms and ranches became even more diversified and decentralized with the core elements of life situated in small economic units, many of them self sufficient or nearly so, scattered across the Powder River Basin. At the same time, however, this agrarian world was being challenged and even undermined by powerful trends in the nation that were reshaping not just the cities but the countryside as well. And those changes ultimately came to the northeast quadrant of the state.

*i. Agriculture and the Winds of Change*

In important regards, Wyoming, and this part of the state in particular, actually ran counter to the national trends—against the prevailing currents of change in the nation. Nationally, the population was moving from the farm to the city. In Wyoming, people were moving from other farms in other places, or from cities in other places, to the farm and ranch. Or, to put it another way, most people who moved to Wyoming to take up residence in these years were moving in a direction very much different from those who were moving to the nation's rapidly growing urban centers, and that direction was more than a point on the compass. While the mainstream of agriculture in the nation in these years represented a depopulation of the countryside, in Wyoming's agrarian northeast corner, people were moving in.

The irony is not just that Wyoming's rural population increased while that in the Midwest declined, but even more that there was a connection between the two. There was a crisis in American agriculture in the late nineteenth century and in a curious way Wyoming was to reap the benefits of what elsewhere was a bitter harvest. The roots of the downward economic spiral that pulled the nation's yeomanry into its grip were deep but perfectly understandable. Raised on the notions of hard work, thrift, and self-discipline, the farmers of the nation were caught in a storm of trouble that steadily increased in the years following the Civil War. During the Civil War, with a serious labor shortage on the farms just from the drain of the young men into the armed service, the nation underwent a true agricultural revolution. Prior to the war, the planting,

cultivating, and harvesting of crops and the production of animal products were carried on by methods and implements that were literally ancient in their technological underpinnings; in fact, if a farmer from biblical times had somehow come to life in the 1850s, some of the tools may have been unfamiliar but many of them could have been quickly figured out by their similarity to tools from their own times.<sup>1</sup> Most were handheld devices like the hoe, the scythe and cradle and flail, although a few were drawn by a draft animal, generally some form of plow—or, more crudely, even a digging stick—for breaking the earth.<sup>2</sup> Even with Cyrus McCormick’s invention of a horse-drawn reaper in the 1830s, the older, traditional, labor-intensive system continued to prevail because the new systems were expensive, they required larger holdings of land to justify them, and they were practical for use in a commercial system of agriculture rather than a system of production for home consumption. In an agrarian society where most people lived on or near the farm, those same people produced for their own consumption, placing onto the market their surplus which they would then use to secure those goods that they—or their locality—could not produce. Moreover, the specialized equipment implied specialized farming, and the prevailing system of agriculture in the pre-Civil War years was a diversified system.

The farm labor shortage of the Civil War, however, planted the seeds of change in American agriculture. The absence from the farms in the North of men serving in

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<sup>1</sup> See the discussion not long after this in which Macy Campbell argued that “The improvements in farm machinery in America since 1830 have done more to increase the productive power of man on the land than all the improvements which had been made in agricultural implements during the four thousand years preceding that date.” Macy Campbell, *Rural Life at the Crossroads* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1927), 52.

<sup>2</sup> For an extensive discussion of this technology see especially Russell Lord, *The Care of the Earth: A History of Husbandry* (New York: Mentor Books, an imprint of New

uniform unleashed a chain of developments that ultimately transformed the nation's farms. This began when the war placed additional demands on the nation's economy to produce food and fiber at precisely the moment that the ability of the farms to respond to that demand dramatically diminished. In that context, the labor-saving machinery that had been available, but in very limited use, found a market. And the more reapers and harrows and other horse-drawn implements that were sold, the more likely they were to be mass produced in the emerging factory system, thus putting more of them on the market, more widely. But those people who then purchased the equipment made changes in the way they operated their farms. Given the nature of the equipment and the investment made in it, they first of all tended to focus their efforts on the crops for which the specific implement was made. This meant moving away from subsistence agriculture to commercial agriculture. Moreover, to reap the monetary benefits that the equipment promised, or, conversely, to justify the purchase of the machinery, they also expanded the size of their farms so that they could produce more of the crop; in this way large swaths of the American farm economy shifted from intensive cultivation to extensive. The implication of this action, in turn, was the increase of agricultural debt, first for the equipment, and second for the increased land, and that further tied those farms to the market economy, not just for the duration of the war but for the future as well.

The debt proved more difficult than at first anticipated. Two separate processes were at work here. One was that agricultural production increased, an obvious result of this mechanization. The increased production and the expansion of transportation networks meant that local surpluses now would reach national markets, in so doing often

flooding them with a surfeit of commodities, with the consequence that prices for those products actually declined. Indeed, given the growth of international markets through increased shipping facilities in the last third of the nineteenth century, there was certain to be a glut in the larger market even if there was a local shortfall because of drought or other climate condition. Thus the investment in equipment and land actually generated a harsh reward since the increased production precipitated a decline in prices.

The second force had to do with expenses, which moved in exactly the opposite direction. The expenses of the farm increased because of that investment in equipment and land. The problem here is often unfamiliar to a modern observer where inflation, to greater or lesser degrees, is a continuing frame of reference; the problem of the late nineteenth century was *deflation*. During the Civil War the United States government had printed money in a measure greater than was supported by gold reserves simply to help pay for the war, but after the war that paper currency was literally being withdrawn from circulation in an effort to restore the nation to a gold standard, and, of course, the confederate money that had also circulated in the South was then worthless. This meant that there was actually less money in circulation although the economy itself was industrializing and expanding dramatically and the population was growing, thus making each dollar worth more and more as time passed. This worked a particular hardship on people who had contracted debts, for it required the repayment of debts in dollars that were increasingly dear, dollars that were much more valuable than the money that had originally been borrowed. Among those who had contracted long term debts were those farmers who had purchased new horse-drawn implements and who had expanded their land holdings during the war. The longer they paid on their loans—and mortgages—the

greater the burden they had to bear.

To make matters worse, while their expenses—in real dollars—increased, their income declined because of the national and international market they were now selling in. And as their only recourse, they had to produce bigger crops, to plant more seeds, and to harvest more wheat and other grains as cash crops, but the more they produced, the more the market was flooded with commodities and the lower the price they received. By the 1890s the American farmer was in serious trouble. Between 1888 and 1892 over half the population of western Kansas, for example, was forced from the land because of their inability to pay their debts and taxes and their farms were foreclosed.<sup>3</sup> And then the merchants in the villages serving them also closed their doors, which placed additional stress on the rural population. In the market of the nation, the farmers themselves were being harvested.

Some of those dispossessed farmers turned to the political solutions of the Populist Party. Some of them sought free land in the land rushes and lotteries of the former Indian lands in Oklahoma. Some moved to the cities to become part of the urban working class. And some moved farther west to places that promised a new opportunity, a chance to start over again, and to claim not only new farms but old dreams, and to do this they moved to places like Wyoming. There, land could still be homesteaded, land could be acquired without a mortgage, and the hard work applied to making improvements on the land would result in ownership and some degree of freedom from the market instead of increasing dependence on the market. And the depopulation of the

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<sup>3</sup> John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959; reprint of 1931 University of Minnesota edition), 32-33.

countryside of the Midwest coincided with the effort of Wyoming officials to encourage migration to the new state. One student of the process concluded that after the Johnson County War, “with the political strength of the cattlemen somewhat curtailed, state officials began to orient their promotional activities around Wyoming’s farming potential.”<sup>4</sup>

The farming population of northeast Wyoming thereby increased substantially in the 1890s. A systematic study of land records is a large project and yet to be done, but most studies report a continuation of the surge in the filing of claims that was growing in the late 1880s. As with previous settlement efforts, the land along the drainages was taken first and farms in the valleys multiplied dramatically. In 1894 the writer John White made a trip through the entire region ostensibly reporting on mining and vacation resorts, but he could not help but discuss the ranching and farming activity in the area and his comments provide a useful assessment of settlement. Some of his general comments on the Edenic qualities of the area carry with them the buoyant optimism of a real estate promoter, but his focused attention to concrete developments carry more weight. After noting the extensive irrigation activities in various drainages, White noted that “It is estimated that there are seven hundred miles of main and seven thousand miles of lateral ditches in Sheridan County alone. The area thus affected is put at two hundred and seventy thousand acres.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, White also offered a close observation of the construction of the irrigation canals and laterals:

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce Noble, “The Quest for Settlement in Early Wyoming,” *Annals of Wyoming*, 55 (Fall 1983), 21.

<sup>5</sup> John M. White, *The Newer Northwest: A Description of the Health Resorts and Mining Camps of the Black Hills of South Dakota and Big Horn Mountains of Wyoming* (St.

The maximum allowance per acre is fixed by law, and the head of the main ditch or canal, where it receives its supply, is provided with a gate so constructed as to admit only so much water as the aggregate allotments of its patrons requires. This ditch or canal is cut along the downward course of the stream, but with a lessening fall until the water rises over the level of the banks in its lower course, and is then directed wherever desired and the contour of the surface will permit. From this main ditch laterals are run, and these are divided and subdivided as the local demands and the situation suggest. These details differ on the different properties, but the principles of irrigation are easily understood and readily applied. A slight stone dam diverts a part of the current into the main ditch, and the rest passes on, to be interrupted in a similar way by the next canal feeder.

For the most part these ditches are simply made; the larger ones with plow and scraper, and the smaller ones with the plow or spade. In almost every case the supplying canals have been built by co-operative companies—the farmers owning the land to be irrigated joining in their formation, and taking shares of stock in proportion to the water they wish to obtain. The stock and water-right become appurtenances of the land, and are transferred with it in case of sale. The cost of these improvements is largely regulated by the current rate of wages.<sup>6</sup>

And the settlers were growing enviable crops on this land. White reported wheat that averaged from twenty to fifty bushels per acre, oats at twenty-five to sixty bushels (with one especially productive area yielding one hundred thirty-one bushels), but corn fared less well. On the other hand, White said, “Every description of vegetable grown in temperate climates has been successfully cultivated in this region. He listed cabbages and onions, cauliflowers, turnips, rutabagas, beets, carrots, melons, cucumbers, celery, and beans as, in some instances, “certain and prolific crops,” and in others, “enormous,” “excellent,” and “as vigorous growth as anywhere in the world.”<sup>7</sup> But potatoes were the lead crop, aside from the small grains. According to White, *The American Agriculturist*

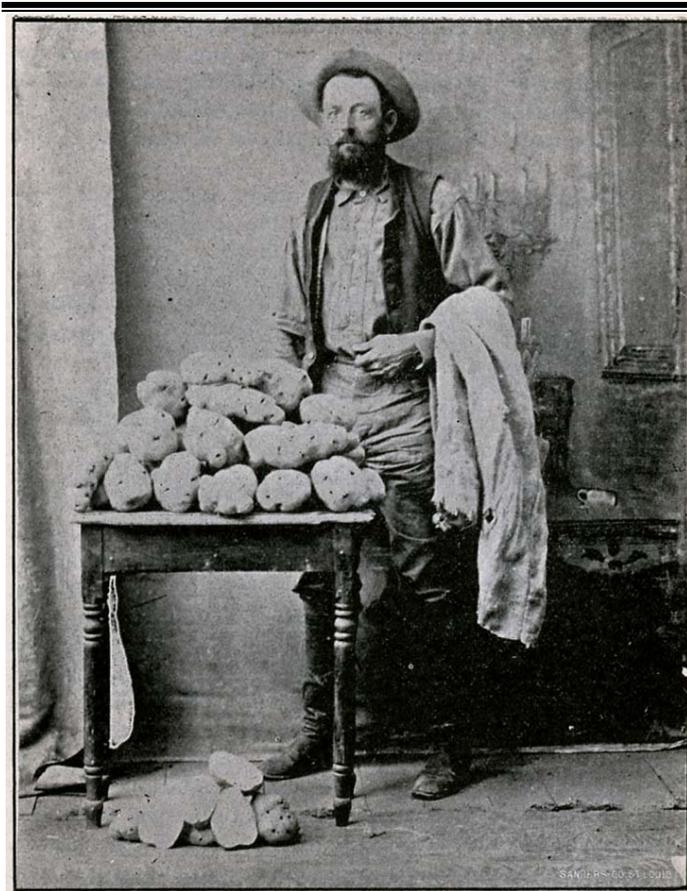
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Louis: Self Culture Publishing Co., 1894), 142-144.

<sup>6</sup> White, *The Newer Northwest*, 144.

awarded Johnson County farmers prizes for the largest number of bushels of potatoes raised on a single acre in 1890 and 1894. In 1894 J. R. Hutton, who lived fifteen miles from Buffalo on Rock Creek, “exhibited forty-one ‘Early Rose’ and ‘Manhattan’ potatoes that weighted sixty-five pounds, and two acres of Hutton’s land produced six hundred bushels.”<sup>8</sup>

In the Tongue River valley, White saw more evidence of the agricultural development made possible by irrigation, where “the river runs its flashing course through field and farm.” Along that drainage he saw “irrigating canals bear off a part of its



J. R. Hutton of Johnson County and his famous potatoes of 1894. Photo: John M. White, *The Newer Northwest: A Description of the Health Resorts and Mining Camps of the Black Hills of South Dakota and Big Horn Mountains of Wyoming* (St. Louis: Self Culture Publishing Co., 1894), 145.

<sup>7</sup> White, *The Newer Northwest*, 146-7.

<sup>8</sup> White, *The Newer Northwest*, 148. See also the discussion of potatoes in Carl Hallberg, “Once They Raised Potatoes in Johnson County.” This copy was provided by the author, but was part of a series, *Buffalo Bones*, sponsored by the Cultural Resources Division, Wyoming State Parks and Cultural Resources Department, that is published in newspapers around Wyoming. This column, for example, can be found in the *Guernsey Gazette*, online edition, at [http://www.guernseygazette.com/main.php?story\\_id=297&page=23](http://www.guernseygazette.com/main.php?story_id=297&page=23).

healthful current to the outer limits of the valley, and here and there, by river and ditch, rise farm buildings of logs or more pretentious materials, while stacks of hay and ripening crops give token of the peaceful plenty that follows the water's track."<sup>9</sup>

Settlers were everywhere and John White also offered descriptions of the buildings in which they lived. Many times the dwellings were new, to the point of being just dug-outs, but even the dugouts had their advantage, and even charm.

The entire district through which we pass is marked by the irrigating ditches of thrifty farmers or the wire-fenced ranches of prosperous stock-growers; while luxuriant crops, and distant herds of grazing cattle and horses, give tangible token of the rewards nature yields to intelligent labor. Farm structures, scattered over the landscape where the convenience of the owner suggests, are principally comfortable log buildings. I visited one "dug-out," which lay near our route and was receiving the last finishing touches. It was simply a cellar, about twelve by twenty feet in area and six feet deep, with the plain dirt walls white-washed. Rising from the surface, a gabled frame-work upheld the sod roof, through the middle of which a stove-pipe projected. Such dwellings are quite common to the new-comer who desires to husband his resources. They are dry the year round, cool in summer, warm in winter, and attractive to snakes, a feature that constitutes the principal disqualification. With the exercise of care, however, these unwelcome visitors are excluded and many a prosperous settler looks back with regret to the comforts of the early dug-out.<sup>10</sup>

Although White's most detailed assessments of agriculture focused on Johnson and Sheridan Counties, he reported similar success elsewhere in the region including in Weston County where most of his attention was directed at the mines, but also as far south as Salt Creek. In that area, beyond the divide separating the Powder River and North Platte drainages, White noted that "while the larger portion of the rough grazing land through which [the observer] passes is principally adapted to range purposes, the creek bottoms, which vary in width from a few hundred rods to many miles, are fast

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<sup>9</sup> White, *The Newer Northwest*, 160.

being reclaimed by irrigation, for the uses of agriculture.” He made plain his conclusion about the recent record of agriculture in the area when he said that anyone who looks closely “cannot fail to be struck with the universal success which attends even the smallest attempt at farming.”<sup>11</sup> And the farming that he portrayed in the area, the farming that was so successful, was invariably intensive farming on small parcels (small, at least in comparison to the sprawling ranches), was abundantly diversified, and tended to be on irrigated lands. What is noteworthy is that much of White’s assessment could have been made of other parts of the nation prior to the Civil War, but the nation’s economy and agricultural practices had taken a course such that neither the diversity, nor the intensity, nor the success of those operations now applied to the longer-settled parts of the country.

The sustainability of farming in northeast Wyoming at the end of the nineteenth century often comes as a surprise to the generations who have been conditioned to expect that the area is unsuited for crops and that the homestead laws were woefully inadequate to provide sufficient area for farming. As to the ability of the area to produce crops, at least in its irrigated sections, the evidence is sufficient not just in the 1890s but for the two decades following. In regard to the shortcomings and inflexibility of the Homestead Act, and other land laws, in failing to anticipate the special conditions of arid lands by allowing for greater land holdings, no less than Paul Wallace Gates, perhaps the pre-eminent critic of the land laws, acknowledged their success. “The land system,” argued Gates, “as it applied to the less humid region of the High Plains, was indeed adequately flexible.” Of course, Gates continued, that flexibility was not intentional. The law was flexible because it did not sharply limit land entries as reformers had sought; it was

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<sup>10</sup> White, *The Newer Northwest*, 171.

flexible “because of the laxness and incompetence of officials in the local land offices and because a penurious Congress failed to make sufficient appropriations to enable those officers to do the work of thoroughly scrutinizing entries for confirmation and patenting;” it was flexible because the shrewdest legal counsel money could buy “was available to capitalists to so phrase the laws or to find loopholes in them as to make evasion easy.”<sup>12</sup> The law was not intended to be nearly as flexible as it wound up being, but in the political process in Washington by which the laws were written and in the administrative framework by which they were administered, they gained flexibility and that flexibility enabled farmers (and others) to settle the lands.

The unintended consequences of the drafting and administration of the land laws thus enabled more “homesteaders”—loosely construed as a term that can include people who used the whole assortment of laws to secure title to parcels of the public domain for the purposes of settling on it—to acquire tracts large enough for them to survive. In addition, access to water also aided them. In this regard the key development was the state water policy developed by Wyoming Territorial Engineer, and then State Engineer, Elwood Mead. It was no overstatement when T. A. Larson suggested that “this outstanding state engineer brought order out of the chaotic water-rights situation.” By seeing that the state had ownership of the water and then by establishing a system for allocating rights to it, Mead prevented the water from being entirely monopolized, and he persisted in his efforts to see that it was made as widely available to the public as possible. And he wanted to increase the amount of water through various reclamation

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<sup>11</sup> White, *The Newer Northwest*, 200.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Wallace Gates, “Homesteading the High Plains,” *Agricultural History*, 51

plans, although his efforts in this regard fell short, by his own estimation.<sup>13</sup>

And federal efforts to increase the water supply for farmers and ranchers in this area also fell short. The chief effort in the 1890s was the Carey Act, sponsored by Wyoming's own Senator Joseph M. Carey, who, in fact, owned the vast CY ranch and its headquarters, Careyhurst, in Converse County, but which also extended west into Natrona County, even beyond Casper. Carey's legislation allowed for the federal government to contribute up to a million acres of land to specified states—including Wyoming—provided that the land (or a portion of it) would then be irrigated and cultivated by settlers who located there on small farms. This was easy for the federal government to do, but it required serious plans and financial support at the state level, enough so that many in Wyoming doubted its sincerity or effectiveness.

The Wyoming government, however, did act, and by 1897 eight projects had been planned, but the only ones that came to life were across the mountains in the Big Horn Basin and in the southeast corner of the state; further implementation was slow and fitful. As late as 1910, sixteen years after the law was enacted, only eight thousand irrigated acres (about four percent of all the irrigated land in the five counties of the northeast quadrant, which itself was only a third of the active farmland), could be attributed to Carey Act projects.<sup>14</sup> This result is in line with the judgment of historian Gilbert C. Fite. Fite, who grew up on a homestead in neighboring South Dakota, who had close ties to this part of Wyoming, and who became one of the leading agricultural historians in the

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(January 1977), 109.

<sup>13</sup> Larson, *History of Wyoming*, 302-303.

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910*, Vol. V,

nation, concluded that the Carey Act “was of little or no value to the semiarid plains states.”<sup>15</sup> In contrast to Carey Act projects, the cooperative irrigation efforts, like those described by John White, were far more significant in the Powder River Basin.

The farms were growing in number, and this held implications for other activities as the larger picture of agriculture in the area shifted away from what it had been just a decade or so before. Cattle ranching was itself changing. The prevailing pattern was increasingly toward diversification in agricultural effort, with ranches and farms alike running livestock and also producing crops. In the Pumpkin Buttes area, which had its first settler on unclaimed land in 1883, homestead claims under various land laws were filed in the 1890s and the area became an important ranching center, based on those patents.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, the huge corporate ranches, the ranches owned by internationally financed companies, the ranches that had owned no land but grazed all of it—those ranches were passing by the side, were smaller in size, and were being fenced. In the 1890s a number of these operations sold out their stock and closed their business. Agnes Wright Spring reported that the Powder River Live Stock Company was one of them. And she indicated exactly why the business shut down: “Because feelings in the Powder River country were running high against the ‘big outfits,’ the officers of the Powder River Live Stock Company hired their cattle ‘gathered’ and closed their books in

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Agriculture (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1914), 967-968.

<sup>15</sup> Gilbert C. Fite, *The Farmers’ Frontier 1865-1900* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), 135.

<sup>16</sup> Sande Oliver and Bill Bryans, “Historical Literature Survey of the Pumpkin Buttes Area of Southwest Campbell County,” 32, 36.

1893.”<sup>17</sup> Another of the most prominent of the large ranches, the Standard Cattle Company which had included the 101 and the Ship Wheel and others, shut down its operation at Moorcroft in 1896.<sup>18</sup> And if the Frewen Castle had once symbolized the new order dominant on the plains of the Powder River country, that symbolism changed. By 1898 Frewen Castle was being used as a school for the children of homesteaders.<sup>19</sup>

There were other changes as well. And the penetration of the Powder River Basin by railroads ushered in vast changes for everybody, including the ranchers. Access to Wyoming’s northeast corner was becoming easier each year, primarily because of the development of railroad lines. In 1886 the Fremont, Elkhorn and Missouri Valley Railroad (a subsidiary of the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad) began construction west of Chadron, Nebraska and reached Douglas by the next year. To the north, in 1891, the Burlington and Missouri River (subsequently, Burlington – Northern) Railroad reached Gillette and the following year its construction connected to Sheridan and then moved on to the north toward Billings.

In a curious but significant way, the railroads, wherever they went, performed a function similar to that provided by the streams and creeks for earlier settlers; and often the railroad followed those same drainages and reinforced those routes as arteries of

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<sup>17</sup> Agnes Wright Spring, “Powder River Live Stock Company,” *Colorado Magazine*, 28 (January 1951), 34

<sup>18</sup> Margaret Dillinger Bowden, *1916: Wyoming, Here We Come!* (Gillette, Wyoming: privately printed by James H. Bowden and Jessie Outka, 2002), 37.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Schultz, “The 76 Castle,” *Wyoming Educational Bulletin* (April 1934), 4. Within twenty years, homesteader Tom Wall was traveling the area when his companion took him to Frewen Castle, which at that time was deserted, but still standing. J. Tom Wall, *Crossing Old Trails to New in North Central Wyoming* (Philadelphia: Dorrance & Company, 1973), 71.

communication and transportation. But more than the waterways, the railroads provided access to shipping that was unequalled by other means. Everywhere the railroads went, new stations and communities sprang up along their sides. And facilities like pens and ramps for loading goods—like cattle—also emerged beside the railroads. In 1894 John White noticed that “The building of the Burlington road right through the middle of this great region has proved an immense advantage to the [cattle] business. Yards for shipping are established every eight or ten miles along the road, and any club of stockmen can secure one at any especially convenient point by assuring the shipment of a reasonable number of cattle each year. This obviates the risk and expense of long drives; and under special provision for the comfort and speedy delivery of the stock, the business has received a new impetus in the last four or five years.”<sup>20</sup>

This, in turn, generated a profound shift in the center of gravity for the area as commerce and people moved closer to the railroad. Historians Sande Oliver and William Bryans examined the development of the area around Pumpkin Buttes and noticed that the completion of the railroad to Gillette “appears to have diverted attention away from the southwest corner of the county.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the Keeline Ranch moved its headquarters from near Lusk northward to the head of Caballo Creek near Gillette where they established the 4J Ranch (purchased a few years earlier from the Converse County cattle operation of Adams and Glover). “The move,” says one account, “was made principally

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<sup>20</sup> White, *The Newer Northwest*, 139.

<sup>21</sup> Sande Oliver and Bill Bryans, “Historical Literature Survey of the Pumpkin Buttes Area of Southwest Campbell County, Wyoming, including the North Butte Mine Site,” prepared for Cleveland Cliffs Iron Company, Casper, Wyoming, April 1980, p. 42.

because a railroad line had been built through Gillette.”<sup>22</sup> And for the cattle industry this had other less obvious effects, including the abandonment of the old Texas Trail and other trails by which ranchers would take their livestock to market. The savings in distance the herd had to travel was significant even when the drive was still considerable, a feature that was important to the rancher, but the direction and route also changed, which was of importance to the broader area. A later account of John Kendrick and his OW Ranch reported that, “One year, from the OW Ranch, the beef herd was driven to the railroad at Belle Fourche, S. D., 200 miles away. Then the Burlington Railroad penetrated Wyoming and the herd was driven to Gillette, 115 miles.”<sup>23</sup> The distances from ranches to the railroads were being gradually reduced.

Moreover, there was another and greater, but more subtle, impact of the railroad. Cattle ranching had held an advantage over other commodities because it was possible to transport them to market in part on their own power, something that could not be said of grains and produce. With luck and careful management, the cattle might even gain weight on their way to the shipping point. But the arrival of the railroad dramatically reduced that advantage and made it possible for people who produced other less mobile commodities—like grain and potatoes—also to have access to shipping, a factor which encouraged commercial farming. And by delivering equipment and supplies to the merchants in the region’s towns and villages, farmers were able to set up their own operations more easily than previously, thus placing additional pressure on the ranches

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<sup>22</sup> Margaret Dillinger Bowden. *1916: Wyoming, Here We Come!* (Gillette, Wyoming: privately printed by James H. Bowden and Jessie Outka, 2002), 41.

<sup>23</sup> Malcolm C. Cutting, “A Cattle Magnate Sits in the Senate; Kendrick of Wyoming Applies Efficiency Methods to the Beef Raising Business and Takes the Gamble Out of

because of their taking up of land.

One influence of the railroad has been often-overlooked by historians, but actually may have been one of the most visible at the time. Because of the constant and huge need for water replenishment to help the big train engines generate the steam for propulsion, the railroad had to position water tanks on towers along the track every eighty or sixty, or even fewer, miles. These tanks would be filled with water pumped by commercially manufactured windmills. The result was, as Allen G. Noble notes, “to introduce the windmill as a feature of the Plains landscape.”<sup>24</sup> Plus, the railroad could now ship the windmills into the region, something that would have been much more difficult in the transportation system that the railroad supplanted. Indeed, the railroad could bring in all kinds of building materials, including dimension lumber; architectural historians routinely note the arrival of the railroad as a turning point in many locations in construction styles and techniques because of the availability of dimension lumber. The railroad was not just the engine of commerce; it was the engine of change.

#### *ii. Sheep and the Cold War with Cattle*

One other sign of the change was evident in a news account from May 1891 in Douglas. That account reported that local agriculturist J. J. Hurt shipped twenty-five thousand pounds of wool from Douglas, that amount “being the clip of those of his sheep

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It,” *New York Times*, December 19, 1926.

<sup>24</sup> Allen G. Noble, “Windmills in American Agriculture,” *Material Culture*, 24 (Spring

sheared at the Douglas shearing pens.”<sup>25</sup> There was doubtless wool shipped from this area before that, but certainly this was one of the earliest documented instances. And the sheep industry in northeast Wyoming was just beginning to grow, having been far overshadowed by the cattle industry in the 1880s. But the sheep industry had taken roots in the 1880s. In fact, Jim Davis is supposed to have started one of the first sheep ranches near Rawhide Buttes at Muskrat Canyon in 1878, followed by the Miller Brothers bringing in a herd around 1880 near Lusk.<sup>26</sup> And in the Black Hills, Jakie Mills started a sheep operation about the same time.<sup>27</sup> In Sheridan County, as early as 1883, there had been an effort to raise sheep on the part of someone named Gruell who had brought a flock down from Montana. Gruell, an account offered by early cattle-rancher-turned-sheep-rancher Tom Stout goes, “remained in Wyoming a year and a half, then, having concluded that Wyoming was not and never would be a sheep country he betook himself back to Montana.”<sup>28</sup> About the same time, however, George Beck brought a flock from Colorado to what would soon be widely known as Beckton, near Sheridan. And George

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1992), 3.

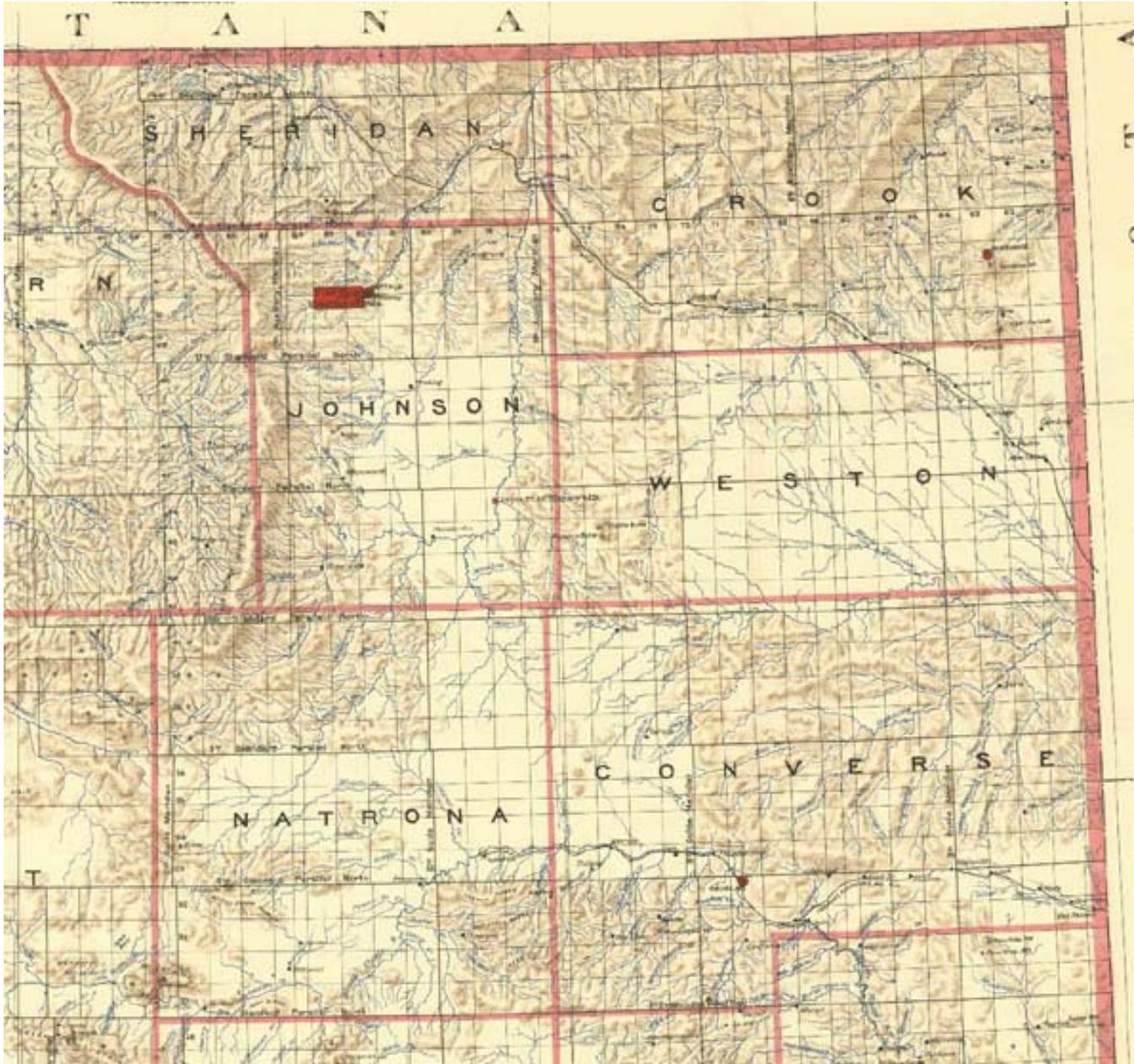
<sup>25</sup> Typed transcript of news article from *Bill Barlow's Budget*, dated May 1891, in WPA Collections, File 1396, Wyoming State Archives, Cheyenne, Wyoming.

<sup>26</sup> Mary A. Skelton, “Sheep,” This is a transcription of an article that appeared in *Bill Barlow's Budget*; 21<sup>st</sup> Anniversary Edition, June 1907, found in WPA Collections, File 1396.

<sup>27</sup> G. F. Lemmon, “Jakie Mills, The First Sheepman of the Black Hills,” WPA Collections, File 242.

<sup>28</sup> *Sheridan Press*, December 24, 1915, untitled article by Tom Stout, transcribed in Minnie Williamson, “The Sheep Industry in Sheridan County,” WPA Collections, File 1469.

Powell brought some into the LaPrele drainage in Converse County, also in 1883.<sup>29</sup> As



Northeast Wyoming, 1892. Map: Department of the Interior, General Land Office, 1892. Source: Wyoming State Archives, Maps Online Collection at [http://wyoarchives.state.wy.us/mapphotos/wy\\_1892\\_color.jpg](http://wyoarchives.state.wy.us/mapphotos/wy_1892_color.jpg)

sheep were brought in from Oregon and Colorado, and from other parts of Wyoming like

<sup>29</sup> Skelton, "Sheep," 3.

the Laramie Plains, their numbers steadily grew and by 1890 Sheridan County had about two thousand head, Johnson County another four thousand, and Converse County nearly eleven thousand—indicating where the center of the sheep industry was at that point.<sup>30</sup>

After the Johnson County War, and the loosening of the hold of the cattle ranchers on the land, more sheep came. The area around Ucross received its first sheep after the invasion when Fred and Charles Waegele brought in a herd. Large sheep operations began to take shape too. In Converse County, DeForest Richards had brought sheep from Oregon and sold them to local ranchers and had joined with J. M. Wilson and J. F. Hamilton in 1892 to form the Platte Valley Sheep Company. The significance of this development has partly to do with the emergence of the sheep industry, but as much to do with a less visible aspect; one biography of Richards details his efforts and then notes with heavy import, “The income from the ranges now belonged to people actually living in the county.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, and contrasting with the early cattle industry, the sheep ranches were locally owned and operated. On the other hand, where the cattle ranch headquarters and homes cropped up at choice spots on the range, whether on deeded land or not, the sheep ranch headquarters often took a different course and the owner lived in town. One account suggests that the sheep industry contributed even to the growth of towns—something anathema to the cattle industry—since the sheepmen “as a rule settle in the towns for the building of the town of Douglas [increased] from 265 population in

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<sup>30</sup> Clearmont Historical Group, *Backward Glance: Ulm, Leiter, Ucross, Clearmont, A Century of History* (Buffalo, Wyoming: The Office, n.d.), 7

<sup>31</sup> Harry Henderson, “Governors of the State of Wyoming,” *Annals of Wyoming*, 12 (April 1940), 122.

1888 to 2000 in 1907.”<sup>32</sup>

The number of sheep in the northeast corner of Wyoming mushroomed in the last decade of the nineteenth century. In 1890 there were just over 17,000 sheep in the four counties (Converse, Crook, Johnson, Sheridan), compared with nearly two hundred thousand in Carbon County and around one hundred fifty thousand each in Laramie and Fremont Counties. Ten years later, in 1900, the four counties had increased to five with the creation of Weston County, and the number of sheep in the area had jumped to more than one and a quarter million, and even subtracting for lambs under a year old, the total was still 846,869—a huge increase. Converse County alone had more than 300,000 sheep and Johnson County had nearly 260,000, but even newly created Weston County had 144,500. This total represented around a fourth of all the sheep in the state of Wyoming.<sup>33</sup> Clearly, the sheep industry was growing dramatically in this area, with implications for the area that were equally dramatic.

Once again, however, the rise of the sheep industry ran counter to what was happening in the rest of the country. In the 1890s the sheep industry in the United States was generally in decline, having been ravaged, first by the depression that started in 1893, and then by a glut on the world market—what was called “free wool” where import duties were relaxed and prices for domestic wool thereupon plummeted. This meant disaster for the sheep industry in what was called “the farming states” of the Midwest and East, and the numbers of sheep in New England fell by forty-three percent, in the Middle

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<sup>32</sup> Mary A. Skelton, “Sheep,” WPA Collections, File 1396.

<sup>33</sup> U.S. Census, Eleventh Census, 1890, *Report on the Products of Agriculture*, Statistics of Agriculture (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1891), 273; U.S. Census, Twelfth Census, 1900, *Report on the Products of Agriculture*, Statistics of Agriculture

Atlantic by forty-seven percent, in the South by thirty-one percent, and in the North Central states by forty-six percent. By contrast, in northeast Wyoming, the number of sheep not only did not decline but increased by nearly a thousand per cent in the decade. One study of the larger sheep industry in the nation captured the national trend, but seriously understated what was going on in places like the Powder River Basin when it noted that “The rise of the western sheep industry in the 1890s is complemented by the decline of the sheep industry in the East and Midwest.”<sup>34</sup>

There is, of course, no evidence to indicate that the prices received by Wyoming sheep grazers were better than those received elsewhere, and shipping was even an added burden, but the expenses for land in this area were negligible and this factor made a huge difference. In 1893, a Congressional inquiry into the sheep industry concluded about Wyoming that “Since 1884 the cattle business had declined, and the sheep business advanced until at the present time there are more sheep than cattle in Wyoming, and as the State improves the number of sheep as well as horses will increase, and together they will excel the cattle business in importance.”<sup>35</sup> This process actually held long term consequences, for the woolen and mutton business never recovered in the East and Midwest, and it was during the 1890s that the industry actually shifted, permanently, to the Far West, and especially to the Rocky Mountain West. The sheep industry was

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(Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1901), 495.

<sup>34</sup> L[ouis] G[eorge] Connor, “A Brief History of the Sheep Industry in the United States,” *Annual Report of the American Historical Association, 1918* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1921), vol. I, 141-142.

<sup>35</sup> U.S. Congress, *House Miscellaneous Documents*, 2d Sess., 52d Cong., 1892-93, Vol. 15; “Special Report on the Sheep Industry of the United States 1892” (Serial 3124), Chapter II, “The Sheep Industry in Wyoming, Colorado, and Utah,” 771-786.

overtaking the cattle industry as the primary grazer of Wyoming, and, while the exact comparison can not be determined in the Powder River Basin as of 1900, quite possibly sheep were becoming dominant in that section.

The structure of the sheep industry was dramatically different from the cattle ranches. The seasonal cycles, the tending, the grazing, and the harvesting made sheep ranching distinct and meant also that the built remnants of sheep grazing would likewise be different. Although not quite so susceptible to the romance of cowboy and ranch life, possibly because of the greater adaptability of cattle ranching to Hollywood imagery and expectations, the lifeways and artifacts of sheep ranching still carried their own distinct patterns and left their own imprints.

The initial similarities were compelling. Where the early cattle operations simply turned loose their herds to wander where they would, the early sheep grazers seemed even more inclined to claim the whole of the public domain for their own use. Although the practice of “tramp herding” or “nomad herding” was common elsewhere, it does not seem to have become a major feature of sheep herding in this area. In that practice, herders would claim no home and wander with their herds over a huge area, even from state to state, allowing their sheep to graze anywhere and everywhere, generating bitterness and consternation, even among other sheep grazers, wherever they went. While “tramp herding” does not figure prominently in the Powder River area, and has not yet been discovered in any records, however, Robert Macy tells of the broad range some grazers used and was even common: “Much trailing of sheep long distances was practiced then to no real gain; a sheep man whose headquarters or ‘home ranch’ was along the Cheyenne river might range far down Powder river to the west and north while

a Powder river sheepman was often occupying ranges that were on the Cheyenne river watershed."<sup>36</sup> But even this long-distance herding faded as the sheep grazers began to settle on their home ranges and use the public domain in their area on a regular basis.



Sheep facility, D. A. Kingsbury Ranch, Bull Creek, 10 miles from Buffalo in Johnson County. Although the photograph is labeled as a "Summer Sheep Camp," it is not a herder camp in the mountains. Instead, a canopied shearing pen is located in the background, and these ewes have lambed already but have not been sheared. Photo: John M. White, *The Newer Northwest: A Description of the Health Resorts and Mining Camps of the Black Hills of South Dakota and Big Horn Mountains of Wyoming* (St. Louis: Self Culture Publishing Co., 1894), 187.

While both cattle and sheep grazing depended on public land, the core distinction between the two livestock operations was the constant attention required by the sheep,

<sup>36</sup> Robert W. Macy, "Thirty Years of Back Ground," 1; this is the typescript of part of a published article that Macy, of Moorcroft, prepared in 1934, and is located in the WPA Collections, File 1267.

and that attention shaped the cycle of activity on a sheep ranch, a system of transhumance. After fattening up in the higher elevations over the summer, the sheep would be moved down in the fall, sometimes first to foothills, and then to lower elevations preparatory to winter, and at that time sheep—mainly yearling lambs—to be marketed as mutton would be separated and shipped to the major markets, usually Chicago or Boston. Then the winter grazing took place, still under the watchful and protective eye of a herder, as the wool grew and the fleeces thickened and the lambs from the previous spring matured. Once the threat of spring snow diminished, the sheep would be sheared, the heavy ewes would be separated into what was called a “drop herd” and put into a lambing ground where attention was more or less constant and close. After lambing and shearing, the sheep were put onto summer grazing generally in higher elevations, although again an intermediate stay in the foothills was also common, and the cycle began again.

Yet within this seasonal cycle, sometimes called the seasonal round, was another cycle, the daily pattern of tending the sheep. Each shepherd would often be responsible for 2500 or 3000 sheep, and this required moving them around so that they had food and water, so that they did not overgraze any single area, and so that their bed grounds remained sanitary and disease-free. Thus the sheep moved in a daily, as well as seasonal, pattern. During the day the herder would move the sheep from their bedgrounds to grazing and watering areas and then back to the bedgrounds, moving out in different directions (like the spokes on a wheel) from the bedgrounds. Once that area had been fully used, the herder would move camp to another area and go through the daily movements again and again, repeating the process as often as necessary to utilize

the range, maximize the resources available, and minimize the energy-depleting movement of the animals.

A different, more specialized, form of activity would take place in the spring



Sheep shearing at Lance Creek, Wyoming, Souther Ranch, 1901. William Souther is tying a fleece at the right of the photograph. Photo: Nebraska State Historical Society, Photo 103317.

when the flocks were brought together for shearing, lambing, docking, and branding, and this would usually take place at a more permanent location, although in the early years those central camps were not always established. In the early years, too, the shearing took place in an open air setting, and this practice would remain true of smaller

operations far into the twentieth century. The 1892 Congressional report on the sheep industry noted that the sheep shearers themselves were an itinerant group, moving about to offer their services: “When a gang of sheep-shearers make their appearance in a county, a date is fixed and a suitable place arranged for the shearing, which is done on a wholesale plan.”<sup>37</sup> From the very beginning the crews doing the shearing tended to be identified as Mexican. The Congressional study of sheep raising noted that “Herders and ranch hands employed are usually foreigners or Mexicans [sic]. The herders receive from \$30 to \$40 per month, and the ranch hands \$20 to \$30 per month by the year.”<sup>38</sup> Early in the twentieth century Charles Floyd Spencer indicated that this had been the pattern for some time and remained so. Spencer also recalled a topographic feature near a sheep camp on the Bishop Ranch known as Mexican Draw.<sup>39</sup>

There was more that took place in the spring than shearing, because lambing also required close attention and the sheep were also branded and docked and dipped before being turned onto summer grazing, still under the care of a herder and dogs. At that point the cycle began over again, marked by movement to high country in the summer, lower country in the winter, and marketing of wool in the spring and mutton in the fall. The fundamentals of the system were put into words by E. B. Viall, a sheep grower near Sheridan, who described his own efforts thus in 1892:

In the first place get good sheep to begin with. Keep them tame. Keep your pens clean in winter. Keep them dry. Keep them out on the range

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<sup>37</sup> “Special Report on the Sheep Industry of the United States 1892,” 775.

<sup>38</sup> “Special Report on the Sheep Industry of the United States 1892,” 776.

<sup>39</sup> Spencer, *Wyoming Homestead Heritage*, 47. For a brief account of Hispanic sheepherders in Wyoming, see Peg Arnold, “Wyoming’s Hispanic Sheepherders,” *Annals of Wyoming*, 69 (Winter 1997), 29-34.

every day. I run my sheep in the mountains from July 1 until the snow drives them out. They do splendidly. There is plenty of shade, feed, and water. There is no other animal that does [as] well in this part of the country. The greatest trouble in this part of the country is to get a good winter range where you can get any. The trouble is scarcity of water to irrigate with. There is no trouble about the range as long as there is no snow; but to be safe in this business you must furnish hay. Last winter I fed considerable hay. Perhaps this winter, if it is a hard one, it will take 100 tons to winter my 9,000 to 10,000 head. No one should go into the business unless he can furnish plenty of good hay. I am now 57 years old and have had more or less experience with sheep my whole life. I have come to the conclusion that the way to make a success of sheep husbandry is to raise the best, keep everything strictly clean, and do everything in season.<sup>40</sup>

It should be noticed that Viall referred to feeding his sheep hay in the winter.

This also suggests the difference between the cattle industry and the sheep growers, and some, on both sides of that fence, have indicated that the cattle ranchers borrowed this practice from the sheep growers. In Will Barnes' history of livestock uses in the national forests, published in 1913, he noted that "Although many old time cattlemen blamed their misfortune on the settlers who had fenced so much of the formerly open range area, the change to winter feeding actually was an inevitable step toward security. Sheepmen, at that time just becoming well established in the west, set the example." The sheep rancher, said Barnes, "had his herd under his eye at all times, and could move it to better feed before the animals became too weak to travel" and the sheep rancher also "found out much earlier than did the cattleman that buying feed against a hard winter was money well invested."<sup>41</sup> And Frederic Hultz, in his study of cattle ranching in Wyoming,

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<sup>40</sup> "Special Report on the Sheep Industry of the United States 1892," 781.

<sup>41</sup> Will C. Barnes, *Western Grazing Grounds and Forest Ranges: A History of the Livestock Industry as Conducted on the Open Ranges of the arid West, with particular Reference to the Use now Being Made of the Ranges in the National Forests* (Chicago:

concluded: "It was the sheepman who first conceived the idea of laying in a supply of feed against severe winters."<sup>42</sup>

In effect, what distinguished sheep ranching from cattle ranching in the last two decades of the nineteenth century in the Powder River Basin was the utilization of a system of intensive ranching by the sheep growers. Even though they used the public domain with the same casual regard for ownership technicalities, and even though they faced the same natural forces that were hard on human and beast alike, and even though they operated in the midst of economic forces that decimated sheep and wool production elsewhere, the sheep industry in northeast Wyoming grew—and grew. Along with that growth, however, came far-reaching consequences for, as with the other elements of the agricultural community in the area, any expansion and growth in one would soon come into conflict with the others.

In 1894 John White observed of the area drained by Powder River and the Tongue River, that "sheep-grazing has been carried on with less friction between sheepmen and cattlemen, or between sheepmen and ranchmen, than in other parts of the state."<sup>43</sup> But the friction was there and the seeds of such conflict that did exist lay in several factors. One was the literal competition for the same range. So long as ranchers sought to graze cattle and sheep on the same grass, grass which still knew finite limits, there would ever be tension. There was even a widespread cultural divide between sheep and cattle growers that rigidified, that turned into a cold war of sorts. A decade and a half into the

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The Breeder's Gazette, 1913), 140-143.

<sup>42</sup> Frederic S. Hultz, "Wyoming Livestock Production," typed manuscript in WPA Collections, File 377.

twentieth century the *Sheridan Press* ran an article reflecting on the history of the local sheep industry and quoted one anonymous individual saying, “It cannot be said that the early flockmasters made any particular hit with the cattlemen. The latter charged that the sheep men were floaters; that they drifted all over the range; spoiling it for the cattle; would not stay ‘put’ in any locality and were a nuisance generally.”<sup>44</sup> These attitudes in part, but not exclusively, referring to the practice of tramp herding, rose to the level of widespread animosity and helped turn other issues into a low-grade running conflict with violent eruptions.

Another contributing feature was the belief among cattle ranchers that sheep actually and literally ruined the range. Robert W. Macy articulated this perspective well. Macy came from a cattle ranching background and ultimately became postmaster at Moorcroft, but only after he had written a thesis in animal husbandry on the open range in his home area. In that thesis Macy wrote, “Sheep graze the land very closely and tramp much of the good grass into the ground with their sharp hoofs. This was the thing that aroused the ire of the owners of herds.”<sup>45</sup> A less-nuanced perspective was offered by R. B. Mullens, a former cowboy in the Sheridan area who went on to become a physician. Mullens recalled his cowboy days and the sweet bunch grass that was so plentiful and nourished the cattle and said, “Now this wonderful grass had been destroyed by those

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<sup>43</sup> White, *The Newer Northwest*, 197.

<sup>44</sup> *Sheridan Press*, December 24, 1915, untitled article by Tom Stout, transcribed in Minnie Williamson, “The Sheep Industry in Sheridan County,” WPA Collections, File 1469.

<sup>45</sup> Robert W. Macy, “Some Factors in the Development and Destruction of the Open Range,” B.S. Thesis, Animal Husbandry, Iowa State College, Ames, Iowa, 1924, 11. A copy of the thesis can be found in the WPA Collections, File 369.

root-eating sheep, which were such a sorry substitute for good wholesome beef.”<sup>46</sup>

Subsequent experience with sheep by cattle ranchers appears to have neutralized the substance of those beliefs, although the ability of sheep to overgraze any particular area if not steadily moved to fresh range on a daily basis could certainly have contributed to the loathing of the cattle ranchers and cowboys for the woolly sheep—or, as they were also thereby called derisively, range maggots.

And those beliefs led to irritation. The irritations grew into issues and the issues into hostility. While other areas seem to have witnessed more and worse episodes of violence, the northeast section of the state was not exempt. As T. A. Larson indicated in his history of Wyoming, the usual pattern in Wyoming was the one outlined more broadly by George Rollins in his University of Utah dissertation.<sup>47</sup> The first step is warnings, the second is some kind of ultimatum, and the third step is violence. In the Powder River country, the warnings were probably unnecessary or so circumspect as to be muted or inarticulate; this was the same region, after all, that had recently simmered with ranchers’ bitterness and presumption which then erupted into the Johnson County War. After that conflict reached its ambiguous conclusion those same ranchers were, both collectively and individually, hardly in a position to be issuing warnings and threats.

Even so, there was no mistaking the atmosphere into which the sheep growers were moving their animals as the numbers of sheep multiplied and spread across the

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<sup>46</sup> Dr. R. B. Mullens, “The End of the Open Range,” typescript in WPA Collections, File 1063, p. 177.

<sup>47</sup> T. A. Larson, *History of Wyoming* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965, 1978; Second Edition, Revised), 369; George W. Rollins’ dissertation was subsequently reprinted for library circulation as, *The Struggle of the Cattleman, Sheepman, and Settler for Control of Lands in Wyoming, 1867-1910* (New York: Arno Press, 1979).

plains and mountains. While private threats and warnings to stay out of a particular area probably were issued but not recorded, the most visible signs were the dead lines. The dead lines were lines literally etched into the earth, or possibly only announced as being between two known points, beyond which sheep were not allowed to graze. The number, length, and location of the dead lines will probably never be determined with certainty. They are often referenced, but usually in general terms. In fact, not a single dead line can be documented in this area with precision as to when it was drawn or exactly where it went. Yet it is reasonably clear that at least some existed in the Powder River Basin. Historians Oliver and Bryans found in their study of the Pumpkin Buttes area that “a deadline was established in the vicinity of North Butte; the area around the Butte was designated cattle country, while west of there was sheep country.”<sup>48</sup> They also note that the Pumpkin Buttes area escaped the range violence found elsewhere and raise the intriguing possibility that dead lines actually prevented violence by keeping the different parties separate. J. Tom Wall, who herded both sheep and cattle later, remembered riding the range one day in the Pumpkin Buttes area with Alex Campbell. Campbell was camp tender for the Scotch Outfit—a large sheep operation. Wall recalls that Campbell told him that “about right along here was what was called the Dead Line in the early days, as around the Buttes was cattle country and west of the line towards the river was sheep country.”<sup>49</sup> An account by another homesteader refers to a “dead line” that “was established by enraged cattlemen near the Powder River in western Campbell County. A

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<sup>48</sup> Sande Oliver and Bill Bryans, “Historical Literature Survey of the Pumpkin Buttes Area of Southwest Campbell County, Wyoming, including the North Butte Mine Site,” prepared for Cleveland Cliffs Iron Company, Casper, Wyoming, April 1980, p. 34.

<sup>49</sup> Wall, *Crossing Old Trails to New in North Central Wyoming*, 98.

man was hired to plow a furrow running north and south, and woe befell any sheep men who dared to cross the line.”<sup>50</sup> Yet this demarcation happened well before that homesteading family had actually entered the area, the stories were already second hand, and this trail of evidence fades quickly.

Probably a common form of dead line was the use of an existing linear built or topographic feature as a boundary. Homesteader—and later cowboy—Charles Floyd Spencer recalled of the area where he lived in western Weston County and eastern Campbell County that, “After the railroad right-of-way was fenced in the late 1890’s, it proved to be a natural boundary between the cattle and sheep range; east of the track was cattle range, and west of the track was sheep range. Both were suited for their particular purpose, as the cattle had deep, well-watered, and sheltered canyons with trees and grass, while the sheep grazed on mostly open prairie.”<sup>51</sup>

With dead lines or without, there were a few instances of range violence in which sheep herders and their flocks suffered from raids by cattle ranchers. A decade later, in Converse County, an article in *Bill Barlow’s Budget* described some attacks there, but the specific attacks have not been otherwise documented: “About 1893 a number of sheep outfits were visited by armed bodies of ranchmen and cattlemen who were called ‘gunny sackers’ on account of being disguised with gunny sacks over their heads and who marked off deadlines on the range. Sheep wagons were burned, sheep shot and clubbed

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<sup>50</sup> Bowden, *1916: Wyoming, Here We Come!*, 44.

<sup>51</sup> Charles Floyd Spencer, *Wyoming Homestead Heritage* (Hicksville, New York: Exposition Press, 1975), 42.

to death, herders shot and mistreated.”<sup>52</sup> A decade later, in 1903, the conflict continued, and one report describes an instance forty miles north of Lusk:

Seven men overpowered, tied, and blindfolded the herder, burned his wagon, killed his horses and in a leisurely manner slaughtered 500 sheep. They rode away leaving the herder to freeze to death but as he was insecurely tied he struggled free and walked fifteen miles to telephone [?] the sheriff. A week earlier four men attacked another camp tying the herder and pitching him into a bank of snow. Then they clubbed 500 sheep.<sup>53</sup>

How many other such raids took place in the northeast quadrant of the state is not known and a systematic study has not been conducted. Statewide, T. A. Larson noted that the violence, though quite real, has sometimes been exaggerated and has cautioned against taking all accounts at face value.<sup>54</sup> Within the Powder River Basin, broadly construed, it does appear that while there were such incidents, the violence did not reach the proportions that it did elsewhere in Wyoming. And the violence around the state appears to have subsided after 1909 when raiders murdered two sheep ranchers and a herder in the Big Horn mountains south of Tensleep; this time, however, the culprits, or at least some of them, were aggressively prosecuted, convicted, and incarcerated.<sup>55</sup>

But even before that, there were indications in this area that tensions were subsiding. The pattern was perhaps unexpected, but more and more cattle ranchers either

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<sup>52</sup> Mary A. Skelton, “Sheep,” 4. This is a transcription of an article that appeared in *Bill Barlow’s Budget*, 21<sup>st</sup> Anniversary edition, June 1907.

<sup>53</sup> “Cattle and Sheep Wars” typescript by unidentified author in WPA Collections, File 404.

<sup>54</sup> Larson, *History of Wyoming*, 372n.

<sup>55</sup> John W. Davis, *A Vast Amount of Trouble: A History of the Spring Creek Raid* (Niwot, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 1993).

switched from cattle to sheep or ran sheep as well as cattle. Horatio Burns, who had ranched in Sheridan County on Prairie Dog Creek as early as 1884, switched over from cattle to sheep around 1900 and expanded his holdings in 1904.<sup>56</sup> “By 1906,” one account that includes the Keeline operation reports, “the 4J was running 30,000 head of cattle and 33,000 head of sheep.”<sup>57</sup> And the same source that reported on the violence of the “gunny sackers” also suggested that shortly afterwards, “It speedily became apparent that the [sheep] business had come to stay, and the men who had been the most bitter ‘Gunny sackers’ engaged in it and are today wealthy men.”<sup>58</sup>

There is even an indication that some cattle ranchers turned to sheep, in addition to their cattle, as a *defensive* mechanism. Near the Black Hills, one account relates that the T7 Ranch acquired a band of sheep which it ran “along the borders of their ranch so that the neighboring 21 could not run their cattle upon the T.7 range, for cattle will not cross or feed upon land where sheep have been. The 21 then retaliated by purchasing a band of sheep to herd along the borders of their range so neighbors on the other side could not encroach upon them. So the sheep formed a sort of living fence on an otherwise open range.”<sup>59</sup> While skirmishes and occasional eruptions continued for a few more years, the cold war between cattle ranchers and sheep ranchers seemed to be headed toward a *détente* in the first decade of the twentieth century.

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<sup>56</sup> Ida McPherran, *History of Grazing*, Part IV, typescript in WPA Collections, File 394, p. 50; Clearmont Historical Group, *Backward Glance: Ulm, Leiter, Ucross, Clearmont, A Century of History* (Buffalo, Wyoming: The Office, n.d.), 11-13.

<sup>57</sup> Bowden, *1916: Wyoming, Here We Come!*, 41.

<sup>58</sup> Skelton, “Sheep,” 4. This would have been in 1907.

<sup>59</sup> Olaf B. Kongsli, “History of Grazing: Introduction of Sheep,” typescript in WPA

*iii. A Garden of Diversity*

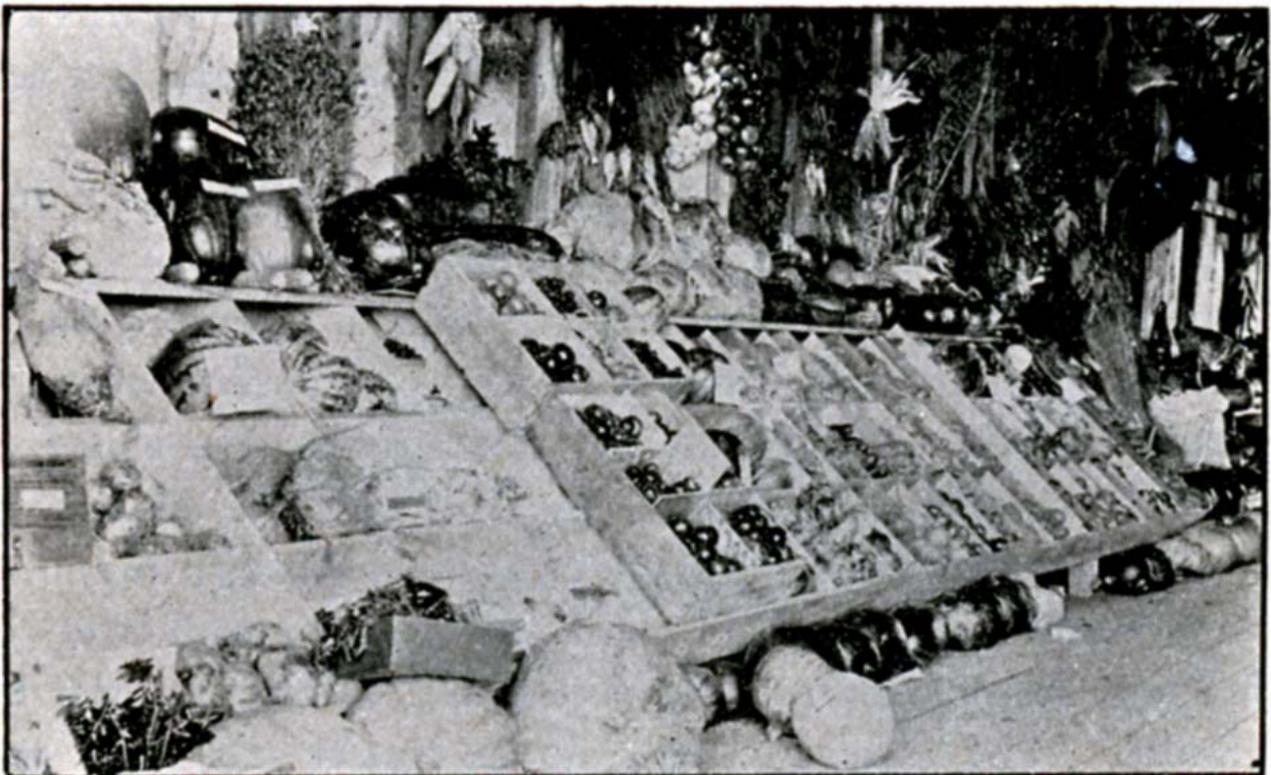
The wars over cattle and over sheep in the first decade of the twentieth century have often concealed the more fundamental development, which was a steady growth in agriculture in the area between the Big Horn Mountains and the Black Hills south to the North Platte. The population of the five counties—Converse, Crook, Johnson, Sheridan, and Weston—more than doubled in the first ten years of the century, and the vast bulk of that population increase filtered into the rural areas to take up new land and set up new farms. The county with the greatest population increase was Sheridan, which went from just over five thousand inhabitants in 1900 to more than sixteen thousand in 1910. On the other hand, the county where mining activity was most concentrated, Weston, increased only from 3203 to 4980 in the same period.<sup>60</sup> Agriculture had lost none of its appeal in northeast Wyoming.

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Collections, File 378.

<sup>60</sup> U.S. Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910*, Vol. V, Agriculture (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1914), 938-968. Unless indicated otherwise, agricultural statistical data in this section will be drawn from this document.

What is especially striking in the way that agriculture was undertaken in that area is its broad diversification and decentralized nature. The overwhelming majority—ninety-one percent—of the farms and ranches were operated by their owners, with only a handful operated by managers or tenants. And the farms and ranches were relatively small, with more than a third (thirty-seven percent) in the neighborhood of 160 acres and



Farm Products of Sheridan County, 1894. Photo: John M. White, *The Newer Northwest: A Description of the Health Resorts and Mining Camps of the Black Hills of South Dakota and Big Horn Mountains of Wyoming* (St. Louis: Self Culture Publishing Co., 1894), 141.

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four out of five (seventy-nine percent) being under 500 acres. And they produced a variety of crops. The mainstay of agriculture was, of course, hay and forage, but the acreage in cultivated grasses (alfalfa, timothy, clover, millet, etc.) was almost twice the area left in wild or prairie grasses. But hay was not the only crop. By this time Sheridan

County alone cultivated one fourth of all the wheat planted in the state. Plus, the northeast quadrant produced respectable quantities of other small grains and vegetables. In this regard, the gross statistics—measuring total units of production—can be misleading for they tend to emphasize extensive rather than intensive agriculture, and all indications are that the system of farms and ranches were operated intensively.

There were 3,710 farms and ranches in the five counties in 1910 and these included all kinds of operations from the large cattle and sheep ranches to tiny parcels of under three acres. To identify a “typical” or “average” farm or ranch is fraught with peril since any resulting portrait would be a statistical blend of diverse features that may not have existed together in reality—like the apocryphal family with two and three tenths children. And the census information does not reveal what such a typical farm or ranch looked like since it deals only in gross statistics and in most instances does not report how many farms (a category that included ranches) produced each commodity or what they did with the crops that were produced and the livestock that were raised. The returns do suggest that most farms were small and they were operated by the owners and probably were worked by the whole family who lived on them. The census data also indicate that not everybody lived and worked on an irrigated farm; while there was a preference for settling in areas along drainages or where the water from those waterways could be diverted through irrigation ditches and canals to water the fields, only a third (thirty-four percent) of the farms and ranches were irrigated in 1910.

Yet, it is still possible to get an idea of the way these farms and ranches were configured and how they worked. In 1903 the *Sheridan Post* surveyed the ranches and farms in the county and described many of them. The information provided, like the

census data, does not suggest any typicality of the particular ranches or even imply that Sheridan County's operations can be generalized to the wider region, but those ranches do suggest a pattern. And that pattern is diversification. Consider the following ranches and farms:

- J. H. Lewis: 960 acres; 240 under ditch; 80 acres hay and 60 acres small grain; livestock: 6 horses, 75 cattle, 25 hogs. Located 5.5 miles south of Sheridan; "has a good house and barn and other ranch buildings"
- L. T. Rawlins: 160 acres 6 miles south of Sheridan. "He has a well improved place and prospects are very bright for a large crop. He has 125 acres of hay, seven horses, twenty head of cattle, besides a few hogs. Mr. Rawlins came from Oregon two years ago and thinks Wyoming is the garden spot of the world."
- J. D. Thurmond: 14 miles south of Sheridan; 160 acres, "all of which is under ditch." 75 acres of hay, 60 acres of small grain; 12 head horses, "and a small bunch of cattle" Mr. Thurmond came to this vicinity 22 years ago.
- L. E. Martin: "a nice ranch of 200 acres" 9.5 miles southwest of town; 160 acres under ditch, 125 acres of which is hay and 10 in small grain; 85 head of cattle. "In 1892 Mr. Martin erected a fine new house on his ranch." Ranch was established in 1880.
- Lee Dickenson: 8 miles southwest of Sheridan; 480 acres deeded land, 200 acres under ditch, all is hay; 11 head of horses, "and a bunch of cattle, and if indications count for anything he will have an immense crop."
- C. M. Hite: 4 miles west of Sheridan; 500 acres, 150 under ditch, 60 in hay, 35 in small grain. "He owns 22 head of horses, 24 head of cattle and a small bunch of

hogs. He also has a fine orchard and present indications are that he will have a nice crop of apples, cherries, plums, currants, raspberries, gooseberries and strawberries.”

- C. F. Ewelson: 6.5 miles west of Sheridan; 160 acres deeded land; 110 acres irrigated; “His crop consists of 85 acres of hay and 25 acres of small grain and his live stock of 10 head of horses and a nice bunch of cattle. Mr. Ewelson erected a large new barn in 1902.”
- Wm. Timm: “one of the old timers of Sheridan county,” his ranch included 480 acres



Garden on McKenzie Ranch, Crook County, Photo: J. E. Stimson Collection, Negative #469, Wyoming State Archives.

nine miles west, and he had resided there for the past twenty years. “He has 170

acres under ditch, of which 100 acres is in hay and 60 acres in small grain. He owns four head of horses and 70 head of cattle, besides 120 stands of bees.”<sup>61</sup>

Although a plethora of conclusions, even contradictory ones, could be drawn from such information, and while it is tempting to broaden the picture of Sheridan’s “garden spot” to the rest of the Powder River Basin, the most important suggestion of this information has to do with the general structure of agriculture it implies rather than the particulars it names. There was every incentive in that system to grow a variety of crops and livestock and to do so in a way that completed an agricultural cycle. The farms were self-contained as much as possible. They would grow their own hay for the horses they used and for the cattle they produced, and they would grow their own wheat and other small grains as well as bees and hogs for their own consumption and then sell the surplus to purchase other goods that they could not produce. Unmentioned in the article because it was an operative assumption about farm life, was that each farm or ranch would have a substantial garden for supplying vegetables to be consumed while fresh and also canned for winter use. While farms and ranches throughout the rest of the Powder River Basin did not always look like those near Sheridan, the basic assumptions and goals of what constituted farm life remained very much a constant.

In its essentials, the system of agriculture that was emerging in the Powder River Basin was not the system that prevailed in the rest of the country, but a system very much like the one that had existed before the Civil War unleashed the forces of transformation in the nation’s countryside. Where the trend in the rest of the nation was toward increasing farm size through consolidation, in the Powder River Basin, the course was

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<sup>61</sup> “Ranch Talk,” *Sheridan Post*, July 2, 1903.

precisely the opposite. The farms were literally smaller in 1910 than they had been in 1900. More than a third (thirty-seven percent) of them were smaller than 174 acres;



2944—RANCH HOME NEAR BIG HORN, WYO. Ranch Home near Big Horn, Wyoming. Photo: J. E. Stimson Collection, Negative 2944, Wyoming State Archives.

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eighty percent were under five hundred acres, and just thirteen percent were larger than a thousand acres. They were operated by the families that owned them. Four out of five (eighty-two percent) of the owner-operated farms and ranches did not owe a dollar on a mortgage. Most farms (fifty-two percent) throughout the five county area did not spend a dollar on hired labor. Nearly two-thirds (sixty-four percent) did not spend any money on

feed for their livestock. The implements and machinery on the farms remained simple and inexpensive and they accounted for around two percent of the value of the farm or ranch.

The buildings in which people lived and worked on these farms and ranches cannot be easily summarized—or categorized. There were, of course, the dugouts, like

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Home of Daniel and Lydia Davis Hilman, near Sheridan. This building began as a two-room cabin and evolved to the 26 room house pictured. It also changed function and ultimately the operation became a dude ranch and the house accommodated guests. Photo: courtesy of Ross Hilman.

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those described by John White. Then there were the more elaborate homes and buildings.

Regarding all of these, however, it is important to remember that they tended to undergo

a process of evolution as they would grow and expand, and they seldom followed a preconceived plan as they evolved. In 1938 the residence of Daniel Hilman and his wife near Sheridan was described in a newspaper account that captured some of that early evolution. Hilman had founded the D Bar H Ranch in 1881 and married Lydia Davis two years later and the couple “took up their residence in a two-room log house on the site of the present ranch house. Ten years later the small quarters were supplanted by a new 11-room house which was enlarged as the years went by. When it burned down three years ago this month it was a 26-room residence, and one of the most beautiful of the ranch homes that had grown up with the cattle country, typical as many of the ranch houses in this area are, of the prosperity and hospitality of that era.”<sup>62</sup>

That process of building on, in what sometimes appeared to be a haphazard pattern, was firmly entrenched as an effective and economical system. Even in 1894 John White had noticed this in his tour of the area, as once when he traveled the road to Clearmont to visit a ranch:

Rounding the projecting point of a hillock, we came upon the ranch buildings situated in a cove of about ten acres. The residence was a combination of log houses, covered with clap-boards. The original structure had been added to as necessity or convenience demanded, until it was now a picturesque arrangement of wings and extensions, half covered by a vine-latticed porch and clambering ivy. Originally, two good-sized log buildings had been erected, with their gable ends confronting each other, about twelve feet apart. The intervening space had been closed, and now constituted the main and only hall, from which spacious rooms opened on either side.<sup>63</sup>

There were, of course, the huge, elaborate, and even ostentatious operations of

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<sup>62</sup> “St. Louis Man Buys famous Hilman Ranch,” typescript of article from *Sheridan Press*, January 16, 1938, in WPA Collections, File 394.

<sup>63</sup> White, *The Newer Northwest*, 201-202.

latter-day English remittance men with their sprawling, but well-groomed, estates of multiple thousand acres that skewed the statistical averages in every way as showcase ranches. Those owned by the Wallops and Moncreiffes specialized in purebred livestock



Stockade Beaver Creek Ranch, Weston County, Photo: J. E. Stimson Collection, Negative #434A, Wyoming State Archives.

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including cattle, horses, and sheep. Those two English families had arrived in 1890 and set out to build the best and most attractive ranches that money could buy. The elaborate ranch and mill operated by George Beck, also near Sheridan, became known widely for

its purebred stock too. The Beckton Stock Farm was described in 1903 as containing seven thousand acres, a thousand of which were irrigated, cultivating three hundred acres of hay, and a hundred acres of small grains. “They make a specialty of fine stock and now have 75 head of horses, 120 head of cattle and 1,700 head of sheep, besides six registered stallions and 15 registered mares. The buildings on this place are the best consisting of a large house of 20 rooms, besides two other large residences. They have ample shed room for cattle and sheep.”<sup>64</sup>

But these were the exceptions, not the rule, and the most common was the middling farm / ranch of four hundred acres on which homesteaders grew a small herd of cattle, some hay, some oats and barley, a few horses, some pigs, and a vegetable garden that could be measured in the acres. And it is important to remember that the size of the house does not determine its historical significance. The small or modest dwellings and ranch buildings of the multitudes were as much a part of the lives, perhaps more even, of those who worked to build the ranches and farms of the region. Consider the recollection of Eva Ogden Putnam around the turn of the century. Her father had homesteaded in Crook County, arriving there in 1882 and later taking up his own place. While she was just a girl, her father started “in the fall of the year on a totally new place with not even a house anywhere near completed, no feed for the cattle, no sheds, . . .” “I know we lived out doors until our log cabin was finished.” And while life in the new cabin was not sumptuous by any measure, it seems to have had its rewards: “we were happy and content in that simple life, altho I confess it would be very hard to go back to it now. We had

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<sup>64</sup> “Ranch Talk,” *Sheridan Post*, July 2, 1903.

health and an unbroken family. We had plenty of good, wholesome food, milk, butter, eggs, cream, and from the first summer a fine garden. We had beef and pork



Scotch Outfit, Johnson County, 1909. The Scotch Outfit was one of the largest sheep operations in Johnson County. Photo: Johnson County Library Local History Collections. Note hewed logs, piece-sur-piece construction, and sod roof on the ranch building.

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occasionally, and a neighbor, who was a hunter, would go up into the mountains any time we requested, killed and dress a deer (no game laws then), bring it on his pony for the big sum of one dollar.” And, while surely the life of Putnam and many others knew privation and hardship, their own perspective carries a different tenor: “. . . I do know this, that

what I saw in those early pioneer days of Wyoming and what I experienced then seemed as all right and life as good and as worth living as it seems today with all its conveniences and modern inventions.”<sup>65</sup>

It was sometimes a fine line between farms and ranches, and sometimes no line at all. The cattle ranches appear to have been more diversified than previously, and certainly they were now growing hay for winter feed rather than relying on the cattle to find their own forage and rather than depending on wild grasses. In Crook and Weston Counties wild grass still formed the greater part of the hay crop, but elsewhere the acres of cultivated grasses far outnumbered the wild to the extent that, except for the prairie grass that grew on the public domain, as a region the hay and forage that was cultivated was almost twice as extensive as the wild. The cattle ranches were smaller, though, both in terms of physical size of land holdings and also in herd size. It was a far different situation from what it had been twenty years before when herds were brought in that counted in the tens of thousands. Representative of the prevailing trend in cattle ranching was a homesteader like W. H. Smyth who filed on a homestead on Lance Creek in 1907. Smyth purchased his first herd of twenty heifers from a neighbor that year and supported his initial years by carrying the mail.<sup>66</sup> But he had a “herd.” The same year the old 101 Ranch was broken up and sold with L. H. Robinson of Moorcroft acquiring part of it and he “started his cattle operation with two carloads (about 40 head) of Durham cows” although he soon switched to Herefords—the breed that was replacing other cattle on the

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<sup>65</sup> Eva Ogden Putnam, “Pioneering in Crook County,” *Annals of Wyoming*, 3 (April 1926), 203-205.

<sup>66</sup> Historical Committee of the Robber’s Roost Historical Society, *Pioneering on the Cheyenne River* (Lusk, Wyoming: The Lusk Herald, 1947; reprinted 1956), 76.

range.<sup>67</sup> Two decades earlier, the twenty-head herd of Smyth and the forty-head herd of Robinson would have been laughably small and easily overwhelmed by the giant ranches; in 1907 they seemed to be about the norm.

The trend toward smallness in herds and ranches was important. The larger trend, though, was that the cattle themselves were being replaced. In part they were being replaced by people who spread out on the former grazing land and in part they were being replaced by sheep. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century there were nearly a million and a half sheep in these five counties and only 350,000 cattle. The sheep business had been difficult during the 1890s, but it picked up in the 1900s. In 1898 J. T. Williams in Converse County was pleased to receive thirteen cents a pound for his wool clip, since that was a penny more than double what he received the previous year.<sup>68</sup> In 1906 Douglas area wool growers were offered as much as twenty-four cents a pound, but held out for twenty-five.<sup>69</sup> The sheep business was booming in the first decade and the results were to be seen everywhere. In one day in June 1907 one buyer purchased 300,000 pounds of wool in Douglas and the wool warehouse there had a capacity for a million pounds.<sup>70</sup>

In 1907 the Douglas *Budget*, which replaced its predecessor *Bill Barlow's Budget* as the newspaper in Douglas, explained why more people were going into the sheep business, or switching to it from cattle—and why they should: “The sheep business is

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<sup>67</sup> Bowden, *1916: Wyoming, Here We Come!*, 38.

<sup>68</sup> *Bill Barlow's Budget*, February 8, 1898.

<sup>69</sup> *Bill Barlow's Budget*, May 28, 1906.

vastly more profitable than the cattle and ranch business. The cattle men have to wait three years for much of a return; the sheep man has his wool clip and his lambs the first year. The growth of the sheep business during the past 16 years has been marvelous, and if all were told, it would read like a fairy tale.”<sup>71</sup> Some entered the sheep business from scratch. Some cattlemen added sheep to their operation. Some in the sheep business elsewhere came to this region. In 1905 M. D. McKeon, who built the 7L Ranch, “trailed his sheep from the western part of Wyoming to his new location on the Cheyenne River and Alkali Creek. There were twenty-four bands, consisting of about 2,500 sheep to a band. Hendrick Hanson was the sheep Foreman and also helped him trail the sheep to the Cheyenne River. Mr. McKeon built up a fine ranch, irrigated about 200 acres of alfalfa from the flood water of Cheyenne River.”<sup>72</sup>

The introduction of sixty thousand sheep on the range, and using two hundred acres of alfalfa to support them, might have conveyed a sense of déjà vu to the cattle ranchers who had seen a similar process two decades earlier, but that was not the real significance of the change underway. The circumstances that produced the crisis of the winter of 1886 – 1887 were no longer present (although the winter of 1911 brought great hardship to some sheep ranchers), and especially since sheep were tended throughout the year instead of let loose in the winter, the repeat of a massive “die out” was not likely.

More fundamentally, though, what this boom in sheep indicated was a divergence

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<sup>70</sup> “Concerning the Sheep Industry in Central Wyoming.”

<sup>71</sup> “Concerning the Sheep Industry in Central Wyoming,” typescript of article from Douglas *Budget*, Anniversary edition, 1907.

<sup>72</sup> Historical Committee of the Robber’s Roost Historical Society, *Pioneering on the Cheyenne River*, 80.

from the other patterns of agriculture in the region. For this pattern implied larger rather than smaller operations, centralization and consolidation rather than decentralized family units, specialization rather than diversification, manager-operated instead of owner-operated, industrial organization rather than pre-industrial, and extensive agriculture rather than intensive. The deeper significance was that the sheep industry in Wyoming in the 1900s was more in line with agriculture in the rest of the nation—for better or worse. The rest of the agrarian activity of the area, with its decentralized, diversified, independent, family-based operations, was not only outside the main trends of agriculture in the nation, but was quite distinctly, and perhaps, deliberately, outside the mainstream.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Harvests of Plenty: 1900-1920**

If the first decade of the twentieth century set the stage for the development of farming and ranching in northeast Wyoming, the following ten years or so produced a series of developments that unleashed enormous transformative forces that took agriculture to new heights of prosperity for just about every group that had taken up residence there. More and more people took out homestead claims of one kind or another and new farms and ranches dotted the landscape. Those farms were often subsistence operations, but many grew and produced crops in abundance, putting more of what they produced onto the market. And they continued to grow. The livestock grazers also expanded their operations, although the structure of the cattle industry changed for both cattle and sheep. But the increased level of prosperity they enjoyed came not because they were working harder, but because of external forces. It was the circumstance of war that brought higher prices. And when the war was gone, so too was the market. And thus the rising tide of commodity prices was replaced by devastating lows which were made the worse by drought and the power of a strong, centralized banking system. Even more significant than the fluctuation in income and standard of living, however, were the enduring structural changes that reshaped the life and work of those who used the land, for those changes created the circumstances that would either condemn or sustain the people who tilled and grazed this area in the future.

*i. The Advance of the Dry Farmer*

A variety of developments contributed to a dramatic surge in homesteading activity in the Powder River Basin in the 1910s, but they had their roots in earlier years. The agricultural practice of dry farming had emerged and spread across the Great Plains in the late nineteenth century, and while this form of agriculture offered hope to many aspiring settlers, it was almost in the same category as astrology or alchemy in the eyes of its detractors. Often perspectives on the practice were shaped by preconceived potential uses of the land, so that some who were intent on farming the land became devout believers in the religion of dry farming, abiding in the faith that “rain follows the plow,” while ranching and other advocates came to see it as yet one more way to break up the public domain and make it unusable for grazing, and suggested that it was a sham, led by a platoon of charlatans for their own profit.

The practice of dry farming had its origins in the arid and semi arid lands of Utah, of western Kansas and Nebraska, and in the valleys of California as settlement expanded westward in the late nineteenth century and the principles of “scientific soil culture” could be found articulated in Wyoming Territory by no less than Samuel Aughey who was Territorial Geologist in the 1880s. Aughey was a minister-turned scientist who had been a professor at the University of Nebraska and had boasted that the state east of Wyoming was destined to become a farmers’ paradise because the tillers of the soil would be able to take advantage of modern soil science. In his 1880 book, *Sketches of*

*the Physical Geography and Geology of Nebraska*, Aughey had described how the breaking up of the hard sod would prevent rainfall from running off into the rivers; instead, it would soak into the soil, nourish crops, and then be returned to the air as it evaporated, and would in that way increase the amount of rainfall in the future, and it was Aughey who pronounced and popularized his notion that the rain literally follows the plow; the more the earth is planted and cultivated, the more rain will fall.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, rainfall in much of the late nineteenth century seemed to increase, but not for the reasons that Aughey had postulated. The natural increase in the rainfall, however, when coupled with the supposedly scientific body of knowledge supporting farming on the semi-arid lands of the Great Plains, encouraged people to draw upon the homestead laws to seek their own fates as farmers.

By the beginning of the twentieth century enthusiasm had waned for the belief that the rain actually followed the plow, but there actually was enough experience to show that crops could be planted, cultivated, and harvested on lands that were much dryer than those people had left behind in the Midwest—if they used careful agricultural practices that would conserve, if not exactly recycle, the moisture. The new practitioners usually followed the more scientifically-based principles developed by Hardy W. Campbell and others who emphasized plowing deeply, packing the seeds in the subsoil, fallowing land (not planting it, but plowing under any moisture that should fall) for a couple of seasons, frequently cultivating it to keep down the weeds, practicing careful

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<sup>1</sup> Robert N. Manley, “Samuel Aughey: Nebraska’s Scientific Promoter,” *Journal of the West*, 6 (1967), 108-118; Mary W. M. Hargreaves, “Dry Farming Alias Scientific Promoter,” *Agricultural History*, 22 (1948), 39-56. On this issue, see more generally, Mary Wilma M. Hargreaves, *Dry Farming in the Northern Great Plains, 1900-1925* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957).

crop diversification and rotation, and using different strains of crops that would be more resistant to drought.<sup>2</sup> And this knowledge became eminently practical as people moved in to claim lands after the choicest land, the land either along a drainage or accessible by irrigation otherwise, had mostly been taken up. This included people who moved into the

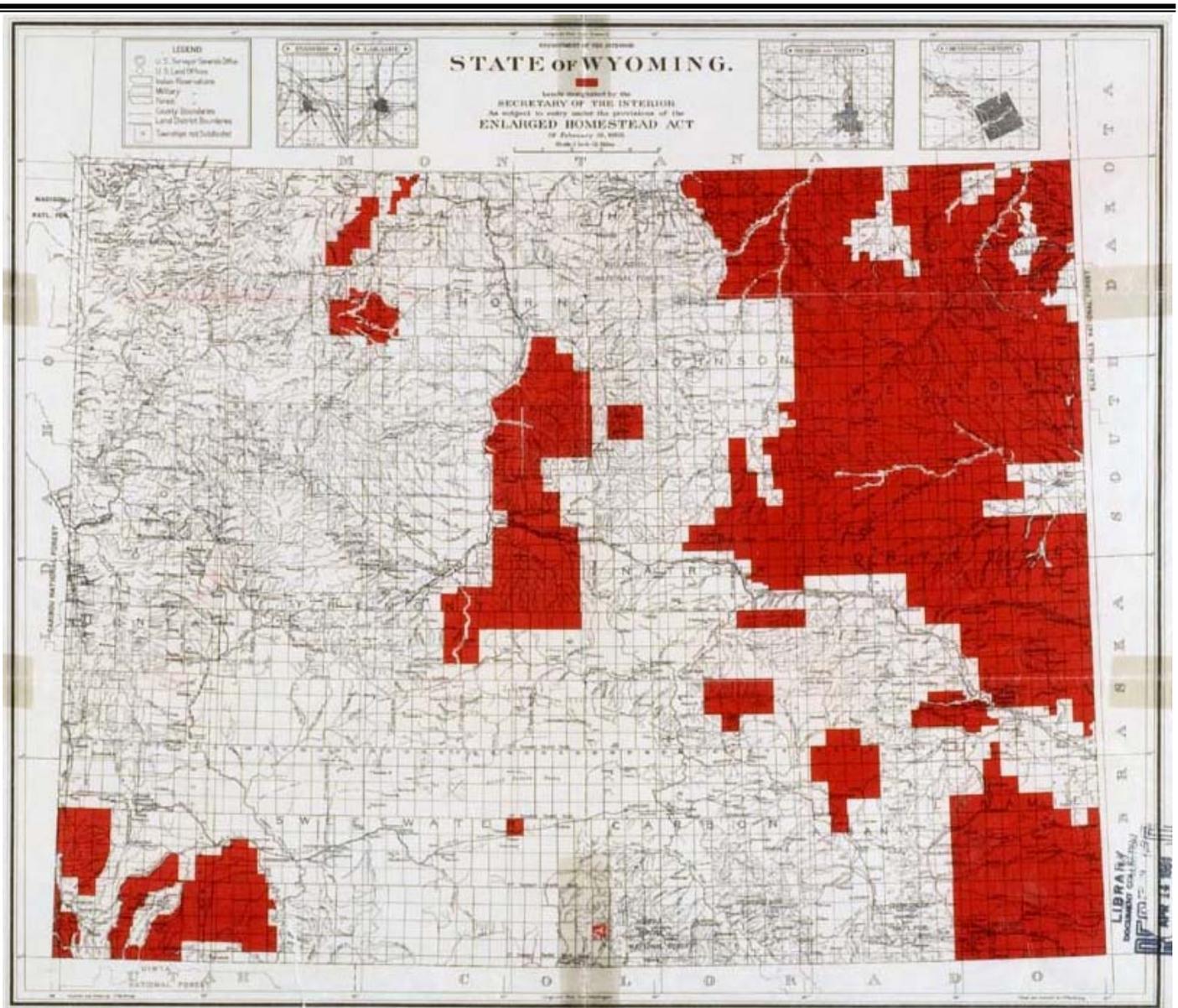


Gatchell's Rye Field, Weston County, Wyoming. Photo: J. E. Stimson Collection, Wyoming State Archives, negative 426.

Powder River Basin.

<sup>2</sup> Mary W. M. Hargreaves, "The Dry-Farming Movement in Retrospect," *Agricultural History*, 51 (1977), 149-165.

Dry farming seemed to work. In the Clearmont area, for example, a local history reports that in the 1890s, “it was found that dry farming could produce hay and wheat as well as the irrigated places. Wheat could be planted in the fall, taking advantage of the



Map: State of Wyoming, Lands Designated by the Secretary of the Interior as subject to entry under the Provisions of the Enlarged Homestead Act of February 19, 1909. Source: American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie.

winter snows.”<sup>3</sup> On the eastern side of the area, Frank W. Mondell engaged in dry farming on his land north of Newcastle as early as the 1880s.<sup>4</sup> But it was in the 1900s that dry farming became especially important as more people moved in and had to settle on lands that could not be irrigated.

But as each claim was taken out and as each farm field was plowed, more of the domain that had been used by cattle was taken away, and so conflicting pressures mounted to secure land laws favorable to either the farmer or the rancher. The issues sometimes got tangled because advocates for both farmers and ranchers pushed for greater allowable homestead claims. Some dry-farming advocates wanted 1862 Homestead Act claims (as distinct from claims under other laws, which were more liberal), which had been limited to 160 acres and which had generally been agreed as inadequate for arid conditions, increased to a full section—640 acres. The livestock growers and their advocates had likewise concluded that 640 acres would suit them too, although some of them preferred a system of leasing the larger public domain to outright ownership of parcels. The final measure that emerged into law in 1909 was a compromise; significantly, that law was promoted mainly by Congressman Frank W. Mondell, whose own experiments with dry farming seem to have guided him.

The resulting Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909 increased the allowable size of a homestead claim to 320 acres, provided that the claimant cultivate one fourth of the land and stipulated that there be no irrigable land, timber land, or mineral land within the

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<sup>3</sup> Clearmont Historical Group, *Backward Glance: Ulm, Leiter, Ucross, Clearmont, A Century of History* (Buffalo, Wyoming: The Office, n.d.), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Mondell described that experience in J. D. Towar, Wyoming Experiment Station Bulletin No. 80, “Dry Farming in Wyoming,” March 1909, 11.

entry. This was exactly a response to dry-farming advocates and the next year Mondell became president of the International Dry Farming Congress.<sup>5</sup> What is usually noticed about the 1909 homesteading law is the doubling of land available to settlers, but there is a separate item that also adds to the significance of this policy change. The Enlarged Homestead Act was passed and signed into law in February 1909; the next month Mondell pushed another, related, provision as he opposed President Theodore Roosevelt's withdrawal of mineral lands from private entry and in this measure he enabled claimants to enter land classified as agricultural prior to the discovery of coal there; when that happened, the new law said, the homesteader would receive a patent to the land but not to the coal rights (separate from other minerals) which would be retained by the federal government.<sup>6</sup> Mondell had been associated not only with dry farming activities, but had begun his career in Wyoming in the coal mining industry.

The impact of the Enlarged Homestead Act—or, as Mary W. M. Hargreaves termed in her study of dry farming, the “Dry-Farming Homestead Legislation”<sup>7</sup>—was two fold generally, and probably carried the same weight in northeast Wyoming as elsewhere in the West. First, it did allow larger entries and it appears that some people

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<sup>5</sup> Mondell's sponsorship of this legislation has been more commonly recognized in Wyoming than in national discussions of the measure. See T. A. Larson, *History of Wyoming* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965, 1978; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, revised), 362, and “Mondell, Frank Wheeler,” in Howard W. Lamar, *The Reader's Encyclopedia of the American West* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977), 765; Paul W. Gates, *History of Public Land Law Development* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1968), 503-509; and Roy M. Robbins, *Our Landed Heritage: The Public Domain 1776-1936* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), 362-363.

<sup>6</sup> Robbins, *Our Landed Heritage*, 370-371; Robert W. Swenson, “Legal Aspects of Mineral Resources Exploitation,” in Gates, *History of Public Land Law Development*, 728-729.

who were already homesteading used the law to claim additional land. Secondly, the simple passage of new legislation and the attendant publicity provided a psychological encouragement for more people to enter claims who had not done so previously. In 1910, the first full year in which it was in operation, nearly a hundred thousand claims were entered nationally, although this was not a record number and was still lower than had been filed previously in some exceptional years. And historian Paul Gates notes that after an initial rush to settlement following the Enlarged Homestead Act, claims dropped sharply in the following two years of drought, but increased afterwards.<sup>8</sup> Because the circumstances of the five (soon to be seven) counties in northeast Wyoming do not always replicate those of other parts of the state, the close study of claims in that area remains an important project for future investigators to determine the various patterns involved in this twentieth-century homesteading surge. One conclusion, however, appears clear from the outset: given the finite amount of irrigable land in the area, each additional homestead claim meant a greater likelihood that subsequent claims would be on land less susceptible to irrigation and that the methods of the dry farmer would be put to use—and put to test.

The new law that Congressman Frank Mondell shepherded into enactment encouraged further settlement, but that encouragement was multiplied by action at the state level. In 1911 the state of Wyoming created a new Board of Immigration and allocated \$40,000 to publicize the agricultural opportunities awaiting any who would come to Wyoming whether they wanted to settle on irrigated land, to engage in dry farming, or to settle on mineral lands and establish some kind of business. One brochure

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<sup>7</sup> Hargreaves, *Dry Farming in the Northern Great Plains, 1900-1925*, 346-356.

the Board of Immigration printed and circulated engaged in a broad array of promotional devices calculated to make the state look attractive. It was titled, appropriately, “Map of Wyoming Resources Showing at a glance the HARVEST OF GOLD Which awaits the Settler and Investor in Wyoming,” and while it painted a glowing picture of the life to be made in Wyoming agriculture, it also offered surprisingly candid insights into expectations the newcomers should have. About dry farming, for example, the brochure noted that “While so-called dry farming does not produce anything like as big yields as farming under irrigation, the land suitable for it is much cheaper, and those who have tried it claim that one can make a larger percentage of profit on the investment by dry farming than any other way.” It proceeded to spell out what crops (row crops, drought resistant crops) under what conditions (only where rainfall is above twelve inches annually, on a large enough acreage such that half can be left fallow each year), and how to tend to the crops (mulching to hold the moisture, deep plowing to allow the rain and snow to soak the soil, stirring the crust of the soil after every shower to capture the water). The brochure made no claims about abundant rainfall expectations or huge crops nor did it make comparisons with the Garden of Eden as some promoters were wont to do.<sup>9</sup> Nor did the brochure—and the Immigration Board—devote all its attention to dry farming. To the contrary, it also promoted the settlement of irrigated lands, and even offered an example of how much a farmer could make on eighty acres of Wyoming irrigated land, an amount that came to a tidy net profit of \$3497.00. What is instructive

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<sup>8</sup> Gates, *History of Public Land Law Development*, 504-505.

<sup>9</sup> State Board of Immigration, “Map of Wyoming Resources Showing at a glance the HARVEST OF GOLD Which awaits the Settler and Investor in Wyoming,” (Denver: Clason Map Co., [1911]), copy located in American Heritage Center, University of

about the calculation is partly the ledger sheet behind the diagram, and partly the modest yields anticipated, and especially the diversity in crops planted: wheat, oats, field peas,

WHAT YOU CAN MAKE ON 80 ACRES OF WYOMING IRRIGATED LAND.	
<p><b>10 ACRES WHEAT</b></p> <p>Total Yield 400 bushels Worth (@ 80¢ a bu.) \$ 320. Total cost to produce 60. Profit on wheat \$ 260.</p>	<p><b>20 ACRES FIELD PEAS</b></p> <p>Total Yield 60,000 pounds Worth (@ \$2.50 a 100 lbs) \$1500. Total cost to produce 90. Profit on peas \$1410.</p>
<p><b>10 ACRES OATS</b></p> <p>Total Yield 700 bushels Worth (@ 35¢ a bu.) \$ 245. Total cost to produce 60. Profit on oats \$ 185.</p>	
<p><b>10 ACRES BARLEY</b></p> <p>Total Yield 500 bushels Worth (@ 50¢ a bu.) \$250. Total cost to produce 60. Profit on barley \$ 190.</p>	
<p><b>15 ACRES ALFALFA</b></p> <p>Total Yield 60 tons Worth (@ \$12 a ton) \$ 720. Total cost to produce 18. Profit on alfalfa \$ 602.</p>	<p>CORRAL</p> <p>PASTURE</p> <p>BARN</p> <p>GARDEN</p> <p>HOUSE</p>
<b>ANNUAL NET PROFIT ON 80 ACRES—\$3497.00</b>	

The potential for eighty acres of irrigated land. From State Board of Immigration, "Map of Wyoming Resources Showing at a glance the HARVEST OF GOLD Which awaits the Settler and Investor in Wyoming," (Denver: Clason Map Co., [1911]), copy located in American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

barley, alfalfa, and potatoes. The brochure estimated the cost of irrigated land at twenty-five to a hundred dollars an acre, and, in an indication that the board was pushing more than settlement on the public domain, pointed out that the land could be bought on easy terms and that "the crops should take care of all payments after the down payment." This was introducing a different element into the equation, one that, though not new, was frequently absent in previous promotional literature: the idea that a person should take out a mortgage on the land to be settled and expect to be able to pay it off with cash

Wyoming.

crops. The invisible ledger used by the Immigration Board anticipated production for a market, not production for home consumption. This may have even the biggest change underway, subtle though it was.

Also of note is that among the many abundant opportunities that Wyoming presented, stock raising seemed not to be at the center of the vision of settlement the board had in mind: “Wyoming cattle are the standard of quality around the globe. The large cattle ranches are, however, being split up to satisfy the increasing demands of agriculture. And the ranchman has turned farmer to keep pace with prosperity.” In fact, the only mention of raising livestock came in the discussion of dry farming when the brochure noted that “The combination of dry farming and stock feeding is one of the state’s best paying industries.” Thus while the Immigration Board anticipated that settlers would produce for the market, it also assumed significant diversity, and certainly not a monoculture system of production.

While the immense amount of General Land Office data relating to the claims for land have not been examined here or anywhere else in the way that is needed to draw accurate conclusions regarding the experience of people who homesteaded, there are pieces of information from and about some of the people who had practiced dry farming in the area. In 1909 the University of Wyoming Agricultural Experiment Station in Laramie studied dry farming in the state. The Agricultural Extension Service had been created to supplement the agricultural and mechanical—land grant—universities in each state as a result of the Hatch Act in 1887, with the intent of researching issues of benefit to farmers and to provide that information to them. In Wyoming, the Experiment Station was created as a part of the university in 1891 and promptly, though limited in resources,

began its mission. In those years the role of the Experiment Station (and substations around the state) was very much that of a cooperative endeavor with the states farmers and ranchers. In 1913 the *Sheridan Post* quoted the regional director (for Wyoming, Colorado, and Utah) about the efforts of the experiment stations and extension agents, then known as “county agriculturists” and that cooperative spirit was very much in evidence: “We are required to work with farmers—to study with them rather than to study for them, so we become partners with the farmers to whom we are sent. They give us facts; we give them facts; and then they and we try to find the meaning of the facts as they may apply for good or harm on the farmer’s own farm.”<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, that was exactly the way that the system worked when it came to dry farming. In 1909 the Experiment Station published a bulletin on the subject but the government’s own experiments had not been concluded or published yet; so the station gathered information from people in the state engaged in the practice and published that information to help others. In addition to other parts of Wyoming, included in the responses to the station’s survey were fifteen respondents from Converse County (from Kirtley, which would soon be in the new county of Niobrara) and three from Weston County. One of the three from Weston County was none other than Frank Mondell.

These farmers, each of whom had succeeded in dry farming over the previous years, reported on their practices, their crop yields, their acreages, and their idea of the optimum size of a dry farming operation. Their experiences varied and so did their recommendations. The farmers who reported were growing their crops on generally

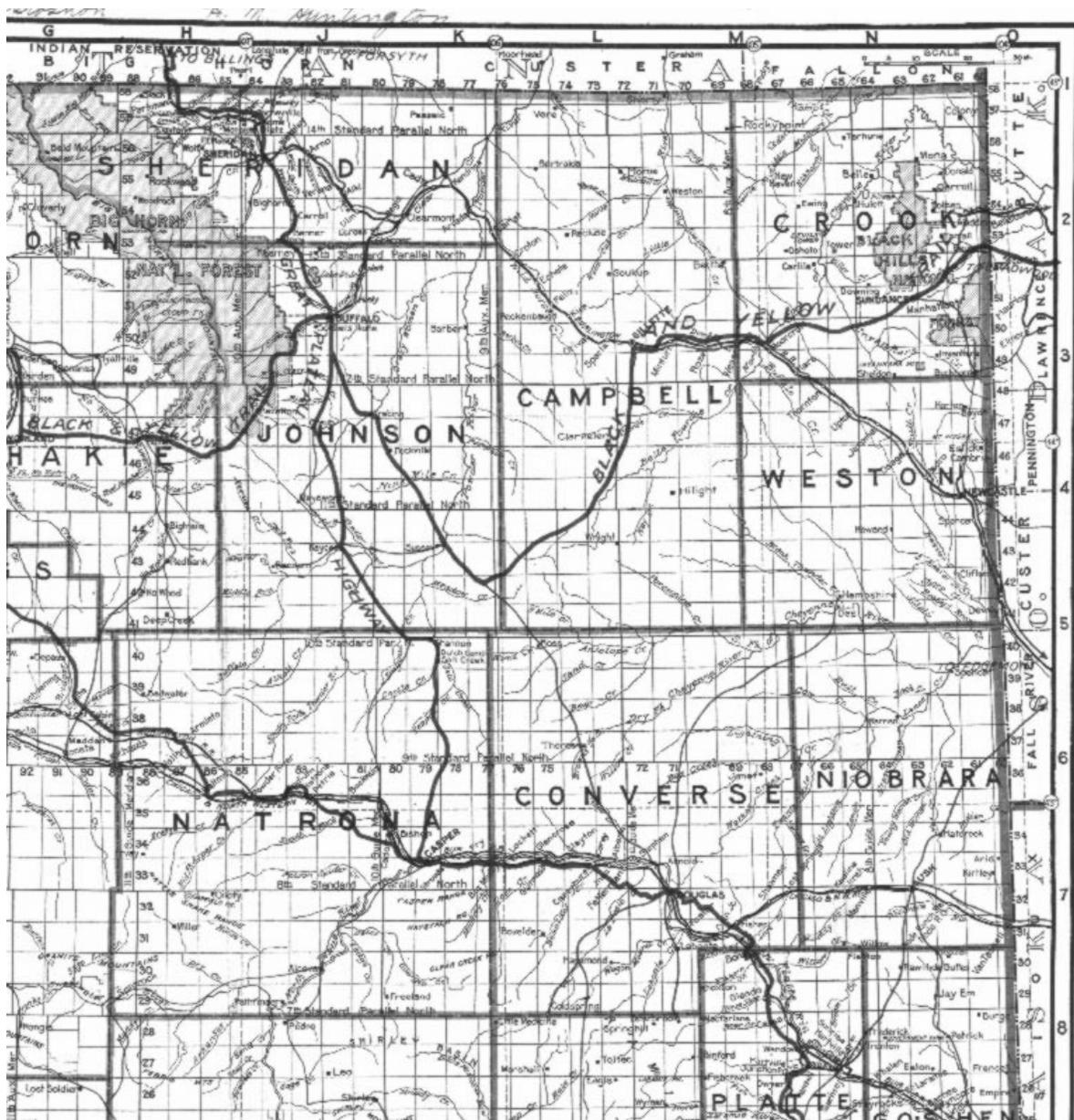
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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Johanna Nel and Johannes E. Nel, “University of Wyoming Agricultural Experiment Station: 100 Years of Service to the State,” *Annals of Wyoming*, 64 (Winter 1992), 18.

limited acreages, with the size of their dry farming ranging from fifteen to 260 acres, although at one time Congressman Mondell reported that he had farmed 800 acres. Two thirds of them said that they farmed a hundred acres or less. Most recommended a farm of 160 acres as the proper size for dry farming, though some indicated that as few as fifty would work and several recommended 640 acres, the primary reason for the larger size being the efficient use of heavy machinery. None reported failure (in which case they may not have been around to respond to the survey) and several reported “that dry farming has been profitable in the locality for the past 19 years,” “there has never been an entire failure in the locality,” “should always be done in connection with stock business,” “considers dry farming profitable in his locality,” “thinks dry farming profitable if one could have 125 acres with proper equipment. Would suggest the dry farmer own additional grazing land,” “the locality has been cropped profitably for 20 years,” “has not had a failure in the entire seven years,” “claims that his particular locality is especially favored, and ‘will stand more drouth than any other place I ever saw, and raise a crop,’” and “regards the heavy snows of winter as the most beneficial agency in dry farming.” It is certain that some who practiced dry farming did not succeed, but why they failed can only be speculated; what this survey reveals, though, is that their failures, at any rate, were not due exclusively to the size of their farms or to the inherent folly of dry farming.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> J. D. Towar, Wyoming Experiment Station Bulletin No. 80, “Dry Farming in Wyoming,” March 1909, 1-29.



Northeast Wyoming in 1918 showing Campbell and Niobrara Counties, created in 1911. Map: Railroad Map of Wyoming for the Wyoming Public Service Commission. Source: Wyoming State Archives, Online Maps Collection, [http://woarchives.state.wy.us/mapphotos/mapf\\_1918.jpg](http://woarchives.state.wy.us/mapphotos/mapf_1918.jpg)

The Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909 made possible homestead acreages larger than before, but pressure still mounted in Congress for even larger acreages and for easier terms. Much of this seems to have been in response to the fear of homesteaders choosing

to settle in Canada, although the terms and sizes there were actually quite similar to those in the U.S.<sup>12</sup> Even so, in 1912 Congress reduced the five year residence on the land requirement to three and permitted the homesteader to be away from the farm for five months in each of those three years. In his response to the Experiment Station survey Congressman Mondell had said, “I think the dry farmer should have at least 320 acres,” and he continued to push for larger acreages, but it was Congressman Edward Taylor of Colorado (who would be the author of the 1934 Taylor Grazing Act) who secured the 1916 Stock Raising Homestead Act which allowed homesteads to be established with 640 acres. This land had to be “chiefly valuable for grazing and raising forage crops,” and could not have timber that could be potentially harvested commercially, could not be susceptible to irrigation from known sources of water, had to be reasonably compact, and had to be land where that size was “reasonably required for the support of a family.”<sup>13</sup> The homesteader claiming this land had to improve the land with expenditures of at least \$1.25 an acre and mineral rights were reserved by the government. Water holes and stock driveways were also withdrawn and reserved by the government. Despite the enactment of this law, and despite the public pressure to settle on and claim lands under it, because of the failure of Congress to appropriate funds for the determination that these lands were suited for grazing, it was not until the end of 1917 that the first claim was accepted; as late as June of 1918 only 734 applications had been accepted in the entire United States.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Gates, *History of Public Land Law Development*, 507-508.

<sup>13</sup> Gates, *History of Public Land Law Development*, 517.

<sup>14</sup> Gates, *History of Public Land Law Development*, 517-519.

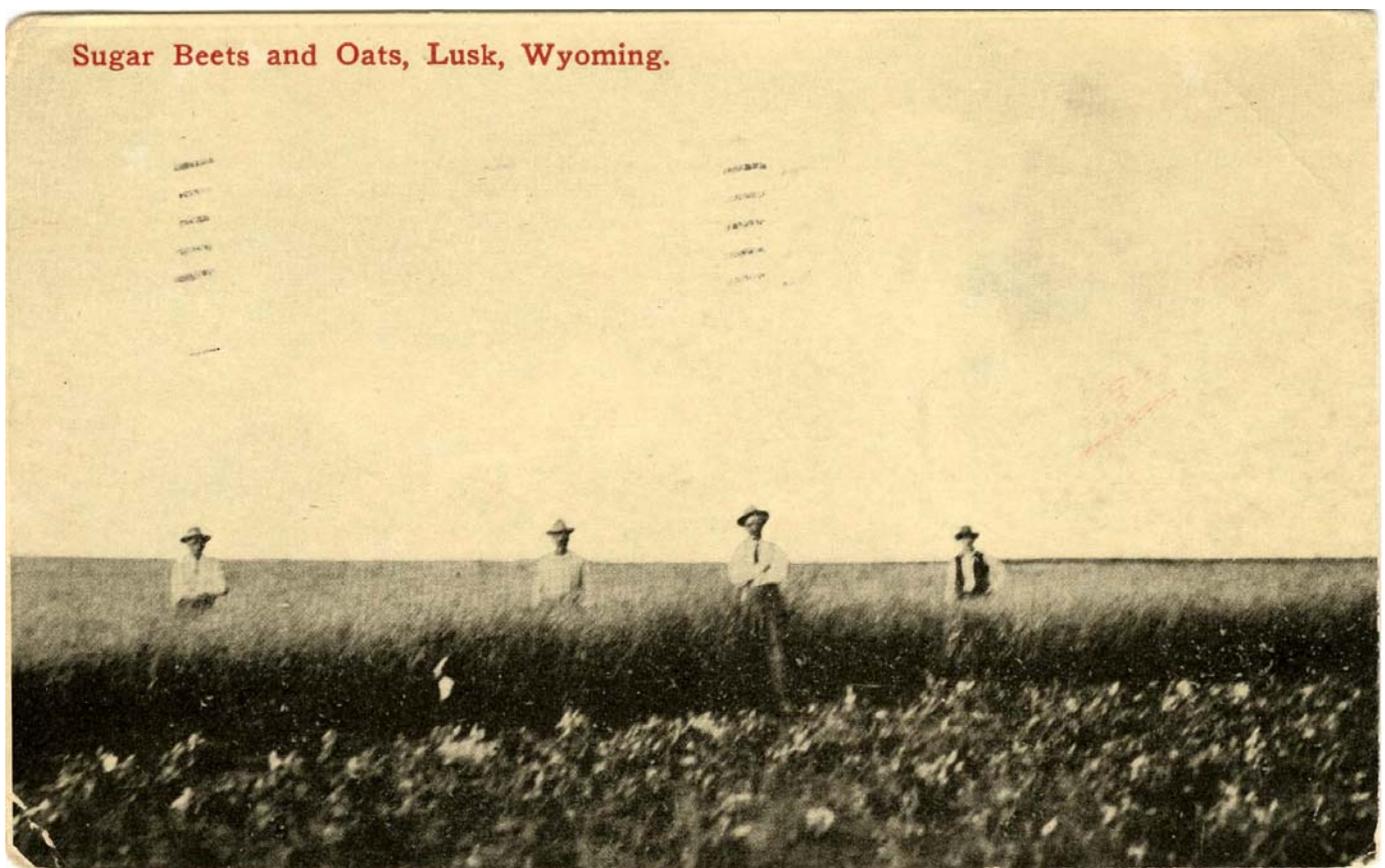
The expansion of the allowable homestead acreages, the lessening of the residence requirement, the efforts of the state Board of Immigration to attract newcomers, and the desire of people in other parts of the country to find new opportunities, old dreams, or something as simple as a refuge in an urbanizing nation, or even just to follow



A powerful image of the fertility of the area and the future of dry farming in northeast Wyoming, this Stimson image was made at the Agricultural Experiment Station in Weston County. Photo: J. E. Stimson Collection, Wyoming State Archives, negative 2298.

other members of their family in northeast Wyoming, all resulted in a major surge of homesteading activity in the 1910s. In addition, the railroads sought to populate both their own land and adjacent government land by publishing flyers advertising the land

available and the promise that it betokened, promoting sometimes actual colonization schemes in specific areas along their routes and other times just encouraging the settlement and population of the areas that they served. For these and a myriad of other reasons, people poured into the Powder River Basin to claim parts of the public domain for themselves and, while numbers are not known, there is a general agreement that this



Successful dry farming: Sugar Beets and Oats, Lusk, Wyoming. Postcard (postmarked 1914), from collection of Michael Cassity.

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surge began a trend of increased homesteading activity in the area that far outdistanced any that had taken place before.

The homesteading experience varied from individual to individual, but it always

started with a decision to leave some other place and relocate to a new place, which itself had to be decided upon. Then the individual or family had to close out their connections with the life they had led, pare down their belongings to what was essential and able to be moved, and then make their way to their new location. Often they would hire a railroad emigrant boxcar, which had room in it for a few head of livestock and fowls, farm equipment that they would need as soon as they arrived, and also whatever household goods and furniture that they might be able to take. One or two people would ride in the emigrant car and tend the livestock while the rest of the family would take a passenger train, the two parties traveling completely separately with the emigrant car taking longer, having to stop en route periodically for the livestock to manage the trip better.

To attempt to fit all homesteaders into a single mold distorts all of them, and some of the variety can be seen in a few examples.

- Perry Osborn's father moved from Iowa to southern Campbell County in the spring of 1916 after his brother settled there and wrote urging him to come, and he did, taking his family and finding "free land." They loaded five cows, two horses, machinery, and household goods into an emigrant car with cut rates; after arriving they bought lumber and built a barn where they lived while they built their house.<sup>15</sup>
- In 1915 Harvey Turk left his family in Wisconsin to scout for land in Montana and Wyoming and claimed land in the Little Nine Mile area, returned home, helped the family close out, and the following spring put everything onto an emigrant car for the move. They arrived in Buffalo, and three families lived

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<sup>15</sup> Perry Osborn, "Perry Osborn," in *From the Belle Fourche to Antelope: History of*

in two rooms in town until they could get to their land, set up a tent, and began hauling logs from the Big Horn Mountains for their home. Soon, however, they went to work (and live) putting up hay on a nearby ranch, using part of the summer's wages to purchase the Majestic range that Mary Turk had used in cooking for the large haying crew, before settling back into their own land.<sup>16</sup>

- Near Moorcroft, A. J. Macy homesteaded a half section in 1916 and an additional 280 acres the next year. His original homestead cabin was twelve feet by twenty, made of board and batten and lined with pink building paper, with no ceiling or plaster before building a permanent ranch house. Subsequently the original homestead cabin became part of the bunkhouse and Macy built a granary fashioned from adobe blocks made from local gumbo, sand, and short grass.<sup>17</sup> The Macy family was developing a ranch and soon acquired both more cattle and land.
- May and William Morgareidge had moved to the Mayoworth area in the late 1880s and then married and started their family, but Will Morgareidge died in an accident in 1902 leaving a widow and six children. May Morgareidge filed on land in the Red Wall country in 1916 or 1917, and her sons purchased another house, took it apart and rebuilt it for her, even though she hoped for

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*Southern Campbell County* (Gillette: Wright Centennial Museum, 1991), 91.

<sup>16</sup> Louise Brown Turk, "Early Wyoming History of Harvey and Mary Turk," in *Our Powder River Heritage* (Cheyenne: Frontier Printing, 1982), 78-80.

<sup>17</sup> Robert W. Macy, *Few Clothes and Plenty Horse* (Moorcroft: Warbonnet Ranch, Inc., 1975), v-vi.

something better. “The boys didn’t know how to build a house from scratch and no one was cutting logs anyway, so she had to submit to the old house.”<sup>18</sup>

- J. Tom Wall had been working on sheep and cattle ranches and took out his own homestead in the Pumpkin Buttes area around 1916, started fencing it, building a barn and corral for his livestock. His brother helped him and one would plow and the other would cut fence posts, and they “plowed twenty-three acres then sowed the oats, rye and barley and harrowed it in well.” Once it was fenced, Wall said, “then the place looked like a real farm, fenced, buildings, the green crop coming up and I looked upon it with pride.” Underscoring that sentiment was the common understanding, as a ranching neighbor told him: “After you prove up, it’s yours and nobody can come along and tell you to get off.”<sup>19</sup>

Fairly representative of the homesteaders was the experience of Charles Floyd Spencer who, as a twelve-year old, settled with his parents and brothers and sisters on land near Thornton, a siding on the Burlington Railroad between Moorcroft and Upton. The Spencer family had decided to leave Michigan because Charles’ father, a stoneworker in a monument works, suffered lung problems from years of breathing the stone dust. They chose this particular parcel of land because the son of a neighbor and friend had just graduated in agriculture from the University of Wyoming, had filed on

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<sup>18</sup> Helena Thomas Rubottom, *Red Walls and Homesteads* (Cheyenne: Frontier Printing, 1987), 76.

<sup>19</sup> J. Tom Wall, *Crossing Old Trails to New in North Central Wyoming* (Philadelphia: Dorrance & Company, 1973), 189.

320 acres in this area, and highly recommended it to others. The Spencer family arrived days before the emigrant car reached Thornton, a circumstance which could have been disastrous, but the family was taken in by the railroad station agent at Thornton, who, as it turned out, had also homesteaded but was also working for the railroad—moonlighting—to support himself. Once the emigrant car arrived, they had ten days to empty it, a considerable challenge given that all they had was a piece of completely undeveloped land, and the first job was just building a ramp to get the horses and cattle out. They located their claim, which they had hired surveyed previously, pitched their tent, and started to build their house, hopefully to have enough of it finished before serious winter set in, and this job proved full time for the family. They traded work for slabs of wood at a nearby sawmill and the homesteader cabin began to take shape:

Most of the slabs were quite thick and measured fourteen feet long. They could be cut into seven-foot lengths and needed only a base and roof to make a solid frame. We found that by placing the sawed sides together and tar paper between we could make a weatherproof shelter. Busy days followed with the sound of hammer and saw. The result in mid-August was a fourteen by sixteen-foot room with two sheds on opposite sides: one to serve as a stable for the team and cow, and the other side for storage of household goods not in immediate use. The roof was built of the heavier slabs, laid in the same way but with heavier weight tar paper between them; another thin layer of tar paper was then laid on top of the slabs and covered with two or three inches of dirt chosen from places that seemed to harden when in contact with water. A few barn sash windows were installed for light, a slab door was hung, and we were ready to move in.

The ground by this time was pretty well packed down, so after hauling a load of fresh green sawdust and putting it on the dirt floor—sprinkling it down with water when needed—we had quite a comfortable shelter. Curtains at the window, cookstove in place, the rosewood piano still in the shipping crate but the keyboard uncovered and table and chairs made it look quite like home. We still continued to sleep in the tent which had four beds in it and sheets to divide each sleeping area. A candle for light was all that was needed to get into bed in a hurry, which was the usual practice. Windy and stormy nights were sometimes quite an adventure, but on the whole, it wasn't too bad, especially for the younger members of

the family who treated it all as a kind of a lark.<sup>20</sup>

The Spencers hunted wild game for food that first winter, although they were also sustained by the canned foods they had brought with them, including a barrel of canned fruit, jams, and jellies that had been given them at a farewell party in Michigan. They had no well, ever, so they hauled water in barrels and then relied on blocks of harvested ice (later stored in an ice house) to melt in a special container for drinking water. As soon as they could, the family started building their permanent home; the first “shack” served the purpose temporarily, but the ranch house itself was more substantial. The house was made from logs, but, as with many homesteader buildings, the local timber source and the skill of the homesteader set limits on what the house would look like:

The timber there was scrub cedar and ponderosa pine. The pine trees were never very tall, so a log house had to be built with short logs. It was quite a problem to design a large house with short logs, but a plan was finally worked out. It was to be shaped like the Red Cross insignia—with a sleeping room on a second floor and logs were cornered at the corner of each room of the ground floor. Each room, including the top floor, was twelve-by-twelve feet square. The north room was used as a kitchen and the east and west rooms as bedrooms, including the second floor, which had a trapdoor leading up from the living room. The center part of the house and the south wing made the living room twelve by twenty-four feet. Later, porches were added to the northeast corner for an enlarged kitchen. . . . After a few years, it became a very comfortable and attractive home in that new country.

It took about 150 logs fourteen-feet long to build the house, including the twenty-four for the upper room. The logs all had to be peeled and selected before starting the building. Dad had never built a log house before and had to decide on how to join the logs at each corner. It was settled by cutting the ends of each log at a 45-degree angle and counter-sinking a six-inch piece of a 2 x 4 from one log to the other and then spiking them into place. There were also two 1 ½ inch holes drilled by hand into each log where wooden pegs were fitted in to help hold the logs in place. This was probably the only log house ever built with corners fitted in this way;

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<sup>20</sup> Spencer, *Wyoming Homestead Heritage*, 9-10.

at least, I have never seen another.<sup>21</sup>

This description suggests both the common pattern and the unique design of the homesteader ranches. The common pattern was the use of materials that could be gathered or bartered for as much of the building as possible, those materials supplemented by finished doors and windows when necessary. There were, typically, some structural imperfections, at least from the perspective of modern building codes and standardized practices and materials. For example, for the foundation, Spencer said that “good, sharp, clean cement sand was very hard to find and almost impossible to get, so large flat stones were used . . .” The result was predictable, but unavoidable, and left a mark that should be taken as an indication of the circumstances of homesteading and not the abilities or desires of the homesteaders: “As the years passed, the house settled on the foundation causing doors and windows to stick, but a little extra work kept things livable.”<sup>22</sup> And, in the same way, many of the homesteader ranch and farm homes were thereby unique, reflecting their own individual needs and resources rather than conforming to standard building patterns and designs that might be current in other parts of the nation or even elsewhere in Wyoming.

The experience of another family six years later adds more texture to the pattern of the homesteader experience. Margaret Dillinger Bowden has described the adventures of her own family, when she was a child, homesteading in newly formed eastern Campbell County in 1916. Her father had farmed rented land in Kansas, renting eight different properties in seven years, forced to move each time just when they needed to be

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<sup>21</sup> Spencer, *Wyoming Homestead Heritage*, 15.

planting crops for the coming season. When the railroad published information about homesteading possibilities in Wyoming, her father wrote for more and received a long letter explaining exactly the process and the land available. Her father traveled to the area and examined the country and was impressed with its potential; the previous summer had plenty of rain so “the grass was tall and lush and the crops had done exceptionally well.”<sup>23</sup> They were able to take up two 320-acre claims, the first carrying mineral rights, except for coal, and the second without any. They took an emigrant car to their new home, made a temporary shelter in a tent, and started to make their new home.

For the Dillingers, the first task was the construction not of a house, but of a much smaller building: “In starting a homestead, nearly everyone first put together some kind of crude outhouse before building anything else. Many of the rugged structures did not even have a door on them, but had an opening facing ‘over yonder.’” The next step was planting a garden, and the next was drilling a well. In this, they had the cooperation of a neighbor, Ed Moore, who had a drilling rig and they worked out an arrangement so that her father would help Moore drill wells for others in return for drilling a well on the Dillinger homestead. The first, surface, water was unusable, but drilling to a level of sixty-five feet allowed them to tap “into an abundant supply of nice soft water.”

The priority was to prepare their crops to meet the requirement that they plant forty acres. This land would be devoted, the first season, to a crop of potatoes and corn: “Our section of Wyoming is especially well adapted to the growing of potatoes. The soil

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<sup>22</sup> Spencer, *Wyoming Homestead Heritage*, 16.

<sup>23</sup> Margaret Dillinger Bowden, *1916: Wyoming, Here We Come!* (Gillette, Wyoming: privately printed by James H. Bowden and Jessie Outka, 2002), 2.

and climate conditions are just right for producing some of the best you have ever eaten.”

The process of preparing the field touches on several areas of significance, including gender relations and technology, but especially suggests the commitment of these people to clearing the land for planting their crops:

Dad walked ahead, cutting sagebrush with a mattock—a tool used for loosening soil and cutting roots. It was like a pick-ax with a sharp, curved blade on one end. A swift swing of the mattock would break up the sagebrush enough so that the plow could turn over the soil. The smaller roots would deteriorate and the larger ones were later hauled off in a wagon. . . . Mother came behind with a four-horse team and a sulky plow, which had a seat about 3 ½ feet off the ground. She would sit on the seat with her legs straddling the tongue and the lines firmly grasped in her hands. She worked the lever with her foot and could manage the four horse team nearly as well as Dad.<sup>24</sup>

As they plowed, the significance of the entire homesteading enterprise for them and for many others was articulated in terms reminiscent of the Jeffersonian vision of the public domain: “The rich smell of the virgin soil being turned over was gratifying to both of them. It held the hope of an inheritance that few before them had achieved. The dream of one day owning their land made all of the sacrifice and labor worthwhile. It was what gave them the courage and determination to continue day after day.”<sup>25</sup>

Compared to the life of the renter that they had followed previously, wholly dependent on others who owned the land, this was like the claiming not just of land but of a birthright.

The land around the Dillingers was in the process of filling up, and Margaret Dillinger Bowden recalled that “we had hardly gotten settled before other new people began arriving in our valley. . . . It wasn’t many weeks before we had neighbors on every side. Some were only a quarter of a mile away, but most were much further. For

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<sup>24</sup> Bowden, *1916: Wyoming, Here We Come!*, 17.

neighbors we had a lawyer, a blacksmith, a secretary, a carpenter and a bootlegger.” Some had given up lives of prosperity to settle there, but each shared a common aspiration, “thrilled by the prospect of owning some land of their own.” One family nearby was able to make four separate, but adjoining claims. Others simply chose to live near others, and “Four other families of homesteaders cornered up to each other. Their houses were built within a half-mile of each other so the ladies would have companionship.”<sup>26</sup>

The living quarters that emerged, into which people moved from their tents, varied; where the Spencers had built up a small structure that would house them, provide shelter for the livestock, and room for storing their household goods, the Dillingers constructed a dugout:

Some of the homesteaders built “shacks” that were just one room covered with tarpaper. Many like us built dugouts, which were basements dug halfway into the ground and then built up about three feet above ground.

The upper part was usually of poles or logs and the cracks were plastered with “gumbo,” a sticky mud that hardened almost like cement. Sometimes boards were laid on the dirt floor and sometimes not. Ours had a dirt floor.

Dad and Oliver cut logs from timber about ten miles away and brought them home on the running gears of a wagon. The size of the dugout was to be 18 feet wide by 24 feet long. They first made an excavation that size. Next they dug down three feet. The middle part of this was dug out with a small Fresno pulled by a team of horses. The sides and floor were then evened up with a shovel and the dirt carried out by hand.

Logs were used to build the sides and ends of the dugout up four feet, so when finished it would be about seven feet from floor to ceiling. The roof was made of logs, which had been split and then covered with tarpaper. A heavy layer of sod was then laid on top of the tarpaper. The roof sloped in

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<sup>25</sup> Bowden, *1916: Wyoming, Here We Come!*, 17.

<sup>26</sup> Bowden, *1916: Wyoming, Here We Come!*, 14, 15.

from each side and came to a peak in the middle. There was a strong ridgepole the length of the dugout and there was a strong upright post supporting the ridgepole.

Openings for two windows were framed with logs as well as an opening for the door, which was on the east end. One window was on the west and the other on the south side. They were “lazy windows” that opened horizontally and were only half as big as regular ones.

The cracks between the logs and around the windows and door were chinked with gumbo. The dirt floor was soon packed and could be swept with a broom. To keep the dust down, Mother would sprinkle the dirt floor with water and then it would harden again like cement. Rag rugs were placed in front of the beds, but the rest of the floor was bare. Because of this my baby sister Inez learned to walk on the beds.

The heating stove was toward the west end of the dugout along with the beds, rocking chairs, a small table, a dresser and a Graphophone . . . The cook stove, kitchen table, chairs, bench, and a kitchen cabinet for supplies were in the east end.

Our dugout was larger than some and as many as 13 people slept in it when new people or neighbors needed lodging. It was a very comfortable home—warm in winter and cool in the summer.<sup>27</sup>

For the Dillingers, the dugout would be their home for at least three years.

What is clear from this description is that dugouts were not a refuge of last resort but a dwelling of first choice for homesteaders, and those dugouts often sufficed not just for the first season but for years into the future as the families who lived in them—and lived comfortably in them—developed their homesteads. And the number of homesteads, whether claims literally filed under the homestead laws or more broadly conceived as farms or ranches claimed, purchased, or taken over, dramatically increased in the decade of the 1910s. The number of farms—a category that included all agricultural operations—increased dramatically in the seven county (that had been five

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<sup>27</sup> Bowden, *1916: Wyoming, Here We Come!*, 20-21.

counties in 1910) area, jumping from 3809 to 6085. The only county that showed a decline in the decade was Crook County, which dropped from 1341 farms to 1093 with the separation of the part that became Campbell County, but that was more than made up for by the new Campbell County which was formed in 1911. In 1920, Campbell County had 1072 farms.



Postcard: Farm near Sheridan, 1910. This farmstead represents one of the larger, or at least more prosperous, operations as indicated by the size of the buildings. The windmill adjacent (behind, in this photo) to the house indicates that the house probably had cold running water. The fields in the foreground, importantly, were as much a part of the photographer's intent as the buildings. The message on the opposite side of the card is from the owner of the property, telling her friend that the elevation seen is the north side of the house. From the collection of Michael Cassity.

And these farms tended to be relatively small. Even with the increase in the allowable size of homesteading claims to 320 acres in 1909 and to 640 acres in 1916, almost exactly half of the farms (3041 of 6085) in the seven county quadrant in 1920

were under 500 acres. Fewer than one in five were greater than a thousand acres.<sup>28</sup> It is important to note, too, that there were fundamental structural alterations and market fluctuations in that decade, discussed below, that might mean that the number of farms had peaked at an even higher rate during the decade before declining to these numbers in 1920.

The hardships that accompanied the homesteading ordeal were numerous and they had to do with the climate, with the isolation, and with the market system which intruded on their lives with increasing pressure, but what these figures indicate is that many of those who made the effort, in fact a great many of them, tried and persisted, even if it meant living in tents and dugouts and one-room temporary quarters and then building a ranch or farmstead with the resources that they had, or even staying in a dugout, in order, as Margaret Dillinger Bowden observed, to fulfill the hope of an inheritance as owners of land in a free country. It is possible to disagree with, or even disapprove of, the objectives of the homesteaders as they set out to build new farms and lives in this unforgiving country, but one aspect of their endeavor commands respectful consideration, or at least acknowledgement, a century later: their objectives included important social and cultural dimensions, not just a narrow economic focus.

*ii. Machines in the Garden*

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<sup>28</sup> U.S. Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States [1920] Bulletins: Statistics for the State and Its Counties, Arranged Alphabetically* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, n.d.), 1-17.

At the same time that these people were settling on small farms and ranches, the currents of change in society and agriculture were moving ever more swiftly, and were moving in directions that undermined the foundations of the independent family farm or ranch. Just as the cattle-ranching system had been imported from Texas and soon suffered a collapse that had its origins within that system, so the system of farming and crop production was largely imported from the Midwest and some predicted that it too would collapse for the same reason. Even though it was substantially modified to accommodate the requirements of dry farming, the broader contours of crop production remained very much the same—the sowing, cultivation, and harvesting of small grain crops and garden vegetables for domestic consumption first and then for market. And just as the Midwest system of agriculture underwent changes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so too did agriculture in the Powder River Basin transform, though usually about one generation removed from its Midwest antecedent. Most conspicuous in that transformation was the technology utilized, although that technology often represented the tip of the iceberg of the larger social, cultural, and economic changes underway.

The evolution of technology between the Big Horn Mountains and the Black Hills followed a conventional path, and while that path was once a part of everyday life and was embedded as a cultural reference point, it has seldom been explored historically in this area or even in Wyoming generally. And while many sources refer to the technological transformation from horse-power to the internal combustion engine, it needs to be remembered that even before this transformation, there was another shift in this area, this one from human-power to horse-power. And the early agricultural

implements in the Powder River Basin—broadly considered—were indeed human-powered. In 1880 Edward Burnett witnessed what he called “the first scene of civilization I had seen in this land,” and this was the harvesting of crops. He stood atop a hill on the way from the 41 Ranch near Buffalo on his way to Creighton and looked down the “Piney valley upon a field where men were cradling and binding wheat and oats.” The next day Burnett rode into Big Horn “and there I saw men flailing grain.”<sup>29</sup> A few years earlier Oliver Hanna Perry had cultivated crops along a tributary to Little Goose Creek, and used a plow to dig an irrigation ditch. “His garden was a success—as was his oats patch which he threshed with a flail and sold at 10c per pound the next year.”<sup>30</sup> And at the end of the 1880s, in Crook County, the Nefsy brothers planted a crop of three acres of buckwheat, and other small grains “and cut it with a hand cradle and threshed it with a frail [sic] making twenty bushel per acre.”<sup>31</sup> This, in its essence, was the system of technology at work in the late nineteenth century agricultural efforts of the study area.

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<sup>29</sup> “Interview with Edward Burnett Recalls Historic Occurrences; Many Interesting Events are Remembered by Buffalo Man,” typescript taken from *Sheridan Press*, May, 16, 1937, in WPA Collections, File 394.

<sup>30</sup> “Interview with Edward Burnett Recalls Historic Occurrences; Many Interesting Events are Remembered by Buffalo Man.”

<sup>31</sup> Carl Plattner, “Farming in Crook County,” note attached to this typescript document in WPA Collections, File 1265.

“Cradling” the grain was the use of a hand-held device that would cut the stalks and hold the straw and grain as it fell so that the stalks would fall together to the ground,



Shocking the grain. As late as 1925, when this photograph was made of Hazel and Lena Porath in the Ninemile area of Johnson County, the gathering of sheaves of grain into shocks that would help the grain dry more, and also retard water in case of rain, was still largely performed by hand.

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to be bound in sheaves, which would then be stacked in shocks. The cradle itself was an advance over the long, single blade of the scythe which would simply cut the grain and leave it on the ground, or the sickle (the smaller, one-hand handled semi-circular blade) which would leave it in the arm of the harvester who cut with one hand and held with the other. Clearly, the cradle was still much at use in this area.

And so was the flail. After the harvest, the prevailing system was to thresh the grain with a flail, and that system possesses a larger symbolic significance in agriculture. The flail was an instrument that was used to separate the grain from the straw after small grains—wheat, oats, barley, rye—had been harvested. The small grains were popular

anywhere once land was cleared because their growth was reasonably dependable and the tools used for planting, cultivating, harvesting, and threshing were simple and relatively inexpensive. Of those tools perhaps the flail was the simplest and least costly. It

consisted of two

wooden poles, a

short one and a long

one, attached usually

with a braided

leather loop; the

operator would hold

the long pole, and

wielding it like an

axe handle, would

bring the beater

pole—the shorter

rod—crashing down

repeatedly on

sheaves of grain

placed on a floor or

hard earthen



The use of the flail. Source: J. T. Trowbridge, "Song of the Flail," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 49 (September 1874), 501.

clearing. This would separate—thresh—the grain from the straw and would usually take a skilled thresher about forty minutes to thresh and stack the straw for a bushel of wheat,

and less time for other grains.<sup>32</sup>

The threshing would be done either outside or inside. Barns were sometimes equipped with a threshing area with either a solid wood or packed dirt floor, often times located in the corridor between bays on either side. It was also performed in the open air, and a special place would be prepared, generally a shallow, circular pit possibly forty-feet in diameter into which the sheaves would be placed and then flailed. After the grain was threshed, it would be further separated to dispose of the chaff either by pouring or tossing, using the wind to carry away the lighter particles while the heavy grain fell into the container below. This winnowing process was often done in the barn too, in a location determined by the positioning of windows or doors opposite each other to carry a steady breeze through the winnowing area.

The social and economic implications of this system of threshing are significant. In the first place, the flail system was attractive because of the minimal investment required, something of importance to people starting out on a homestead. Secondly, because it required considerable labor and time to use, it encouraged an intensive system of agriculture, and it encouraged diversified farming, or, to put it the other way round, it encouraged farmers not to plant too many acres of grain. The three acres that the Nefsy brothers planted and harvested may seem outlandishly small from the perspective of modern farms that reach from one horizon to another and to horizons beyond them, but the sixty bushels those three acres produced probably produced about the right amount for home consumption. But more than this, the flailing system was a practice, as historian J. Sanford Rikoon has observed, “with roots predating the writing of the Old

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<sup>32</sup> J. Sanford Rikoon, *Threshing in the Midwest, 1820-1940: A Study of Traditional*

Testament.”<sup>33</sup> It had the weight of tradition behind it.

Moreover, it could be performed by members of the family farm without additional pay to a professional thresher. The primary alternative, using horses to tread the bundles and separate the grain and straw, had serious disadvantages, only one of which was the hardship it worked on the horses. It required a different configuration and greater work area and often tended to be an outside activity, and it required both a team, or usually multiple teams, of horses and at least two laborers to manage. Plus, using horses generally involved threshing larger quantities of grain at one time, whereas an individual flailing the grain not only had an incentive to do a small amount at a time because of the labor expended, but was assured of having freshly threshed grain for the making of bread for a long time, something that grain threshed otherwise could never equal, and home consumption was the primary purpose of the crops produced.

There was another aspect of flailing that bears acknowledgement. This was a system of production that was distinctly pre-industrial in its rhythm and time-orientation. The effective and skilled thresher sustained the movement of the beater by a steady pace, often paced to the rhythm of traditional work songs, and the flailing itself produced something that was poetically referred to as “the song of the flail.”

And can ease and wealth avail  
To make any music sweeter  
Than the pounding of the flail?  
Oh, the sounding of the flail!  
Never music can be sweeter  
Than the beating of the flail!<sup>34</sup>

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*Culture and Technological Change* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 7-8.

<sup>33</sup> Rikoon, *Threshing in the Midwest, 1820-1940: A Study of Traditional Culture and Technological Change*, 1.

When an individual was flailing the grain, it was important to maintain consistent beats and steady exertion; when two people were threshing as a team, it was even more important; the steady, sing-song rhythm assured that they would do so in a synchronized way without collision. E. P. Thompson's famous study of "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," examined these pre-industrial systems of work as both symbols and regulators of work activity, and in fact as systems shaping life and labor alike in pre-industrial society. In those systems the worker controlled the tool instead of vice-versa; the task, rather than the clock, determined the time expended; the work rhythm was "natural" instead of governed by automated, mechanical systems; the work was, in Thompson's words, "more humanly comprehensible than timed labour." Thompson's framework has thus been widely used to understand the contours of change to an industrial system of production.<sup>35</sup> And given the changes ahead in this area, that framework is abundantly relevant.

For the system of threshing was starting to change. And the direction of change was decidedly mechanical. By the end of the century these devices were being largely replaced by mechanical reapers, horse-drawn mowers, and mechanical threshers of one kind or another, except, of course, in those instances in which small amounts of grain were being harvested or where the expense of the larger equipment was prohibitive. In 1890, *Bill Barlow's Budget* in Converse County informed readers that "Charley Rice of

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<sup>34</sup> J. T. Trowbridge, "Song of the Flail," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 49. (September 1874), 501-502.

<sup>35</sup> E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism" *Past and Present*, No. 38 (1967), 60-61.

the Upper LaPrele, informs us that he and his neighbors are arranging to bring in a threshing machine this fall—something needed very much in this section.”<sup>36</sup> The experience that Mr. Rice had with the mechanical thresher is not known and the diffusion



Threshing on W. J. Barker's Ranch, Parkman, Wyoming, 1910 or earlier. This postcard illustrates the new, mechanized threshing process. Wagons bring shocks of grain to the site where the threshing machine is parked at right in the field that has been harvested. The man on the wagon is taking grain bundles from the wagon to put into the machine; the straw and grain are separated by the thresher and the grain is then winnowed by a fan and clean grain is sacked; the straw is piled after it leaves the blower. The machine is powered by a long belt connecting it to the drive wheel of the steam tractor at left. A total of eleven workers are involved in this scene. Postcard (postmarked August 22, 1910 in Ranchester) from the collection of Michael Cassity.

rate by which these machines were adopted by other farmers is also not known, but it is clear that the threshers were spreading across the region. And the coming of the railroad, as with other changes in agriculture, usually heralded the introduction of the big

<sup>36</sup> *Bill Barlow's Budget*, May 7, 1890.

machines. Some of the first threshing machines were hand-powered but they were soon overtaken by the larger horse-propelled machines. And these devices would be stationary operations powered by the walking of horses either on a treadmill or in a circular twelve-horse sweep. There was no denying the greater quantity of grain threshed and the greater speed at which the threshing was accomplished, but the machines did not work well for the horses and the steam-powered threshers developed in the Midwest quickly took their place. These were even larger machines with greater appetites and abilities—and costs. Often the thresher was run by a belt and pulley arrangement that connected the threshing machine to a steam-powered tractor's separate drive wheel, thus representing actually two connected machines, not one. But most of all, they presented a range of challenges for the people who contracted them, for they tended to be owned by someone else. As Sanford Rikoon notes, “For most men, mechanized threshing created new harvest expenses, stimulated different cooperative relations with neighbors, and entailed dependence on itinerant contractors to see the harvest through to its completion.”<sup>37</sup>

Actually that just hints at the larger changes in store. The only justification for using a thresher of that substantial capacity was production for the market; this was not the machine to use for domestic production of wheat and barley and rye. And the only way to justify that expense was to produce more of the grain. Thus, in the wake of the adoption of mechanical harvesters came tangible changes to the physical landscape of the farming countryside. The availability and use of the mechanical thresher implied putting more of the farm's productive land into grain, thus encouraging the departure from a system of diversified agriculture. And it encouraged the expansion of the farms

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<sup>37</sup> Rikoon, *Threshing in the Midwest, 1820-1940: A Study of Traditional Culture and*

themselves.

Other changes reinforced that tendency to ever-larger farms producing fewer



“Some of the farming implements on the Morton farm.” The Morton farm in Converse County was a vast operation. Although it was especially known for its sheep flocks, it also engaged extensively in farming, and this photo shows some of the implements used on the farm, and thus also some of the implements available for farmers to invest in the 1910s. Photo: J. E. Stimson Collection, Wyoming State Archives, negative 2924.

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crops, and it should be remembered that a change in one area of agriculture usually generated changes in most other parts of the calling of the tiller of the soil. Sometimes dry farming itself called forth changes. In 1909 when Frank Mondell was asked about

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*Technological Change*, 32.

the proper implements to use on a dry farm, he responded “Good heavy plows, substantial harrows and press drills and plenty of stock to operate them.”<sup>38</sup> At least if one were farming commercially, as certainly Mondell was, the heavier and more specialized equipment and the greater acreage on which to apply that equipment, formed an increasing part of the investment of the farmer.

The machine that was at the heart of the revolution, however, both symbolically



Steam plow on Unland's farm, Douglas. This steam tractor is breaking sod with a moldboard plow. Note the two operators on the tractor and the size of the machine. Photo: J. E. Stimson Collection, Wyoming State Archives, negative 2925.

<sup>38</sup> Towar, “Dry Farming in Wyoming,” 12.

and mechanically, was the tractor. Slowly—very slowly—the behemoths of the prairies crawled across the farmlands dragging behind them a variety of implements old and new, and slowly these steam-powered tractors that approached the size of railroad locomotives began to replace the horse and mule. But the earth they plowed gave way more easily than did the people who were accustomed to using draft animals. Historian Gilbert Fite studied tractors in neighboring South Dakota, and he observed some of the limits on tractors in these years: “Although South Dakota farmers were among the earliest tractor users, the first machines were heavy, cumbersome, and poorly suited to modest field work.”<sup>39</sup> And they were not widely adopted until later in South Dakota, and even later than that anywhere in Wyoming, until sometime in the 1930s and 1940s. But they were present in the 1910s. Margaret Dillinger Bowden recalled that one of her family’s neighbors had purchased an Avery tractor “which had steel wheels with lugs. He apparently used the tractor to plow a lot of the other homesteaders’ fields as well as their own.”<sup>40</sup> Charles Floyd Spencer recalled his neighbor with a tractor more precisely, and more negatively, remembering that the man had one of the first Rumely tractors in Wyoming.

His idea was that custom plowing for settlers would be a big help to the homesteaders who were required to cultivate a certain number of acres each year to prove up on their land. It sounded like a good idea, but actual practice showed that the Rumely could plow only twelve to fifteen acres of land a day, when it was running. The rough sagebrush land, the hard to replace parts, and the lack of a good mechanic to run the tractor made it a poor investment.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Gilbert C. Fite, “The Transformation of South Dakota Agriculture: The Effects of Mechanization, 1939-1964,” *South Dakota History*, 19 (1989), 280.

<sup>40</sup> Bowden, *1916: Wyoming, Here We Come!*, 14.

An appreciation of the early tractors was provided by Ed Willard who remembered that his father had purchased a steam tractor before they moved to Campbell County.

Took several men to run the thing. One man with a team and tank wagon hauling water all the time. It could pull ten to fourteen plows which was plowing just under twelve feet wide. Where with three horses you could only turn over twelve to fourteen inches, so it paid to have a man and wagon hauling water. The water tank on the steamer held about ten to twelve barrels and took three or four tanks a day. Would burn over a ton of coal in building up the pressure and trying to keep it up all day. It took two men on the tractor; one to guide it and one to shovel coal in.<sup>42</sup>

Appropriately, the operator of the tractor was usually called an engineer.

It was not just the machines in the field that generated changes. Something as innocuous as the construction of a mill nearby could also unleash a set of transformative forces in local agriculture. The flour mills in Sheridan, for example, did exactly that. In 1883 a flour mill had been constructed at the mouth of Wolf Creek near Sheridan, but it seems to have been of limited capacity and when George Beck built his flour mill at Beckton this generated more interest by local farmers who started producing more wheat.<sup>43</sup> Southeast of Sheridan the changes began in earnest in the first decade of the century when, according to the history of the communities in the Clearmont – Leiter area, “the Denio Mill in 1904 added new equipment and made improvements in the manufacturing of its own flour, ‘The Best Out West.’ They encouraged farmers to grow

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<sup>41</sup> Spencer, *Wyoming Homestead Heritage*, 5.

<sup>42</sup> Ed Willard, Bernice Groves, and Edra Drake, “Ed R. Willard,” in *From Antelope to Belle Fourche*, 154.

<sup>43</sup> “Next Governor of Wyoming,” *Sheridan Enterprise*, August 16, 1902.

more and better wheat.”<sup>44</sup> Or, consider the even more explicit and dramatic change generated in sugar beets. The Holly Sugar Company opened a sugar factory in Sheridan in 1915, and thereupon Felix Leiter “leased his operation to the Holly Sugar Company and by means of the tenant system, brought hundreds of families into the Lower Clear



Beet Sugar Field, Keystone Ranch. The Keystone Ranch in Sheridan County responded to the demand for sugar beets created by the growing sugar beet industry in Sheridan. Photo: J. E. Stimson Collections, Wyoming State Archives, negative 2580.

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<sup>44</sup> Clearmont Historical Group, *Backward Glance: Ulm, Leiter, Ucross, Clearmont, A Century of History* (Buffalo, Wyoming: The Office, n.d.), 9.

Creek Valley for the production of sugar beets.”<sup>45</sup> This was a single-crop, commercial system of agriculture with an exclusive focus on the market and thereby acquired the machinery necessary for an efficient, industrial operation, and also suggested the contours of the future of agriculture.

### *iii. Rangeland in Transition*

The livestock industry continued its evolution away from the day when the cattle ranches ruled the open range in the 1880s, and that evolution took on several dimensions. One was the continuing movement away from grazing the public domain unfettered. Another was the grazing of sheep by the same cattle ranches that a short while before had bitterly fought the introduction of sheep. In addition, however, the sheep ranches underwent a major change in numbers and in structure, a transformation that had its own evolution.

As the number of homesteaders increased, the cattle ranches were being hemmed in on every side and they found it necessary more and more to build their own fences and graze on their own land, although often the homesteaders were building the fences to keep out the wandering cattle. The settling up of the country may have caused the ranchers some anguish, but often they had been competing with each other for the same public domain. Now, that public domain was being taken away for farming. Richard Pfister, a small rancher, noted that the homesteaders solved that problem, although it

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<sup>45</sup> Clearmont Historical Group, *Backward Glance: Ulm, Leiter, Ucross, Clearmont, A*

came at a real cost. Pfister recalled that “In 1909 the country around Lusk began to settle up, the land agents locating people on the government public domain. Up to this time the small ranchers had the country all fenced up, and there was plenty of land-fighting among them. It was not long until all the best land had been homesteaded. The homesteaders went into the big pastures and this put a stop to our fighting among ourselves.”<sup>46</sup>

One indication of the change was the fading of the institution of the open range roundup. In 1909 Elsie Schaubel described a roundup on the Two A Bar Ranch near Parkman, owned by E. L. Dana, but this was not the kind of roundup that had been practiced two decades earlier. This was a roundup where the ranch’s cattle were gathered and taken to the loading chutes on the railroad siding. A bit wistfully Schaubel wrote, “Ten years ago the unsettled country was the range of numerous herds owned by wealthy men. Today it is found that the number of exclusive cattle dealers is very limited. Observation shows that the cultivation of lands is fast supplanting the cattle industry.” In fact, with some precious ambiguity, the author gave the impression that Dana, who was selling his remaining cattle that were not shipped to market to another ranch and that he was going into the farming business himself: “it is the common opinion that the country under his possession will prove to be the foundation of a successful thriving land that not only brings wealth but happiness also to the owner.”<sup>47</sup>

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*Century of History*, 10.

<sup>46</sup> Historical Committee of the Robber’s Roost Historical Society, *Pioneering on the Cheyenne River* (Lusk, Wyoming: The Lusk *Herald*, 1947; reprinted 1956), 80-82.

<sup>47</sup> Untitled typescript of article written by Elsie Schaubel for the September 14, 1909 *Sheridan Post*, in WPA Collections, File 395.

And the same process was at work everywhere in this section of the state. In 1910 near Lusk, Edward Arnold found his cattle ranch hemmed in by settlers so he sold



Silva Ranch, Johnson County. While no ranch is exactly “typical,” this ranch photo reveals the usual assortment of buildings to be found on ranches including the main house, possibly a bunkhouse or earlier dwelling, root cellar, poultry house, and barns and corrals and related utility buildings. Photo: Johnson County Library Local History Collection.

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his property. He and his family had lived there about twenty years and he recalled how “it was a wonderful cattle country. The cattle ranged east in the summer and we had windmills for water. There was no limit to the free range to the east in the summer. There were not settlers, the grass was good and the cattle put on weight fast. In the fall when it got cold and snowy, they would all drift home to go in the hills where the grass was plentiful.” But settlers moved in “and settled the land up in almost a year.” Arnold sold his land and herd, planning to move to Kansas, but at the last minute changed his mind and decided to stay. Not wanting to leave Wyoming, Arnold, around 1910 bought

another ranch, the “Webster sheep and holdings,” and thus the transfer was made from cattle to sheep on the Cheyenne River.<sup>48</sup>

Charles Floyd Spencer recalled the closing of the open range southeast of Moorcroft where his family had homesteaded:

The summers of 1911 and 1912 saw much of the open range fenced in by homesteaders, so the cattle and sheep ranches had to adjust to a new method of operation. Most of them cut down somewhat on the size of their herds and started more improvements on their original holding. Some urged their riders or herders to file on homesteads of their own. They financed the improvements necessary to prove-up on the land in return for the deed, plus a little bonus for the use of their employee’s name. This was especially true when water holes for stock were involved, as water was necessary on any range, and if fenced off by homesteaders, large chunks of land could be of little value to the rancher. Land was also purchased from the homesteaders who just managed to prove-up on their holdings before returning to their former way of life.

Spencer made clear the association between the homestead activity and the end of the roundups: “The old open-range roundups were on their way out. The last one that I remember in our part of the country was in the first part of June, 1911. It was held on a large flat near our homestead.”<sup>49</sup> Roundups would continue, but they would be increasingly on a rancher’s own, or leased, land, and not the vast projects where teams of cowboys from all the ranches would scour the drainages for miles and miles gathering up all of the cattle to be then divided according to brand.

Although there had been constant opportunity for conflict over the fencing issue in the past, and although fences had long generated significant tension, and although fences still could be a sore point, most generally the people involved, who were now

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<sup>48</sup> Historical Committee of the Robber’s Roost Historical Society, *Pioneering on the Cheyenne River*, 84.

more or less neighbors, appear to have managed to work out an amicable, or at least workable, relationship. Again Charles Floyd Spencer provides a pointed commentary on the subject from the perspective of his homestead near Thornton:

During the summers of 1911 and '12, the homesteaders were busy completing the fences around their land. It was necessary both to keep their own stock from getting out with the range cattle and horses, and to keep the range stock from destroying the crops planted each spring. The range cattle didn't take kindly to being fenced out from their old range and sometimes were hard to control, especially if their water holes were fenced off. The owners of the cattle didn't always help either, as the settlers sometimes found their wires cut to let the cattle in. The law, however, was on the land owners' side, so after a few years of adjustment, the problem disappeared, and settlers and cattlemen got along fairly well.<sup>50</sup>

The long war and its many skirmishes between homesteaders and cattle ranchers seemed finally to be over.

The sheep industry also changed, and the most obvious indication of that was a dramatic decline in the numbers of the animals in the area. Nationally the sheep population peaked in 1911 and probably did so in this part of Wyoming too. In 1910 there were more than a million and a half sheep in the five counties that made up the northeast corner of the state, but by the end of the decade the number had dropped to less than half a million. There were serious problems, some of them well beyond the control of the sheep ranchers. One of the crises facing the sheep industry came in the form of a blizzard that sometimes replicated the big die-out of cattle in 1886-1887. In the spring of 1912 a blizzard hit the plains that took a devastating toll on the flocks. Margaret Dillinger Bowden recalled that the blizzard hit in her area just before lambing, an especially vulnerable time for the ewes and that untold numbers of sheep perished in the

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<sup>49</sup> Spencer, *Wyoming Homestead Heritage*, 43.

storm. "All through that spring and summer," she wrote, "crews of men skinned thousands of head of dead sheep. The pelts were sold and the profit helped to stabilize the Empire Sheep Company for a few more years of operation."<sup>51</sup>

Robert W. Macy in the Moorcroft area wrote about sheep ranches in that area who suffered enormously from the blizzard, although many in his neighborhood were able to make a comeback. The losses there, he wrote, were "so severe that most of the sheep men were compelled to begin anew, but banks were lenient and prices of wool and lambs made it possible for most of the sheepmen to get back on their financial feet. One ranchman who owned about 9000 sheep in the fall of 1911 only had 3000 sheep left in the spring of 1912 and owed \$50,000." Macy reported that it took him five years to recover, but he did.<sup>52</sup>

The blizzard, however, was just part of the problem, for homesteaders took up not just cattle range but sheep range too. Tom Stout, a Sheridan area cattle rancher who had turned to sheep, wrote with some understatement in 1915 about the severe winter of 1911-1912 and also the one that followed it in 1912-1913, that "The hard winters of 1911-12-13 were something of a setback. . . . Since then the industry has not grown to any appreciable extent. In fact since incoming home seekers have commenced to homestead the old range, sheep raising has fallen off."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Spencer, *Wyoming Homestead Heritage*, 55.

<sup>51</sup> Bowden, *1916: Wyoming, Here We Come!*, 48.

<sup>52</sup> Robert W. Macy, "Thirty Years of Back Ground," 1; this typescript of part of an article by Macy is located in the WPA Collections, File 1267.

<sup>53</sup> Sheridan *Press*, December 24, 1915, untitled article by Tom Stout, transcribed in Minnie Williamson, "The Sheep Industry in Sheridan County," WPA Collections, File

At the same time that the sheep numbers fell, other changes came to the industry, some of them predictable as homesteaders took up land that the sheep growers, like the cattle ranchers, had been using. And, as with the cattle ranches, the sheep operators and the homesteaders sometimes came into conflict, but increasingly those problems were worked out amicably, or at least without recourse to the means that would have been used in earlier days. Helena Thomas Rubottom tells of her grandmother, May Morgareidge, who had been widowed and was living in a rented house owned by L. R. A. Condit in the Red Wall country. She decided to homestead land that was used by Condit's sheep, in fact "this land was right in the middle of his sheep range and was land he had always had for free," but would file on it only if he had no objection. When the two discussed the matter, he rapidly gave his assent, and they negotiated an arrangement so that he would have his critical bedground and she would have pasture for cows which she could fence when she wanted. "This," explains Rubottom, "was an old-time Western verbal agreement that held until he was out of the sheep business."<sup>54</sup>

There was also the issue of grazing on the public domain. Part of the public domain was withdrawn in the form of Forest Reserves, or, as they became known after March 1907, National Forests. Where herders had once roamed broadly and freely through the forests, subject to size limitations that were difficult to enforce, and in competition with each other for the resources there, the establishment of regulations altered the practice dramatically. In 1905, for example, parts of the Big Horn National Forest were closed to the herders to let the resources replenish and were not reopened until 1913. And when they reopened, Robert Macy reported, "the new plan of individual

camps was inaugurated,” so that they would now be leasing assigned lands where they would be the sole flocks and the size of the flocks would be limited.<sup>55</sup>

Other changes came to mark the industry and to bring different practices to it. One was the introduction of winter feeding. While sheep ranchers had often set aside feed for emergencies in the winter, increasingly some came to the conclusion that regular winter—late winter at least—feeding would be beneficial. In Douglas, *Bill Barlow's Budget* reported in 1914 that the sheep rancher who consistently received the highest prices for his wool was “Elsa B. Combs who feeds his sheep every winter and who undoubtedly has a much better quality of wool than the average flock produces.”<sup>56</sup> The winter feed consisted mainly of corn at first, but by the end of the decade the sheep operations were purchasing cottonseed cake for their winter feed.

The second change was related to this. In addition to feeding the sheep in the late winter – early spring before lambing, the sheep ranchers also started to use sheds for lambing. This was something of a remarkable event and again *Bill Barlow's Budget*, ever sensitive to sheep ranching, pronounced the new development a major contribution when it reported in 1916 that “a most interesting sight is the bunch of lambs at the Olsen & Heller ranch just south of town. The ‘Swede Boys,’ as they are called, were the first to introduce the lambing in sheds and the other sheepmen are rapidly following their

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<sup>54</sup> Rubottom, *Red Walls and Homesteads*, 75.

<sup>55</sup> Macy, “Thirty Years of Back Ground,” 1; see also Will C. Barnes, *Western Grazing Grounds and Forest Ranges: A History of the Live-stock Industry as Conducted on the Open Ranges of the arid West, with particular Reference to the Use now Being Made of the Ranges in the National Forests* (Chicago: The Breeder's Gazette, 1913), 208-225.

<sup>56</sup> *Bill Barlow's Budget*, May 14, 1914.

example. They have been feeding corn and alfalfa the [past] two months and are certainly being repaid for the bother and expense, as they have 135% of lambs. . . . The Swedes have refused an offer of 30 cents per pound for this spring's wool."<sup>57</sup>

These developments of winter feeding and using lambing sheds certainly benefited the ranchers who could afford to implement them—and also their sheep, of course—but as with the innovations in crop production through mechanization, the development of more tightly managed operations, the acquisition of additional facilities and equipment, the use of “scientific” agriculture methods, and the leasing of land instead of the free use of land, also placed additional pressure in a competitive market system on the smaller operations that could not afford the innovations.

That pattern actually was even more developed in another way in the sheep industry as the different tasks on a sheep ranch became increasingly specialized. This had both economic and cultural consequences. As with the early cattle industry, the sheep ranches depended heavily on hired labor. By the 1910s it was clear that there were two distinct groups of workers in the sheep business who operated according to their orders from the owners and managers. These were those who herded the sheep and supported the herding activity, and those who were the shearers and others involved in processing the wool after it was shorn, and while at one time the same people may have performed both functions, that was no longer the case. Shearing required a certain skill and the people who did that work traveled around contracting with the various ranchers. The shearers formed a distinct class and were looked upon often with both grudging respect and fear by the owners. One guidebook for sheep owners minced no words,

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<sup>57</sup> *Bill Barlow's Budget*. March 30, 1916. The percentage of lambs is the ratio of lambs

warning readers that

Operators of shearing plants often have difficulty with shearers. The shearers lead a more or less nomadic life and if they hear of better wages further on in the way of more money for each sheep shorn or of easier shearing, they are likely to leave the plant before the shearing season is over. The operators have been forced to protect themselves by requiring the shearers to sign a contract which keeps them on the job till the last band of sheep contracted for has been through the pens.

Sheep shearing is hard work and it requires strong men whose backs are as untiring as springs of steel. They must be well fed and comfortably quartered. Since they live a nomadic life they are not given to accumulating much, for gambling is a game which puts their wages in the hands of the few who are cleverer at it than the rest.<sup>58</sup>

In addition to the class barriers between the owners and shearers, these workers often took on an ethnic association. Charles Floyd Spencer worked at the Metcalf Land and Livestock Company west of Moorcroft in 1913 during shearing time, which proved to be an incredibly busy time. In addition to the hard work, he noticed that “Mexican shearing crews, moved in by caravan to do the job, lived and cooked by themselves and were furnished mutton while at work. There were about fifteen to eighteen men to do the shearing, besides two or three extra to sharpen shears and carry wood and water for the cook wagon. Several women, accompanied by their small children, did the cooking for the entire crew, as many of the men were single.”<sup>59</sup>

It was not just the shearers where cultural chasms existed, for the herders also were often associated with ethnicity by others in the area. And sometimes these too were termed “Mexican.” It is far from clear if the shearers and herders were actually from

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to ewes; one lamb per ewe is 100%.

<sup>58</sup> Walter Castella Coffey, *Productive Sheep Husbandry* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1917), 413.

Mexico or if they were simply American citizens of Hispanic descent. As early as 1892 one Congressional report had muddied the distinction when it noted that “Herders and ranch hands employed are usually foreigners or Mexicans.”<sup>60</sup> Charles Floyd Spencer, while working for another sheep rancher, his brother-in-law, noted that “Sheepmen at that time employed Mexican herders to a large extent. For the most part, the Mexicans were dependable and stayed on the job better than others.” Spencer related experiences with one of them, Pablo (whose last name was never identified), who was struck by lightning and killed; his replacement was Ben (also whose last name was never mentioned). Spencer seems to have made a discovery at some level in his association with “Ben.” He said, “The new herder was also a Spanish-American, as Ben liked to be called. He had been a friend of Pablo’s and liked the life with the sheep.”<sup>61</sup>

The Hispanic association with herding was widespread, and just as the culture created chasms between people, it also cemented bonds. Tomas Antillon was a boy on the Altiplano of South America who moved with his parents first to Mexico, then to Colorado, and then to Wyoming and became a herder. Life in Mexico had been difficult for him since he spoke Castilian Spanish and his mother’s Mexican relatives spoke a different dialect “which was just as difficult for me to understand as it would be for a small American boy to understand French or German when he had never heard it before.” His father was, however, very, very proud of his Castilian heritage “and insisted that his children not forget their language.” Tomas Antillon retained his fluency in the Castilian

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<sup>59</sup> Spencer, *Wyoming Homestead Heritage*, 49.

<sup>60</sup> U.S. Congress, *House Miscellaneous Documents*, 2d Sess., 52d Cong., 1892-93, Vol. 15; “Special Report on the Sheep Industry of the United States 1892” (Serial 3124), Chapter II, “The Sheep Industry in Wyoming, Colorado, and Utah,” 776.

dialect and later moved with his family to Converse County:

Though my younger brothers and I did not want to come to Wyoming, we have grown to love this country very much, and would not want to leave it now. We had heard so many stories of outlaws, horse thieves, and so on, I know we must have had the impression that it was a wild, lawless country. But we had been here only a few days, when we found an old, old herder who could speak Castilian Spanish! It sort of gave us the feeling that we were back in our native land again—where the winds sweep over the “altiplano” and there are fine droves of sheep, long noted for the splendid quality of their wool.<sup>62</sup>

But the herding of sheep was an occupation not exclusively associated with Hispanic workers. If anything, the Basque association has sometimes overshadowed the Hispanic role, at least in Johnson County, and that association has often had its negative consequences through an occupational / ethnic reductionism that implies that all Basques are shepherders. Documentation on Basque shepherders is sparse, but it is clear that a population of Basques emerged in Buffalo in 1902 and that they earned a solid reputation as herders that made them much sought after by area sheep ranchers. Many, perhaps most, of those who settled in the Buffalo area not only followed the example of John Esponda who came to Buffalo in 1902 but were even connected to Esponda by virtue of their origins—including their own ancestors—near Esponda’s home community in the Pyrenees Mountains between France and Spain, through a system of chain migration.<sup>63</sup>

While sometimes associated with tramp or nomadic herding elsewhere, in

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<sup>61</sup> Spencer, *Wyoming Homestead Heritage*, 151.

<sup>62</sup> Tomas Antillon, “Sheep Herder Monuments,” typescript of first person narrative, located in WPA Collections, File 1396.

<sup>63</sup> Nancy Weidel, *Sheepwagon: Home on the Range* (Glendo, Wyoming: High Plains Press, 2001), 103; David A. Cookson, “The Basques in Wyoming,” in Gordon Olaf Hendrickson, ed., *Peopling the High Plains: Wyoming’s European Heritage* (Cheyenne:

Johnson County the Basques followed the pattern of seasonal transhumance, and indeed they were able to use employment as herders to develop their own herds and sheep operations. There were some distinct features about Basque activity in the sheep business that deserve note. One is that many of the herders did not develop permanent dwellings on the range. As part of the system of chain migration, they would often herd for a certain period and save money or develop a herd of their own to sell and then return to the home country at which time a replacement would come to Wyoming; in that system ownership of land would be a burden more than a help. Aside from their dwellings on wheels—the ubiquitous sheep wagons—dotting the plains, a temporary lodging might be found in Buffalo at the Basque hotel or with family and friends who were remaining permanently. And, of course, there were those who found a spouse either in the Basque country of the Pyrenees or locally, and who raised their own families in Wyoming.

The second feature had to do with the role of women in the sheep business. Historian Nancy Weidel has perceptively noted that Basque women were much more involved in the sheep industry than was the case with other ethnicities. “Certainly many ranch wives of all nationalities,” Weidel writes, “were involved in various cycles of the business, most remembering the nonstop cooking at shearing time. But a Basque woman usually spent all or part of her summer in the mountains, living in a sheepwagon along with her husband and children.”<sup>64</sup> Weidel speculates that this active involvement may derive from the persistence of a strong matriarchal tradition and also their shared commitment to the work with the sheep.

These developments in the sheep industry left their marks on the landscape.

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Wyoming State Archives and Historical Department, 1977), 105.

There were the shearing pens and lambing sheds that were increasing instead of open-air work. There were also the sheepwagons, the remains of some of which still can be found. And there were the shepherd monuments. The origin of these cairns has never been definitively established and most speculation is that they were constructed by shepherders. Even their purpose and function is not clear. Robert Rosenberg has drawn upon Mark Miller's archaeological analysis of shepherd camps and Miller's hypotheses that the cairns were related to winter camps, and, more specifically, that winter pastures will have more cairns than summer pasture, that the cairns will "be found on topographic prominences overlooking areas protected from northeasterly winds," that "sheep bedgrounds and refuse middens will be found near these cairns," and that "the further a camp is from a monument, the more likely it is that the camp was occupied during the summer."<sup>65</sup> This set of hypotheses appears to be the closest assessment in the archeological work in the state of shepherders monuments will remain an important guide to the evaluation of cairns in northeastern Wyoming.

There is, however, at least one source in the historical record that does give a clue to the function of the shepherd monuments, and possibly something of the origin of some of them. The herder Tomas Antillon in the 1930s shared his own knowledge of the cairns drawing from his experience in Converse County and elsewhere. Even as a child herding sheep in the Andes he was familiar with the monuments:

As I have herded sheep ever since I can remember, I have been much interested in the heaps of stones, which herders pile up as they watch their

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<sup>64</sup> Weidel, *Sheepwagon: Home on the Range*, 107/

<sup>65</sup> Rosenberg, "A Historical Context for Shepherd Monuments (Rock Cairn Sites) in Wyoming," in Brian R. Waitkus, "Evaluative Test Excavations at Five Sites in the Bend Gravel Expansion Area," prepared for Wyoming Transportation Department, 1991.

flocks. My days of watching sheep began when I was a very small boy, looking after my father's flocks, on the wind swept "altiplano" (high plane) in South America. I know that I built "monuments" then, and so did other boys who looked after sheep.

After his family moved to Mexico, he still encountered the shepherd monuments, although he too had to speculate on their origin and his own use of the monuments may or may not have been idiosyncratic rather than cultural or occupational:

I can remember that here, too, we would heap up great piles of stone, so "monuments" must have been known to the Mexican herders. As many other people think, I believe it is quite possible that workers from "old Mexico" may have originated this custom in Wyoming and other western states. Before I was twenty, my father and I went to Colorado to work for a large sheep company, and the strongest impression of that country was the deep snows. Now, the "monuments" I had built began to serve a practical purpose, for several times, when blizzards started, the piles of stones were my only means of getting back to the main camp, in a country which was all new to me.

In Colorado, where he was a herder before coming to Wyoming, Antillon recalled building—and adding onto—several monuments:

Some of the Mexican boys in Colorado even had names for certain monuments—such as "Dinner Table Monument" (where we ate our lunch); "La Mesa Monument" (because we had put a flat, table-like rock on top of a big monument); and "Frijole Monument" (because some of the rocks we used in building it looked like frijole beans. We took a great deal of pride in seeing who could make the largest and best monuments, and building them helped while away many lonely hours. If we could find stones of contrasting colors, we felt we were lucky, for then we could build something very striking looking. Although I asked many older herders how such a custom ever started they could not give me an answer, but they nearly always said, "There have been herders' monuments in this country as long as I can remember."

Antillon also suggested a practical use for the monuments, as landmarks by which herders would find their way.

In many instances, when herders become confused or lost in a storm, they

can get their bearings from some monument, and so find their way back to camp or to some rancher's house.

I know that in my own case, I would have frozen to death had I not followed a line of monuments. The blizzard started suddenly and I was far from camp. As I tried to make my way blindly along, the wind and snow grew worse and worse. It is a terrible feeling to know that you are lost, and so cold you can hardly move. Finally, I saw a "hump" of snow that I thought might be a monument I had built. I scraped away some of the loose snow and found the "hump" to be a pile of stones I had put there, weeks before. It may sound absurd to say you can "recognize" such a monument. But actually, it can be done, for you remember some certain stones, where you got them, and how you set them in place. I remembered that this monument was due north of an old, deserted shack, so I began trying to make my way there. For a while it looked as if I was beaten, but I finally did get there, and got a fire built. But some of my fingers were so badly frozen I had to have them taken off.

I do not doubt that in many other cases, monuments have helped save lives, by serving as a sort of "guide post". So they may mean a great deal more than just some herder's way of keeping the time from hanging heavy on his hands.<sup>66</sup>

Tomas Antillon may be the closest we have to a first-person source who can actually share stories of the construction and use of shepherd monuments, but one source is not sufficient for a final conclusion about so many of these landscape features. What it does indicate, however, is that shepherders at a minimum made use of the monuments and doubtless built or contributed to many of them, and that these cairns—as opposed to prehistoric cairns—bear a strong association with the sheep industry both culturally and occupationally. From expanded farmsteads to shepherd monuments and from fenced-in-ranges to lambing sheds, the marks on the land of the transformation in agriculture before World War I are everywhere to be seen in northeast Wyoming.

*iv. War and the New Order*

While Europe marched to war in 1914, Americans watched nervously, afraid that it might engulf them too, but the U.S. stayed out of armed conflict, if not exactly “neutral in thought and action” as President Wilson had publicly urged. In fact, in 1916 although Wilson was running as the candidate opposed to war (“He kept us out of war” being the primary slogan for his campaign), Helena Thomas Rubottom writes that her grandmother, May Morgareidge, who had just filed on a homestead in the Red Wall Country on the North Fork of Powder River and had draft-age sons, discussed whether voting for Wilson would take the U.S. into the war.<sup>67</sup> Wilson was re-elected, was inaugurated again in March 1917, and in April 1917 he asked Congress for a declaration of war on Germany and Austria.

The war had already reached into the Powder River Basin before the United States joined the combat. As the Allies and the Central Powers fought each other, they also came to the United States for war materiel and for food and fiber, the Allies doing so in much greater volume. This created more of a demand for some of the agricultural products generated on the farms and ranches of the area. Plus, this was combined with the agricultural system of Europe closing down for the duration of the war, a factor that meant that an important competitor to American agriculture was now out of the picture. These forces combined to create a substantial level of prosperity for the Powder River agriculturists who were producing for the commercial market. And it encouraged those

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<sup>66</sup> Antillon, “Sheep Herder Monuments,” 1-5.

<sup>67</sup> Helena Thomas Rubottom, *Red Walls and Homesteads* (Cheyenne: Frontier Print, Inc.,

who were not, to do so. In the early autumn of 1914, as Europe mobilized for war, a section director of the U.S. Weather Bureau for Wyoming toured the state and reported that “Wyoming is enjoying one of its most prosperous years. Crops in the northern part of the state have seldom been as thriving.”<sup>68</sup> If the crops were already in good shape, all that was needed was a market, and that market came as the war deepened. So prices increased.

Wheat prices during the war rose dramatically, from seventy-six cents a bushel in 1912 to \$2.49 in June 1917. In August 1917, the government set wheat prices at \$2.20 a bushel for the next year’s crop, in hopes that this would encourage production and modestly protect the consumer.<sup>69</sup> Statewide, wheat production increased from two and a quarter million bushels in 1913 to more than six and a half million bushels in 1918, and the production in the Powder River Basin doubtless increased by approximately that amount. Reflecting this surge in wheat production, new elevators were built at many places, like those that were constructed along the railroad at Clearmont, Big Corral, and Beebe Siding.<sup>70</sup> Likewise, the market in cattle also climbed quickly, pushing up both prices and the number that the ranchers put on the range. Dale A. Poeske, in his master’s thesis on Wyoming during the war, concluded that the cattle population of the state “more than doubled” between 1913 and 1919, and that the valuation of the animals

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1987; “edited and published by Margaret Brock Hanson”), 74.

<sup>68</sup> R. Q. Grant quoted in Dale A. Poeske, “Wyoming in World War I,” M.A. Thesis, University of Wyoming, 1968, 30.

<sup>69</sup> Poeske, “Wyoming in World War I,” 35.

<sup>70</sup> Clearmont Historical Group, *Backward Glance: Ulm, Leiter, Ucross, Clearmont, A Century of History*, 10.

trebled.<sup>71</sup>

The same trend did not apply to sheep, and the numbers of sheep, already in decline, continued downward. In this case, however, the reduced supply pushed prices up that much more. Probably the closest observation of that process can be found in the pages of *Bill Barlow's Budget*, or, as it became known subsequently, the *Douglas Budget*. The price of wool had climbed steadily since the beginning of the war in Europe and in June 1915, when a local grower received twenty-seven and a half cents, it was noted as the highest paid price since 1882. By May of 1916 the *Budget* could report that wool had reached thirty cents a pound and “the prospects for the sheepmen of Wyoming are better this season than ever before in the history of the sheep industry.” But wool prices continued to climb and by June 1917 they hovered around fifty or sixty cents, with some growers holding out for the higher price. In June the *Budget* announced that “given a fair management and fairly economical treatment there is no business in central Wyoming that promises as great a return for the money invested. The future prospect, in view of the sheep feeding industry, is even brighter than in the past, . . . .”<sup>72</sup> Ultimately the War Industries Board fixed the price for the 1918 wool clip at fifty-five cents a pound, based on 1917 market rates. This, it should be noted, was price control, and the effect of price control was to guarantee the price that wool growers would receive—an unprecedented guarantee and an unprecedented price. The other side of that was that it also stimulated increases in prices these people paid. T. A. Larson reported that the cost of living

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<sup>71</sup> Poeske, “Wyoming in World War I,” 31.

<sup>72</sup> *Bill Barlow's Budget* and *Douglas Budget*, for June 3, 1915, May 4, 1916, March 1, 1917, March 8, 1917, June 21, 1917, June 28, 1917; typescripts of newsclippings located in WPA Collections, File 1613.

increased by nearly seventy-five percent between 1913 and 1918.<sup>73</sup>

The war brought some level of prosperity to the farmers and ranchers of the Powder River Basin, and sometimes that came in the form of higher prices for their wool, higher prices for their cattle, and higher prices for their crops. But higher prices did not help all equally. Those who benefited most from the highest prices on the wool clip, for example, were those who had the most clips to sell. Those with thousands of fleeces obviously fared better than those with fifty or those with one or two hundred. And the same would be true in wheat, oats, cattle, and other commodities. The larger producers benefited more than did the smaller operations. It does appear that some of the extra income was passed on to the hired laborers. Robert W. Macy recalled that sheepherders were classified as skilled workers, and thus made exempt from the wartime draft, and they were sometimes paid as much as \$125 a month.<sup>74</sup>

As for the small farmers, life on a homestead had usually been tight, with every spare nickel set aside for buying new tools or other items that would go into the productivity of the operation, but it seems to have loosened up a bit because of the war. It was with considerable pride that Margaret Dillinger Bowden recalled that her parents, and their whole family who lived in a dugout, during the war purchased a Graphophone in 1918—“during World War I.” The Graphophone operated by a crank and used flat records instead of a cylinder “and provided hours of entertainment for our entire family.”<sup>75</sup>

The war did offer hope because of the surge in prices received for their crops.

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<sup>73</sup> Larson, *History of Wyoming*, 399.

<sup>74</sup> Macy, “Thirty Years of Back Ground,” 2.

And many, of course, used their new income—or the prospect of additional income—to expand their operations, or possibly to buy equipment that they had not previously been able to afford. Garland Turner, for example, homesteaded on Bates Creek in southern Campbell County with his father and used the profitable times to invest in a Titan tractor that cost sixteen hundred eighty-five dollars even though he had to borrow six hundred of that amount from the local bank.<sup>76</sup> And some who had not previously produced for the market, or not much for the market, now saw the logic of shifting their operation to a cash crop, and possibly taking land out of production of foods and fiber for their own needs and putting it into something more marketable, like wool or wheat or oats. And some borrowed money to expand their operations, and if the inflationary cycle continued, that would make the investment all the better. The war, in this way, actively, but often subtly, encouraged a reconfiguration of agriculture in the area. Farms and ranches were getting bigger and they were becoming more mechanized. They were producing more for the market. And they were hiring labor more and going into debt more.

The end of the war brought a series of changes that rippled through the countryside with powerful force, sometimes immediately and sometimes slowly, but always with a crashing power, especially hitting those who were the weakest and most vulnerable. As peace settled into Europe, the farms in those countries that had been idle during the war started producing more, so there were no longer the global shortages that had sent prices climbing during the war; there was even competition from those countries so that supplies increased and prices dropped. In addition, the government price

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<sup>75</sup> Bowden, *1916: Wyoming, Here We Come!*, 21.

<sup>76</sup> Leland Joe Turner and Erma Turner, “The Turner Family,” in *From the Belle Fourche*

supports—the fixed, guaranteed prices—that had benefited producers during the war were no longer there to protect them, just as the downward pressure on prices became heaviest. And many of the ranchers had boosted their operations with additional livestock just as the farmers were planting additional acres in marketable commodities. With agricultural production and its seasonal and annual cycles, there is always a lag in the speed, and thus also the timeliness, with which operators can respond to markets to supplement their production or to cut it. And the only way to get rid of the excess they may find on their hands is to sell it on the market, which, when everybody else does the same, further pushes down the prices in a deepening, downward spiral. Meanwhile, the costs of production remained high, never dropping to the prewar levels.

And this is exactly what happened in the Powder River Basin after World War I, sometimes abruptly, and sometimes sinking in only over the next several years. It is not clear exactly how fast the prices dropped on wool, to take but one example, but as late as 1921 wool was selling in Douglas for twenty-one cents. In fact, the growers were fortunate to get that amount. The Douglas newspaper reported that “Last year there were simply no buyers in the market, except for a very few clips early in the season. That same condition obtained up to very recently.”<sup>77</sup> Within a few months wool was selling for fifteen cents a pound. This was bad enough, but what of those who had borrowed money, expecting to be able to pay off their loans with the income at the higher prices? The answer was that they would not be able to. One account notes that “There was such a sudden slump in prices that many stockmen of Sheridan county who had been regarded as financially safe lost all their holdings and there was not any of them who did not lose

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*to Antelope: History of Southern Campbell County*, 146.

heavily.”<sup>78</sup>

On top of this was the short, but severe, drought of 1919. Accounts of the drought are scattered and it is difficult to measure the impact of the dry year. Some, it is clear, avoided the problem by shipping their livestock to other places, but most could not afford that option. Naomi Streeter Meike near Sussex recalled that the previous winter was dry, and the spring brought no grass. “The hay and grain did not grow, and by fall animals were starving.”<sup>79</sup> J. Tom Wall in the Pumpkin Buttes area said, about the winter that came without the reserves of feed from the previous season, “it was sickening to see so many stock suffering and dying from cold and hunger.”<sup>80</sup> The following year the rains returned, but not the prices.

And involved in all this were the banks, often the same banks that had helped out their distraught debtors after the hard winter of 1912. Since then the Federal Reserve System had been created, the money supply was now regulated and controlled, and during the war a deliberate easy money policy had encouraged lending to stimulate production and economic growth. Within a few years following the war, however, the Federal Reserve System sought to combat inflation by tightening the money supply.<sup>81</sup> This put pressure on the banks by raising discount rates (interest it charges its member

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<sup>77</sup> Douglas *Budget*, April 21, 1921.

<sup>78</sup> Ida McPherran, “History of Grazing,” p. 20, typescript dated November 15-28, 1940, in WPA Collections, File 395

<sup>79</sup> Naomi Streeter Meike, “History of the Sussex Community,” in *Our Powder River Heritage*, 60.

<sup>80</sup> Wall, *Crossing Old Trails to New in North Central Wyoming*, 204.

<sup>81</sup> Milton Friedman and Anna Jacobson Schwartz, *A Monetary History of the United*

banks), and that translated into tighter operating circumstances for the banks. Not only were they unable to make fewer new loans, but they found themselves with less flexibility with their outstanding loans. This meant that banks closed in what became known as “The Contraction of 1920-21.” And that contraction was felt by the grazers and homesteaders in the Powder River Basin.

In 1910 Charles Floyd Spencer was a twelve-year-old boy who came with his family from Michigan to homestead near Thornton. The Spencer family had done well, advancing from a tent to a shack that housed them in their first winter, and then built their ranch house of unique design. One of the two daughters was old enough to file on land so claimed an adjoining 320 acres, on which she and her sister shared work to improve the farm with the assistance of the rest of their family, and the two daughters were able to take jobs teaching in the area, sometimes at local ranches. They raised their chickens, grew their own corn and grain to feed all the livestock, enjoyed the milk and eggs from their own land, consumed the “potatoes, cabbage, carrots, and other vegetables that we raised in the garden” and stored in their cellar, and received an occasional beef from the neighboring cowboys who favored the sisters. Charles Floyd Spencer recalls that “Eventually we fared very well on home-grown things and grocery prices were never much of a problem. Farming tools and livestock took most of the cash that could be accumulated.”<sup>82</sup> Step by step, the Spencers increased their livestock from the very few that came with them in the emigrant car from Michigan. They added another horse and then another milk cow “and four bum lambs that were to be my special project” which was the beginning of a small flock that grew when his sisters taught at a ranch and raised

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*States, 1867-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 221-239.

orphan lambs on bottles, and brought thirty home, which meant that they then had to buy another milk cow to support the lambs. As a growing young man Spencer worked for others, especially sheep operations, in the area but he and his father especially, after two brothers went off on their own, plowed and fenced the land and grew their crops.

When World War I came, Charles Floyd Spencer joined the army and left the homestead, even though this worked a hardship on his family. But after two years he returned and by this time he was old enough to file on land of his own. But things started to go sour at this point. Spencer relates the course of events in which hard work, thrift, trust, and modest ambition were rewarded with dispossession:

Livestock brought a good price after the war, and we increased our number to the point that it was making us a fair living. With my return we naturally thought of acquiring more sheep, and we decided that enough could be purchased to warrant the hiring of a herder. I liked the ranch and we had plenty of land to carry additional stock. We could also rent grazing acreages from homesteaders who were now leaving for better-paying jobs. A new bank, a branch of a Cheyenne bank, had just opened in Moorcroft. In an effort to get business, it was advancing loans to those interested in expanding their livestock holdings. At the time it was carrying the papers on a band of about five hundred head of fine young breeding ewes that were due to lamb the first of May. The sheep had wintered well and were in good condition when we went to see them in March. The owner had a comfortable sheep wagon that was to go with the herd. We considered buying them to add to our own flock which numbered around three hundred head.

The bank was anxious to approve the transfer of the mortgage to our names, as we had experience in running sheep and enough range to pasture them. Although the price was high for that time at twenty dollars per head, they were better than average—young ewes in the wool with lambs on the way so we arranged to take delivery the last of April. The bank stated that the first note could be made out for only a six-month period; by fall when the wool and lambs were sold, the amount left to pay on the mortgage could then be changed into a long-term loan. This sounded reasonable to us and would have worked out fine if the bank had gone ahead with its promised extension. After the war boom, however,

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<sup>82</sup> Spencer, *Wyoming Homestead Heritage*, 25.

the bottom dropped out of livestock prices, causing an extended depression. We were caught along with many others who could not meet the short-term loans. The Cheyenne bank was forced to call in the notes of its member branches and the People's Bank of Moorcroft closed its doors permanently after being in business only a short time. Dad had signed our homestead as additional security for the sheep purchased, but luckily the livestock we already had was not included in the transaction, for it meant we still had the original band which we had raised.

The expense of spring lambing and running the sheep for the summer was allowed us, but dad's homestead, that he had labored on for ten years, and all the sheep in the newly-purchased band, together with their lambs, were turned back to the bank for the cancellation of notes due them.

No longer the owners of the sheep they had bought or the homestead they had developed, Spencer's parents moved to Yakima, Washington, where another son lived, to start over again. They sold their original sheep not covered by the mortgage to aid them in their new start. As for Charles Floyd Spencer, since he had only recently filed on his own homestead, and had not proved up on it yet, it was not covered by the mortgage. He completed his homestead cabin and barn in the autumn of 1919, so he was able to begin again, this time on his own.

Charles Floyd Spencer's story is important because it is one of the few instances in which the precise circumstances of the departure from the homestead are recorded. Yet, Spencer's story is not just his, for it is the same story that was being repeated all across the northeast section of Wyoming as homesteaders and ranchers who had struggled to survive finally met their match, not in the dryness of the land, the cold of the winter, or the antagonism of their neighboring ranchers, but at the hands of a system that rewarded them with lower prices the harder they worked and with taking their land and livelihood when they sought to expand their operation. This experience is important, finally, because it raised the question of whether the greater challenge to the agriculturists

of the Powder River Basin was the force of nature or the pressure of the marketplace.

## Chapter 6

# From Homesteader to Industrial Agriculture: 1920-1940

The census of 1920 revealed a development of fundamental importance in American history since that year was the first time that a majority of Americans lived in cities—in any village with more than 2500 people. The trend toward the city had been clear even in the Gilded Age, but that migration away from the farm gained velocity and force in the twentieth century so that by 1920 the nation could be called accurately an urban nation. The sources of that migration especially had to do with a set of push—pull forces. These forces reflected the new system of agriculture that was changing the face of rural America in which farm families were being pushed from the countryside in search of employment elsewhere and the pull of industrial capitalism in the nation's manufacturing and commercial centers that held out the promise, or sometimes just the hope, of making a living by working for a wage in the industrial sector of the economy.

The set of circumstances facing the Wyoming farmers and ranchers after World War I especially intensified the push from the land that they felt. In this, these homesteaders, ranchers, and farmers were catching up with the rest of the nation and conforming to a trend toward migration away from the countryside that had prevailed elsewhere in the nation, especially in the Midwest and the South, for decades and this was a population shift from which Wyoming had even benefited as some of those who were forced off the land found their way to Wyoming to start a new life on the free land

available there.

For a half century or more following the removal of the Indians from the Powder River Basin, the population increased in northeast Wyoming as ranchers, farmers, homesteaders, and then merchants in the communities that served the agriculturists, all migrated from other parts of the country to make this area their home. The laws, and the administration of those laws, were such as to encourage that in-migration, and the availability of the vast public domain in northeast Wyoming offered a tempting destination for people of all kinds of aspirations—a second chance, a home of their own, independence, wealth, security, refuge, hopes for their children, the sanctity of rural life—or some combination of these. With each passing decade more people had moved into the area, and while the weight of the various pursuits undertaken there shifted from cattle ranching to crop raising and to sheep grazing, the population continued to grow steadily through the first two decades of the twentieth century, and so did the number of farms increase.

At some point in the 1920s, probably around 1923 or 1924, however, the prevailing pattern shifted. While migration patterns are never completely uniform, and while some people had moved out in earlier years, and while some people continued to move into the Powder River Basin in the 1920s and even in the 1930s, there was a subtle shift as the pressures bore down upon people to change their farming and ranching practices or to move out. Those changes came first in a general way as the forces of modernization pressed farmers and ranchers to expand, to mechanize, to specialize, to centralize their operations, to leave behind their notions of agrarianism and to accept the priorities and principles of business organization. Then the pressures intensified in the

form of a general Depression that was both economic and social. And finally, those pressures were hardly relieved when the government attempted to help out those most in need of help in the 1930s.

*i. The Challenge of Modernization*

Although the prosperity of the nation in the decade is legendary, the 1920s represented a depression in the nation's farms and ranches that extended to the rest of the economy after the stock market crash of 1929. But this agricultural depression did not reach all parts of the nation with equal force; there were parts, after all, that were relatively less integrated into the national economy, and while that feature may have hampered some of their power as efficient, modern producers and marketers, it also provided something of a buffer when the adverse waves of crisis rippled across the sea of grain covering the fields of northeastern Wyoming.

The key feature that distinguished this area was fundamental: the prospect of free land, land without a mortgage, land without a debt burden, land without obligations of any kind save the requirement to live on it and develop it. T. A. Larson suggested that statewide the Twenties represented a boom in the homesteading surge, and this was probably true in northeast Wyoming, although the statewide land records have not been sorted by county or region in any study. What is clear, however, is that the land susceptible to irrigation had already been taken up and this meant that the land available for homesteading was increasingly, almost by definition, dry land where only dry farming

or livestock grazing could take place. Yet the dry farmers forged on and, in a time when despair and failure marked the efforts of many agriculturists, and holding on represented a triumph, these farmers and ranchers seemed to be more than modestly successful, and paradoxically, they achieved that success in a semi-arid region considered by some to be still a frontier area in the 1920s, an area lacking the infrastructure and conveniences of longer-settled areas. At the same time, the forces of change and modernization were upon them.

By virtually every measure, diversification in crops had been for a while the prevailing pattern among the farmers in the area, whether they were large or small operations, and this continued into the 1920s. Almost every farm or ranch produced a variety of crops, including extensive gardens for home consumption, and the requirements of dry farming mandated rotation of crops (for example wheat with corn) to preserve the soil nutrients. And many farms included some livestock, although the smaller operations usually had only draft animals and dairy cattle, but even these farms managed to procure beef to slaughter. And during the 1920s there were additional livestock on these farms, with swine increasing and with more attention to chickens and even to turkeys. In 1920 the Agricultural Extension Service at the University of Wyoming provided information to farmers on how to construct poultry houses that would be dry, well ventilated, soundly floored, and amply lighted, and six years later the same agency noted that the number of chickens in the state had increased by sixty-three percent and noted that “it has not been until recent years that the production of eggs in Wyoming has been sufficient to meet the home needs of even the farms which produced them.”<sup>1</sup> By

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<sup>1</sup> W. L. Quayle and Axell Christensen, “Feeding and Housing for Laying Hens,”

1929 more than eighty-five percent of all the farms and ranches in the area raised some chickens and a handful in each county were even producing as specialized poultry farms.<sup>2</sup>

Even more striking is the number of turkeys raised on farms, or, more precisely, the number of farms and ranches that raised turkeys. Nearly one third (thirty-two percent) of all the farms and ranches in the northeast corner of Wyoming raised turkeys in 1929.<sup>3</sup> The Extension service called this increase, which was true evidently in the entire state, “phenomenal” and suggested that turkey production had increased in Wyoming while it declined in the rest of the nation.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, this was exactly the same pattern that had previously been noted in sheep production; as the older states had become more settled and more crowded, the costs of sheep production increased there but conditions remained favorable in the Rocky Mountain West. Now the same thing was happening with turkeys. Ever the positive and helpful source of information for the farmers of the state, the Extension Service abidingly provided them information on how to build their brood houses and how to tend to their gobblers. This was a low budget operation and one that small operators could develop; turkeys, after all, did not require extensive ranges.

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University of Wyoming Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 149 (January 1927), 19; H. M. Lackie, “A Farm Poultry House,” Wyoming Extension Service Circular No. 4 (September 1929), 3-11.

<sup>2</sup> *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930; Agriculture: Chickens and Chicken Eggs and Turkeys, Ducks, and Geese Raised on Farms* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1933), 554.

<sup>3</sup> *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930; Agriculture: Chickens and Chicken Eggs and Turkeys, Ducks, and Geese Raised on Farms*, 563.

<sup>4</sup> Oliver N. Summers, “Turkey Raising in Wyoming,” Wyoming Extension Service Circular No. 26 (July 1928; revised May 1929, March 1933), 5.

Land use and agricultural practices in the sheep and cattle industry were changing, becoming more precisely calibrated by economic formulas, and ranches were seeking control of resources (and cost of production) more than previously, and shifting their practices to whatever would generate the greatest return on investment, and in so doing following the broad economic trend of the 1920s as a time when business was often trumping tradition. Among the cattle ranchers, access to free range had declined from what it had been in years past, but even so, the livestock numbers increased in the 1920s, reflecting a more intensive form of grazing than had prevailed in earlier years. In 1923 A. L. Brock, a rancher who settled in Johnson County in 1884 and whose son, Elmer continued the family ranching tradition and became president of the American Livestock Association, wrote that ranchers were still doing the roundup, but each ranch would do its own in the spring instead of it being a cooperative, collective affair. He noted, however, that “there are more or less reps [representatives] with each wagon from other outfits to gather and take back cattle to their own range that have strayed away during the winter.”<sup>5</sup> He also noted that cattle still had to be trailed long distances from some remote locations “but when properly handled gain in weight while being trailed to the railroad.”

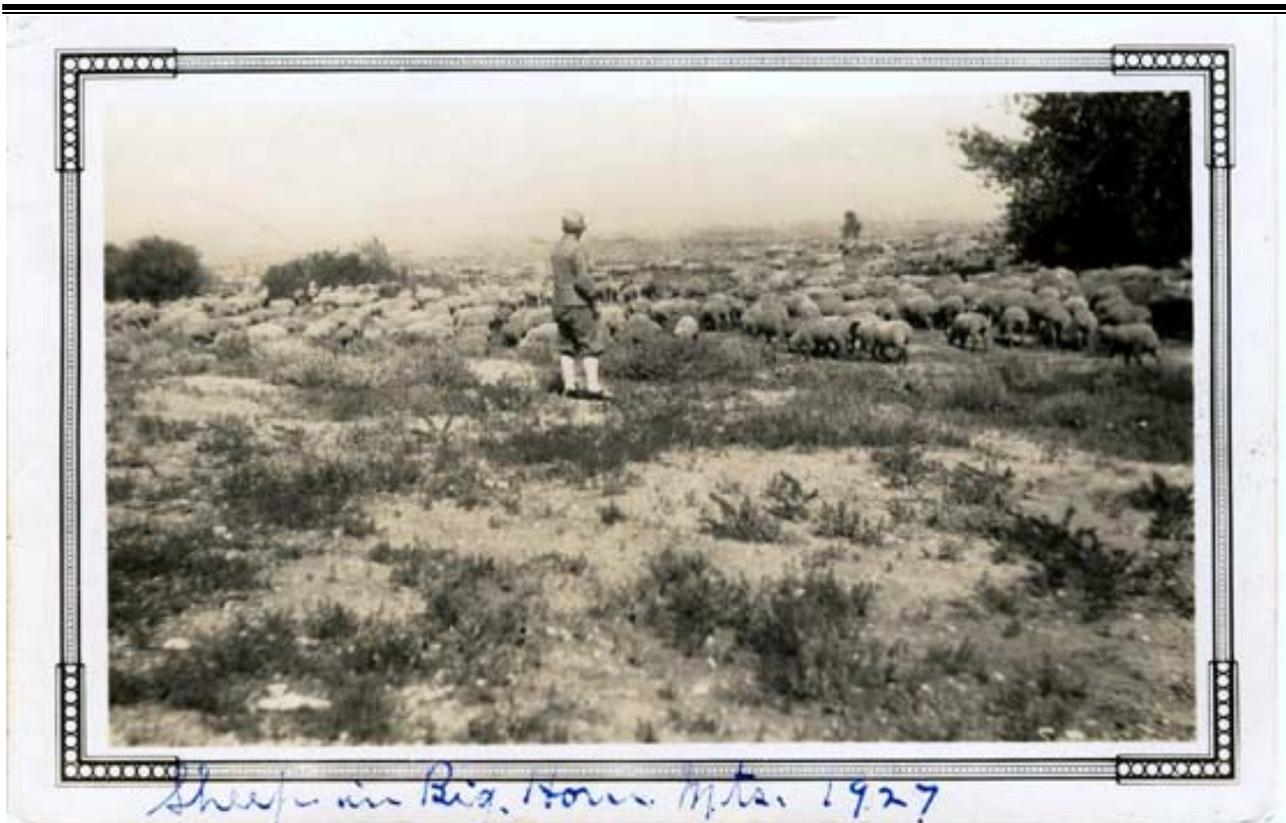
In 1926, A. F. Vass at the University of Wyoming studied cattle ranching in Campbell and Crook Counties and found that ranchers there were no longer inclined to use the public domain, believing instead “that leasing had many distinct advantages over the free range, in that leasing permitted controlled grazing and increased the carrying

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<sup>5</sup> A. L. Brock, “Comparison of Methods of Handling Livestock in 1923 and in 1933,”

capacity.”<sup>6</sup> Vass also observed at mid-decade that sheep had taken over the desert and mountain ranges because they were better adapted to the sagebrush and timbered ranges and cattle were not using those ranges anyway; but he also maintained that “sheep have been crowding cattle off the grass ranges” in many parts of Wyoming.<sup>7</sup>

During the 1920s, cattle ranching at least held its own in this area and the number of cattle on the range actually increased slightly during the decade, from 319,439 to 336,868, an increase that still did not take the numbers up to the 1910 level of 349,392.<sup>8</sup>



Sheep in the Big Horn Mountains, 1927. This appears to be a flock of sheep tended by one of the Basque herders of the Johnson County area. Photo from collection of Michael Cassity.

<sup>6</sup> A. F. Vass, “Range and Ranch Studies in Wyoming,” University of Wyoming Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 147 (June 1926), 148.

<sup>7</sup> Vass, “Range and Ranch Studies in Wyoming,” 117.

<sup>8</sup> *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930; Agriculture, Volume II, Part 3, The Western States* (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1932), 238-239;

The census statistics also suggest, but do not confirm, that there was an even more substantial increase in the size of the cattle ranches. At a minimum, it is possible to say with certainty that cattle ranching continued to grow in the 1920s, although not at a steady rate and with some important fluctuations in the early years of the decade, and that it was generally on the way to recovery from the post-World War I crisis.

Likewise with the sheep grazing. The decimation of flocks and the catastrophically low prices received for sheep after the war took years to restore, but during the 1920s, the sheep industry began to rebound. By the end of the decade the number of sheep in the seven counties increased by eighty-four percent—from 434,873 to 799,478—but was still far short of the 1910 record of a million and a half. There is some evidence, however, that much of this increase came only very late in the decade. In 1924 the Converse County wool growers were receiving around thirty-six cents a pound for their wool, which was certainly better than they had received for several years, but they remained apprehensive, with the Douglas newspaper reporting that “the price paid is not so good as anticipated earlier in the season, but is considered good in the present doubtful state of the wool market.”<sup>9</sup> The next year the Gillette *News-Record* found signs of enduring recovery in Campbell County and observed that the improved price “has caused many people in Campbell county to give most of their attention to sheep with the result that they are rapidly overcoming the post-war slump that so badly paralyzed the stock business.”<sup>10</sup> In 1928, the Douglas *Budget*, a consistent and reliable source on

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<sup>9</sup> Douglas *Budget*, July 3, 1924.

<sup>10</sup> Gillette *News-Record*, October 13, 1925; this article is quoting itself from news accounts of fifty years previous on that day.

developments in the sheep industry, reported that “skyrocketing prices for Wyoming wool were indicated this week with the sale of the John Carmody clip, Lander, at 42 cents flat” and it presumed that those prices would also be received locally.<sup>11</sup>

Part of the increase in sheep can be accounted for by cattle ranchers switching to sheep. Professor Vass’s 1926 analysis examined the economics for sheep and cattle production and concluded that the “purchasing power” of cattle—a combination of price received and the cost of production—was, in the previous year, “the lowest it has ever been since 1880” and the “purchasing power” of sheep, on the same date, was “the highest it has ever been at any time since 1880.”<sup>12</sup> Clearly, a scientific, or at least, sophisticated economic, approach to livestock grazing and marketing was coming into greater force as a guiding element in both the sheep and cattle industries. So, more and more ranchers made the switch. In 1928, for example, the Driskills’ D Ranch on the Belle Fourche sold to Roy Witcher who “brought in sheep and the operation of the ranch changed dramatically.”<sup>13</sup>

The switch from cattle to sheep was important, but much more important was the switch to a system of accounting that underlay the decision itself. In fact, the formulation represented a dramatic departure from the life of the cowboy or the rancher. The ranch, according to Vass, should be run like a business, and in any business capital rather than labor is the key ingredient. As Professor Vass argued, “In so much as capital is more

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<sup>11</sup> Douglas *Budget*, June 7, 1928.

<sup>12</sup> Vass, “Range and Ranch Studies in Wyoming,” 117-118.

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Dillinger Bowden, *1916: Wyoming, Here We Come!* (Gillette, Wyoming: privately printed by James H. Bowden and Jessie Outka, 2002), 41.

important than labor in the production of livestock on the range, the author deemed it advisable to use ‘rate of return on investment’ in measuring the success of a business rather than ‘labor income’ or what a man receives for his labor.” He then devised a set of correlation tables that showed how much the rancher was actually making, which was different from the amount of money the family had left over after settling up at the end of the year. In those calculations Vass made allowances for direct and indirect investments, wages for operators and unpaid family labor that went into the enterprise, and any other expenses. The return on the investment was then figured to be the income exceeding six percent above all those costs.<sup>14</sup> (Six percent was the amount that the rancher could presumably have earned by otherwise investing the money.) A new day was dawning for the entrepreneurs of the range—whether they knew they were entrepreneurs or not.

Vass developed a similar analysis for the sheep industry and some of his comparisons drew upon both cattle and sheep. Although he clearly focused on the economies of scale in the cattle industry and he generally favored large ranches over small because of the organizational efficiencies he found there (small ranchers could not afford, for example, enough young bulls, well distributed, to service the cows), he was even more explicit about the sheep ranchers: “The Wyoming sheep industry lends itself to large scale operation, and it would seem that the dividing up of our ranges for small scale operations would not be advisable at the present time.”<sup>15</sup> And his advice pertained

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<sup>14</sup> Vass, “Range and Ranch Studies in Wyoming,” 108-114.

<sup>15</sup> A. F. Vass and Harry Pearson, “An Economic Study of Range Sheep Production on the Red Desert and Adjoining Areas,” University of Wyoming Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 156 (July 1926), 57. While Vass focuses especially on the Red Desert, his analysis and data cover the entire state of Wyoming.

to both sheep and cattle ranches equally when he called “not for harder work and longer hours for the laborers, but for better organization and management.”<sup>16</sup> This suggestion held within it the seeds of revolution in a part of the economy known for its culture of hard work, long hours, and endless duty and sacrifice. It held within it the seeds of the industrialization of ranching, or, at a minimum, the transformation of ranching from a way of life to a business investment and the profit priorities implicit in that.

The perspectives and recommendations offered farmers by the Extension Service may have portended large changes for the future, but they also were part of a pattern of change already underway. In the 1920s the farm and ranch operations were becoming increasingly specialized, were becoming larger, and were becoming more mechanized. The specialization is evident in the census categories used for the first time at the end of the decade and these categories showed that in the northeastern corner of Wyoming the agricultural operations could be separated as either cash-grain farms (which included corn, wheat, oats, barley, rye, buckwheat and other grains), crop-specialty farms (including the specialties of sugar beets, soybeans, peas, beans, potatoes, and other field crops), livestock (mules, horses, cattle, sheep, hogs), animal specialty (distinguished from livestock operations by its emphasis on production of crops and feeding the livestock instead of open range grazing), dairy, or poultry operations. In contrast, by 1929, the “general” farming operations in the area—those farms and ranches where no single category could claim more than forty percent of the total revenue of the farm products—and the “self-sufficing” farms, where the value of the farm products used by the family was over half the total production of the operation, represented only small numbers in

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each county. At one time they had not only formed the bulk of the farms and ranches, they had been what homesteading was all about. Put another way, the diversification of agriculture was noticeably declining and single crop or specialized livestock production was ascendant.

Even within the various specialties, these farms and ranches were dividing themselves into more sub-specialties. Part of that had to do with the promulgation of purebred strains of livestock. In 1923 a directory of breeders of purebred livestock in the state listed nearly half of all purebred Hereford breeders (twenty-eight of fifty-nine) as operating in the study area, thus also reflecting the cattle of preference for the region. In addition, this area also served as a base for the breeding of dairy cattle (both Guernseys and Holstein-Friesian) that rivaled the Star Valley in western Wyoming. Three of the six purebred horse breeders in Wyoming were in this area and they produced quality Percherons and Belgians, the draft animals capable of pulling the heavy implements used on the farms. It is also important to note that there were more purebred swine breeders in the area (thirty-four Poland China; seven Hampshires; twenty-one Duroc Jerseys, one Chester Whites) than there were cattle breeders, and there were more swine breeders there than in the rest of the state.<sup>17</sup> This breeding of livestock actually reflects two different, even contradictory, trends. On the one hand the breeds were more specialized, as were the ranches that offered their purebred stock for sale. On the other hand, though, their market was farms and ranches that were quite diversified.

In addition, and more reflective of the specialization taking place on the farms and

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<sup>16</sup> Vass and Pearson, "An Economic Study of Range Sheep Production," 59.

<sup>17</sup> A. E. Bowman, *A Directory of Breeders of Purebred Livestock and Poultry in*

ranches of the area, the producers were organizing themselves into narrowly-focused commodity groups to promote their own products. Campbell County in 1927 had, in addition to the usual broad organizations like the Farmers' Union and county fair-related activities, a county Farmers Grain Association and a Wool Growers Association; Converse County had a Beekeepers Association, and a Dairy Association; Crook County had a Live Stock Association; Johnson County had its own chapter of the Wool Growers Association, and a chapter of the North Central Wyoming Poultry Association; Niobrara farmers organized a Potato Growers Association and a Turkey Growers organization; Sheridan County had its own Beekeepers Association, Poultry Association, Wool Growers Association, and Poultry Marketing Association; and Weston County had a Poultry Association.<sup>18</sup>

Converse County provides a good example of the process and Dan Greenburg reported on these in his 1926 promotional account of the county's resources. The Converse County Dairy Association was organized in 1924, Greenburg reported, "when dairying was almost unknown" there and within three years had its own trucks and was even delivering milk daily as far away as Casper. The Bee Keepers also organized in 1924, and the Poultry Association, which formed a little earlier, endeavored "to standardize the production and marketing of eggs on a high quality basis." Greenburg observed that the Converse County Agricultural Association was the parent, in some way,

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*Wyoming* (Laramie: University of Wyoming Extension Service, 1923),.

<sup>18</sup> Wyoming State Department of Agriculture (in conjunction with U.S. Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agriculture and Economics), *Wyoming Agriculture Statistics, 1927* (Cheyenne, Wyoming: Wyoming State Department of Agriculture, 1927), 62-63. I am grateful to Carl Hallberg of the Wyoming State Archives for finding this document and sharing it.

of the more specialized bodies and saw its own mission as promoting “all lines of agriculture, particularly from the educational standpoint, [addressing] problems relating to producing including the introduction of new crops, marketing, transportation and many other features.”<sup>19</sup>

This tendency toward organization along specialized producer lines is reflective, first, of a growing orientation of farmers and ranchers to cash crop production, and secondly to dividing along their income-producing lines, a division that spread from economic activity to social and political identities so that they often felt they had more in common with other producers of the same product elsewhere than they did with their own neighbors and community members who labored and produced differently. The rise of the fragmented community—and its consequences and resistance—forms one of the central themes of American history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This process was hardly complete in this area by the end of the 1920s, and it likely included only the largest of the various commodity producers, but it was at work eroding some of the community bonds that could normally be found and associated with small town and rural life where people traditionally counted as neighbors those who lived miles away, but whose friendship and support could be counted on in time of need or celebration.

But there was more. The revolution that had started in the use of machinery on the farm gained momentum and breadth in the 1920s. The measures of that mechanization show that the farms and ranches of the area in the first part of the 1920s

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<sup>19</sup> Dan W. Greenburg, “Converse County’s Magnificent Resources,” *The Midwest Review*, VII (August 1926), 14-18.

actually reduced their investment in implements and machinery by about twenty percent, a circumstance that corresponds clearly with the agricultural crisis that lasted until around 1924. After 1925, however, the investment in implements nearly doubled (increasing by ninety-five percent) in five years.<sup>20</sup> What they were investing in is also clear. By 1929 almost a fourth of the farms and ranches had a tractor, and some had more than one. A smaller number, twenty percent, had a truck. The tractor was making major gains in the decade, although it should be remembered that seventy-six percent of the farms and ranches did not have one. The steam-powered dinosaurs that had roved the countryside like railroad locomotives with oversize wheels were still around, but tractors were changing. As Gilbert Fite has observed, the major change in tractor technology came in 1924 when the International Harvester Company introduced its all-purpose gasoline-powered Farmall tractor, and that, says Fite, was when “the tractor age really began in American agriculture.”<sup>21</sup> These were still large, they still had steel (rather than rubber which would come in the 1930s) wheels, they were expensive, and they were slow to catch on.

There was also the matter of the implements to be pulled behind the tractors; instead of investing in all new plows, rakes, disks, harrows, and other implements, most farmers would simply hitch up their existing horse-drawn implements to the tractor, although this represented less than optimum efficiency, for another person would have to ride on the implement and control it. But the tractors were improving in the 1920s and

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<sup>20</sup> *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930; Agriculture, Volume II, Part 3, The Western States*, 227-228.

<sup>21</sup> Gilbert C. Fite, “The Transformation of South Dakota Agriculture: The Effects of

they soon developed a power takeoff to transfer power directly from the tractor to the implement and also developed a hydraulic lift so that the plow could be lifted from the ground more easily before turning. The tractors began to catch on, though. In 1926, J. D. LeBar planted thirty acres of peas west of Douglas near the highway, and he used two Fordson tractors to do the plowing. The local newspaper reported that LeBar's demonstration "will be an advertisement for the successful growing of peas." It could also have said that it would be an advertisement for the use of tractors.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to the tractors—and literally connected to the tractors—were the threshers. These threshers themselves came in a variety of configurations, many, perhaps most, serving the function of separating the small grains from the straw, but they also expanded into other areas. In 1926 the Douglas *Budget* announced that "A thresher, built for handling of peas and beans, has arrived in Douglas and will be ready to take care of the crop which will be raised in this vicinity this season." This represented a sizeable investment and was financed by a group of local individuals—whether farmers or bankers or both is not clear—and was intended to stimulate the production of peas and beans locally; in fact, as a result of this technology, within a few years Douglas had developed a seed house for peas that was owned by a Connecticut firm.<sup>23</sup>

Where the technology of threshing grain had evolved well beyond the individual or team with flails, the process of threshing still involved harvesting the grain, tying it into sheaves, placing the sheaves in shocks to dry, and then taking the shocks to the mechanical thresher, a device powered first by the steam tractors and then the gasoline

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Mechanization, 1939-1964," *South Dakota History*, 19 (1989), 281.

<sup>22</sup> Douglas *Budget*, March 25, 1926.

tractors. A team of people, often neighbors, called a “threshing ring,” would operate the threshing as the shocks were brought to the machine which was parked where the stacks of straw would be made, and the event became a neighborhood affair with huge meals and recreation to encourage the workers on. The advent of the combine harvester—sometimes seen in the 1930s—changed this, since this machine would go through the fields and harvest and thresh the grain in one action, or at most two steps. Because the early combines had a tendency to shatter the grain if it was threshed immediately upon harvesting, the practice often was to harvest the grain, leaving it in windrows, and after it had dried pass over it with the combine to pick it up and separate it, first the grain from the straw, and then the grain from the chaff. In either instance, however, now one individual alone could harvest and thresh the entire farm.<sup>24</sup> The implications of the new technology for hired labor and for community interaction were enormous.

The increasing mechanization of agriculture, however, was more than just the triumph of the internal combustion engine. Even the horse-drawn implements were being used more, and they were becoming more specialized. Consider the adoption of winter wheat. As late as 1926 three-fourths of the wheat produced in Wyoming was spring wheat, i.e., wheat that was planted in the spring to grow and mature over the summer. Winter wheat was widely recognized as a superior alternative, especially on dry farms, because it was more likely to mature since it usually escaped the dry season of July and August. The problem, though, was that often the winter wheat would not survive the winter. Once it was planted in late fall, the wheat seeds would too often perish, largely as a result of wind abrasion during the winter.

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<sup>23</sup> Douglas *Budget*, April 15, 1926, January 20, 1927.

The University of Wyoming Extension Service researched the subject and came up with a set of recommendations to help the farmers who planted winter wheat. One involved using a furrow drill to plant the seed deeper in the furrow, but covered only with the usual topsoil; by planting deeper in the furrow, the seed would be closer to moisture and would be protected from the wind. Also the Extension Service recommended the use of a duckfoot cultivator, instead of a plow, on fallow land to stir the soil without exposing too much of it to the drying action of the wind. The duckfoot was an ingenious device, sliding along just under the surface of the soil, cutting through the weeds between the rows but leaving the wheat standing and pulverizing the dirt into the dust mulch that would hold the moisture beneath. And thus more equipment was added to the inventory of the farmer, even when the farmers continued to use horses as their source of power in the fields.<sup>25</sup> And thus was more money invested in the farm, and that money was often borrowed. And thus was more land acquired which would make the new equipment that much more efficient, hopefully even paying for itself.

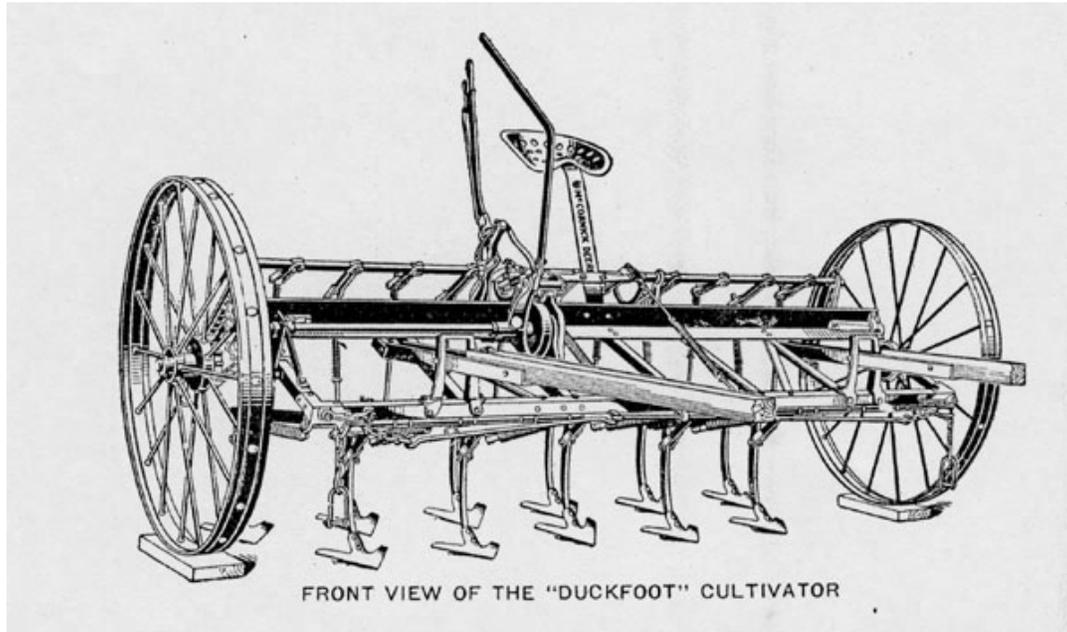
The technological revolution carried consequences for the use of the land. Most directly and immediately, it meant that larger acreages were both more practical and even necessary. The individual family farm with a few draft horses and implements, relying on family labor, could not work a large spread, but with more and more powerful implements, with tractors, with threshers, with combines the extra land was not only possible to cultivate but was even necessary in order to justify the additional expense

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<sup>24</sup> Fite, "The Transformation of South Dakota Agriculture," 291.

<sup>25</sup> W. L. Quayle and A. L. Nelson, "A Better Method for Winter Wheat Production," University of Wyoming Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin No. 151 (February 1927).

entailed in purchasing and maintaining the equipment. The technology would not ordinarily increase the bushels per acre of any product (although some devices like the



Duckfoot cultivator. From: W. L. Quayle and A. L. Nelson, "A Better Method for Winter Wheat Production," University of Wyoming Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin No. 151 (February 1927), 48.

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duckfoot cultivator promised to do this indirectly by assuring a greater seedling success rate), but it would increase the acres that could be worked. And, in fact, by the end of the 1920s the farms and ranches in the area had increased dramatically in size.

It is always problematic to use averages, especially with relatively small numbers, since the average is just a mythical number to begin with, and that number can so easily be skewed by a handful of extreme cases at either end of the scale. Yet the marked shift in the average size of farms in the Powder River Basin during the 1920s is such that the average does indeed signal the contours of a larger reality and suggest a greater transformation underway. In ten years the sizes of the average farm and ranch almost

exactly doubled, jumping from 864.57 acres to 1703.5 acres.<sup>26</sup> Most of that increase, in fact, took place during the first half of the decade as larger operations expanded by buying out, foreclosing mortgages, or otherwise taking over smaller farms and ranches that were weakened by the tight money supply and declining prices on their products. By the end of the decade thirty-seven percent of the farms in this area controlled sixty-three percent of the farmland. It is also important to note that during the decade the total number of farms in the area actually declined for the first time. Farmland had grown, but the number of farms on that land dropped slightly, from 6085 farms in 1920 to 5879 in 1930. The prevailing—but not universal—pattern was clear: a general pattern of agricultural consolidation was underway as the total number of farms was declining and the individual farms were getting larger, with the largest farms showing the greatest growth and, conversely, the smallest farms showing the greatest decline.

During the decade, the mortgages on farms and ranches increased so that by 1930, thirty-one percent of the farms were free of mortgages; in 1920, sixty-one percent of them had had no mortgage burden. The general picture of the area thus shows a system of agriculture in which sheep and wool production was increasing, farm and ranch size was increasing, technology was increasing, and the numbers of the large farms (over a thousand acres) climbed dramatically, but so also was debt increasing. Meanwhile, the number of farms was declining (except for in Campbell County), the number of *small* farms was also declining, the number of farms that were mortgage free was declining, and the farms and ranches were increasingly turning to a single crop system of

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<sup>26</sup> This is a calculation based upon the size of all farms (which included ranches) in the seven county area based on the census data from 1920 and 1930.

production. While Wyoming had for decades represented a countertrend to the main social and economic pattern of agriculture in the nation, by the 1920s the state, and this part of the state in particular, appeared to be joining the mainstream.

Some of the largest ranches and farms were the ones that attracted most attention as showcase operations, and usually these were pointed to as examples of practices that others should adopt, and, at any rate, as a vision of the agricultural future. For example, around Sheridan there were the elegant ranches and farms of English nobility, like the Moncreiffes and Wallops, that had been established around 1890 but had avoided the issues of the Johnson County War and had become hideaways mainly noted for the purebred livestock they produced and the polo they played. Oliver Wallop left the country (and his U.S. citizenship) for a while to assume his role as Earl of Portsmouth.<sup>27</sup> Allan Seager, a well-known writer at mid-twentieth century, recalled his visit to a wealthy aunt and uncle who lived and circulated among those ranches in 1923 when he was a young man of seventeen years. “The country round about had gone through a cycle of cattle, sheep, and dry farming, and now it was devoting itself mainly to raising horses for cavalry remounts, and entertaining the first dudes.”<sup>28</sup> The Gallatin and McCoy polo ranch specialized in the breeding of polo ponies with four registered stallions. Nearby, Ridgely Nicholas was specializing in raising thoroughbred hunters and jumpers. Bradford Brinton also produced thoroughbred horses, Arabian.

Aside from the elegant estates, however, there were the vast working ranches. Among those ranches was that of Edward L. Dana near Parkman, whose operation

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<sup>27</sup> “Earl of Portsmouth Quits Wyoming Ranch, Ends American Citizenship of 42 Years,” *New York Times*, April 9, 1933.

included nearly a hundred thousand acres and extended into Montana. When Dan W. Greenburg reported on the ranches of the area, he noted this ranch's "huge scale for the proper handling and feeding of cattle. The sheds and pens, dipping vats, feeding racks are orderly and extensive. Even in the branding operations and the dehorning operations, chutes are made and each operation goes on with despatch. Granaries are filled, rations are measured and fed in feeding season, while every precaution is taken against disease and modern dipping vats are so constructed that the animal is driven quickly through the chute into cement lined vats where the animal is immersed and dragged out secure from contamination."<sup>29</sup> In addition, there was the huge ranch of Senator John Kendrick himself, a ranch that included multiple other properties including the one-time separate OW Ranch, the E Bar U, the LX Bar, the 76, the 77 and other ranches for a total of some 210,000 acres.<sup>30</sup> At that ranch Dan Greenburg captured some perspective on the changes underway, observing that "The range days are gone. The lands are fenced and the system is changed from an exclusive cattle country to one of cattle, hogs, sheep, poultry and the plow is in operation at full tilt." Again, this was one of those ranches that heralded the scientific future of agriculture because of its industrial organization: "it would be a revelation to go upon any one of his [Kendrick's] places and observe the modern methods

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<sup>28</sup> Allan Seager, "Powder River in the Old Days," *The New Yorker*, August 17, 1957, 28.

<sup>29</sup> D. W. Greenburg, "Marvelous Sheridan County," *The Midwest Review*, VII (October 1926), 14.

<sup>30</sup> B. J. Earle, "The Kendrick Ranch as Historic Context: Attention Coal Bed Methane Surveyors!" Poster Paper, 62<sup>nd</sup> Plains Anthropological Conference, Billings, Montana October 14-16, 2004. A copy of this paper is located on the web page for the Wyoming SHPO Planning and Historic Context Program, <http://wyoshpo.state.wy.us/SHPOweb2002/2002webpages/availablecontexts.htm>, accessed June 27, 2006.

of handling cattle which he has installed.”<sup>31</sup>

There was also the Levi Leiter estate on Clear Creek in Johnson County, operated in the 1920s by Joseph Leiter, and while not as extensive as the Kendrick or Dana ranches, was large—very large. At first appearance, the Leiter estate was as diversified as any operation and produced in 1925 “2500 tons of alfalfa, 1000 bushels of peas, 55,000 bushels of barley, 4,000 bushels of oats and 1,000 bushels of corn” in addition to a thousand head of hogs sent to market and twenty thousand head of sheep fed. Leiter had shifted away from the production of wheat as the major crop of the operation and now used the three wheat elevators constructed during World War I to store oats. Yet this was not so much diversification as vertical integration—control of the resources used at every step of production. His intention in the 1920s was that “nothing should be shipped out except on the hoof,” and the crops he raised were going directly to feed for his livestock. This control of production extended even to the labor supply and by the 1920s Leiter had shifted his organization in another way and had developed an operation based upon tenant farmers with about sixty tenant units at mid-decade.<sup>32</sup>

West of Douglas, at Careyhurst, the old showcase ranch of the 1880s continued, but it too was changing. Although at one time it was exclusively a cattle ranch, it had increasingly diversified and by the 1920s included sheep as well, in fact, a large number

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<sup>31</sup> Greenburg, “Marvelous Sheridan County,” 11-12.

<sup>32</sup> Greenburg, “Marvelous Sheridan County,” 10. In addition, as sometimes happens but usually not so prominently, a legal dispute between Joseph Leiter and his sister, the widow of the Earl of Suffolk, brought further details of the operation of this ranch to public notice. See, for example, “Sister Says Leiter Mismanages Estate Worth \$100,000,000,” *New York Times*, May 6, 1923; “Leiter as Manager of Farms Assailed, Lady Suffolk Offers Testimony To Show Poor Marketing of Sugar Beet Crops,” *New York Times*, March 26, 1926.

of sheep, and it was producing hogs and horses too. Dan Greenburg reported that “Due to restricted range the management has been reducing its cattle and is devoting more effort to farming.” Like the Leiter estate, Careyhurst had shifted its labor system from hired labor to tenant farming or share-cropping, “and now the management maintains a consistent policy of adding more tenants each year.”<sup>33</sup>

The future, the modern form of organization, was advancing, and it was big. It was also vertically integrated, and was pioneering in areas of labor management that in other parts of the nation were perceived as systems of peonage.

Actually, this pattern of modernization was not universally prevalent. The pattern in which vast operations were taking the place of small operations, where family-farm homesteading was being challenged by corporate-based entities, where specialized, scientific, commercial-oriented, capital-intensive agriculture grew each year, but it was not yet dominant. In fact, that can be seen most clearly in one county. During the 1920s, Campbell County was the only part of the northeastern quadrant of Wyoming to increase the number of farms in its borders. While the numbers of farms were declining elsewhere, that county increased the number of farms by twenty-two percent, or 236 farms; where the county had 1072 farms in 1920 there were 1308 in 1930. Clearly a reflection of the importance of Campbell County as a homesteading location, this is striking because it also presents a contrast with the other counties where the farms were declining. And along with the increase in farms in Campbell County there was also a huge increase in farmland. During the 1920s the amount of land put into farms in the county almost quadrupled, jumping from 233,632 to 888,287 acres. And Campbell

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<sup>33</sup> Dan W. Greenburg, “Converse County’s Magnificent Resources,” *The Midwest*

County also showed the lowest relative investment in farm machinery and implements, a feature that revealed the reluctance (or inability) to buy into the new technology available. All of these are traits and indications of homesteading activity.

In Campbell County and elsewhere in the region, there still persisted those who saw themselves as pioneers, people on the frontier, people who were moving west and claiming parts of the public domain on which they might live their own vision of the American dream, a vision that went back to a Jeffersonian agrarian formulation of freedom and democracy and civic virtue. And Campbell County seemed to be one of the few places left where it appeared that that dream might be fulfilled in the 1920s.

Studies of the communities and neighborhoods where homesteaders took up land in any period are frustratingly uncommon and in the twentieth century they are even more scarce, a fact that has meant that the historical depictions of farming and ranching have tended to focus on dramatic episodes or to gravitate to the most colorful, largest, and least representative examples. There is, however, a study of a community of homesteaders in Campbell County, Wyoming in the 1920s and 1930s that helps provide, in microcosm, a portrait of the life and history of homesteaders.

In 1999 William P. Fischer studied the homesteading community of Teckla, Wyoming, examining land records, local records, family histories, letters, and farm accounts, government reports, and topical academic histories, in addition to interviewing family members from the community. That study represents a possible model for anyone investigating homesteading sites not only in Campbell County, but in northeast Wyoming and probably more broadly in the state, and the core site evaluation is the Mackey

Homestead, 48CA2675.<sup>34</sup>

The basic story of Teckla, as Fischer describes it, was one that conformed to larger trends:

Homestead entries flourished in the late 1910s and into the early 1920s. Settlers arrived primarily from neighboring states, established homes, and developed a permanent community. They attempted farming with mixed success and failure, and they supplemented their operations with animal husbandry. During the 1920s, a number accomplished their objectives, as is evident in the improvements and subsequent patenting of their homesteads.<sup>35</sup>

Examining their kinship networks and marriage status, Fischer concludes that these people fully intended to stay, to make permanent homes when they filed their claims under the 1909 Enlarged Homestead Act and the 1916 Stock Raising Homestead Act (for the Mackey family this represented claims totaling 640 acres). They developed a diversified agriculture, growing dry-farm crops like corn, oats, cane, rye, millet, flax and wheat, and raising some livestock too. Although the drought of 1919 caused a crop failure, as it did for a broad area of small and large operations alike, their successes in other years can be documented. In addition to the barns and permanent homes they built after their temporary abodes, they also constructed the full array of chicken houses, swine shelters, cellars, granaries, windmills, reservoirs and utility buildings. Some worked for others in the area while building up the homestead; one person hired out as a shepherd to nearby large sheep operation. An important theme runs through Fischer's account of the Teckla homesteaders: they succeeded in the 1920s, and that success was based on

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<sup>34</sup> William P. Fischer, "Homesteading the Thunder Basin: Teckla, Wyoming, 1917-1938," *Annals of Wyoming*, 71 (Spring 1999), 21-34.

“diversified cultivation, poultry raising, and animal husbandry.”<sup>36</sup> Although Fischer was unable to find records for the Mackey family between 1922 and 1925, he notes that

Mackey marketed 500 pounds of beans, 10,000 pounds of oats, 310 pounds of potatoes, forty-eight bushels of wheat, 500 bushels of corn, and 151 pounds of dressed turkeys between October and November 10, 1926. In 1927, wheat, oats, and turkeys were sold, while 1928 included the sale of oats, hogs, wheat, cattle, and turkeys. The farm produced 189 bushels of winter wheat, flax, sixty-four bushels of rye, and 716 pounds of live turkeys for sale in 1929.<sup>37</sup>

The Mackeys’ daughter “remembered the 1920s as seemingly prosperous years on the homestead, although tempered by the basic hardships of homestead life.” They raised their own food (“beans, potatoes, peas, onions, carrots, tomatoes, and, on at least one occasion, even watermelon”) in their garden and spent considerable time canning and curing food, storing it in their root cellar. They hauled in water for drinking, although they had a well that produced water not as good as that of the hauled water. Family labor took care of many general farm chores and specialized tasks on the homestead. Although the family used horses to work their fields for most of the 1920s, in 1928 they purchased a “1530 International tractor, combine, plow, and tandem disk,” which they then also used to farm nearby land owned by others. In addition to their own entertainment with a battery-powered radio, the community came together at dances and other gatherings. Customarily someone would donate a couple of acres for a school (the return on the investment being the nearness of the school to the homestead), and, at Teckla, “neighbors joined together and collectively purchased a steam tractor to thresh grain, and they

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<sup>35</sup> Fischer, “Homesteading the Thunder Basin,” 23.

<sup>36</sup> Fischer, “Homesteading the Thunder Basin,” 27.

commonly acted as midwives at the births of each other's children."<sup>38</sup>

Obviously not everyone who homesteaded succeeded, and it is impossible to determine why some people left the land that they had claimed. Some could not thrive in the manner they hoped. Some grew weary of the effort. Some lacked a background in farming, or in this kind of farming. Some fell victim to one scheme or another. Some left for better pay at a job in town or in another state. Some were foreclosed when the bank that owned their mortgage closed. Some never intended to remain, hoping instead to attract an offer on their land. And clearly, those who left their farms and ranches were no different from farmers all across the nation who were also leaving to find employment in the cities. But many remained and, as already noted, the number of farms in Campbell County actually increased during the decade as a result. In one way these homesteaders at Teckla can be understood as people exactly like their homesteading progenitors of the nineteenth century attempting build a life with homes of their own according to their own expectations and standards of contentment. In another way, however, they can be understood as individuals still bucking the trend of modern agriculture in that they retained a faith in the family farm and economic independence instead of opting for a corporate form of organization and specialization of function, in that they still retained a sense of farming as a way of life instead of as merely a business proposition. They were not alone. All across the region stretching from the Big Horn Mountains to the Black Hills and down to the North Platte River, small operations like theirs continued on, sometimes growing, sometimes shrinking, and increasingly they were fighting not just a battle to make ends meet, but struggling against the system of economic and social

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<sup>37</sup> Fischer, "Homesteading the Thunder Basin," 27.

organization itself that threatened to leave them behind. Those pressures and that struggle would increase with the downturn of the nation's economy in the 1930s.

*ii. Agricultural Crisis, Social Crisis*

Although the Depression of the 1930s is ordinarily calculated as beginning with the stock market crash of 1929, that economic spiral actually came after a much less dramatic but equally devastating blow to the nation's economy that had begun years before. The decline in the number of farms in northeast Wyoming in the 1920s is directly related to that agricultural depression, for those farmers who left their lands, by force or choice, were joining a nationwide stream to the city. The problems of farmers in the 1920s were the problems not of dry farming and drought, not of blizzards and winter die-outs, not problems of nature at all. They were problems of social organization. Much of the particular part of the social organization that beset them had to do with the nation's banking system, which was itself modernizing, thinning its own ranks, becoming more specialized, and more centralized.

The nation's banking system was in crisis throughout the 1920s and the most vulnerable part of that system rested in the small banks in the rural communities. Between 1921 and 1929 nearly 6,000 banks failed in the United States, an amount equal to twenty percent of the total. The leading students of banking in the nation concluded that "A large fraction of all banks that suspended during the period had capital of \$25,000

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<sup>38</sup> Fischer, "Homesteading the Thunder Basin," 29.

or less and were located in towns of 2,500 or less, largely situated in seven western grain states.”<sup>39</sup> Wyoming contributed to this trend as 101 (out of a total of 153) banks closed their doors during the 1920s, thirty of them national banks (chartered by the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency) and seventy-one of them state chartered banks; only thirty-two banks opened for business in the decade. The first few years of the decade saw the banking system contract sharply but the failures of the banks plummeted in 1924. In that single year banks closed in Manville, Lusk, Newcastle, Buffalo, Clearmont, Douglas, Glenrock, Kaycee, Keeline, Lavoye, Osage, Van Tassell, Upton, and Sheridan. The next year, three banks in Sheridan alone closed their doors.<sup>40</sup>

This impacted the farmers and ranchers around those communities seriously since any deposits they had in those banks were usually lost. Indirectly, however, the entire economy and anyone with outstanding loans from any source suffered since these and other closures in the nation represented a contraction of the money supply—another deflationary cycle—which meant that the loans would have to be repaid with more valuable dollars than were originally borrowed. That group included those with mortgages, those who were investing in the new agricultural equipment and cars and trucks, and those who were expanding their holdings through purchases—in other words, just about everybody.

To make matters worse, just as had been the case nationally in the decades following the Civil War, the increasing burden of debts and costs of production collided

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<sup>39</sup> Milton Friedman and Anna Jacobson Schwartz, *A Monetary History of the United States, 1867-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 249.

<sup>40</sup> Larson, *History of Wyoming*, 413; Peter W. Huntoon, “The National Bank Failures in Wyoming, 1924,” *Annals of Wyoming*, 54 (Fall 1982), 35, 42-43.

with declining prices received for the products of their labor. Wool was bringing fifty-six cents a pound in 1920, but dropped to twenty-five cents or less the next year, recovered then fluctuated, hitting thirty-three cents in 1927, then recovering some the next two years, but never to the level it had been at the beginning of the decade. Likewise, wheat that had sold for \$2.78 in 1920 was bringing seventy-four cents a bushel in 1929; beef cattle sold for \$10.90 per hundredweight in 1920 and for \$6.30 in 1927.<sup>41</sup> Some recovery was experienced in 1928 and 1929, and this brought new hope, but the prices did not last. In fact, bad as the prices were, they carried a perversely worsening consequence with them. As the farmers and ranchers saw their income fall, about their only recourse, to increase their income, was to plant more crops on more land with more equipment—and more debt. In view of these pressures, it should come as no surprise that the number of farms in the area declined, but that the number did not decline even more than it did. This was not an instance where the folly of dry farming was finally realized; this was part of a social crisis besetting all farmers in the United States and the migration from the farm to the city was the pattern across the nation.

After the stock market crash of 1929 the agricultural depression of the 1920s merged with the economic crisis of the nation that deepened each year until 1933; but even then the economy languished and people despaired as recovery seemed ever elusive. The banking crisis, already awful, got even worse between 1929 and 1933 as the entire

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<sup>41</sup> These figures are prices in Montana since price data are not available for Wyoming for these years. This information can be found in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service, available on World Wide Web at [http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics\\_by\\_State/Montana/index.asp](http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Montana/index.asp) and [http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics\\_by\\_State/Montana/Publications/croptoc.htm](http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Montana/Publications/croptoc.htm). The index for Wyoming does, however, include production output. See: [http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics\\_by\\_State/Wyoming/index.asp](http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Wyoming/index.asp).

money supply of the nation, already painfully tightened, shrank by more than a third, thus placing additional pressure on the farmers and ranchers. More banks shut down or merged, and farmers and ranchers watched their savings evaporate at worst, or, at best move far away. Typical was the experience in Moorcroft where the American State Bank, which had been formed in 1921 upon the failures of the Moorcroft Bank and the Peoples Bank, merged with the Sundance State Bank. The local newspaper commented on this merger, in which the bank's assets were at least still in existence, that it still left local people "without local banking facilities and at considerable inconvenience."<sup>42</sup>

Commodity prices dropped too and the wheat that sold for seventy-four cents in 1929 sold for thirty-six cents two years later. The cattle that sold for \$6.30 per hundredweight in 1927 sold for \$2.70 in 1933. In 1932 wool sold for seven or eight cents a pound, sometimes as much as a dime.<sup>43</sup> In Converse County at the end of June 1932, the local paper reported that there had been no wool sales at all in the county "and buyers have not been making much effort to get clips." And when sales were made later in the summer, the Morton Ranch received a dime a pound, "which is the highest reported locally and probably as high as has been paid in the state."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> "Moorcroft Without Banking Institution," Moorcroft *Leader*, January 15, 1932, quoted in Sundance High School Sophomore Class of 1987, *Triumphs and Tragedies of Crook County* ( n.p., n.d.), 60.

<sup>43</sup> Again these prices were true of Montana and Wyoming prices were doubtless similar: U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service Montana data at [http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics\\_by\\_State/Montana/Publications/economic/prices/woolpr.htm](http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Montana/Publications/economic/prices/woolpr.htm);  
[http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics\\_by\\_State/Montana/Publications/economic/prices/allwhtr.htm](http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Montana/Publications/economic/prices/allwhtr.htm);  
[http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics\\_by\\_State/Montana/Publications/economic/prices/bfcatlpr.htm](http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Montana/Publications/economic/prices/bfcatlpr.htm).

Again, this crisis was a general crisis and was not a reflection on the lack of hard work by the farmers and ranchers, nor was it even a result of weather; it had to do with the general crisis in the nation's economy and especially with the failure of the banking system. A. L. Brock in Johnson County effectively captured the situation in 1933 when he observed that "Many of the once well-to-do farmers and stockmen have lost their farms and homes, largely on account of the financial conditions of the country. Many of the stockmen in Wyoming are using more or less borrowed money and owing to the present financial conditions of the country many of them have very little equity left."<sup>45</sup>

When the drought of 1933 and 1934 came, it worsened the problems; not only were prices for the commodities low and costs high, but their production of crops and livestock also declined, making their income that much leaner. It is perilous to compare one drought with another, because the measurement can vary dramatically from one drainage to another, and the statewide data tend to average out the highs and lows of the different parts of Wyoming. Nonetheless, the period of drought between 1931 and 1936 (locals in the Powder River Basin, however referred to the droughts of 1933, 1934, and 1936) measures as one of the seven worst droughts lasting three years or longer in Wyoming history since 1895. The Wyoming State Climate Office puts the drought into climatological context by noting that "The most recent statewide drought that began in earnest in the spring of 2000 over Wyoming is considered by many to be the most severe in collective memory. However, some old timers have indicated that they remember

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<sup>44</sup> Douglas Budget, June 23, August 11, 1932.

<sup>45</sup> A. L. Brock, "Comparison of Methods of Handling Livestock in 1923 and in 1933," 6.

streams drying up in the 1930s and 1950s.”<sup>46</sup>

The exact conditions are hard to define, but there can be no mistaking the severity of the drought. The state of Wyoming effectively defined the drought area in 1937 when it reduced the leasing rates for state grazing land by forty percent in the “drouth-stricken” counties of Campbell, Crook, Sheridan, Weston, and Johnson, and by twenty-five percent for lands in Converse County.<sup>47</sup> In the summer of 1936, which was probably the nadir of the drought because of the cumulative weight of the decline over the previous year and more, the northern part of Campbell County was described as appearing to be “as smooth as cement” and one report indicated that “the southern part of the county, although not hit as hard yet, is beginning to show signs of the severe dry weather. Many residents report the drying up of wells and water holes.”<sup>48</sup> By all accounts, the drought hit everywhere in Wyoming, and in northeast Wyoming Campbell County was the drought’s epicenter.

The drought was severe for anybody who went through it, and, like the rain that falls on the just and unjust alike, the drought also afflicted everybody. But some were impacted harder than others. Some of those who suffered the most, and whose soil suffered the most, were those who had adopted new technology for cultivating their crops, in particular the implements that would cut the weeds just beneath the surface and leave a finely pulverized layer of dust, what they called a dust mulch, to protect the seeds

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<sup>46</sup> Jan Curtis and Kate Grimes, *Wyoming Climate Atlas*, copy located on the World Wide Web at <http://www.wrds.uwyo.edu/wrds/wsc/climateatlas/drought.html>

<sup>47</sup> Larry James Krysl, “The Effects of the Great Depression on the State of Wyoming, 1935-1940,” M.A. Thesis, University of Wyoming, 1960, 19.

<sup>48</sup> “Government Agencies Unite to Alleviate Local Distress,” *Gillette News-Record*, July 2, 1936.

and retain moisture. Several implements did this and historian Donald Worster has pointed out that the one-way disk plow, with its vertical concave plates, had that precise effect and that “some observers blamed the dust storms of the 1930s on the misuse of this single implement.”<sup>49</sup> There was, of course, another implement that farmers in northeast Wyoming were familiar with, the duckfoot cultivator, that also had that exact impact on the land.

Responses to the crisis included considerable belt-tightening and adjustments. The main problem was the general economic crisis that had been pressing on the farmers and ranchers for a decade. Then the drought complicated the situation. By January 1935, the condition of the range in Wyoming generally was eighty-three percent of normal and it appears to have declined more over the following year although the winter of 1935-1936 was mild and offered much needed moisture.<sup>50</sup> Some ranchers in 1934 shipped their livestock to other places where they would have better grazing, and in this they were sometimes able to take advantage of reduced railroad shipping rates, generally set at eighty-five percent of normal rates; yet even this reduction in rates meant that only the ranchers with sufficient numbers of stock to export, with the ability to pay railroad freight rates, with a destination range to ship the cattle and sheep to, and with the ability to manage the livestock in the out-of-state ranges were able to take advantage of the opportunity. In 1936, as the drought of the previous year returned after a respite during the winter, seventeen trucks made nine trips to the Midwest area where the Padlock

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<sup>49</sup> Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 91.

<sup>50</sup> Krysl, “The Effects of the Great Depression on the State of Wyoming, 1935-1940,” 18.

Ranch shipped its cattle to Gillette where they were transported by train to Nebraska. The Gillette newspaper reported that “Every train that leaves the local yards is made up of a great number of stock cars loaded with cattle, horses and sheep consigned to market or to pasture in localities that have not suffered from drouth and insects.”<sup>51</sup> Three weeks later, the *News-Record* reported that the out-migration of livestock was continuing, that shipments of cattle out from Gillette “have been heavier than for many years over the same July period, due to the extreme drouth conditions.”<sup>52</sup> By November of 1936 an estimated four hundred cars of cattle were shipped out of northeast Wyoming.<sup>53</sup>

The shipment of cattle to other ranges helped those who could do so, but not all could; in fact, those most distressed were the least able to ship their cattle elsewhere. They had few alternatives. One option, to walk away from the land that had been farmed or ranched, was implicit in one report from Gillette in 1936: “With no rain recorded for over four weeks and none in sight, conditions have almost reached the point of hopelessness. Stock is being shipped from the county and many farmers have deserted their places to seek new locations.”<sup>54</sup> Exactly how many “deserted their places to seek new locations” can not be determined, nor can it be ascertained how many retained ownership of their property and moved to town to find work, how many turned over their deed to the mortgage holder but continued to farm as a tenant or renter, and, for that matter, how many may have even moved on to the farms to pick up where someone else

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<sup>51</sup> “Stock Moving out of County,” *Gillette News-Record*, June 13, 1936.

<sup>52</sup> “Cattle Being Moved Rapidly,” *Gillette News-Record*, July 7, 1936.

<sup>53</sup> Krysl, “The Effects of the Great Depression on the State of Wyoming, 1935-1940,” 19.

<sup>54</sup> “County Known as Drouth Area,” *Gillette News-Record*, July 8, 1936.

left off. In fact, the statistics show that in the first half of the 1930s the total number of farms in the area actually *increased*. In 1930 there had been 5879 farms and ranches in the seven county area and by 1935 that number had increased to 6041, although it was still short of the 6085 in 1920 before the ravages of the 1920s.<sup>55</sup> Only in Campbell County, where the number of farms dropped from 1310 to 1227, and in Weston County, where the 616 farms and ranches fell by five, was there any indication of a depopulation of the countryside.

There was another alternative, though, and that was to struggle through and endure as best as one could. At the end of the Depression, the WPA Writer's Guide for Wyoming provided a glimpse into this course when it noted that during the 1930s "many Wyoming farmers who were unable to finance the farming of their large acreages made a living by maintaining a small flock of sheep, some turkeys and chickens, and a few milk cows, and cultivated only sufficient land to raise feed for the stock and for a small garden."<sup>56</sup> The ability of small farmers to turn their meager circumstances into an advantage was found also in the ranching community. Agnes Wright Spring suggested that the small growers often had enough water to make it through the dry spell with their limited number of sheep and cattle.<sup>57</sup> Their large counterparts with sizeable herds also had sizeable water needs. The managing of water, in fact, was the forte of the dry-

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<sup>55</sup> State of Wyoming, Wyoming Planning Board, Coordination Survey ([Cheyenne:] October 1938).

<sup>56</sup> Workers of the Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Wyoming, *Wyoming: A Guide to Its History, Highways, and People* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981; reprint of 1941 Oxford University Press edition), 105.

<sup>57</sup> Spring is quoted by Krysl, "The Effects of the Great Depression on the State of

farmer, and while the drought of 1936 continued unabated that summer, there was a small amount of moisture that season and some of the small operators were able to put it to good use. Between the first of April and near the end of November, Gillette received only 3.92 inches of rain. While this was not sufficient to produce a crop of the small grains, “corn and several of the annual forage crops made a crop although the yields were not so good as in years of more nearly normal rain fall. Yet enough feed was produced to be of great value in carrying of livestock through the fall and winter.”<sup>58</sup> Likewise in Crook County, reports were that “During the drought of the last few years corn has done pretty well and supplied a big part of the stock feed for winter.”<sup>59</sup> The Depression put the farmers and ranchers into severe conditions and the drought only worsened their plight, but still many of these agriculturists pressed on. Whatever else might be said of the area, it was not part of the Dust Bowl that plagued farmers and ranchers in the Southern Plains.

### *iii. Federal Assistance and the Transformation of the Landscape*

The administration of Franklin Roosevelt that took office in 1933 launched a series of programs that were designed to get the country out of the Depression and provide assistance to those who needed help, and also to restructure portions of the economy to make them less vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the market. Drawing upon academic experts and a mobilized national political system, the Roosevelt administration

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Wyoming, 1935-1940,” 23.

<sup>58</sup> “State Experiment Farm News Notes,” *Gillette News-Record*, November 28, 1936.

drew up plans for change in virtually every part of the economy. And the agricultural sector ranked secondly only to manufacturing in the attention that the New Deal gave it. Roosevelt had signaled early in the 1932 presidential campaign that changes for agriculture were to be expected and when he took office in March 1933 he initiated a flurry of initiatives to bring those changes about.

In much of this he followed the lead of Dr. Rexford Tugwell, an economics professor at Columbia University who in 1932 served as a member of Roosevelt's Brains Trust—intellectual advisors who helped him formulate policy during the campaign and then helped steer the administration in the months following their candidate's victory in November. The Brains Trust placed an emphasis on planning in the economy and Tugwell, in particular, promoted ways to plan better for agriculture, a part of the economy that he felt was hampered by its legendary individualism. As Richard Kirkendall has explained about Tugwell, the economist disliked the traditional philosophy of agrarianism that so many espoused, and where the agrarians “talked of the fundamental importance of agriculture and the superiority of agriculture as a way of life; he [Tugwell] insisted that the United States had become fundamentally an industrial nation, and he did not regret the change. In fact, he talked of absorbing ‘a very large number of persons from farms into our general industrial and urban life.’”<sup>60</sup> Instead of fighting the industrial trend in modern society, Tugwell argued, farmers should use industrial principles to organize their own activities. As Kirkendall, the preeminent scholar of New Deal agricultural policy, argues, Tugwell “believed that government

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<sup>59</sup> Carl Plattner, “Crook County in General,” typescript, WPA Collections, File 1265.

<sup>60</sup> Richard S. Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*

should promote the consolidation and rationalization of agriculture, reorganizing it along the lines that industry had followed. The area of land in production should be limited so that the system would include only the most efficient farmers operating the best land, and the cities and factories should absorb a very large number of people from the farms.”<sup>61</sup>

The central element of the New Deal program for farmers and ranchers involved production planning, something Tugwell had been talking about since the 1920s. The fundamental problem facing agriculture in the Depression, according to this approach, was that of overproduction; farmers and ranchers had produced so much that the markets were glutted and the prices they received were thereby pushed down. There were other ways of looking at this problem, and some critics argued that the agricultural sector was in trouble, not because of overproduction, but because of underconsumption; people in the cities did not have the money to buy food and fiber even at depressed prices. Those critics called for increasing purchasing power and consumption through government spending and wealth redistribution and using anti-trust laws to generate greater competition and lower prices in the processors of agricultural commodities who stood between the producer and the consumer.<sup>62</sup> Those critics notwithstanding, however, the new president and his advisers embarked on a course to achieve the restructuring that they had proposed and Rexford Tugwell became Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, although he retained considerable independence because of his close relationship to the president.

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(Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1966), 43.

<sup>61</sup> Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 44.

<sup>62</sup> See Michael Cassity, “Huey Long: Barometer of Reform in the New Deal,” *South*

The first large New Deal program for agriculture was the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, a system designed to plan and control agricultural production and to create artificial shortages in products to raise commodity prices. And this program hit the northeast quarter of Wyoming directly. And the most noticeable part of the AAA was its Drought Relief Program in which herd reduction was undertaken immediately. There



“Senator Kendrick’s OW Condemned Cattle shot during government drought relief, 1934.” Photo: Wyoming Stock Growers Association Records, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie.

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were two elements to the program. One was to pay farmers and ranchers a subsidy to take land out of production and to reduce the numbers of livestock in their herds. The impact of that effort, however, would take time to achieve the reductions desired, so an

immediate effort was undertaken to reduce the numbers of livestock grazing the land and plow under crops already in the field. The herd reduction program was not always well documented since the specter of destroying animals in a nation that was hungry was not the image that the nation's leaders especially relished, but scattered references provide some information about the program. Cattle were appraised and the prices set for two-year old cattle ranged from ten to fifteen dollars and eight dollars a head for those under a year old, although it was not uncommon for a flat fee of eight dollars to be paid in some counties. Some cattle were purchased and then shipped to market, although this was generally avoided since the object was to take them off the market, and many more were destroyed. Numbers of livestock purchased and shipped or destroyed are inexact and hard to come by. One local history quotes extensively from the Moorcroft *Leader* in 1934 about these herd reductions, noting that "the slaughter of these animals was the largest in the history of the livestock industry." The same newspaper reported that "Fifty-five cars of government cattle left Moorcroft's stockyards between July 12-20 1934. By fall of 1934 32,270 head of cattle and 21,058 head of sheep were purchased by the government in Crook County in the emergency livestock purchasing program."<sup>63</sup>

The Sheridan *Press* in 1934 reported that "The Wyoming Stock Growers Association asked the federal government to buy 7000 head of cattle a day to be slaughtered. . . . Some of these slaughtered animals were canned and distributed among the needy. Some were given to the Indians for jerked meat and some were left where

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<sup>63</sup> "Stock Shipments are Very Heavy," Moorcroft *Leader*, July 20, 1934, quoted in Sundance High School Sophomore Class of 1987, *Triumphs and Tragedies of Crook County* (n.p., n.d.), 65. See also, "Government Will Soon Start Buying Cattle under New Drought Relief Buying Program," Moorcroft *Leader*, June 22, 1934.

they were slaughtered.” The same newspaper also reported that 67,000 sheep per day “were purchased by the government and either slaughtered or shipped to processors.”<sup>64</sup> These figures were doubtless national in scope, and in January 1935 the Agricultural Extension Service reported that the previous year that the sheep and cattle buying programs “have accounted for the purchase of 7,500,000 head of cattle and approximately 5,000,000 head of sheep over and above the normal marketing through regular channels” and the hog purchasing program targeted nine percent of the hogs and planned a twenty-five percent reduction in breeding operations.<sup>65</sup> The goal was to cut back the numbers of cattle to the level of 1928, to eliminate the increase in the ranchers’ herds since that year, and in that way to stimulate higher prices.

The other side of the program was the offering of incentives to keep production low for future years through subsidy payments. Ranchers would contract with the government to follow herd maximum limits. The crop reduction program was even more obscure than the herd reductions, but it too went into effect in this area. In order to reduce production, farmers would contract to leave a certain portion of the farm acreage unsowed. For wheat planting, for example, contracts on wheat were limited to a specific maximum and minimum acreage, and the subsidy (“benefit payment”) would be calculated at “54 per cent of his production to supplement any decreased wheat price.” In 1935 the Agricultural Extension Service cautioned those without contracts and those who planned to plant the maximum allowable acreage under contracts, that “the outlook for

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<sup>64</sup> These Sheridan *Press* quotations are from Ida McPherran, “History of Grazing” [Sheridan County], WPA Collections, File 405.

<sup>65</sup> “Wyoming Agricultural Situation for 1935,” Wyoming Agricultural Extension Service,

wheat as a paying cash crop in 1935-36 is not as bright as for some other crops.”<sup>66</sup>

The impact of the crop and herd reduction programs are difficult to assess not only because of the absence of reliable county-by-county numbers by type of livestock and crop, but is made more complex by the impact it had on different sizes of operations. The farmer with four thousand acres who could take out more acres from production obviously received substantially more cash in the “benefit payments” than the smaller operator with 640 acres, although the smaller operator had fewer resources to fall back upon and usually needed help more. And similarly, the herd reductions, where payments of ten dollars a head for livestock, on a head-by-head basis, worked to the benefit of the rancher who had more cattle for the government to purchase, which, of course, was consistent with the policy of encouraging large producers.

Plus, there were other implications. The Wyoming Agricultural Extension Service offered advice to homemakers on the farm and ranch which suggested some of the more subtle, even hidden, impacts of those operations:

Enforced sale of dairy stock has released time for many homemakers. Government purchase of cattle and sheep has brought about dismissal of “hired men,” resulting in a decrease of home work for women on stock ranches. Crop reduction will decrease the amount of work of women in the fields. This will bring an increase in demand for more profitable leisure time activities and a revival of home crafts.<sup>67</sup>

The dismissal of farm laborers held implications for that growing group of people, and

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Circular No. 57 (January 1935), 3, 7-9, 15-17.

<sup>66</sup> A. W. Willis, “Wheat: Price Steady to Lower: Buying Power Lower,” in Wyoming Agricultural Extension Service, Circular No. 57 (January 1935), 27.

<sup>67</sup> Mary Collopy, “The Outlook for Farm Family Living,” Wyoming Agricultural Extension Service, Circular No. 57 (January 1935), 33.

the reduction of work by women in the fields held significant gender implications for the role of women, defining their labor more along gender lines than previously.

The Agricultural Adjustment Administration was declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1936 because of a provision that taxed the processors of food and fiber in order to fund the benefit payments that went to the farmers and ranchers, but it was almost immediately renewed by Congress without the offending provision. Indeed, the agricultural subsidies and domestic allotment programs became permanent features of the agricultural landscape.

But other federal initiatives complemented and expanded the agricultural program that was reconfiguring the farms and ranches of the region. The federal government offered credit and loans to help the farmers and ranchers survive in very difficult times. In Gillette, where much of the crisis was focused, in 1935 Robert Peterson announced that the “Rural Resettlement Division” (evidently a local office of the Resettlement Administration) “will immediately begin work upon long-term plans whereby a farmer is extended credit for buying necessary livestock and equipment and for paying necessary farm expenses with the view of establishing him on a self-sustaining basis with as much as five years to repay.” Peterson cautioned hopeful recipients, however, that “the idea is to take care of a few clients well, rather than try to get out unsound plans for a large number of people and [he] asserted that the work would be slow.”<sup>68</sup>

The next spring, Campbell County Agricultural Extension Agent Floyd Dominy distributed applications for emergency crop loans for 1936; Dominy also advised caution since farmers were not eligible for those loans if they could borrow money from any

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<sup>68</sup> “Relief Farmers in County to Benefit,” *Gillette News-Record*, October 31, 1935.

other source including from “an individual, production credit association, bank, or other concern.” He also advised them that “the security for an emergency crop loan will consist of a first lien on the crop financed. Landlord[s] or others having an interest in the crop to be financed will be required to waive their claims in favor of a lien to the Governor of the Farm Credit Administration until the emergency crop loan is repaid.” The loans themselves were limited “and in no instance may exceed \$200 to one farmer.”<sup>69</sup> If the federal government had been too generous in distributing the public domain to individuals, it was making up for it with tightfisted loans to help them stay on the land.

Also, there were the technical assistance programs, the education efforts to help farmers and ranchers, often isolated, often with limited access to the information about farming and ranching that others who were better situated could take for granted. The premier institution for the dissemination of information for the farmers was the Agricultural Extension Service, a collaborative effort of the state universities and agricultural colleges, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the county governments. By the 1930s, however, the Extension Service in most states had abandoned the philosophy that was much involved in its creation—the idea that the nation needed a large population of family farms, on their own land, independent of landlords, with sufficient resources to lead good, if not always abundant, lives, and free to determine how best to use the land and its products. In its place, the agricultural colleges of the nation had adopted a narrower view, in which the essential information to be provided was managerial and technical and that farming was a business, not a way of life, and the

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<sup>69</sup> “Farmers May Apply for Crop Loans Now,” *Gillette News-Record*, March 25, 1936

farmers were business people just like any other business person; it was the business of agriculture, in this view, that was to be sustained and nurtured even as it grew far from its family origins.<sup>70</sup>

Certainly the Agricultural Extension Service in Wyoming had followed that course and the

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### CLOSING THE ACCOUNT

1. Fill in the inventory values for the beginning and end of the year. Subtract one total from the other. If the inventory at the end of the year is greater than at the beginning enter the difference under "increase in inventory." If it is less, enter the difference as "decrease in inventory."
2. Man labor. Total the man hours in the work report and charge at a prevailing rate per hour. A fair rate would be 35 to 40 cents per hour.
3. Horse labor. Total the horse hours, in the work report and charge at the rate of 15 to 20 cents per hour.
4. If truck or auto has been used for poultry, charge it at what you estimate its cost to be. Auto 10 cents per mile. Truck 15 cents per hour.
5. Charge turkeys for use of land and buildings at 10 per cent of their value.
6. Interest. Charge interest at 6 per cent on the average of the two inventories.

Final accounting procedures for poultry in record book distributed by Agricultural Extension Service. Source: A. F. Vass, *Account Book for Poultry Production and Costs* (Laramie: Wyoming Agricultural Extension Service, n.d.) [c. 1934], 21.

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<sup>70</sup> Richard S. Kirkendall, "The Agricultural Colleges: Between Tradition and Modernization," *Agricultural History*, 60 (Spring 1986), 3-21; William L. Hewitt, "Education for Agribusiness: Public Agricultural Education in Wyoming before World War I," *Midwest Review*, 9 (1987), 30-45.

proper tilling of the soil, effective marketing of their products, and even more efficient organization of home life, but theirs was mainly an effort to bring the ranchers and farmers into line with modern

practices. One particular way that they sought to help the farmers in the Depression came when the county agents distributed account books to the farmers to show them how to calculate their expenses and income and investment, and more pointedly, how to treat their entire operation as a business with an expected return on their investment that went beyond what they might pay themselves in



Shoulder patch worn by Wyoming enrollees in Wyoming CCC camps. From Collection of Michael Cassity.

wages.<sup>71</sup> The prevailing system had been simply to tally up expenses at the end of the year and compare them with the income they received from the sale of their livestock or crops. The new system had them calculating what they would pay themselves and their family members, how much they had invested in land, equipment, and supplies, and then view themselves as an investor who would decide if all that expenditure was the best use of the money. In good times this may have been a productive, and certainly informative

<sup>71</sup> See in this regard especially “Profitable Systems of Farm and Ranch Organizations for Certain Areas in Wyoming,” Wyoming Agricultural Extension Service Circular No. 60 (June 1935) and A. F. Vass, *Account Book for Poultry Production and Costs* ([Laramie]: 1936). A copy of this sample account book can be found in the Hebard Collection of the

exercise, but in hard times it meant that farms which were designed for subsistence, or for other purposes than maximized returns, were certain to be determined failures.

The most visible part of the federal assistance effort came in other programs that went beyond providing cash assistance, or technical and managerial education, and these programs sometimes offered work to unemployed people and even more fundamentally, they promised to revitalize the used-up, washed-away prairies. And multiple programs provided what was known as work-relief—where people would receive financial assistance but also be allowed to earn it at the same time that they contributed to the improvement of the nation’s public assets.

The Civilian Conservation Corps, for example, was an emergency relief organization established in the earliest days of the New Deal to provide work for unemployed young men and, that work was structured so as to promote the conservation of natural resources. The CCC as early as June 1933 began work on outdoor recreation facilities, soil erosion, and flood control projects in the area. The camps were set up as attachments to existing government organizations like the General Land Office, the Division of Grazing (after its creation in 1934), the Forest Service, the state parks, and the national parks, and operated under the jurisdiction, mission, and direction of those agencies. The camps themselves were military in organization and the CCC enrollees were uniformed and disciplined according to military standards, although there was no military training as such.

The CCC left a visible mark on the landscape throughout the nation but especially in the Western states. Enrollment in a CCC camp lasted for a six month term, and at the

end of the six months the camp might be continued in that same location, moved to another location, or completely disbanded, so the physical location and organizational structure of the CCC camps in the area is not easy to follow, and in each case requires research in the National Archives and Records Administration collections (often at the regional office in Denver) in the records of the sponsoring agency. That research,

<b>Federal Camp Identification Number</b>	<b>CCC Company Identification number</b>	<b>Date Established</b>	<b>Nearest Post Office of Camp</b>
PD-1	847	5/15/1934	Gillette
F-34	853	10/27/34	Ranchester
F-3	853	5/24/37	Ranchester
F-3	855	5/30/1936	Dayton
PD-1	858	6/15/1933	Gillette
P-201	874	6/11/1933	Buffalo
GLO-1	874	6/5/1935	Gillette
GLO-2	885	5/5/1937	Gillette
GLO-1	886	5/6/1937	Gillette
P-35	1807	5/10/1934	Buffalo
F-3	1811	6/3/1938	Ranchester
F-34	1811	10/31/1939	Ranchester
F-3	1811	5/23/1940	Ranchester
F-37	1815	5/31/1936	Dayton
GLO-2	2853	5/9/1936	Gillette
GLO-2	2869	5/9/1936	Gillette
NM-1	3887	10/26/1935	Moorcroft
PD = Public Domain or GLO F = Forest Service P = GLO or Division of Grazing NM = National Monument			

however, can often yield rich material and provide list of projects, photos, and special events and developments associated with the camp history. In the seven county area of northeast Wyoming, the following CCC camps have been recorded by the CCC Alumni

Association, although this list may not be entirely accurate and is almost certainly not complete.<sup>72</sup> In 1935, for example, the Gillette local newspaper reported that CCC Camp 3849 had just been established near that community and was the second camp with the General Land Office to be located there but this camp is not indicated in that list.<sup>73</sup> (The local communities would sometimes petition the offices of government agencies asking for a new camp to be organized or for an existing camp to be made permanent, and protested when a camp was to be dismantled or transferred.<sup>74</sup>)

The significance of the CCC in northeast Wyoming is possibly different from the significance of the organization nationally. Nationally it provided some unemployment relief, although with somewhere between thirteen and fifteen million unemployed, the annual average of a quarter-million CCC enrollees indicates that this was not the foremost agency for fighting the problems people faced from being out of work. In this area, it provided few jobs for locals, since the CCC enrollees were brought in from out of state; the locals that did enroll in the CCC were usually taken elsewhere for their service.<sup>75</sup> Nonetheless the CCC in this area focused on, and did something concrete about, the conservation of natural resources, although that conservation was almost always linked to development rather than restoration.

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<sup>72</sup> This information is taken from the CCC Alumni Organization page on the World Wide Web at <http://www.cccalumni.org/states/wyoming1.html#legend>.

<sup>73</sup> “Second CCC Company Here,” *Gillette News-Record*, August 17, 1935.

<sup>74</sup> See the example of Gillette again, at “Permanent CCC Camp is Sought by Lions – City,” *Gillette News-Record*, August 23, 1934; “Planning Board is Organized,” *Gillette News-Record*, May 24, 1935. Likewise, the departure of these camps generated local news: “CCC Camps to Leave Today” *Gillette News-Record*, October 31, 1935.

<sup>75</sup> H.F. Johnny Gillen, ed., *Civilian Conservation Corps, Wyoming, 1933-1942* (n.p.,

The available histories of the individual camps include only two in the study area, one operated by the Forest Service at Ranchester, where work included fighting forest fires, working on timber stand improvement, building trails, constructing ranger stations, and improving campgrounds. The other, at Gillette, was attached to the General Land Office and its sole mission was to extinguish coal fires on the public domain.<sup>76</sup> It does appear, however, that the CCC was directly involved in projects to improve grazing lands in the study area, although documentation of that history has not yet been located. In Campbell County, the Gillette Lions Club and the city government wanted the local CCC camp made permanent “on account of the nature of the work now being undertaken, which is designed to conserve the only natural resource in this county,” the only natural resource they saw evidently being coal. The next spring (1935) the county planning board asked for another CCC camp “to carry out a long term program of soil erosion and flood control work.”<sup>77</sup>

The CCC in the Powder River Basin was but a small part of a much larger effort to do something about the land, which was increasingly viewed by the government as of no value for farming. And the special focus of those improvement efforts reached sharper definition both strategically and geographically in 1935. Every state established a State Planning Board to identify needs of the state in the application for federal work-

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n.d.).

<sup>76</sup> “History of Camp 886, Camp GLO-1-W, Gillette, Wyo.,” and “History of Company 1811, Camp F-3-W, Ranchester, Wyo.,” in *History of the Civilian Conservation Corps Colorado and Wyoming District* (Pueblo, Colorado: O’Brien Printing Company, [1938]), 16-17, 56-58.

<sup>77</sup> “Permanent CCC Camp is Sought by Lions – City,” *Gillette News-Record*, August 23, 1934; “Planning Board is Organized,” *Gillette News-Record*, May 24, 1935.

relief funds and Wyoming created its own board which conducted studies and offered a series of reports. The Wyoming Planning Board found several places in the seven counties that were termed “problem areas.” These included “the southern part and a minor area in the northeastern part of Campbell and Crook counties where land is more suitable for grazing than for cash crop farming due to low rainfall. Large areas have already been abandoned; tax delinquency and relief are high.” It also maintained that the situation was similar in the Ninemile country of Johnson County, where “in years of high rainfall, farmers have done well, but, in dry years, crop failures occur.” Finally, the Planning Board included southwestern Weston County, the northeast corner of Converse County, and some parts of Niobrara County that “are equally unfitted for cash grain crops.” Although some thought this had to do with the drought, that was not the case. The source of the problem was instead, according to the Planning Board, “conditions are due to very small farms rather than to natural disadvantages.”<sup>78</sup>

If the problem was clear by this definition so was the solution, which was “modification of ranch setups,” a process that included the following fundamental measures:

1. Elimination of crop farming except in good areas.
2. Assistance to farmers in order that they can find more favorable locations.
3. Increase of land holdings of stockmen who are now trying to make livelihoods on areas which are too small.
4. Regrouping of population.
5. Prevention of resettlement by direct methods and by zoning regulations.
6. Consolidation of tax delinquent land.

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<sup>78</sup> State Planning Board, Wyoming, *Land Utilization: Preliminary Studies (Revised)*, February 1936, mimeographed document widely available including copies at Wyoming State Archives and Coe Library, University of Wyoming, 13.

7. Sound program for private and public land.
8. Revision of institutional organizations.<sup>79</sup>

With this vision and these objectives, forces were set to work to restructure the social and physical landscape of the Powder River Basin.

There were several approaches to this. The first one had already been achieved in 1934 with the enactment of the Taylor Grazing Act. This law achieved several ends, including the withdrawal of lands in the public domain from homesteading, except for those in Alaska. The fundamental purpose of the nation's land laws, from 1820 forward, had been in one way or another to encourage the distribution of the public domain to settlers through provisions for homesteading, and those provisions became increasingly lenient, and thus increasingly attractive to potential settlers. With the New Deal, however, that course was dramatically reversed and the unclaimed land was no longer available for private settlement. In addition, the Secretary of the Interior was given responsibility "to stop injury to the public grazing lands by preventing overgrazing and soil deterioration, to provide for their orderly use, improvement, and development, and to stabilize the livestock industry dependent upon the public range."<sup>80</sup>

The public domain in each of the western states was accordingly divided into official grazing districts, although those portions where there was only a small portion of the land remaining in the public domain were not so organized. In Campbell County, for

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<sup>79</sup> State Planning Board, Wyoming, *Land Utilization: Preliminary Studies*, 13-14.

<sup>80</sup> Kenneth B. Platt, "The Taylor Grazing Act in Operation," 1940, mimeographed document including outlines for presentations and articles supporting the law and its objectives, to be presented to public groups. Although the document does not indicate, it appears to have been published by the Grazing Service, as the Division of Grazing

example, only 4.16 percent of the land was public domain, in Sheridan County 1.59 percent, Crook County 3.76 percent, in Weston county 3.4 percent, in Niobrara county 4.07 percent, and in Converse County 5.08 percent, while Johnson had the most with 12.88 percent, although that figure may have included parts of the national forest.<sup>81</sup> The Division of Grazing, a new organization in the Department of the Interior after the passage of the Taylor Grazing Act, was given the responsibility for administering that land and would, as the Forest Service had done previously, issue permits for grazers to use those portions in such an amount and under specified conditions that the Division of Grazing would determine. Thus, under the new dispensation, grazing would be regulated and homesteading would be prohibited.

The next step was toward an actual rehabilitation of the range to make it usable by livestock growers. Usually this was called a Range Conservation Program or Range Improvement Program, but it included a variety of agencies and varying names. Initially the same work had been done under the Emergency Relief Act, the object of which was not so much conservation as it was to provide jobs; where in cities the money went to pay people to build parks and sidewalks, in this area it went into range improvement programs. In 1934 Johnson County used some of its Emergency Relief Act funds to put unemployed people to work to help solve the problems associated with drought. In June 1934 the *Buffalo Bulletin* announced that “Drouth work-relief projects for wells and reservoirs are already under way. The local county government is cooperating in this

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became known in 1939.

<sup>81</sup> Wyoming State Planning Board, “A Survey of Public Domain in Wyoming,” 21. This is a mimeographed document available in the University of Wyoming Libraries and in the Wyoming State Archives.

work, . . . Locations are being spotted and all plans are being pushed as rapidly as possible.”<sup>82</sup> This was doubtless the case in other counties too as work-relief projects often wound up being agriculture oriented.

The creation of the Works Progress Administration in 1935 (later reorganized and renamed as Work Projects Administration) made additional funds available, though not so much for grazing / farming related projects as for other work and the bulk of the programming and funding was directed toward highways, streets and roads, public buildings, recreational facilities, utilities, transportation, and other infrastructure development. Conservation was but one part of a broad effort.<sup>83</sup> Even so, the WPA contribution was not negligible, and planning documents showed plans and funding for stock wells in Converse County and the construction of Hay Creek, Inyan Kara, and Thompson Creek Reservoirs in Crook County. The “construction of stock reservoirs and cleaning out of springs and the drilling of wells to provide water for stock-watering purposes” in Johnson County was a broad cluster of small projects that had listed as their justification simply, “Recommended by Wyoming Stockgrowers Association and Wyoming Woolgrowers Association.” In Weston County, the WPA developed plans and funds for the Beaver Creek Irrigation System.<sup>84</sup> With some exceptions, the WPA projects were large construction projects, not the average small improvement on the range.

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<sup>82</sup> “Big E. R. A. Program is Outlined for Johnson County,” *Buffalo Bulletin*, June 14, 1934

<sup>83</sup> Wyoming State Planning Board, “Public Works Program,” undated mimeographed publication available in University of Wyoming libraries and Wyoming State Archives. By context, the date of preparation and probably publication is 1936.

<sup>84</sup> Wyoming State Planning Board, “Public Works Program,” includes actual planning

The multitude of small projects, which were the most pervasive and which still dot the landscape of the area, most frequently came as a result of the range improvement programs of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The first step in the development of those programs came with the creation of the Resettlement Administration in the spring of 1935. Drawing upon existing appropriations under the 1935 Emergency Relief Appropriation Act, President Roosevelt created the Resettlement Administration with an executive order on May 1 of that year and named his close advisor, Rexford Tugwell, at that time Under Secretary of Agriculture, also to serve as its director.<sup>85</sup>

Of course, the Resettlement Administration was Tugwell's idea and he immediately set about to fulfill his vision for American agriculture. Recognizing that as the system of agriculture became increasingly consolidated into larger operations, many would be left out, and dismayed because he thought the AAA was dominated by big farmers and leaving behind the rural poor, Tugwell was concerned about the fate of those at the bottom, and the object of the Resettlement Administration, at least in part, was to provide assistance to those people by, as the name of the agency suggested, removing them from their farms and ranches and resettling them elsewhere. Usually cited as the most visible and enduring contributions of the Resettlement Administration to the American scene are the four new planned communities the agency established in New Jersey, Wisconsin, Ohio, and Maryland for people who had been removed from the land,

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forms for these projects identifying costs and justifications.

<sup>85</sup> The text of this executive order, unusual in the brevity of its text and the breadth of its scope, can be found at John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, The American Presidency Project [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available on World Wide Web at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=15048>.

but that perspective leaves out the much broader effort of the agency that reached across the countryside and even into the valleys and plains of the Powder River Basin.

The Resettlement Administration began its task in northeast Wyoming in the summer of 1935 and that task was large. In November 1935—just six months after the



"Drought committee visits a stock water dam near Gillette, Wyoming." Photo: Arthur Rothstein, Resettlement Administration Photographs, Farm Security Administration – Office of War Information Photo Collection, Library of Congress. August 1936.

RA was created—the regional director of the agency visited Gillette and explained how extensive the job was. Elmer Starch estimated that it would take 225 man-years of work

in Campbell County to do the work the Resettlement Agency had in mind, and that work would “include the moving of all fences to section lines, cleaning and relining all wells and springs, building dams and reservoirs and seeding cultivated land to grass.”<sup>86</sup>

By sharing this common goal, the Resettlement Administration, the Emergency Relief Administration, and the Department of Agriculture programs all dovetailed into a single, coordinated effort to restructure farming and ranching in the area and by 1936 the endeavor was well underway. As if to underscore the importance of this work, Rexford Tugwell himself visited Campbell County in August 1936 to inspect the range improvements being developed. In July, Roosevelt had appointed a Great Plains Drought Area Committee to address the problems of the entire Great Plains, the committee to be chaired by Morris L. Cooke, the head of the Rural Electrification Administration, with Tugwell serving as one of its members. The next month, on a two-week tour of drought areas in the Great Plains, from Amarillo, Texas to Rapid City, South Dakota, Cooke and Tugwell and others on the committee went to some of the outlying parts of Campbell County to inspect dams and wells that had been constructed with federal funds. Either before or after their visit the group, including others on the Drought Committee, gathered at Ranch A in Crook County as a stop on their trip and to work on their report. Ranch A was a recreational ranch built in 1935 by publishing magnate Moses Annenberg, and Annenberg had allowed the governor of South Dakota to use it for visiting dignitaries the next year.<sup>87</sup> Those dignitaries evidently included Tugwell, Cooke, Dr. L. C. Gray, and

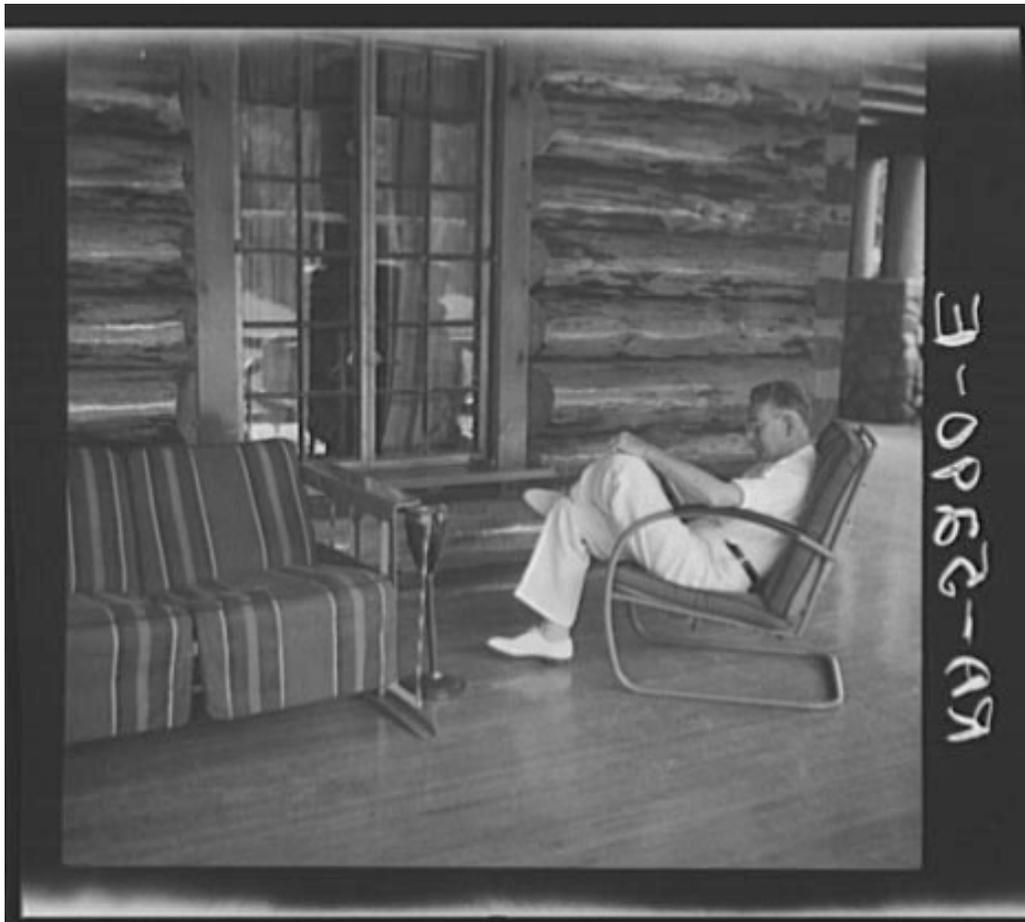
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<sup>86</sup> “Work Program Outlined will Employ Many,” *Gillette News-Record*, November 8, 1935.

<sup>87</sup> “Past Year Saw much Interesting News Here,” *Gillette News-Record*, January 6, 1937; this summary of the past year’s news noted that in August, Morris L. Cooke and Rexford

others serving on the Drought Committee or otherwise involved in the New Deal agricultural program.

They returned to Washington and had their report ready by the end of August. That report placed blame for the “present situation” on the Great Plains not so much on



“Dr. Tugwell at Ranch A, Beulah, Wyoming.” Photo: Arthur Rothstein, Resettlement Administration Photographs, Farm Security Administration – Office of War Information Photo Collection, Library of Congress. August 1936.

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the weather as on the historic agricultural practices there. The cause of it all, the committee argued, lay in the “attempt to impose upon the region a system of agriculture

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Tugwell had inspected the area; see also National Register nomination for Ranch A, 1997, files of Wyoming SHPO, and Tugwell, *The Democratic Roosevelt: A Biography of*

to which the Plains are not adapted to bring into a semi arid region methods which, on the whole, are suitable only for a humid region.” Then the committee charted the future of agriculture in the Great Plains, including this area, and urged the president to follow a course that would include major changes:

The region should be divided into sub-areas according to the types of use to which each portion of it may be best and most safely devoted; and, in addition, to determine the kinds of agricultural practice and engineering treatment required to fit each portion to its indicated use. Certain sub-marginal lands should be taken permanently out of commercial production. On arable farms such soil conserving practices as re-grassing, contour plowing, listing, terracing, strip cropping and the planting of shelter trees should be followed. Grasses of demonstrated fitness to local conditions should be developed and used.

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The regional agriculture must rest on the development of holdings which will actually support a family in independence and comfort. Undoubtedly these holdings must be larger than those now prevailing in many parts of the Plains. They can be made more adequate in some instances by reclamation, in others by the combination of smaller units. State and county governments may expedite this process by making available to grazing and other cooperative agencies the chronically tax delinquent lands which it is not to be expected will again be cultivated by their nominal owners. Such lands may be developed under a work relief program during the period of transition which must follow the drought and the development of new land policies.<sup>88</sup>

If there had been any doubt previously, the map to the future was now crystal clear. In November, the newspaper in Douglas could report that “the range improvement program started in this county in September has grown until there are 170 ranches signed

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*Franklin D. Roosevelt* (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1957), 422-425.

<sup>88</sup> The full text of the report, taken from the papers of Harry Hopkins at the Roosevelt Library, can be found online at <http://newdeal.feri.org/hopkins/hop27.htm>, and a discussion of the origins and evolution of the report can be located in Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, 192-197.

up with approximately one and one-half million acres of range land listed for improvements, or about one-half of the entire area of the county.” In that county about seventy-five reservoirs were being built, a hundred miles of fence were being “rebuilt,” and “possibly 80 or 90 springs are being developed and considerable water spreading and contouring is being done.”<sup>89</sup> In Campbell County, in November, County Extension Agent F. E. Dominy announced that the Range Improvement Program was moving fast and widely as “Four hundred and seventy-eight applications covering a total of 1,750,000 acres of range land are now on file in the county office with additional applications being received daily.”<sup>90</sup> In Niobrara County, the local extension agent reported 253 ranchers indicated that they were going to participate in the Range Improvement Program, representing about 650,000 acres, building fifty stock-watering reservoirs, about twenty wells, developing about fifty springs and seeps, and constructing about 120 miles of fence.<sup>91</sup> Each one of these projects had to start after September 9 and had to be completed by the end of the calendar year. The program paid “range operators” to undertake the following activities:

- Construction of earthen dams or reservoirs.
- Development of springs or seeps
- Drilling or digging of wells.
- Construction of contour furrows to hold back run-off and prevent erosion.

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<sup>89</sup> “Range Program is Under way in Converse Co.,” *Douglas Budget*, November 19, 1936.

<sup>90</sup> “478 Campbell Farmers Apply in Range Plan,” *Gillette News-Record*, November 6, 1936.

<sup>91</sup> “1936 Annual Narrative Report, Niobrara County, Wyoming, for Extension Work in Agriculture & Home Economics,” J. Melvin Stephenson, County Extension Agent, p. 47. I am grateful to Carl Hallberg for locating this county extension agent report in the Wyoming State Archives, the only one that has surfaced so far, although hope continues that more are located in the collections of the American Heritage Center.

Construction of dikes and ditches to spread water and prevent erosion.  
Re-seeding of depleted range land.  
The construction of range division fences.<sup>92</sup>

The amounts that the operators received for undertaking these range improvements generally followed a standard scale. The county agent would pay ranchers sixty cents per acre for contouring their land, fifty dollars for digging out each spring or seep approved by the county, fifteen cents per cubic yard of fill for constructing earthen reservoirs, a dollar for each linear foot of drilling or digging wells, and variable amounts for other activities such as water spreading—a crude form of irrigation that diverts, or spreads, intermittent channel water to adjacent fields.<sup>93</sup> County Agent Dominy in Gillette calculated his payments in the program at about thirty dollars per section of rangeland.<sup>94</sup>

The transformation of the land had begun in earnest and the county extension agents were directing it. “In past years,” the Niobrara County agent reported to his superiors, “Extension works have been considered to be mainly of educational service.” But that was changing, he said. “The farmer and rancher is now in an era when the results of the Extension service directly effect the financial status of almost every rural family.”<sup>95</sup> The extent to which the county agent had gone beyond education can be found especially in the example of the Campbell County agent, Floyd E. Dominy, one or two

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<sup>92</sup> “478 Campbell Farmers Apply in Range Plan,” *Gillette News-Record*, November 6, 1936.

<sup>93</sup> “1936 Annual Narrative Report, Niobrara County, Wyoming, for Extension Work in Agriculture & Home Economics,” appendix.

<sup>94</sup> “478 Campbell Farmers Apply in Range Plan,” *Gillette News-Record*, November 6, 1936.

<sup>95</sup> “1936 Annual Narrative Report, Niobrara County, Wyoming, for Extension Work in

years out of the University of Wyoming when he took his position at Gillette. “Campbell County was my kingdom. When I was twenty-four years old, I was king of the God-damned county,” Dominy later told writer John McPhee.<sup>96</sup> Dominy would later become the Commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation and build, most notably, the Glen Canyon Dam. In various interviews and other reflections on his career, Dominy says that he got his start in the dam building business in Campbell County as part of the Range Improvement Program. Even before he entered the range improvement business, though, Dominy established himself and his authority, and the government’s authority in the new system of agriculture, with the herd reduction program. According to McPhee, “He paid the eight dollars and shot the cattle.”

But he was serious, energetic, and even unstoppable when it came to range improvement. McPhee writes that “Ranchers got up at four in the morning, and sometimes Dominy was outside honking his horn to wake them. He wanted them to come out and build dams—dams, dams, dams.” Although McPhee says that “Dominy and the ranchers and farmers built a thousand dams in one year,” Marc Reisner recorded Dominy saying that they built three hundred in Campbell County.<sup>97</sup> The actual number will probably remain uncertain, but a likely possibility, given other records, is a combination of the two figures: three hundred in a year and a thousand over three years.

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Agriculture & Home Economics,” 55-56.

<sup>96</sup> John McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), 157.

<sup>97</sup> McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid*, 158; Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (New York: Viking Penguin Books, 1986), 226.

What is more precise is how Dominy accomplished this, paying as he did, less than the assigned wage schedule. “The government was paying farmers fifteen cents a cubic yard to move dirt. Hell, I wasn’t going to pay fifteen cents if it cost ten. I said to those ranchers, ‘I’m going to pay you cost—nothing more.’ Naturally, they bellyached. But with my relief allotment stretched further I could build a lot more dams.”<sup>98</sup> A new era had come to agriculture in the Powder River Basin.

The various accounts of Floyd Dominy follow him into the small communities of the county—“Soda Well, Wild Cat, Teckla, Turnercrest—single family post offices widely spaced,”—but what Dominy himself did there is less important than the projects the government was undertaking in those communities.<sup>99</sup> Turnercrest and Teckla, in fact, were within the bounds of the proposed Resettlement Administration project focusing on the Thunder Basin area, or, as it was originally identified, the Northeastern Wyoming Land Utilization Project and Soda Well was nearby. The Thunder Basin project had two objectives when it was approved in 1935. One was to restore “177 families now residing in the area to a higher standard of living,” and the other was “to make additional land available to those who remain in the area.”<sup>100</sup> Those families and that land lay in parts of Campbell, Converse, Niobrara, and Weston Counties.

The necessary work, after buying out the residents, included “restoration of land that should never have been plowed, by reseeding with native grass,” and “conservation and better usage, stabilization of grass resources through water development and

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<sup>98</sup> Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 226.

<sup>99</sup> McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid*, 157.

<sup>100</sup> “Thunder Basin Project OK’ed,” *Gillette News-Record*, October 16, 1935.

controlled grazing practices.” The director was enthusiastic about the opportunity for range improvement in the area and presented the plan: “Considerable run-off water will be stored in stock reservoirs. Additional livestock water will be developed by the opening-up of seep springs and piping water thus collected in stock tanks or small earth reservoirs. In a few instances, additional water will be obtained by drilling wells in strategic places.” All of this was essentially what the Resettlement Administration and the Department of Agriculture were already doing. What was new, though, was the removal of the people who had been farming the land. The agency would “remove farm families from waste land and transfer them to more productive sites where they can maintain life on an economic basis.” And the farm land those people would leave behind “will revert to grazing, with consequent conservation for vast areas now damaged by overgrazing, wind and water erosion.”<sup>101</sup>

At its inception, William Fischer notes in his research on the area, 309 families (not 309 individuals) resided in the Thunder Basin area planned for restoration. In February 1936, payments began to those who had indicated a willingness to sell to the government, and by July 1940, 172 families had left. Fischer notes that the schools in the community had been pronounced “far from desirable,” and they too were removed.<sup>102</sup> Once again the U.S. government became the owner of this land.<sup>103</sup> The Campbell County

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<sup>101</sup> “Work Program Outlined Will Employ Many,” *Gillette News-Record*, November 8, 1935.

<sup>102</sup> Fischer, “Homesteading the Thunder Basin,” 31-32.

<sup>103</sup> The records for the government’s purchase of these properties from the homesteaders represent an exceptional body of information for researchers investigating historic resources in the area. These records include transfer papers, land use and condition documents, itemization of improvements on the land, and income, assets, and financial

Rehabilitation Committee, which advised the county agent in the process, saw the benefits of the program and, as Fischer quotes the committee, endorsed the idea that the residents “be allowed to trade their land to the government for irrigated tracts.” County livestock operators in particular worked to see the project realized, including Ernest P. Spaeth who was also chair of the Rehabilitation Committee and Thomas A Nicholas who saw this project as important in “stabilizing the livestock industry.” The latter’s main concern, however, was that “outside livestock owners will be able to take advantage of government purchased lands to unfairly compete with us.”<sup>104</sup>

The range improvement work proceeded in the Thunder Basin project with dams being built, seeps and springs improved, and other alterations. The other results, however, appear not to have followed exactly as planned, or intended. William Fischer examined the project and determined that “Wyoming’s funding dwindled and the project ended with only the land purchases and subsequent reclamation work. Although several families were relocated, a large scale resettlement community for displaced farmers was never fully realized in Wyoming.”<sup>105</sup> The ability of farm families to relocate on their own depended on the usual range of factors, including how much they had in assets, what debts they had to settle, and how quickly they could find a farm better situated than the one they left (knowing also that their ability to secure a grazing allotment was

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records of the landholders who sold. The lands were acquired and managed by the Resettlement Administration, then the Soil Conservation Service, and then were transferred to the Forest Service in the 1960s and are part of Thunder Basin National Grassland. The documents are located at Douglas Ranger District of the Medicine Bow - Routt National Forests in Douglas, Wyoming. I am grateful to Judy Wolf and Ian Ritchie for this information.

<sup>104</sup> Fischer, “Homesteading the Thunder Basin,” 32.

nonexistent). Some, like Wyoming's Senator Joseph O'Mahoney, opposed farm and ranch buy-outs at the beginning for the reason that, as he wired the governor, "Feeling here [Washington, D.C.] is that buying program will not be particularly helpful since mortgage holders rather than stock owners would receive principal benefit."<sup>106</sup> What is clear is that the families were not relocated to "government owned irrigated tracts" or any other government land and that most (145 of the 172) requested and received no assistance in relocation. (Nationally, about three-fourths of the people removed from their homes received no assistance and about nine percent were resettled onto government land.<sup>107</sup>) When that last group was monitored by the project, "loosely" as William Fischer writes, most were found to be living "more or less on a 'shoe string basis.'"<sup>108</sup>

*iv. Family Farms and Factory Farms in Modernizing Society*

The changes wrought by the New Deal in the Powder River Basin were of two general kinds. One set of changes included the physical construction that took place, the dams and reservoirs built, the stock tanks put into service, the fences moved, the soil and

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<sup>105</sup> Fischer, "Homesteading the Thunder Basin," 31.

<sup>106</sup> "Government Agencies Unite to Alleviate Local Distress," *Gillette News-Record*, July 2, 1936.

<sup>107</sup> Mary W. M. Hargreaves, *Dry Farming in the Northern Great Plains: Years of Readjustment, 1920-1990* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 124.

<sup>108</sup> Fischer, "Homesteading the Thunder Basin," 33.

fields reclaimed, and other literally, earth-moving accomplishments. The other set of changes, however, were just as important, and perhaps more so, for they included the structural changes in the operation of farms and ranches in the area. Often less visible, these changes represented both a continuity with the past, and an intensification of forces at work already for decades, and a continuity with the future, as the programs, priorities,



“Resettlement stock water dam. Johnson County, Wyoming.” Photo: Arthur Rothstein, Resettlement Administration Photographs, Farm Security Administration – Office of War Information Photo Collection, Library of Congress. August 1936.

and assumptions of the New Deal agricultural program did not fade with the New Deal itself.

Exactly how many dams and reservoirs and springs and fences and other

improvements were constructed in the years when the New Deal was going strong in northeast Wyoming, from about 1935 to 1938 or 1939, can probably never be tallied. But the change was measured at the time in various ways. In Johnson County the county agent there noted in his annual report for 1939 that “There are more than 600 stock watering reservoirs constructed under the Range Conservation Program in Johnson County.”<sup>109</sup> Of course, Floyd Dominy claimed to have reshaped Campbell County more than anybody anywhere else, saying “Christ, we did more in that county in one year than any other county in the country,” and, although there may be some exaggeration in the statement, no one doubts that huge changes came to the county in those years.<sup>110</sup> In Weston County, Olaf Kongsli, one of the writers for the WPA Writer’s Project in Newcastle, described the change in 1940 with less bravado, but also pointed to the government’s role:

There was a time when water gushed down every little water shed in the hills, now only streams fed from underground springs are alive. This forces the cattle to go for miles to get water in some places, and they crowd around the water and soon eat up all the surrounding pasturage. To overcome this difficulty, the government has put out great galvanized tanks for the cattle to drink from right on their feeding grounds. These tanks are kept filled by the herders all the time. Wherever possible, wells are dug and water pumped for their herds by windmills.<sup>111</sup>

Agnes Wright Spring included this area when she wrote of the whole state in 1941, overemphasizing the role of the CCC, but generally getting right the change that

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<sup>109</sup> “1939 Johnson County, Wyoming, Annual Narrative Report, Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics.” This copy, evidently an annual report for public distribution, as opposed to the report that goes to state extension service offices, is located in the Johnson County Library.

<sup>110</sup> McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid*, 158.

had come to ranching:

Since 1933 much work has been done by Civilian Conservation Corps forces and others engaged under relief programs, to improve forage conditions and to facilitate the management of livestock on the ranges. Areas only partially utilized heretofore, because of lack of water, have been made suitable for sheep and cattle by construction of livestock watering ponds and reservoirs. Range fences have been constructed to separate range allotments and to reduce drift of cattle. Stock driveways, trails and bridges, corrals, and cattle guards that have been built will facilitate the use of approximately 5,000,000 acres of livestock ranges in the national forests in Wyoming.<sup>112</sup>

While the years between 1935 and 1940 were, with the exception of the downturn of 1938, years of economic growth, and while prices for farm and ranch products increased over what they had been in the depths of the



Fordson Tractor. Photo: J. E. Stimson Photo Collection, Wyoming State Archives, negative 4278.

Depression, the number of farms and ranches in the area declined dramatically in these

<sup>111</sup> Olaf B. Kongsliie, "History of Grazing," 9, typescript in WPA Collections, File 1358.

<sup>112</sup> Workers of the Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Wyoming, *Wyoming: A Guide to Its History, Highways, and People* (Lincoln: university of Nebraska Press, 1981; reprint of 1941 Oxford University Press edition), 104.

five years. The steady growth in the number of these operations had continued through years of prosperity and years of Depression but the process was reversed in the second half of the decade of the 1930s. In 1935 there were 6041 farms and ranches in this area, but by 1940 the number had fallen to 4635, a decline of twenty-three per cent in just five years. Only in Sheridan County where the number went from 1002 to 1019 farms was there any increase, and Sheridan County was already becoming a resort or destination area with not only dude ranches but second homes and hobby ranches, activities well outside the mainstream of livestock grazing activity. In fact, if Sheridan County with its anomalous small holdings is removed from the statistical portrait, the decline in the number of farms in the rest of the area is 39 percent, a loss of nearly two out of every five farms and ranches in a period of five years. At the same time that their total numbers declined, the size of the average farm or ranch increased, reaching 3249.5 in 1940, up from 2011 five years earlier, and up from 1703.5 at the beginning of the decade.<sup>113</sup>

Moreover, the farms and ranches were no longer operated by their owners as they had been in the past. Only 1545 of the 4635 units were operated by their owners, about a third of them. The other two thirds were operated by part owners, managers, and tenants. And of those 1545 farms and ranches operated by their owners, 631 (forty-one percent) were free of mortgage burdens at the end of the decade. If they were fewer and bigger and less likely to be operated by their actual owner, the farms and ranches were also becoming more mechanized by 1940. The small increase in farms and ranches with tractors may be difficult to explain at first glance; after all the hard times of the

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<sup>113</sup> These figures are all drawn from the county statistics provided in the *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940 Agriculture*, Volume I, Part 6 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1942), 186-191.

Depression certainly kept people who were trying to meet their existing mortgage payments and feed their families from investing in new, or even used, equipment. But the number of farmers using tractors did, in fact, increase in this area, from 1430 to 1624, about fourteen percent. What that meant was that by 1940 about thirty-five percent of the farms and ranches in this area had at least one tractor. In neighboring South Dakota, Gilbert Fite found two forces at work encouraging this mechanization. One was the increase in prices the farmers and ranchers received by the end of the decade. But the other was more direct: “Federal government benefit payments received for reducing acreage contributed considerably to their increased income,” and Fite argues that this increase went into investments in machinery.<sup>114</sup> Still, the mechanization was not complete, the primary power in the countryside continued to be horses and mules, and horses would remain the mainstay of the farm and ranch until World War II created a labor shortage and higher prices that stimulated even more mechanization.

The substantial increase in size of farm and ranches in the late 1930s came especially to the cattle ranches and sheep ranches of the area; the ranches had expanded physically, although they managed smaller herds. This generally came as a result of the decline in the numbers of the farms and in the decline in the amount of land used for crops, and especially because of the increase in grazing land. In 1940 the seven counties grazed over 263,000 cattle, a number that was down about forty-five thousand from 1935 and seventy thousand from 1930. This also represented, however, a further increase in the trend toward intensive management of the herds. In 1933 A. L. Brock of Johnson County compared cattle ranching methods of that year with what they had been just ten

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<sup>114</sup> Fite, “The Transformation of South Dakota Agriculture: The Effects of

years before. He maintained then that “What is termed open range on Government Lands in Johnson County, is practically something of the past. It is at present practically an inside proposition on owned and leased lands.”<sup>115</sup>

That was even more true by the end of the decade. In 1940 Olaf Kongslie described the practice of cattle ranching in Weston County. There were still ranches in that county, he said, that ran a thousand head or more, but they also farmed extensively to provide feed for their cattle, which were mainly full blood Herefords and also some dairy cattle. And while the cattle at one time were simply turned loose to forage for themselves, “now all stock is herded closely within the boundaries of fenced pastures. As a rule, the owner keeps his herds around his home ranch in winter where it is convenient to feed them, and in the summer takes his flocks to the hills . . . .”<sup>116</sup> In Sheridan County, by the end of the 1930s, one account noted that “most of the ranchers practice scientific ranching which is similar to crop rotation. Fences are built on a ranch so that cattle are excluded from a section where hay is being raised, one year, and the next year the process is reversed.”<sup>117</sup> The roundup tended now to be an activity performed at or near the headquarters or at selected permanent sites on the range, and the complexes of corrals and chutes and pens testify to the activity that once took place on the open range as cattle from multiple ranches were herded together and then sorted. The Midwest system of

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Mechanization, 1939-1964,” 283.

<sup>115</sup> A. L. Brock, “Comparison of Methods of Handling Livestock in 1923 and in 1933,” 6, typescript document in WPA Collections, File No.394.

<sup>116</sup> Kongslie, “History of Grazing,” 7.

<sup>117</sup> Ida McPherrren, “Ranches of Sheridan Valley,” 2, typescript, WPA Collections, File 394.

ranching had almost completely overtaken the Texas system.

The system of herding and fattening the cattle had become more scientific and systematic over the years, with increased reliance on information provided by the Agricultural Extension Service, but tradition still dominated parts of the process and the tractor would not replace the horse in many aspects of cattle ranching. On the other hand, the truck was replacing the cattle drive. While truck trails were not specifically mentioned in the range improvement projects of the late 1930s, attention obviously was being directed to them. Kenneth Platt in 1940 included truck trails as one of the central ways in which the Grazing Service increased grazing capacity. He noted that the Grazing Service, under the Taylor Grazing Act, continued to maintain the stock driveways, but “at the same time every effort is being turned toward developing truck trails which will permit trucks to load the stock directly on the ranges.” In fact, he noted that the stock driveways themselves had damaged the range significantly with herds of cattle repeatedly traveling the same corridors. Plus, “modern truck transportation is increasingly important in placing the range stockman on a more nearly equal footing with operators located near railway loading stations.”<sup>118</sup> It is at this point, some time in the 1930s, that loading ramps and their associated corrals and pens were being constructed not just at the ranch headquarters but at selected places on the ranch property and also on leased lands, wherever accessible by ranch roads. This even impacted the ranch headquarters itself, and one report notes that in Sheridan County, “on the smaller ranches the cowboys eat at the ranch house when branding while the larger outfits have permanent camps established

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<sup>118</sup> Platt, “The Taylor Grazing Act in Operation.” this mimeographed document is generally unpaginated, but one page is titled, “Trucks, Highways, Key to Modern Production Trends.”

where the crew stops during roundup time.”<sup>119</sup>

The ranch homes themselves had changed too. In Sheridan County Ida McPherren described the ranch houses of the wealthy estates in a WPA account of ranches in that county, and then she noted that the more typical ranches were different. “The ranch home on these ranches is generally built of logs and is western in design—low, rambling and with wide, long porches. It is built with a view to convenience and health, often standing on an elevation where the drainage runs away from the building instead of toward it. Water is piped into the house from a nearby stream or a well; electricity is furnished by means of some form of gasoline operated motor power and many of the homes have installed furnaces for heating purposes.”<sup>120</sup> Sheridan County, however, was not typical and these were not the norm for the broader Powder River Basin.

About forty per cent of the ranches and farms of Sheridan County did indeed have electricity from one source or another. Removing Sheridan County from the data, only twenty-eight per cent in the region had electricity in the home. As McPherren indicated, they often used a gasoline generator for the power plant, but it appears that a significant, though indeterminate, number used wind generators to create electricity that was then stored in batteries, from which the electric lights and small appliances operated.

Although precise data on the use of wind chargers do not exist, historian Robert Righter has noted their presence in Wyoming in the period marked at the beginning by World War I and at the end by the expansion of the Rural Electrification Administration into the

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<sup>119</sup> McPherren, “Ranches of Sheridan Valley,” 2.

<sup>120</sup> Ida McPherren, “Ranches of Sheridan Valley,” 2, typescript, WPA Collections, File

countryside, a time that ranged between the late 1930s and mid-1950s. “Numerous ranchers,” Righter has found through oral history accounts, “simply desired to have



“Shearing sheep. Converse County, Wyoming.” Photo: Arthur Rothstein, Resettlement Administration Photographs, Farm Security Administration – Office of War Information Photo Collection, Library of Congress. May 1936. This shearing is being done on a small operation. Note the children observing, and the single wool bag suspended, with steps for the shearer to carry the wool to the bag. The children, given their position on the roof of the shed, are probably involved in the operation by tramping the fleeces in the bag.

enough electricity to operate a few 40-watt lights and a radio.”<sup>121</sup> Photographs indicate that logs were declining as the building material of choice on the farms and ranches,

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<sup>121</sup> Robert W. Righter, “The Wind at Work in Wyoming,” *Annals of Wyoming*, 61 (Spring 1989), 35-36; see also, Righter, *Wind Energy in America: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996).

although in wooded areas they would remain so for some time; elsewhere, dimension lumber and even stucco buildings emerged. Water was available indoors, when the well could be made to serve indoors. Indoor plumbing, however, remained in the future for all but the wealthy outside the cities and towns.

The homes of the sheep ranchers—of the owners of the ranches, at least—remained, as they generally always had been, in town. Sheep growing activities out in the field, and especially the processing of wool, however, became more specialized. In the 1920s the use of feedlots for the sheep in winter had become increasingly common (and indeed had also been used some for cattle as well on some of the larger operations). Dan Greenburg had noted in the mid 1920s the emergence of the practice in Converse County, and predicted its wider use, saying that “Feeding operations have merely begun and it seems certain as time advances this industry will build up as the most substantial boost to the stock business in Converse County.”<sup>122</sup> One source noted that the feedlots were used in Sheridan County in 1938 and they were doubtless present elsewhere. The sheep would be brought to the feed lot, “depending on the condition of the sheep at the beginning of the winter, the condition of the range and the severity of the winter,” and would be fed alfalfa for roughage—suggesting thereby also the increased cultivation of crops by the sheep growers as well as cattle ranchers—although wild hay would also be fed some.<sup>123</sup> At the same time, it is important to note that the number of sheep continued to increase during the 1930s, increasing slightly from around 800,000 in 1930 to about 825,000 at mid-decade, but between 1935 and 1940 the number increased by nearly a

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<sup>122</sup> D. W. Greenburg, “Converse County’s Magnificent Resources,” 8.

<sup>123</sup> Minnie Williamson, “The Sheep Industry in Sheridan County,” typescript August 20,

hundred thousand to 923,433. The increased range of the larger ranches and farms, and the newer ranges that had once been farms, were being put to use by increased sheep.

Probably the most significant change on the sheep ranches came in the shearing process. Manual shearing continued, but it had become more routinized and even mechanized. Minnie Williamson in Sheridan indicated that as of 1938, “most of the sheep are sheared with machine shears, but some sheepmen think they take the wool off too close and expose the sheep to the danger of storms and for that reason have them hand sheared.”<sup>124</sup> The process for mechanical shearing impacted the physical arrangement of the shearing sheds. The mechanical shears were similar to hair clippers “only they are larger and are fastened to flexible shafts that lead from a gasoline engine. Some ranchers have a line shaft that runs along the shearing pens and the flexible shafts lead from this.” A form of assembly line had emerged in the shearing process as early as the 1910s, where the pens would be arranged for the most efficient handling so that the sheep would be shorn systematically, the wool handed to another worker to be placed in the huge wool bag which was suspended to, and then the wool tramped down by yet another worker who had the job of remaining in the bag to compress it, and then, when full, another would sew it shut and then the bag of wool would be delivered to a wagon or truck for hauling to market. The industrial process was already evident in the organization of the shearing, and it was being refined in the age of the machine, either internal combustion or electrical.

As for the farmers, their situation at the end of the 1930s was dramatically

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1938, in WPA Collections, File 403.

<sup>124</sup> Minnie M. Williamson, “How Sheep are Sheared,” handwritten manuscript, WPA

different from that of the large rancher and large sheep grazer. Their number had declined and at every turn they were discouraged from growing the crops they had customarily grown and harvested, and if they persisted, they did so only on smaller acreages, a feature that made it even more difficult for them to sustain their operations. The dry farmer, and even the small operator on irrigated land, was especially hard pressed in that situation. But there were other changes at work too. The system of calculating the profitability of agricultural production helped farmers identify which crops were their profit centers and encouraged them to focus their efforts on those commodities, even to the extent of purchasing feed for their livestock and groceries for their families instead of producing them on their own land. By 1940, sixty-nine percent of all farms and ranches purchased feed for their domestic animals and poultry, and one county agent reported that most of the farmers in his county went to town at least every two weeks for supplies.<sup>125</sup> The evidence is not conclusive, but increasingly farmers were turning, if not directly to a single crop system of production, at least to a form of production where they were much more dependent on a single crop, or two or three crops, than had been the case not long before.

And those lines of production where they experienced some success, they were encouraged to take seriously and to develop—again “scientifically” and with attention to the economic matrix of production costs and benefits. In the 1930s turkey production increased considerably in this area. What had been an infant industry only occasionally

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Collections, File No. 403.

<sup>125</sup> “1936 Annual Narrative Report, Niobrara County, Wyoming, for Extension Work in Agriculture & Home Economics,” J. Melvin Stephenson, County Extension Agent, p. 31.

mentioned in Agricultural Extension Service bulletins and census reports a mere ten years before, turkeys in the 1930s came to be seen not just as another form of poultry for home consumption, but, as one report indicated in 1939 in Sheridan County, “turkey raising is fast becoming one of northern Wyoming’s leading industries and thousands of turkeys are raised annually for eastern consumption.”<sup>126</sup> In Weston County the story was the same: “Extremely healthy conditions” and low losses, ample feed, assured that the turkeys would “command the highest prices in eastern markets.”<sup>127</sup> Instructions abounded on how to build a brooder house for turkeys and even how to convert existing structures into turkey brooders and incubators, using sewn-together burlap bags as a carpet over a sand or straw floor in the brooder house, and putting the incubator into the cellar.<sup>128</sup> There was, however, an underlying assumption in most of this turkey raising industry and one report made that assumption explicit: “as it is a business which the farm woman can handle successfully more and more farm women are raising turkeys along with other farm produce.”<sup>129</sup>

But the farms were no longer just the family farms and were increasingly large-scale corporate farms that extended over vast areas and used the system of tenancy that

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<sup>126</sup> Minnie M. Williamson, “Turkey Raising” handwritten manuscript, June 9, 1939, WPA Collections, File No. 1468.

<sup>127</sup> O. B. Kongslie, “History of Grazing Material: Grazing Resources of Weston county,” typescript document in WPA Collections, File No. 1358.

<sup>128</sup> Annette Heglar, “Pen to Platter: Turkey Production a 12 Month Job,” typescript document from Moorcroft, WPA Collections, File 1267. See the 1939 Annual Report of the Johnson County Agricultural Extension Agent, found in the Johnson County Library, for an example of converting a cowshed into a turkey brooder.

<sup>129</sup> Minnie M. Williamson, “Turkey Raising.” This too is part of a larger pattern. See Madeline Buckendorf, “The Poultry Frontier: Family Farm Roles and Turkey Raising in

was developing in the area in the 1920s for a source of labor. But they also used migrant labor more, and this, with the exception of the itinerant bands of shearers that had traveled from ranch to ranch with their families in the 1910s, seems to have developed in the 1930s. And this was most notable in the sugar beet farms. In Converse County sugar beet propagation had become a major industry and it depended on two particular ethnic groups. In 1938 one description of the sugar beet fields included a glimpse into a world that has been little recorded in this area. Mary Skelton, writing for the WPA Writers' Project in Douglas, described the farm labor situation in Converse County in 1938, saying "A large part of the labor in the beet fields of the county is done by contract labor, usually Japanese or Mexicans. The Japanese rent small farms, which they plant to vegetables and tend while working in the neighboring beet fields. The Mexicans usually contract several fields, rent a house in town where they and their family live, and travel from field to field, returning home when a field is finished."<sup>130</sup> A similar description emerged at the same time from Sheridan County:

As a large amount of hand labor is required in the thinning, cultivation, and harvesting of sugar beets, there are shipped annually from Mexico a great number of workers to be employed in the sugar beet fields. Each laborer and his family tend about ten acres of beets from the planting to the harvesting. They live in small houses, usually one or two rooms and are satisfied with cheap living conditions. Their chief food is beans and chile peppers and therefore they work for a small wage. They work hard through the beet harvest but most of them are idle during the winter months, unless they are kept over on one [of] the farms to help out with the farm work. In some localities the sugar factories keep them in company houses. Not being a progressive class of people they seem to be satisfied with the work in the beet fields.<sup>131</sup>

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Southwest Idaho, 1910-1940," *Idaho Yesterdays*, 37 (Summer 1993), 2-8.

<sup>130</sup> "The Sugar Beet," manuscript in WPA Collections, File No. 1399.

<sup>131</sup> Minnie M. Williamson, "The Sugar Beet Industry," handwritten manuscript, WPA Collections, File No. 1468.

These brief descriptions of the new system of labor only hint at the larger picture, but those hints are piercing: hard work, seasonal employment alternating with seasonal unemployment, low wages, poor, cramped living conditions, meager diet, and a pervasive set of prejudices that assigned them to such a life without a blink. If there was any doubt that the era of active homesteading was over when President Roosevelt signed the Taylor Grazing Act into law a few years earlier, that doubt vanished with this picture. Instead of homesteads dotting the landscape and instead of the wild, free life of the cowboy and the independent rancher on the open prairie, the industrial and market models were reshaping life in the Powder River Basin. In some instances agriculture was even becoming what some termed factories in the field.

The industrialization of agriculture and the decline of the family farm and ranch were but parts of a larger process of change in which the use of the land became increasingly commercialized, increasingly organized, increasingly “scientific,” or at least technical, increasingly mechanized, with bigger units of production, and with greater integration into and linkages with the national, and international, economy. This was common enough everywhere else in the nation, but in this area the process was especially striking. After the removal of the Indians from northeast Wyoming in the name of the expansion of white civilization so that the area could become the home of independent farmers and ranchers, it had been settled by people carrying the hope and promise of a freehold democracy, where farming and ranching were not just parts of the economy but proud ways of life. A huge transformation was taking place, and would continue to evolve, during World War II, and well beyond.

The source of this transformation can be found in a variety of factors, and while it is customary to attribute the demise of farms to homestead laws that unrealistically promised opportunity in an arid province or to blame the climate itself, and while that perspective holds considerable merit, the story is more complicated than that. After all, people had succeeded, often in modest ways, in the years before the agricultural crisis of the late 1930s and some of them would continue to succeed as farmers and small ranchers in this area. And it is not just that drought drove them out, for there had been droughts before. What was especially different, however, and what was especially powerful, was the new set of social and economic circumstances shaping agriculture in the 1920s and 1930s, circumstances that derived from organizing society to conform to the priorities of the marketplace.

This was a social crisis as much as it was a natural crisis, and perhaps more social than anything. And it may be that the real crisis was not just the drought, and not even the specific changes underway in the name of range improvement. The real crisis was deeper, and had to do with the changing framework of life itself. The homesteads, farms, and ranches throughout the area had been at the core of a way of life that was itself complex, evolving, and full of dreams and aspirations, but those homesteads, farms and ranches increasingly became just another sector of the economy the measure of which was not so much framed in traditional terms as it was more and more calculated by costs of production and returns on investment. As the small farms began to wither and the people who lived on them moved away, they left behind the relics of their existence as monuments to both success and failure, to dreams and realities, and to the passing of one way of life and its replacement with another. And they continued doing this for decades

into the future just as they had for decades already.

The end of the decade of the 1930s should not be taken to represent an end to an era. The New Deal, in the sense that it represented a coherent set of policy changes and programmatic initiatives, was dead by 1937 when Roosevelt introduced his plan to restructure the Supreme Court and thereupon lost the support of much of his own party. Many historians have concluded that the New Deal was over well before that and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., stopped his three volume history of the New Deal with the achievements of 1935. The New Deal programs, the New Deal's emphasis on planning, and the New Deal's effort to mobilize society in a coordinated effort, however, continued on and with often greater success in World War II. And the Depression that lingered throughout the decade, the Depression that the New Deal had not been able to bring to an end, finally came to an end, not at the end of the decade, but with exactly that total mobilization for war in the 1940s.

Yet the economic growth of the war intensified the trends that were already evident on the farms and ranches of the Powder River Basin, as the depopulation of the countryside continued, as the small operations yielded to the expansion of the large, as a system of monoculture became even more pervasive, as tractors and combines became not only available but necessary, and as the industrialization of farms and ranches continued on the same course in the years of prosperity following the war that had been evident during years of Depression.<sup>132</sup> Modernization had roots deep in the past and would continue to form the pattern of the organization of society, and the operation of

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<sup>132</sup> See a fuller discussion of this in Michael Cassity, "'In a Narrow Grave': World War II and the Subjugation of Wyoming," *The Wyoming History Journal*, 68 (Spring 1996), 2-13.

crop production and livestock grazing into the future.

While it is sometimes said that Wyoming is what the nation used to be, it is clear with the process of historical change in the Powder River Basin, that even there, Wyoming was becoming what the rest of the nation already was.

## Chapter 6

# From Homesteader to Industrial Agriculture: 1920-1940

The census of 1920 revealed a development of fundamental importance in American history since that year was the first time that a majority of Americans lived in cities—in any village with more than 2500 people. The trend toward the city had been clear even in the Gilded Age, but that migration away from the farm gained velocity and force in the twentieth century so that by 1920 the nation could be called accurately an urban nation. The sources of that migration especially had to do with a set of push—pull forces. These forces reflected the new system of agriculture that was changing the face of rural America in which farm families were being pushed from the countryside in search of employment elsewhere and the pull of industrial capitalism in the nation's manufacturing and commercial centers that held out the promise, or sometimes just the hope, of making a living by working for a wage in the industrial sector of the economy.

The set of circumstances facing the Wyoming farmers and ranchers after World War I especially intensified the push from the land that they felt. In this, these homesteaders, ranchers, and farmers were catching up with the rest of the nation and conforming to a trend toward migration away from the countryside that had prevailed elsewhere in the nation, especially in the Midwest and the South, for decades and this was a population shift from which Wyoming had even benefited as some of those who were forced off the land found their way to Wyoming to start a new life on the free land

available there.

For a half century or more following the removal of the Indians from the Powder River Basin, the population increased in northeast Wyoming as ranchers, farmers, homesteaders, and then merchants in the communities that served the agriculturists, all migrated from other parts of the country to make this area their home. The laws, and the administration of those laws, were such as to encourage that in-migration, and the availability of the vast public domain in northeast Wyoming offered a tempting destination for people of all kinds of aspirations—a second chance, a home of their own, independence, wealth, security, refuge, hopes for their children, the sanctity of rural life—or some combination of these. With each passing decade more people had moved into the area, and while the weight of the various pursuits undertaken there shifted from cattle ranching to crop raising and to sheep grazing, the population continued to grow steadily through the first two decades of the twentieth century, and so did the number of farms increase.

At some point in the 1920s, probably around 1923 or 1924, however, the prevailing pattern shifted. While migration patterns are never completely uniform, and while some people had moved out in earlier years, and while some people continued to move into the Powder River Basin in the 1920s and even in the 1930s, there was a subtle shift as the pressures bore down upon people to change their farming and ranching practices or to move out. Those changes came first in a general way as the forces of modernization pressed farmers and ranchers to expand, to mechanize, to specialize, to centralize their operations, to leave behind their notions of agrarianism and to accept the priorities and principles of business organization. Then the pressures intensified in the

form of a general Depression that was both economic and social. And finally, those pressures were hardly relieved when the government attempted to help out those most in need of help in the 1930s.

*i. The Challenge of Modernization*

Although the prosperity of the nation in the decade is legendary, the 1920s represented a depression in the nation's farms and ranches that extended to the rest of the economy after the stock market crash of 1929. But this agricultural depression did not reach all parts of the nation with equal force; there were parts, after all, that were relatively less integrated into the national economy, and while that feature may have hampered some of their power as efficient, modern producers and marketers, it also provided something of a buffer when the adverse waves of crisis rippled across the sea of grain covering the fields of northeastern Wyoming.

The key feature that distinguished this area was fundamental: the prospect of free land, land without a mortgage, land without a debt burden, land without obligations of any kind save the requirement to live on it and develop it. T. A. Larson suggested that statewide the Twenties represented a boom in the homesteading surge, and this was probably true in northeast Wyoming, although the statewide land records have not been sorted by county or region in any study. What is clear, however, is that the land susceptible to irrigation had already been taken up and this meant that the land available for homesteading was increasingly, almost by definition, dry land where only dry farming

or livestock grazing could take place. Yet the dry farmers forged on and, in a time when despair and failure marked the efforts of many agriculturists, and holding on represented a triumph, these farmers and ranchers seemed to be more than modestly successful, and paradoxically, they achieved that success in a semi-arid region considered by some to be still a frontier area in the 1920s, an area lacking the infrastructure and conveniences of longer-settled areas. At the same time, the forces of change and modernization were upon them.

By virtually every measure, diversification in crops had been for a while the prevailing pattern among the farmers in the area, whether they were large or small operations, and this continued into the 1920s. Almost every farm or ranch produced a variety of crops, including extensive gardens for home consumption, and the requirements of dry farming mandated rotation of crops (for example wheat with corn) to preserve the soil nutrients. And many farms included some livestock, although the smaller operations usually had only draft animals and dairy cattle, but even these farms managed to procure beef to slaughter. And during the 1920s there were additional livestock on these farms, with swine increasing and with more attention to chickens and even to turkeys. In 1920 the Agricultural Extension Service at the University of Wyoming provided information to farmers on how to construct poultry houses that would be dry, well ventilated, soundly floored, and amply lighted, and six years later the same agency noted that the number of chickens in the state had increased by sixty-three percent and noted that “it has not been until recent years that the production of eggs in Wyoming has been sufficient to meet the home needs of even the farms which produced them.”<sup>1</sup> By

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<sup>1</sup> W. L. Quayle and Axell Christensen, “Feeding and Housing for Laying Hens,”

1929 more than eighty-five percent of all the farms and ranches in the area raised some chickens and a handful in each county were even producing as specialized poultry farms.<sup>2</sup>

Even more striking is the number of turkeys raised on farms, or, more precisely, the number of farms and ranches that raised turkeys. Nearly one third (thirty-two percent) of all the farms and ranches in the northeast corner of Wyoming raised turkeys in 1929.<sup>3</sup> The Extension service called this increase, which was true evidently in the entire state, “phenomenal” and suggested that turkey production had increased in Wyoming while it declined in the rest of the nation.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, this was exactly the same pattern that had previously been noted in sheep production; as the older states had become more settled and more crowded, the costs of sheep production increased there but conditions remained favorable in the Rocky Mountain West. Now the same thing was happening with turkeys. Ever the positive and helpful source of information for the farmers of the state, the Extension Service abidingly provided them information on how to build their brood houses and how to tend to their gobblers. This was a low budget operation and one that small operators could develop; turkeys, after all, did not require extensive ranges.

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University of Wyoming Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 149 (January 1927), 19; H. M. Lackie, “A Farm Poultry House,” Wyoming Extension Service Circular No. 4 (September 1929), 3-11.

<sup>2</sup> *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930; Agriculture: Chickens and Chicken Eggs and Turkeys, Ducks, and Geese Raised on Farms* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1933), 554.

<sup>3</sup> *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930; Agriculture: Chickens and Chicken Eggs and Turkeys, Ducks, and Geese Raised on Farms*, 563.

<sup>4</sup> Oliver N. Summers, “Turkey Raising in Wyoming,” Wyoming Extension Service Circular No. 26 (July 1928; revised May 1929, March 1933), 5.

Land use and agricultural practices in the sheep and cattle industry were changing, becoming more precisely calibrated by economic formulas, and ranches were seeking control of resources (and cost of production) more than previously, and shifting their practices to whatever would generate the greatest return on investment, and in so doing following the broad economic trend of the 1920s as a time when business was often trumping tradition. Among the cattle ranchers, access to free range had declined from what it had been in years past, but even so, the livestock numbers increased in the 1920s, reflecting a more intensive form of grazing than had prevailed in earlier years. In 1923 A. L. Brock, a rancher who settled in Johnson County in 1884 and whose son, Elmer continued the family ranching tradition and became president of the American Livestock Association, wrote that ranchers were still doing the roundup, but each ranch would do its own in the spring instead of it being a cooperative, collective affair. He noted, however, that “there are more or less reps [representatives] with each wagon from other outfits to gather and take back cattle to their own range that have strayed away during the winter.”<sup>5</sup> He also noted that cattle still had to be trailed long distances from some remote locations “but when properly handled gain in weight while being trailed to the railroad.”

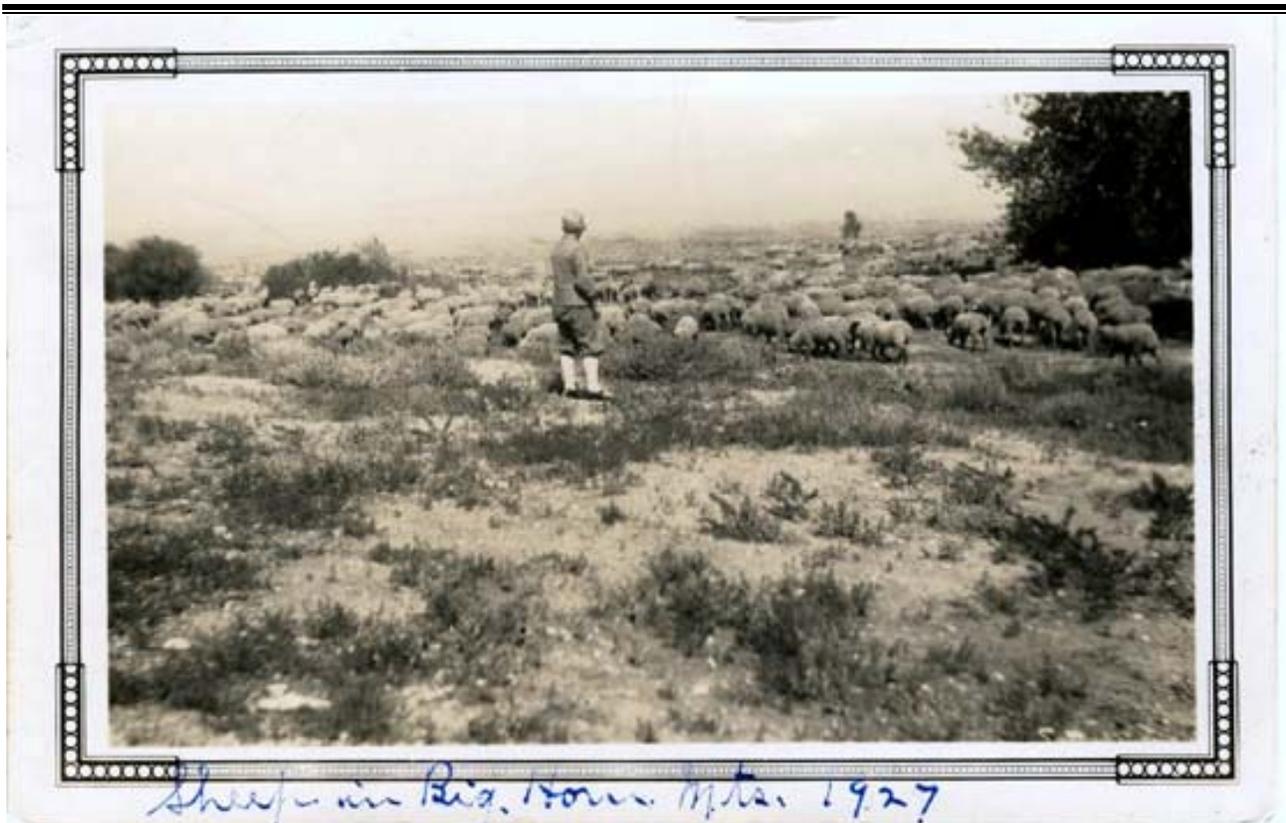
In 1926, A. F. Vass at the University of Wyoming studied cattle ranching in Campbell and Crook Counties and found that ranchers there were no longer inclined to use the public domain, believing instead “that leasing had many distinct advantages over the free range, in that leasing permitted controlled grazing and increased the carrying

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<sup>5</sup> A. L. Brock, “Comparison of Methods of Handling Livestock in 1923 and in 1933,”

capacity.”<sup>6</sup> Vass also observed at mid-decade that sheep had taken over the desert and mountain ranges because they were better adapted to the sagebrush and timbered ranges and cattle were not using those ranges anyway; but he also maintained that “sheep have been crowding cattle off the grass ranges” in many parts of Wyoming.<sup>7</sup>

During the 1920s, cattle ranching at least held its own in this area and the number of cattle on the range actually increased slightly during the decade, from 319,439 to 336,868, an increase that still did not take the numbers up to the 1910 level of 349,392.<sup>8</sup>



Sheep in the Big Horn Mountains, 1927. This appears to be a flock of sheep tended by one of the Basque herders of the Johnson County area. Photo from collection of Michael Cassity.

<sup>6</sup> A. F. Vass, “Range and Ranch Studies in Wyoming,” University of Wyoming Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 147 (June 1926), 148.

<sup>7</sup> Vass, “Range and Ranch Studies in Wyoming,” 117.

<sup>8</sup> *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930; Agriculture, Volume II, Part 3, The Western States* (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1932), 238-239;

The census statistics also suggest, but do not confirm, that there was an even more substantial increase in the size of the cattle ranches. At a minimum, it is possible to say with certainty that cattle ranching continued to grow in the 1920s, although not at a steady rate and with some important fluctuations in the early years of the decade, and that it was generally on the way to recovery from the post-World War I crisis.

Likewise with the sheep grazing. The decimation of flocks and the catastrophically low prices received for sheep after the war took years to restore, but during the 1920s, the sheep industry began to rebound. By the end of the decade the number of sheep in the seven counties increased by eighty-four percent—from 434,873 to 799,478—but was still far short of the 1910 record of a million and a half. There is some evidence, however, that much of this increase came only very late in the decade. In 1924 the Converse County wool growers were receiving around thirty-six cents a pound for their wool, which was certainly better than they had received for several years, but they remained apprehensive, with the Douglas newspaper reporting that “the price paid is not so good as anticipated earlier in the season, but is considered good in the present doubtful state of the wool market.”<sup>9</sup> The next year the Gillette *News-Record* found signs of enduring recovery in Campbell County and observed that the improved price “has caused many people in Campbell county to give most of their attention to sheep with the result that they are rapidly overcoming the post-war slump that so badly paralyzed the stock business.”<sup>10</sup> In 1928, the Douglas *Budget*, a consistent and reliable source on

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<sup>9</sup> Douglas *Budget*, July 3, 1924.

<sup>10</sup> Gillette *News-Record*, October 13, 1925; this article is quoting itself from news accounts of fifty years previous on that day.

developments in the sheep industry, reported that “skyrocketing prices for Wyoming wool were indicated this week with the sale of the John Carmody clip, Lander, at 42 cents flat” and it presumed that those prices would also be received locally.<sup>11</sup>

Part of the increase in sheep can be accounted for by cattle ranchers switching to sheep. Professor Vass’s 1926 analysis examined the economics for sheep and cattle production and concluded that the “purchasing power” of cattle—a combination of price received and the cost of production—was, in the previous year, “the lowest it has ever been since 1880” and the “purchasing power” of sheep, on the same date, was “the highest it has ever been at any time since 1880.”<sup>12</sup> Clearly, a scientific, or at least, sophisticated economic, approach to livestock grazing and marketing was coming into greater force as a guiding element in both the sheep and cattle industries. So, more and more ranchers made the switch. In 1928, for example, the Driskills’ D Ranch on the Belle Fourche sold to Roy Witcher who “brought in sheep and the operation of the ranch changed dramatically.”<sup>13</sup>

The switch from cattle to sheep was important, but much more important was the switch to a system of accounting that underlay the decision itself. In fact, the formulation represented a dramatic departure from the life of the cowboy or the rancher. The ranch, according to Vass, should be run like a business, and in any business capital rather than labor is the key ingredient. As Professor Vass argued, “In so much as capital is more

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<sup>11</sup> Douglas *Budget*, June 7, 1928.

<sup>12</sup> Vass, “Range and Ranch Studies in Wyoming,” 117-118.

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Dillinger Bowden, *1916: Wyoming, Here We Come!* (Gillette, Wyoming: privately printed by James H. Bowden and Jessie Outka, 2002), 41.

important than labor in the production of livestock on the range, the author deemed it advisable to use ‘rate of return on investment’ in measuring the success of a business rather than ‘labor income’ or what a man receives for his labor.” He then devised a set of correlation tables that showed how much the rancher was actually making, which was different from the amount of money the family had left over after settling up at the end of the year. In those calculations Vass made allowances for direct and indirect investments, wages for operators and unpaid family labor that went into the enterprise, and any other expenses. The return on the investment was then figured to be the income exceeding six percent above all those costs.<sup>14</sup> (Six percent was the amount that the rancher could presumably have earned by otherwise investing the money.) A new day was dawning for the entrepreneurs of the range—whether they knew they were entrepreneurs or not.

Vass developed a similar analysis for the sheep industry and some of his comparisons drew upon both cattle and sheep. Although he clearly focused on the economies of scale in the cattle industry and he generally favored large ranches over small because of the organizational efficiencies he found there (small ranchers could not afford, for example, enough young bulls, well distributed, to service the cows), he was even more explicit about the sheep ranchers: “The Wyoming sheep industry lends itself to large scale operation, and it would seem that the dividing up of our ranges for small scale operations would not be advisable at the present time.”<sup>15</sup> And his advice pertained

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<sup>14</sup> Vass, “Range and Ranch Studies in Wyoming,” 108-114.

<sup>15</sup> A. F. Vass and Harry Pearson, “An Economic Study of Range Sheep Production on the Red Desert and Adjoining Areas,” University of Wyoming Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 156 (July 1926), 57. While Vass focuses especially on the Red Desert, his analysis and data cover the entire state of Wyoming.

to both sheep and cattle ranches equally when he called “not for harder work and longer hours for the laborers, but for better organization and management.”<sup>16</sup> This suggestion held within it the seeds of revolution in a part of the economy known for its culture of hard work, long hours, and endless duty and sacrifice. It held within it the seeds of the industrialization of ranching, or, at a minimum, the transformation of ranching from a way of life to a business investment and the profit priorities implicit in that.

The perspectives and recommendations offered farmers by the Extension Service may have portended large changes for the future, but they also were part of a pattern of change already underway. In the 1920s the farm and ranch operations were becoming increasingly specialized, were becoming larger, and were becoming more mechanized. The specialization is evident in the census categories used for the first time at the end of the decade and these categories showed that in the northeastern corner of Wyoming the agricultural operations could be separated as either cash-grain farms (which included corn, wheat, oats, barley, rye, buckwheat and other grains), crop-specialty farms (including the specialties of sugar beets, soybeans, peas, beans, potatoes, and other field crops), livestock (mules, horses, cattle, sheep, hogs), animal specialty (distinguished from livestock operations by its emphasis on production of crops and feeding the livestock instead of open range grazing), dairy, or poultry operations. In contrast, by 1929, the “general” farming operations in the area—those farms and ranches where no single category could claim more than forty percent of the total revenue of the farm products—and the “self-sufficing” farms, where the value of the farm products used by the family was over half the total production of the operation, represented only small numbers in

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each county. At one time they had not only formed the bulk of the farms and ranches, they had been what homesteading was all about. Put another way, the diversification of agriculture was noticeably declining and single crop or specialized livestock production was ascendant.

Even within the various specialties, these farms and ranches were dividing themselves into more sub-specialties. Part of that had to do with the promulgation of purebred strains of livestock. In 1923 a directory of breeders of purebred livestock in the state listed nearly half of all purebred Hereford breeders (twenty-eight of fifty-nine) as operating in the study area, thus also reflecting the cattle of preference for the region. In addition, this area also served as a base for the breeding of dairy cattle (both Guernseys and Holstein-Friesian) that rivaled the Star Valley in western Wyoming. Three of the six purebred horse breeders in Wyoming were in this area and they produced quality Percherons and Belgians, the draft animals capable of pulling the heavy implements used on the farms. It is also important to note that there were more purebred swine breeders in the area (thirty-four Poland China; seven Hampshires; twenty-one Duroc Jerseys, one Chester Whites) than there were cattle breeders, and there were more swine breeders there than in the rest of the state.<sup>17</sup> This breeding of livestock actually reflects two different, even contradictory, trends. On the one hand the breeds were more specialized, as were the ranches that offered their purebred stock for sale. On the other hand, though, their market was farms and ranches that were quite diversified.

In addition, and more reflective of the specialization taking place on the farms and

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<sup>16</sup> Vass and Pearson, "An Economic Study of Range Sheep Production," 59.

<sup>17</sup> A. E. Bowman, *A Directory of Breeders of Purebred Livestock and Poultry in*

ranches of the area, the producers were organizing themselves into narrowly-focused commodity groups to promote their own products. Campbell County in 1927 had, in addition to the usual broad organizations like the Farmers' Union and county fair-related activities, a county Farmers Grain Association and a Wool Growers Association; Converse County had a Beekeepers Association, and a Dairy Association; Crook County had a Live Stock Association; Johnson County had its own chapter of the Wool Growers Association, and a chapter of the North Central Wyoming Poultry Association; Niobrara farmers organized a Potato Growers Association and a Turkey Growers organization; Sheridan County had its own Beekeepers Association, Poultry Association, Wool Growers Association, and Poultry Marketing Association; and Weston County had a Poultry Association.<sup>18</sup>

Converse County provides a good example of the process and Dan Greenburg reported on these in his 1926 promotional account of the county's resources. The Converse County Dairy Association was organized in 1924, Greenburg reported, "when dairying was almost unknown" there and within three years had its own trucks and was even delivering milk daily as far away as Casper. The Bee Keepers also organized in 1924, and the Poultry Association, which formed a little earlier, endeavored "to standardize the production and marketing of eggs on a high quality basis." Greenburg observed that the Converse County Agricultural Association was the parent, in some way,

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*Wyoming* (Laramie: University of Wyoming Extension Service, 1923),.

<sup>18</sup> Wyoming State Department of Agriculture (in conjunction with U.S. Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agriculture and Economics), *Wyoming Agriculture Statistics, 1927* (Cheyenne, Wyoming: Wyoming State Department of Agriculture, 1927), 62-63. I am grateful to Carl Hallberg of the Wyoming State Archives for finding this document and sharing it.

of the more specialized bodies and saw its own mission as promoting “all lines of agriculture, particularly from the educational standpoint, [addressing] problems relating to producing including the introduction of new crops, marketing, transportation and many other features.”<sup>19</sup>

This tendency toward organization along specialized producer lines is reflective, first, of a growing orientation of farmers and ranchers to cash crop production, and secondly to dividing along their income-producing lines, a division that spread from economic activity to social and political identities so that they often felt they had more in common with other producers of the same product elsewhere than they did with their own neighbors and community members who labored and produced differently. The rise of the fragmented community—and its consequences and resistance—forms one of the central themes of American history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This process was hardly complete in this area by the end of the 1920s, and it likely included only the largest of the various commodity producers, but it was at work eroding some of the community bonds that could normally be found and associated with small town and rural life where people traditionally counted as neighbors those who lived miles away, but whose friendship and support could be counted on in time of need or celebration.

But there was more. The revolution that had started in the use of machinery on the farm gained momentum and breadth in the 1920s. The measures of that mechanization show that the farms and ranches of the area in the first part of the 1920s

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<sup>19</sup> Dan W. Greenburg, “Converse County’s Magnificent Resources,” *The Midwest Review*, VII (August 1926), 14-18.

actually reduced their investment in implements and machinery by about twenty percent, a circumstance that corresponds clearly with the agricultural crisis that lasted until around 1924. After 1925, however, the investment in implements nearly doubled (increasing by ninety-five percent) in five years.<sup>20</sup> What they were investing in is also clear. By 1929 almost a fourth of the farms and ranches had a tractor, and some had more than one. A smaller number, twenty percent, had a truck. The tractor was making major gains in the decade, although it should be remembered that seventy-six percent of the farms and ranches did not have one. The steam-powered dinosaurs that had roved the countryside like railroad locomotives with oversize wheels were still around, but tractors were changing. As Gilbert Fite has observed, the major change in tractor technology came in 1924 when the International Harvester Company introduced its all-purpose gasoline-powered Farmall tractor, and that, says Fite, was when “the tractor age really began in American agriculture.”<sup>21</sup> These were still large, they still had steel (rather than rubber which would come in the 1930s) wheels, they were expensive, and they were slow to catch on.

There was also the matter of the implements to be pulled behind the tractors; instead of investing in all new plows, rakes, disks, harrows, and other implements, most farmers would simply hitch up their existing horse-drawn implements to the tractor, although this represented less than optimum efficiency, for another person would have to ride on the implement and control it. But the tractors were improving in the 1920s and

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<sup>20</sup> *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930; Agriculture, Volume II, Part 3, The Western States*, 227-228.

<sup>21</sup> Gilbert C. Fite, “The Transformation of South Dakota Agriculture: The Effects of

they soon developed a power takeoff to transfer power directly from the tractor to the implement and also developed a hydraulic lift so that the plow could be lifted from the ground more easily before turning. The tractors began to catch on, though. In 1926, J. D. LeBar planted thirty acres of peas west of Douglas near the highway, and he used two Fordson tractors to do the plowing. The local newspaper reported that LeBar's demonstration "will be an advertisement for the successful growing of peas." It could also have said that it would be an advertisement for the use of tractors.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to the tractors—and literally connected to the tractors—were the threshers. These threshers themselves came in a variety of configurations, many, perhaps most, serving the function of separating the small grains from the straw, but they also expanded into other areas. In 1926 the Douglas *Budget* announced that "A thresher, built for handling of peas and beans, has arrived in Douglas and will be ready to take care of the crop which will be raised in this vicinity this season." This represented a sizeable investment and was financed by a group of local individuals—whether farmers or bankers or both is not clear—and was intended to stimulate the production of peas and beans locally; in fact, as a result of this technology, within a few years Douglas had developed a seed house for peas that was owned by a Connecticut firm.<sup>23</sup>

Where the technology of threshing grain had evolved well beyond the individual or team with flails, the process of threshing still involved harvesting the grain, tying it into sheaves, placing the sheaves in shocks to dry, and then taking the shocks to the mechanical thresher, a device powered first by the steam tractors and then the gasoline

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Mechanization, 1939-1964," *South Dakota History*, 19 (1989), 281.

<sup>22</sup> Douglas *Budget*, March 25, 1926.

tractors. A team of people, often neighbors, called a “threshing ring,” would operate the threshing as the shocks were brought to the machine which was parked where the stacks of straw would be made, and the event became a neighborhood affair with huge meals and recreation to encourage the workers on. The advent of the combine harvester—sometimes seen in the 1930s—changed this, since this machine would go through the fields and harvest and thresh the grain in one action, or at most two steps. Because the early combines had a tendency to shatter the grain if it was threshed immediately upon harvesting, the practice often was to harvest the grain, leaving it in windrows, and after it had dried pass over it with the combine to pick it up and separate it, first the grain from the straw, and then the grain from the chaff. In either instance, however, now one individual alone could harvest and thresh the entire farm.<sup>24</sup> The implications of the new technology for hired labor and for community interaction were enormous.

The increasing mechanization of agriculture, however, was more than just the triumph of the internal combustion engine. Even the horse-drawn implements were being used more, and they were becoming more specialized. Consider the adoption of winter wheat. As late as 1926 three-fourths of the wheat produced in Wyoming was spring wheat, i.e., wheat that was planted in the spring to grow and mature over the summer. Winter wheat was widely recognized as a superior alternative, especially on dry farms, because it was more likely to mature since it usually escaped the dry season of July and August. The problem, though, was that often the winter wheat would not survive the winter. Once it was planted in late fall, the wheat seeds would too often perish, largely as a result of wind abrasion during the winter.

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<sup>23</sup> Douglas *Budget*, April 15, 1926, January 20, 1927.

The University of Wyoming Extension Service researched the subject and came up with a set of recommendations to help the farmers who planted winter wheat. One involved using a furrow drill to plant the seed deeper in the furrow, but covered only with the usual topsoil; by planting deeper in the furrow, the seed would be closer to moisture and would be protected from the wind. Also the Extension Service recommended the use of a duckfoot cultivator, instead of a plow, on fallow land to stir the soil without exposing too much of it to the drying action of the wind. The duckfoot was an ingenious device, sliding along just under the surface of the soil, cutting through the weeds between the rows but leaving the wheat standing and pulverizing the dirt into the dust mulch that would hold the moisture beneath. And thus more equipment was added to the inventory of the farmer, even when the farmers continued to use horses as their source of power in the fields.<sup>25</sup> And thus was more money invested in the farm, and that money was often borrowed. And thus was more land acquired which would make the new equipment that much more efficient, hopefully even paying for itself.

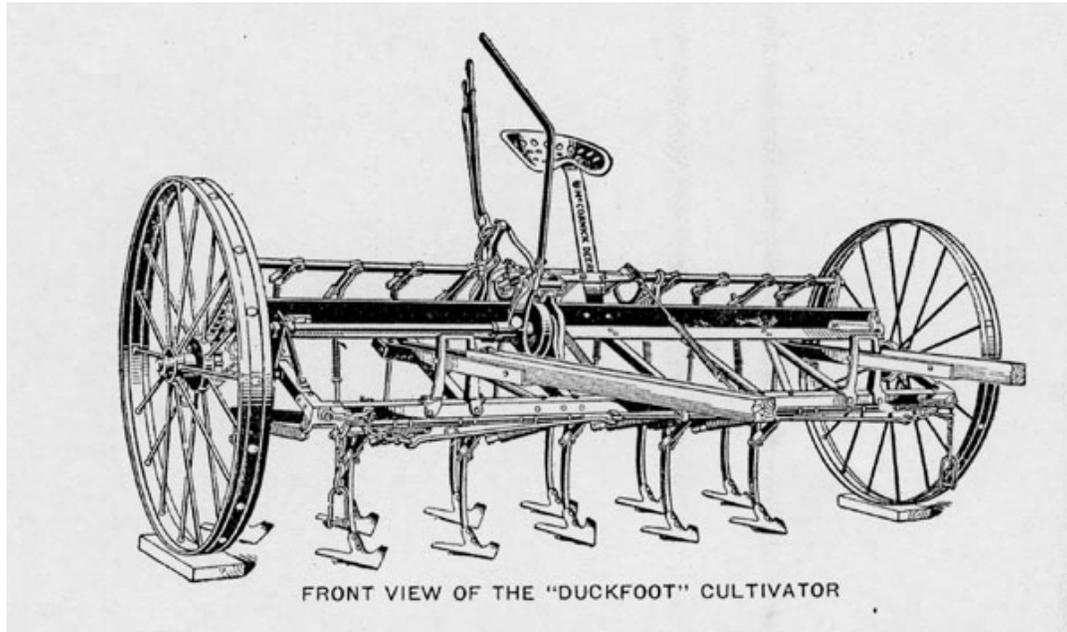
The technological revolution carried consequences for the use of the land. Most directly and immediately, it meant that larger acreages were both more practical and even necessary. The individual family farm with a few draft horses and implements, relying on family labor, could not work a large spread, but with more and more powerful implements, with tractors, with threshers, with combines the extra land was not only possible to cultivate but was even necessary in order to justify the additional expense

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<sup>24</sup> Fite, "The Transformation of South Dakota Agriculture," 291.

<sup>25</sup> W. L. Quayle and A. L. Nelson, "A Better Method for Winter Wheat Production," University of Wyoming Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin No. 151 (February 1927).

entailed in purchasing and maintaining the equipment. The technology would not ordinarily increase the bushels per acre of any product (although some devices like the



Duckfoot cultivator. From: W. L. Quayle and A. L. Nelson, "A Better Method for Winter Wheat Production," University of Wyoming Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin No. 151 (February 1927), 48.

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duckfoot cultivator promised to do this indirectly by assuring a greater seedling success rate), but it would increase the acres that could be worked. And, in fact, by the end of the 1920s the farms and ranches in the area had increased dramatically in size.

It is always problematic to use averages, especially with relatively small numbers, since the average is just a mythical number to begin with, and that number can so easily be skewed by a handful of extreme cases at either end of the scale. Yet the marked shift in the average size of farms in the Powder River Basin during the 1920s is such that the average does indeed signal the contours of a larger reality and suggest a greater transformation underway. In ten years the sizes of the average farm and ranch almost

exactly doubled, jumping from 864.57 acres to 1703.5 acres.<sup>26</sup> Most of that increase, in fact, took place during the first half of the decade as larger operations expanded by buying out, foreclosing mortgages, or otherwise taking over smaller farms and ranches that were weakened by the tight money supply and declining prices on their products. By the end of the decade thirty-seven percent of the farms in this area controlled sixty-three percent of the farmland. It is also important to note that during the decade the total number of farms in the area actually declined for the first time. Farmland had grown, but the number of farms on that land dropped slightly, from 6085 farms in 1920 to 5879 in 1930. The prevailing—but not universal—pattern was clear: a general pattern of agricultural consolidation was underway as the total number of farms was declining and the individual farms were getting larger, with the largest farms showing the greatest growth and, conversely, the smallest farms showing the greatest decline.

During the decade, the mortgages on farms and ranches increased so that by 1930, thirty-one percent of the farms were free of mortgages; in 1920, sixty-one percent of them had had no mortgage burden. The general picture of the area thus shows a system of agriculture in which sheep and wool production was increasing, farm and ranch size was increasing, technology was increasing, and the numbers of the large farms (over a thousand acres) climbed dramatically, but so also was debt increasing. Meanwhile, the number of farms was declining (except for in Campbell County), the number of *small* farms was also declining, the number of farms that were mortgage free was declining, and the farms and ranches were increasingly turning to a single crop system of

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<sup>26</sup> This is a calculation based upon the size of all farms (which included ranches) in the seven county area based on the census data from 1920 and 1930.

production. While Wyoming had for decades represented a countertrend to the main social and economic pattern of agriculture in the nation, by the 1920s the state, and this part of the state in particular, appeared to be joining the mainstream.

Some of the largest ranches and farms were the ones that attracted most attention as showcase operations, and usually these were pointed to as examples of practices that others should adopt, and, at any rate, as a vision of the agricultural future. For example, around Sheridan there were the elegant ranches and farms of English nobility, like the Moncreiffes and Wallops, that had been established around 1890 but had avoided the issues of the Johnson County War and had become hideaways mainly noted for the purebred livestock they produced and the polo they played. Oliver Wallop left the country (and his U.S. citizenship) for a while to assume his role as Earl of Portsmouth.<sup>27</sup> Allan Seager, a well-known writer at mid-twentieth century, recalled his visit to a wealthy aunt and uncle who lived and circulated among those ranches in 1923 when he was a young man of seventeen years. “The country round about had gone through a cycle of cattle, sheep, and dry farming, and now it was devoting itself mainly to raising horses for cavalry remounts, and entertaining the first dudes.”<sup>28</sup> The Gallatin and McCoy polo ranch specialized in the breeding of polo ponies with four registered stallions. Nearby, Ridgely Nicholas was specializing in raising thoroughbred hunters and jumpers. Bradford Brinton also produced thoroughbred horses, Arabian.

Aside from the elegant estates, however, there were the vast working ranches. Among those ranches was that of Edward L. Dana near Parkman, whose operation

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<sup>27</sup> “Earl of Portsmouth Quits Wyoming Ranch, Ends American Citizenship of 42 Years,” *New York Times*, April 9, 1933.

included nearly a hundred thousand acres and extended into Montana. When Dan W. Greenburg reported on the ranches of the area, he noted this ranch's "huge scale for the proper handling and feeding of cattle. The sheds and pens, dipping vats, feeding racks are orderly and extensive. Even in the branding operations and the dehorning operations, chutes are made and each operation goes on with despatch. Granaries are filled, rations are measured and fed in feeding season, while every precaution is taken against disease and modern dipping vats are so constructed that the animal is driven quickly through the chute into cement lined vats where the animal is immersed and dragged out secure from contamination."<sup>29</sup> In addition, there was the huge ranch of Senator John Kendrick himself, a ranch that included multiple other properties including the one-time separate OW Ranch, the E Bar U, the LX Bar, the 76, the 77 and other ranches for a total of some 210,000 acres.<sup>30</sup> At that ranch Dan Greenburg captured some perspective on the changes underway, observing that "The range days are gone. The lands are fenced and the system is changed from an exclusive cattle country to one of cattle, hogs, sheep, poultry and the plow is in operation at full tilt." Again, this was one of those ranches that heralded the scientific future of agriculture because of its industrial organization: "it would be a revelation to go upon any one of his [Kendrick's] places and observe the modern methods

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<sup>28</sup> Allan Seager, "Powder River in the Old Days," *The New Yorker*, August 17, 1957, 28.

<sup>29</sup> D. W. Greenburg, "Marvelous Sheridan County," *The Midwest Review*, VII (October 1926), 14.

<sup>30</sup> B. J. Earle, "The Kendrick Ranch as Historic Context: Attention Coal Bed Methane Surveyors!" Poster Paper, 62<sup>nd</sup> Plains Anthropological Conference, Billings, Montana October 14-16, 2004. A copy of this paper is located on the web page for the Wyoming SHPO Planning and Historic Context Program, <http://wyoshpo.state.wy.us/SHPOweb2002/2002webpages/availablecontexts.htm>, accessed June 27, 2006.

of handling cattle which he has installed.”<sup>31</sup>

There was also the Levi Leiter estate on Clear Creek in Johnson County, operated in the 1920s by Joseph Leiter, and while not as extensive as the Kendrick or Dana ranches, was large—very large. At first appearance, the Leiter estate was as diversified as any operation and produced in 1925 “2500 tons of alfalfa, 1000 bushels of peas, 55,000 bushels of barley, 4,000 bushels of oats and 1,000 bushels of corn” in addition to a thousand head of hogs sent to market and twenty thousand head of sheep fed. Leiter had shifted away from the production of wheat as the major crop of the operation and now used the three wheat elevators constructed during World War I to store oats. Yet this was not so much diversification as vertical integration—control of the resources used at every step of production. His intention in the 1920s was that “nothing should be shipped out except on the hoof,” and the crops he raised were going directly to feed for his livestock. This control of production extended even to the labor supply and by the 1920s Leiter had shifted his organization in another way and had developed an operation based upon tenant farmers with about sixty tenant units at mid-decade.<sup>32</sup>

West of Douglas, at Careyhurst, the old showcase ranch of the 1880s continued, but it too was changing. Although at one time it was exclusively a cattle ranch, it had increasingly diversified and by the 1920s included sheep as well, in fact, a large number

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<sup>31</sup> Greenburg, “Marvelous Sheridan County,” 11-12.

<sup>32</sup> Greenburg, “Marvelous Sheridan County,” 10. In addition, as sometimes happens but usually not so prominently, a legal dispute between Joseph Leiter and his sister, the widow of the Earl of Suffolk, brought further details of the operation of this ranch to public notice. See, for example, “Sister Says Leiter Mismanages Estate Worth \$100,000,000,” *New York Times*, May 6, 1923; “Leiter as Manager of Farms Assailed, Lady Suffolk Offers Testimony To Show Poor Marketing of Sugar Beet Crops,” *New York Times*, March 26, 1926.

of sheep, and it was producing hogs and horses too. Dan Greenburg reported that “Due to restricted range the management has been reducing its cattle and is devoting more effort to farming.” Like the Leiter estate, Careyhurst had shifted its labor system from hired labor to tenant farming or share-cropping, “and now the management maintains a consistent policy of adding more tenants each year.”<sup>33</sup>

The future, the modern form of organization, was advancing, and it was big. It was also vertically integrated, and was pioneering in areas of labor management that in other parts of the nation were perceived as systems of peonage.

Actually, this pattern of modernization was not universally prevalent. The pattern in which vast operations were taking the place of small operations, where family-farm homesteading was being challenged by corporate-based entities, where specialized, scientific, commercial-oriented, capital-intensive agriculture grew each year, but it was not yet dominant. In fact, that can be seen most clearly in one county. During the 1920s, Campbell County was the only part of the northeastern quadrant of Wyoming to increase the number of farms in its borders. While the numbers of farms were declining elsewhere, that county increased the number of farms by twenty-two percent, or 236 farms; where the county had 1072 farms in 1920 there were 1308 in 1930. Clearly a reflection of the importance of Campbell County as a homesteading location, this is striking because it also presents a contrast with the other counties where the farms were declining. And along with the increase in farms in Campbell County there was also a huge increase in farmland. During the 1920s the amount of land put into farms in the county almost quadrupled, jumping from 233,632 to 888,287 acres. And Campbell

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<sup>33</sup> Dan W. Greenburg, “Converse County’s Magnificent Resources,” *The Midwest*

County also showed the lowest relative investment in farm machinery and implements, a feature that revealed the reluctance (or inability) to buy into the new technology available. All of these are traits and indications of homesteading activity.

In Campbell County and elsewhere in the region, there still persisted those who saw themselves as pioneers, people on the frontier, people who were moving west and claiming parts of the public domain on which they might live their own vision of the American dream, a vision that went back to a Jeffersonian agrarian formulation of freedom and democracy and civic virtue. And Campbell County seemed to be one of the few places left where it appeared that that dream might be fulfilled in the 1920s.

Studies of the communities and neighborhoods where homesteaders took up land in any period are frustratingly uncommon and in the twentieth century they are even more scarce, a fact that has meant that the historical depictions of farming and ranching have tended to focus on dramatic episodes or to gravitate to the most colorful, largest, and least representative examples. There is, however, a study of a community of homesteaders in Campbell County, Wyoming in the 1920s and 1930s that helps provide, in microcosm, a portrait of the life and history of homesteaders.

In 1999 William P. Fischer studied the homesteading community of Teckla, Wyoming, examining land records, local records, family histories, letters, and farm accounts, government reports, and topical academic histories, in addition to interviewing family members from the community. That study represents a possible model for anyone investigating homesteading sites not only in Campbell County, but in northeast Wyoming and probably more broadly in the state, and the core site evaluation is the Mackey

Homestead, 48CA2675.<sup>34</sup>

The basic story of Teckla, as Fischer describes it, was one that conformed to larger trends:

Homestead entries flourished in the late 1910s and into the early 1920s. Settlers arrived primarily from neighboring states, established homes, and developed a permanent community. They attempted farming with mixed success and failure, and they supplemented their operations with animal husbandry. During the 1920s, a number accomplished their objectives, as is evident in the improvements and subsequent patenting of their homesteads.<sup>35</sup>

Examining their kinship networks and marriage status, Fischer concludes that these people fully intended to stay, to make permanent homes when they filed their claims under the 1909 Enlarged Homestead Act and the 1916 Stock Raising Homestead Act (for the Mackey family this represented claims totaling 640 acres). They developed a diversified agriculture, growing dry-farm crops like corn, oats, cane, rye, millet, flax and wheat, and raising some livestock too. Although the drought of 1919 caused a crop failure, as it did for a broad area of small and large operations alike, their successes in other years can be documented. In addition to the barns and permanent homes they built after their temporary abodes, they also constructed the full array of chicken houses, swine shelters, cellars, granaries, windmills, reservoirs and utility buildings. Some worked for others in the area while building up the homestead; one person hired out as a shepherd to nearby large sheep operation. An important theme runs through Fischer's account of the Teckla homesteaders: they succeeded in the 1920s, and that success was based on

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<sup>34</sup> William P. Fischer, "Homesteading the Thunder Basin: Teckla, Wyoming, 1917-1938," *Annals of Wyoming*, 71 (Spring 1999), 21-34.

“diversified cultivation, poultry raising, and animal husbandry.”<sup>36</sup> Although Fischer was unable to find records for the Mackey family between 1922 and 1925, he notes that

Mackey marketed 500 pounds of beans, 10,000 pounds of oats, 310 pounds of potatoes, forty-eight bushels of wheat, 500 bushels of corn, and 151 pounds of dressed turkeys between October and November 10, 1926. In 1927, wheat, oats, and turkeys were sold, while 1928 included the sale of oats, hogs, wheat, cattle, and turkeys. The farm produced 189 bushels of winter wheat, flax, sixty-four bushels of rye, and 716 pounds of live turkeys for sale in 1929.<sup>37</sup>

The Mackeys’ daughter “remembered the 1920s as seemingly prosperous years on the homestead, although tempered by the basic hardships of homestead life.” They raised their own food (“beans, potatoes, peas, onions, carrots, tomatoes, and, on at least one occasion, even watermelon”) in their garden and spent considerable time canning and curing food, storing it in their root cellar. They hauled in water for drinking, although they had a well that produced water not as good as that of the hauled water. Family labor took care of many general farm chores and specialized tasks on the homestead. Although the family used horses to work their fields for most of the 1920s, in 1928 they purchased a “1530 International tractor, combine, plow, and tandem disk,” which they then also used to farm nearby land owned by others. In addition to their own entertainment with a battery-powered radio, the community came together at dances and other gatherings. Customarily someone would donate a couple of acres for a school (the return on the investment being the nearness of the school to the homestead), and, at Teckla, “neighbors joined together and collectively purchased a steam tractor to thresh grain, and they

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<sup>35</sup> Fischer, “Homesteading the Thunder Basin,” 23.

<sup>36</sup> Fischer, “Homesteading the Thunder Basin,” 27.

commonly acted as midwives at the births of each other's children."<sup>38</sup>

Obviously not everyone who homesteaded succeeded, and it is impossible to determine why some people left the land that they had claimed. Some could not thrive in the manner they hoped. Some grew weary of the effort. Some lacked a background in farming, or in this kind of farming. Some fell victim to one scheme or another. Some left for better pay at a job in town or in another state. Some were foreclosed when the bank that owned their mortgage closed. Some never intended to remain, hoping instead to attract an offer on their land. And clearly, those who left their farms and ranches were no different from farmers all across the nation who were also leaving to find employment in the cities. But many remained and, as already noted, the number of farms in Campbell County actually increased during the decade as a result. In one way these homesteaders at Teckla can be understood as people exactly like their homesteading progenitors of the nineteenth century attempting build a life with homes of their own according to their own expectations and standards of contentment. In another way, however, they can be understood as individuals still bucking the trend of modern agriculture in that they retained a faith in the family farm and economic independence instead of opting for a corporate form of organization and specialization of function, in that they still retained a sense of farming as a way of life instead of as merely a business proposition. They were not alone. All across the region stretching from the Big Horn Mountains to the Black Hills and down to the North Platte River, small operations like theirs continued on, sometimes growing, sometimes shrinking, and increasingly they were fighting not just a battle to make ends meet, but struggling against the system of economic and social

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<sup>37</sup> Fischer, "Homesteading the Thunder Basin," 27.

organization itself that threatened to leave them behind. Those pressures and that struggle would increase with the downturn of the nation's economy in the 1930s.

*ii. Agricultural Crisis, Social Crisis*

Although the Depression of the 1930s is ordinarily calculated as beginning with the stock market crash of 1929, that economic spiral actually came after a much less dramatic but equally devastating blow to the nation's economy that had begun years before. The decline in the number of farms in northeast Wyoming in the 1920s is directly related to that agricultural depression, for those farmers who left their lands, by force or choice, were joining a nationwide stream to the city. The problems of farmers in the 1920s were the problems not of dry farming and drought, not of blizzards and winter die-outs, not problems of nature at all. They were problems of social organization. Much of the particular part of the social organization that beset them had to do with the nation's banking system, which was itself modernizing, thinning its own ranks, becoming more specialized, and more centralized.

The nation's banking system was in crisis throughout the 1920s and the most vulnerable part of that system rested in the small banks in the rural communities. Between 1921 and 1929 nearly 6,000 banks failed in the United States, an amount equal to twenty percent of the total. The leading students of banking in the nation concluded that "A large fraction of all banks that suspended during the period had capital of \$25,000

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<sup>38</sup> Fischer, "Homesteading the Thunder Basin," 29.

or less and were located in towns of 2,500 or less, largely situated in seven western grain states.”<sup>39</sup> Wyoming contributed to this trend as 101 (out of a total of 153) banks closed their doors during the 1920s, thirty of them national banks (chartered by the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency) and seventy-one of them state chartered banks; only thirty-two banks opened for business in the decade. The first few years of the decade saw the banking system contract sharply but the failures of the banks plummeted in 1924. In that single year banks closed in Manville, Lusk, Newcastle, Buffalo, Clearmont, Douglas, Glenrock, Kaycee, Keeline, Lavoye, Osage, Van Tassell, Upton, and Sheridan. The next year, three banks in Sheridan alone closed their doors.<sup>40</sup>

This impacted the farmers and ranchers around those communities seriously since any deposits they had in those banks were usually lost. Indirectly, however, the entire economy and anyone with outstanding loans from any source suffered since these and other closures in the nation represented a contraction of the money supply—another deflationary cycle—which meant that the loans would have to be repaid with more valuable dollars than were originally borrowed. That group included those with mortgages, those who were investing in the new agricultural equipment and cars and trucks, and those who were expanding their holdings through purchases—in other words, just about everybody.

To make matters worse, just as had been the case nationally in the decades following the Civil War, the increasing burden of debts and costs of production collided

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<sup>39</sup> Milton Friedman and Anna Jacobson Schwartz, *A Monetary History of the United States, 1867-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 249.

<sup>40</sup> Larson, *History of Wyoming*, 413; Peter W. Huntoon, “The National Bank Failures in Wyoming, 1924,” *Annals of Wyoming*, 54 (Fall 1982), 35, 42-43.

with declining prices received for the products of their labor. Wool was bringing fifty-six cents a pound in 1920, but dropped to twenty-five cents or less the next year, recovered then fluctuated, hitting thirty-three cents in 1927, then recovering some the next two years, but never to the level it had been at the beginning of the decade. Likewise, wheat that had sold for \$2.78 in 1920 was bringing seventy-four cents a bushel in 1929; beef cattle sold for \$10.90 per hundredweight in 1920 and for \$6.30 in 1927.<sup>41</sup> Some recovery was experienced in 1928 and 1929, and this brought new hope, but the prices did not last. In fact, bad as the prices were, they carried a perversely worsening consequence with them. As the farmers and ranchers saw their income fall, about their only recourse, to increase their income, was to plant more crops on more land with more equipment—and more debt. In view of these pressures, it should come as no surprise that the number of farms in the area declined, but that the number did not decline even more than it did. This was not an instance where the folly of dry farming was finally realized; this was part of a social crisis besetting all farmers in the United States and the migration from the farm to the city was the pattern across the nation.

After the stock market crash of 1929 the agricultural depression of the 1920s merged with the economic crisis of the nation that deepened each year until 1933; but even then the economy languished and people despaired as recovery seemed ever elusive. The banking crisis, already awful, got even worse between 1929 and 1933 as the entire

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<sup>41</sup> These figures are prices in Montana since price data are not available for Wyoming for these years. This information can be found in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service, available on World Wide Web at [http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics\\_by\\_State/Montana/index.asp](http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Montana/index.asp) and [http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics\\_by\\_State/Montana/Publications/croptoc.htm](http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Montana/Publications/croptoc.htm). The index for Wyoming does, however, include production output. See: [http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics\\_by\\_State/Wyoming/index.asp](http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Wyoming/index.asp).

money supply of the nation, already painfully tightened, shrank by more than a third, thus placing additional pressure on the farmers and ranchers. More banks shut down or merged, and farmers and ranchers watched their savings evaporate at worst, or, at best move far away. Typical was the experience in Moorcroft where the American State Bank, which had been formed in 1921 upon the failures of the Moorcroft Bank and the Peoples Bank, merged with the Sundance State Bank. The local newspaper commented on this merger, in which the bank's assets were at least still in existence, that it still left local people "without local banking facilities and at considerable inconvenience."<sup>42</sup>

Commodity prices dropped too and the wheat that sold for seventy-four cents in 1929 sold for thirty-six cents two years later. The cattle that sold for \$6.30 per hundredweight in 1927 sold for \$2.70 in 1933. In 1932 wool sold for seven or eight cents a pound, sometimes as much as a dime.<sup>43</sup> In Converse County at the end of June 1932, the local paper reported that there had been no wool sales at all in the county "and buyers have not been making much effort to get clips." And when sales were made later in the summer, the Morton Ranch received a dime a pound, "which is the highest reported locally and probably as high as has been paid in the state."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> "Moorcroft Without Banking Institution," Moorcroft *Leader*, January 15, 1932, quoted in Sundance High School Sophomore Class of 1987, *Triumphs and Tragedies of Crook County* ( n.p., n.d.), 60.

<sup>43</sup> Again these prices were true of Montana and Wyoming prices were doubtless similar: U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service Montana data at [http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics\\_by\\_State/Montana/Publications/economic/prices/woolpr.htm](http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Montana/Publications/economic/prices/woolpr.htm);  
[http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics\\_by\\_State/Montana/Publications/economic/prices/allwhtr.htm](http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Montana/Publications/economic/prices/allwhtr.htm);  
[http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics\\_by\\_State/Montana/Publications/economic/prices/bfcatlpr.htm](http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Montana/Publications/economic/prices/bfcatlpr.htm).

Again, this crisis was a general crisis and was not a reflection on the lack of hard work by the farmers and ranchers, nor was it even a result of weather; it had to do with the general crisis in the nation's economy and especially with the failure of the banking system. A. L. Brock in Johnson County effectively captured the situation in 1933 when he observed that "Many of the once well-to-do farmers and stockmen have lost their farms and homes, largely on account of the financial conditions of the country. Many of the stockmen in Wyoming are using more or less borrowed money and owing to the present financial conditions of the country many of them have very little equity left."<sup>45</sup>

When the drought of 1933 and 1934 came, it worsened the problems; not only were prices for the commodities low and costs high, but their production of crops and livestock also declined, making their income that much leaner. It is perilous to compare one drought with another, because the measurement can vary dramatically from one drainage to another, and the statewide data tend to average out the highs and lows of the different parts of Wyoming. Nonetheless, the period of drought between 1931 and 1936 (locals in the Powder River Basin, however referred to the droughts of 1933, 1934, and 1936) measures as one of the seven worst droughts lasting three years or longer in Wyoming history since 1895. The Wyoming State Climate Office puts the drought into climatological context by noting that "The most recent statewide drought that began in earnest in the spring of 2000 over Wyoming is considered by many to be the most severe in collective memory. However, some old timers have indicated that they remember

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<sup>44</sup> Douglas Budget, June 23, August 11, 1932.

<sup>45</sup> A. L. Brock, "Comparison of Methods of Handling Livestock in 1923 and in 1933," 6.

streams drying up in the 1930s and 1950s.”<sup>46</sup>

The exact conditions are hard to define, but there can be no mistaking the severity of the drought. The state of Wyoming effectively defined the drought area in 1937 when it reduced the leasing rates for state grazing land by forty percent in the “drouth-stricken” counties of Campbell, Crook, Sheridan, Weston, and Johnson, and by twenty-five percent for lands in Converse County.<sup>47</sup> In the summer of 1936, which was probably the nadir of the drought because of the cumulative weight of the decline over the previous year and more, the northern part of Campbell County was described as appearing to be “as smooth as cement” and one report indicated that “the southern part of the county, although not hit as hard yet, is beginning to show signs of the severe dry weather. Many residents report the drying up of wells and water holes.”<sup>48</sup> By all accounts, the drought hit everywhere in Wyoming, and in northeast Wyoming Campbell County was the drought’s epicenter.

The drought was severe for anybody who went through it, and, like the rain that falls on the just and unjust alike, the drought also afflicted everybody. But some were impacted harder than others. Some of those who suffered the most, and whose soil suffered the most, were those who had adopted new technology for cultivating their crops, in particular the implements that would cut the weeds just beneath the surface and leave a finely pulverized layer of dust, what they called a dust mulch, to protect the seeds

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<sup>46</sup> Jan Curtis and Kate Grimes, *Wyoming Climate Atlas*, copy located on the World Wide Web at <http://www.wrds.uwyo.edu/wrds/wsc/climateatlas/drought.html>

<sup>47</sup> Larry James Krysl, “The Effects of the Great Depression on the State of Wyoming, 1935-1940,” M.A. Thesis, University of Wyoming, 1960, 19.

<sup>48</sup> “Government Agencies Unite to Alleviate Local Distress,” *Gillette News-Record*, July 2, 1936.

and retain moisture. Several implements did this and historian Donald Worster has pointed out that the one-way disk plow, with its vertical concave plates, had that precise effect and that “some observers blamed the dust storms of the 1930s on the misuse of this single implement.”<sup>49</sup> There was, of course, another implement that farmers in northeast Wyoming were familiar with, the duckfoot cultivator, that also had that exact impact on the land.

Responses to the crisis included considerable belt-tightening and adjustments. The main problem was the general economic crisis that had been pressing on the farmers and ranchers for a decade. Then the drought complicated the situation. By January 1935, the condition of the range in Wyoming generally was eighty-three percent of normal and it appears to have declined more over the following year although the winter of 1935-1936 was mild and offered much needed moisture.<sup>50</sup> Some ranchers in 1934 shipped their livestock to other places where they would have better grazing, and in this they were sometimes able to take advantage of reduced railroad shipping rates, generally set at eighty-five percent of normal rates; yet even this reduction in rates meant that only the ranchers with sufficient numbers of stock to export, with the ability to pay railroad freight rates, with a destination range to ship the cattle and sheep to, and with the ability to manage the livestock in the out-of-state ranges were able to take advantage of the opportunity. In 1936, as the drought of the previous year returned after a respite during the winter, seventeen trucks made nine trips to the Midwest area where the Padlock

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<sup>49</sup> Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 91.

<sup>50</sup> Krysl, “The Effects of the Great Depression on the State of Wyoming, 1935-1940,” 18.

Ranch shipped its cattle to Gillette where they were transported by train to Nebraska. The Gillette newspaper reported that “Every train that leaves the local yards is made up of a great number of stock cars loaded with cattle, horses and sheep consigned to market or to pasture in localities that have not suffered from drouth and insects.”<sup>51</sup> Three weeks later, the *News-Record* reported that the out-migration of livestock was continuing, that shipments of cattle out from Gillette “have been heavier than for many years over the same July period, due to the extreme drouth conditions.”<sup>52</sup> By November of 1936 an estimated four hundred cars of cattle were shipped out of northeast Wyoming.<sup>53</sup>

The shipment of cattle to other ranges helped those who could do so, but not all could; in fact, those most distressed were the least able to ship their cattle elsewhere. They had few alternatives. One option, to walk away from the land that had been farmed or ranched, was implicit in one report from Gillette in 1936: “With no rain recorded for over four weeks and none in sight, conditions have almost reached the point of hopelessness. Stock is being shipped from the county and many farmers have deserted their places to seek new locations.”<sup>54</sup> Exactly how many “deserted their places to seek new locations” can not be determined, nor can it be ascertained how many retained ownership of their property and moved to town to find work, how many turned over their deed to the mortgage holder but continued to farm as a tenant or renter, and, for that matter, how many may have even moved on to the farms to pick up where someone else

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<sup>51</sup> “Stock Moving out of County,” *Gillette News-Record*, June 13, 1936.

<sup>52</sup> “Cattle Being Moved Rapidly,” *Gillette News-Record*, July 7, 1936.

<sup>53</sup> Krysl, “The Effects of the Great Depression on the State of Wyoming, 1935-1940,” 19.

<sup>54</sup> “County Known as Drouth Area,” *Gillette News-Record*, July 8, 1936.

left off. In fact, the statistics show that in the first half of the 1930s the total number of farms in the area actually *increased*. In 1930 there had been 5879 farms and ranches in the seven county area and by 1935 that number had increased to 6041, although it was still short of the 6085 in 1920 before the ravages of the 1920s.<sup>55</sup> Only in Campbell County, where the number of farms dropped from 1310 to 1227, and in Weston County, where the 616 farms and ranches fell by five, was there any indication of a depopulation of the countryside.

There was another alternative, though, and that was to struggle through and endure as best as one could. At the end of the Depression, the WPA Writer's Guide for Wyoming provided a glimpse into this course when it noted that during the 1930s "many Wyoming farmers who were unable to finance the farming of their large acreages made a living by maintaining a small flock of sheep, some turkeys and chickens, and a few milk cows, and cultivated only sufficient land to raise feed for the stock and for a small garden."<sup>56</sup> The ability of small farmers to turn their meager circumstances into an advantage was found also in the ranching community. Agnes Wright Spring suggested that the small growers often had enough water to make it through the dry spell with their limited number of sheep and cattle.<sup>57</sup> Their large counterparts with sizeable herds also had sizeable water needs. The managing of water, in fact, was the forte of the dry-

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<sup>55</sup> State of Wyoming, Wyoming Planning Board, Coordination Survey ([Cheyenne:] October 1938).

<sup>56</sup> Workers of the Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Wyoming, *Wyoming: A Guide to Its History, Highways, and People* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981; reprint of 1941 Oxford University Press edition), 105.

<sup>57</sup> Spring is quoted by Krysl, "The Effects of the Great Depression on the State of

farmer, and while the drought of 1936 continued unabated that summer, there was a small amount of moisture that season and some of the small operators were able to put it to good use. Between the first of April and near the end of November, Gillette received only 3.92 inches of rain. While this was not sufficient to produce a crop of the small grains, “corn and several of the annual forage crops made a crop although the yields were not so good as in years of more nearly normal rain fall. Yet enough feed was produced to be of great value in carrying of livestock through the fall and winter.”<sup>58</sup> Likewise in Crook County, reports were that “During the drought of the last few years corn has done pretty well and supplied a big part of the stock feed for winter.”<sup>59</sup> The Depression put the farmers and ranchers into severe conditions and the drought only worsened their plight, but still many of these agriculturists pressed on. Whatever else might be said of the area, it was not part of the Dust Bowl that plagued farmers and ranchers in the Southern Plains.

### *iii. Federal Assistance and the Transformation of the Landscape*

The administration of Franklin Roosevelt that took office in 1933 launched a series of programs that were designed to get the country out of the Depression and provide assistance to those who needed help, and also to restructure portions of the economy to make them less vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the market. Drawing upon academic experts and a mobilized national political system, the Roosevelt administration

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Wyoming, 1935-1940,” 23.

<sup>58</sup> “State Experiment Farm News Notes,” *Gillette News-Record*, November 28, 1936.

drew up plans for change in virtually every part of the economy. And the agricultural sector ranked secondly only to manufacturing in the attention that the New Deal gave it. Roosevelt had signaled early in the 1932 presidential campaign that changes for agriculture were to be expected and when he took office in March 1933 he initiated a flurry of initiatives to bring those changes about.

In much of this he followed the lead of Dr. Rexford Tugwell, an economics professor at Columbia University who in 1932 served as a member of Roosevelt's Brains Trust—intellectual advisors who helped him formulate policy during the campaign and then helped steer the administration in the months following their candidate's victory in November. The Brains Trust placed an emphasis on planning in the economy and Tugwell, in particular, promoted ways to plan better for agriculture, a part of the economy that he felt was hampered by its legendary individualism. As Richard Kirkendall has explained about Tugwell, the economist disliked the traditional philosophy of agrarianism that so many espoused, and where the agrarians "talked of the fundamental importance of agriculture and the superiority of agriculture as a way of life; he [Tugwell] insisted that the United States had become fundamentally an industrial nation, and he did not regret the change. In fact, he talked of absorbing 'a very large number of persons from farms into our general industrial and urban life.'"<sup>60</sup> Instead of fighting the industrial trend in modern society, Tugwell argued, farmers should use industrial principles to organize their own activities. As Kirkendall, the preeminent scholar of New Deal agricultural policy, argues, Tugwell "believed that government

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<sup>59</sup> Carl Plattner, "Crook County in General," typescript, WPA Collections, File 1265.

<sup>60</sup> Richard S. Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*

should promote the consolidation and rationalization of agriculture, reorganizing it along the lines that industry had followed. The area of land in production should be limited so that the system would include only the most efficient farmers operating the best land, and the cities and factories should absorb a very large number of people from the farms.”<sup>61</sup>

The central element of the New Deal program for farmers and ranchers involved production planning, something Tugwell had been talking about since the 1920s. The fundamental problem facing agriculture in the Depression, according to this approach, was that of overproduction; farmers and ranchers had produced so much that the markets were glutted and the prices they received were thereby pushed down. There were other ways of looking at this problem, and some critics argued that the agricultural sector was in trouble, not because of overproduction, but because of underconsumption; people in the cities did not have the money to buy food and fiber even at depressed prices. Those critics called for increasing purchasing power and consumption through government spending and wealth redistribution and using anti-trust laws to generate greater competition and lower prices in the processors of agricultural commodities who stood between the producer and the consumer.<sup>62</sup> Those critics notwithstanding, however, the new president and his advisers embarked on a course to achieve the restructuring that they had proposed and Rexford Tugwell became Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, although he retained considerable independence because of his close relationship to the president.

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(Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1966), 43.

<sup>61</sup> Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt*, 44.

<sup>62</sup> See Michael Cassity, “Huey Long: Barometer of Reform in the New Deal,” *South*

The first large New Deal program for agriculture was the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, a system designed to plan and control agricultural production and to create artificial shortages in products to raise commodity prices. And this program hit the northeast quarter of Wyoming directly. And the most noticeable part of the AAA was its Drought Relief Program in which herd reduction was undertaken immediately. There



“Senator Kendrick’s OW Condemned Cattle shot during government drought relief, 1934.” Photo: Wyoming Stock Growers Association Records, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie.

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were two elements to the program. One was to pay farmers and ranchers a subsidy to take land out of production and to reduce the numbers of livestock in their herds. The impact of that effort, however, would take time to achieve the reductions desired, so an

immediate effort was undertaken to reduce the numbers of livestock grazing the land and plow under crops already in the field. The herd reduction program was not always well documented since the specter of destroying animals in a nation that was hungry was not the image that the nation's leaders especially relished, but scattered references provide some information about the program. Cattle were appraised and the prices set for two-year old cattle ranged from ten to fifteen dollars and eight dollars a head for those under a year old, although it was not uncommon for a flat fee of eight dollars to be paid in some counties. Some cattle were purchased and then shipped to market, although this was generally avoided since the object was to take them off the market, and many more were destroyed. Numbers of livestock purchased and shipped or destroyed are inexact and hard to come by. One local history quotes extensively from the Moorcroft *Leader* in 1934 about these herd reductions, noting that "the slaughter of these animals was the largest in the history of the livestock industry." The same newspaper reported that "Fifty-five cars of government cattle left Moorcroft's stockyards between July 12-20 1934. By fall of 1934 32,270 head of cattle and 21,058 head of sheep were purchased by the government in Crook County in the emergency livestock purchasing program."<sup>63</sup>

The Sheridan *Press* in 1934 reported that "The Wyoming Stock Growers Association asked the federal government to buy 7000 head of cattle a day to be slaughtered. . . . Some of these slaughtered animals were canned and distributed among the needy. Some were given to the Indians for jerked meat and some were left where

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<sup>63</sup> "Stock Shipments are Very Heavy," Moorcroft *Leader*, July 20, 1934, quoted in Sundance High School Sophomore Class of 1987, *Triumphs and Tragedies of Crook County* (n.p., n.d.), 65. See also, "Government Will Soon Start Buying Cattle under New Drought Relief Buying Program," Moorcroft *Leader*, June 22, 1934.

they were slaughtered.” The same newspaper also reported that 67,000 sheep per day “were purchased by the government and either slaughtered or shipped to processors.”<sup>64</sup> These figures were doubtless national in scope, and in January 1935 the Agricultural Extension Service reported that the previous year that the sheep and cattle buying programs “have accounted for the purchase of 7,500,000 head of cattle and approximately 5,000,000 head of sheep over and above the normal marketing through regular channels” and the hog purchasing program targeted nine percent of the hogs and planned a twenty-five percent reduction in breeding operations.<sup>65</sup> The goal was to cut back the numbers of cattle to the level of 1928, to eliminate the increase in the ranchers’ herds since that year, and in that way to stimulate higher prices.

The other side of the program was the offering of incentives to keep production low for future years through subsidy payments. Ranchers would contract with the government to follow herd maximum limits. The crop reduction program was even more obscure than the herd reductions, but it too went into effect in this area. In order to reduce production, farmers would contract to leave a certain portion of the farm acreage unsowed. For wheat planting, for example, contracts on wheat were limited to a specific maximum and minimum acreage, and the subsidy (“benefit payment”) would be calculated at “54 per cent of his production to supplement any decreased wheat price.” In 1935 the Agricultural Extension Service cautioned those without contracts and those who planned to plant the maximum allowable acreage under contracts, that “the outlook for

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<sup>64</sup> These Sheridan *Press* quotations are from Ida McPherran, “History of Grazing” [Sheridan County], WPA Collections, File 405.

<sup>65</sup> “Wyoming Agricultural Situation for 1935,” Wyoming Agricultural Extension Service,

wheat as a paying cash crop in 1935-36 is not as bright as for some other crops.”<sup>66</sup>

The impact of the crop and herd reduction programs are difficult to assess not only because of the absence of reliable county-by-county numbers by type of livestock and crop, but is made more complex by the impact it had on different sizes of operations. The farmer with four thousand acres who could take out more acres from production obviously received substantially more cash in the “benefit payments” than the smaller operator with 640 acres, although the smaller operator had fewer resources to fall back upon and usually needed help more. And similarly, the herd reductions, where payments of ten dollars a head for livestock, on a head-by-head basis, worked to the benefit of the rancher who had more cattle for the government to purchase, which, of course, was consistent with the policy of encouraging large producers.

Plus, there were other implications. The Wyoming Agricultural Extension Service offered advice to homemakers on the farm and ranch which suggested some of the more subtle, even hidden, impacts of those operations:

Enforced sale of dairy stock has released time for many homemakers. Government purchase of cattle and sheep has brought about dismissal of “hired men,” resulting in a decrease of home work for women on stock ranches. Crop reduction will decrease the amount of work of women in the fields. This will bring an increase in demand for more profitable leisure time activities and a revival of home crafts.<sup>67</sup>

The dismissal of farm laborers held implications for that growing group of people, and

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Circular No. 57 (January 1935), 3, 7-9, 15-17.

<sup>66</sup> A. W. Willis, “Wheat: Price Steady to Lower: Buying Power Lower,” in Wyoming Agricultural Extension Service, Circular No. 57 (January 1935), 27.

<sup>67</sup> Mary Collopy, “The Outlook for Farm Family Living,” Wyoming Agricultural Extension Service, Circular No. 57 (January 1935), 33.

the reduction of work by women in the fields held significant gender implications for the role of women, defining their labor more along gender lines than previously.

The Agricultural Adjustment Administration was declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1936 because of a provision that taxed the processors of food and fiber in order to fund the benefit payments that went to the farmers and ranchers, but it was almost immediately renewed by Congress without the offending provision. Indeed, the agricultural subsidies and domestic allotment programs became permanent features of the agricultural landscape.

But other federal initiatives complemented and expanded the agricultural program that was reconfiguring the farms and ranches of the region. The federal government offered credit and loans to help the farmers and ranchers survive in very difficult times. In Gillette, where much of the crisis was focused, in 1935 Robert Peterson announced that the “Rural Resettlement Division” (evidently a local office of the Resettlement Administration) “will immediately begin work upon long-term plans whereby a farmer is extended credit for buying necessary livestock and equipment and for paying necessary farm expenses with the view of establishing him on a self-sustaining basis with as much as five years to repay.” Peterson cautioned hopeful recipients, however, that “the idea is to take care of a few clients well, rather than try to get out unsound plans for a large number of people and [he] asserted that the work would be slow.”<sup>68</sup>

The next spring, Campbell County Agricultural Extension Agent Floyd Dominy distributed applications for emergency crop loans for 1936; Dominy also advised caution since farmers were not eligible for those loans if they could borrow money from any

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<sup>68</sup> “Relief Farmers in County to Benefit,” *Gillette News-Record*, October 31, 1935.

other source including from “an individual, production credit association, bank, or other concern.” He also advised them that “the security for an emergency crop loan will consist of a first lien on the crop financed. Landlord[s] or others having an interest in the crop to be financed will be required to waive their claims in favor of a lien to the Governor of the Farm Credit Administration until the emergency crop loan is repaid.” The loans themselves were limited “and in no instance may exceed \$200 to one farmer.”<sup>69</sup> If the federal government had been too generous in distributing the public domain to individuals, it was making up for it with tightfisted loans to help them stay on the land.

Also, there were the technical assistance programs, the education efforts to help farmers and ranchers, often isolated, often with limited access to the information about farming and ranching that others who were better situated could take for granted. The premier institution for the dissemination of information for the farmers was the Agricultural Extension Service, a collaborative effort of the state universities and agricultural colleges, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the county governments. By the 1930s, however, the Extension Service in most states had abandoned the philosophy that was much involved in its creation—the idea that the nation needed a large population of family farms, on their own land, independent of landlords, with sufficient resources to lead good, if not always abundant, lives, and free to determine how best to use the land and its products. In its place, the agricultural colleges of the nation had adopted a narrower view, in which the essential information to be provided was managerial and technical and that farming was a business, not a way of life, and the

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<sup>69</sup> “Farmers May Apply for Crop Loans Now,” *Gillette News-Record*, March 25, 1936

farmers were business people just like any other business person; it was the business of agriculture, in this view, that was to be sustained and nurtured even as it grew far from its family origins.<sup>70</sup>

Certainly the Agricultural Extension Service in Wyoming had followed that course and the

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### CLOSING THE ACCOUNT

1. Fill in the inventory values for the beginning and end of the year. Subtract one total from the other. If the inventory at the end of the year is greater than at the beginning enter the difference under "increase in inventory." If it is less, enter the difference as "decrease in inventory."
2. Man labor. Total the man hours in the work report and charge at a prevailing rate per hour. A fair rate would be 35 to 40 cents per hour.
3. Horse labor. Total the horse hours, in the work report and charge at the rate of 15 to 20 cents per hour.
4. If truck or auto has been used for poultry, charge it at what you estimate its cost to be. Auto 10 cents per mile. Truck 15 cents per hour.
5. Charge turkeys for use of land and buildings at 10 per cent of their value.
6. Interest. Charge interest at 6 per cent on the average of the two inventories.

Final accounting procedures for poultry in record book distributed by Agricultural Extension Service. Source: A. F. Vass, *Account Book for Poultry Production and Costs* (Laramie: Wyoming Agricultural Extension Service, n.d.) [c. 1934], 21.

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<sup>70</sup> Richard S. Kirkendall, "The Agricultural Colleges: Between Tradition and Modernization," *Agricultural History*, 60 (Spring 1986), 3-21; William L. Hewitt, "Education for Agribusiness: Public Agricultural Education in Wyoming before World War I," *Midwest Review*, 9 (1987), 30-45.

proper tilling of the soil, effective marketing of their products, and even more efficient organization of home life, but theirs was mainly an effort to bring the ranchers and farmers into line with modern

practices. One particular way that they sought to help the farmers in the Depression came when the county agents distributed account books to the farmers to show them how to calculate their expenses and income and investment, and more pointedly, how to treat their entire operation as a business with an expected return on their investment that went beyond what they might pay themselves in



Shoulder patch worn by Wyoming enrollees in Wyoming CCC camps. From Collection of Michael Cassity.

wages.<sup>71</sup> The prevailing system had been simply to tally up expenses at the end of the year and compare them with the income they received from the sale of their livestock or crops. The new system had them calculating what they would pay themselves and their family members, how much they had invested in land, equipment, and supplies, and then view themselves as an investor who would decide if all that expenditure was the best use of the money. In good times this may have been a productive, and certainly informative

<sup>71</sup> See in this regard especially “Profitable Systems of Farm and Ranch Organizations for Certain Areas in Wyoming,” Wyoming Agricultural Extension Service Circular No. 60 (June 1935) and A. F. Vass, *Account Book for Poultry Production and Costs* ([Laramie]: 1936). A copy of this sample account book can be found in the Hebard Collection of the

exercise, but in hard times it meant that farms which were designed for subsistence, or for other purposes than maximized returns, were certain to be determined failures.

The most visible part of the federal assistance effort came in other programs that went beyond providing cash assistance, or technical and managerial education, and these programs sometimes offered work to unemployed people and even more fundamentally, they promised to revitalize the used-up, washed-away prairies. And multiple programs provided what was known as work-relief—where people would receive financial assistance but also be allowed to earn it at the same time that they contributed to the improvement of the nation's public assets.

The Civilian Conservation Corps, for example, was an emergency relief organization established in the earliest days of the New Deal to provide work for unemployed young men and, that work was structured so as to promote the conservation of natural resources. The CCC as early as June 1933 began work on outdoor recreation facilities, soil erosion, and flood control projects in the area. The camps were set up as attachments to existing government organizations like the General Land Office, the Division of Grazing (after its creation in 1934), the Forest Service, the state parks, and the national parks, and operated under the jurisdiction, mission, and direction of those agencies. The camps themselves were military in organization and the CCC enrollees were uniformed and disciplined according to military standards, although there was no military training as such.

The CCC left a visible mark on the landscape throughout the nation but especially in the Western states. Enrollment in a CCC camp lasted for a six month term, and at the

end of the six months the camp might be continued in that same location, moved to another location, or completely disbanded, so the physical location and organizational structure of the CCC camps in the area is not easy to follow, and in each case requires research in the National Archives and Records Administration collections (often at the regional office in Denver) in the records of the sponsoring agency. That research,

<b>Federal Camp Identification Number</b>	<b>CCC Company Identification number</b>	<b>Date Established</b>	<b>Nearest Post Office of Camp</b>
PD-1	847	5/15/1934	Gillette
F-34	853	10/27/34	Ranchester
F-3	853	5/24/37	Ranchester
F-3	855	5/30/1936	Dayton
PD-1	858	6/15/1933	Gillette
P-201	874	6/11/1933	Buffalo
GLO-1	874	6/5/1935	Gillette
GLO-2	885	5/5/1937	Gillette
GLO-1	886	5/6/1937	Gillette
P-35	1807	5/10/1934	Buffalo
F-3	1811	6/3/1938	Ranchester
F-34	1811	10/31/1939	Ranchester
F-3	1811	5/23/1940	Ranchester
F-37	1815	5/31/1936	Dayton
GLO-2	2853	5/9/1936	Gillette
GLO-2	2869	5/9/1936	Gillette
NM-1	3887	10/26/1935	Moorcroft
PD = Public Domain or GLO F = Forest Service P = GLO or Division of Grazing NM = National Monument			

however, can often yield rich material and provide list of projects, photos, and special events and developments associated with the camp history. In the seven county area of northeast Wyoming, the following CCC camps have been recorded by the CCC Alumni

Association, although this list may not be entirely accurate and is almost certainly not complete.<sup>72</sup> In 1935, for example, the Gillette local newspaper reported that CCC Camp 3849 had just been established near that community and was the second camp with the General Land Office to be located there but this camp is not indicated in that list.<sup>73</sup> (The local communities would sometimes petition the offices of government agencies asking for a new camp to be organized or for an existing camp to be made permanent, and protested when a camp was to be dismantled or transferred.<sup>74</sup>)

The significance of the CCC in northeast Wyoming is possibly different from the significance of the organization nationally. Nationally it provided some unemployment relief, although with somewhere between thirteen and fifteen million unemployed, the annual average of a quarter-million CCC enrollees indicates that this was not the foremost agency for fighting the problems people faced from being out of work. In this area, it provided few jobs for locals, since the CCC enrollees were brought in from out of state; the locals that did enroll in the CCC were usually taken elsewhere for their service.<sup>75</sup> Nonetheless the CCC in this area focused on, and did something concrete about, the conservation of natural resources, although that conservation was almost always linked to development rather than restoration.

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<sup>72</sup> This information is taken from the CCC Alumni Organization page on the World Wide Web at <http://www.cccalumni.org/states/wyoming1.html#legend>.

<sup>73</sup> “Second CCC Company Here,” *Gillette News-Record*, August 17, 1935.

<sup>74</sup> See the example of Gillette again, at “Permanent CCC Camp is Sought by Lions – City,” *Gillette News-Record*, August 23, 1934; “Planning Board is Organized,” *Gillette News-Record*, May 24, 1935. Likewise, the departure of these camps generated local news: “CCC Camps to Leave Today” *Gillette News-Record*, October 31, 1935.

<sup>75</sup> H.F. Johnny Gillen, ed., *Civilian Conservation Corps, Wyoming, 1933-1942* (n.p.,

The available histories of the individual camps include only two in the study area, one operated by the Forest Service at Ranchester, where work included fighting forest fires, working on timber stand improvement, building trails, constructing ranger stations, and improving campgrounds. The other, at Gillette, was attached to the General Land Office and its sole mission was to extinguish coal fires on the public domain.<sup>76</sup> It does appear, however, that the CCC was directly involved in projects to improve grazing lands in the study area, although documentation of that history has not yet been located. In Campbell County, the Gillette Lions Club and the city government wanted the local CCC camp made permanent “on account of the nature of the work now being undertaken, which is designed to conserve the only natural resource in this county,” the only natural resource they saw evidently being coal. The next spring (1935) the county planning board asked for another CCC camp “to carry out a long term program of soil erosion and flood control work.”<sup>77</sup>

The CCC in the Powder River Basin was but a small part of a much larger effort to do something about the land, which was increasingly viewed by the government as of no value for farming. And the special focus of those improvement efforts reached sharper definition both strategically and geographically in 1935. Every state established a State Planning Board to identify needs of the state in the application for federal work-

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n.d.).

<sup>76</sup> “History of Camp 886, Camp GLO-1-W, Gillette, Wyo.,” and “History of Company 1811, Camp F-3-W, Ranchester, Wyo.,” in *History of the Civilian Conservation Corps Colorado and Wyoming District* (Pueblo, Colorado: O’Brien Printing Company, [1938]), 16-17, 56-58.

<sup>77</sup> “Permanent CCC Camp is Sought by Lions – City,” *Gillette News-Record*, August 23, 1934; “Planning Board is Organized,” *Gillette News-Record*, May 24, 1935.

relief funds and Wyoming created its own board which conducted studies and offered a series of reports. The Wyoming Planning Board found several places in the seven counties that were termed “problem areas.” These included “the southern part and a minor area in the northeastern part of Campbell and Crook counties where land is more suitable for grazing than for cash crop farming due to low rainfall. Large areas have already been abandoned; tax delinquency and relief are high.” It also maintained that the situation was similar in the Ninemile country of Johnson County, where “in years of high rainfall, farmers have done well, but, in dry years, crop failures occur.” Finally, the Planning Board included southwestern Weston County, the northeast corner of Converse County, and some parts of Niobrara County that “are equally unfitted for cash grain crops.” Although some thought this had to do with the drought, that was not the case. The source of the problem was instead, according to the Planning Board, “conditions are due to very small farms rather than to natural disadvantages.”<sup>78</sup>

If the problem was clear by this definition so was the solution, which was “modification of ranch setups,” a process that included the following fundamental measures:

1. Elimination of crop farming except in good areas.
2. Assistance to farmers in order that they can find more favorable locations.
3. Increase of land holdings of stockmen who are now trying to make livelihoods on areas which are too small.
4. Regrouping of population.
5. Prevention of resettlement by direct methods and by zoning regulations.
6. Consolidation of tax delinquent land.

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<sup>78</sup> State Planning Board, Wyoming, *Land Utilization: Preliminary Studies (Revised)*, February 1936, mimeographed document widely available including copies at Wyoming State Archives and Coe Library, University of Wyoming, 13.

7. Sound program for private and public land.
8. Revision of institutional organizations.<sup>79</sup>

With this vision and these objectives, forces were set to work to restructure the social and physical landscape of the Powder River Basin.

There were several approaches to this. The first one had already been achieved in 1934 with the enactment of the Taylor Grazing Act. This law achieved several ends, including the withdrawal of lands in the public domain from homesteading, except for those in Alaska. The fundamental purpose of the nation's land laws, from 1820 forward, had been in one way or another to encourage the distribution of the public domain to settlers through provisions for homesteading, and those provisions became increasingly lenient, and thus increasingly attractive to potential settlers. With the New Deal, however, that course was dramatically reversed and the unclaimed land was no longer available for private settlement. In addition, the Secretary of the Interior was given responsibility "to stop injury to the public grazing lands by preventing overgrazing and soil deterioration, to provide for their orderly use, improvement, and development, and to stabilize the livestock industry dependent upon the public range."<sup>80</sup>

The public domain in each of the western states was accordingly divided into official grazing districts, although those portions where there was only a small portion of the land remaining in the public domain were not so organized. In Campbell County, for

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<sup>79</sup> State Planning Board, Wyoming, *Land Utilization: Preliminary Studies*, 13-14.

<sup>80</sup> Kenneth B. Platt, "The Taylor Grazing Act in Operation," 1940, mimeographed document including outlines for presentations and articles supporting the law and its objectives, to be presented to public groups. Although the document does not indicate, it appears to have been published by the Grazing Service, as the Division of Grazing

example, only 4.16 percent of the land was public domain, in Sheridan County 1.59 percent, Crook County 3.76 percent, in Weston county 3.4 percent, in Niobrara county 4.07 percent, and in Converse County 5.08 percent, while Johnson had the most with 12.88 percent, although that figure may have included parts of the national forest.<sup>81</sup> The Division of Grazing, a new organization in the Department of the Interior after the passage of the Taylor Grazing Act, was given the responsibility for administering that land and would, as the Forest Service had done previously, issue permits for grazers to use those portions in such an amount and under specified conditions that the Division of Grazing would determine. Thus, under the new dispensation, grazing would be regulated and homesteading would be prohibited.

The next step was toward an actual rehabilitation of the range to make it usable by livestock growers. Usually this was called a Range Conservation Program or Range Improvement Program, but it included a variety of agencies and varying names. Initially the same work had been done under the Emergency Relief Act, the object of which was not so much conservation as it was to provide jobs; where in cities the money went to pay people to build parks and sidewalks, in this area it went into range improvement programs. In 1934 Johnson County used some of its Emergency Relief Act funds to put unemployed people to work to help solve the problems associated with drought. In June 1934 the *Buffalo Bulletin* announced that “Drouth work-relief projects for wells and reservoirs are already under way. The local county government is cooperating in this

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became known in 1939.

<sup>81</sup> Wyoming State Planning Board, “A Survey of Public Domain in Wyoming,” 21. This is a mimeographed document available in the University of Wyoming Libraries and in the Wyoming State Archives.

work, . . . Locations are being spotted and all plans are being pushed as rapidly as possible.”<sup>82</sup> This was doubtless the case in other counties too as work-relief projects often wound up being agriculture oriented.

The creation of the Works Progress Administration in 1935 (later reorganized and renamed as Work Projects Administration) made additional funds available, though not so much for grazing / farming related projects as for other work and the bulk of the programming and funding was directed toward highways, streets and roads, public buildings, recreational facilities, utilities, transportation, and other infrastructure development. Conservation was but one part of a broad effort.<sup>83</sup> Even so, the WPA contribution was not negligible, and planning documents showed plans and funding for stock wells in Converse County and the construction of Hay Creek, Inyan Kara, and Thompson Creek Reservoirs in Crook County. The “construction of stock reservoirs and cleaning out of springs and the drilling of wells to provide water for stock-watering purposes” in Johnson County was a broad cluster of small projects that had listed as their justification simply, “Recommended by Wyoming Stockgrowers Association and Wyoming Woolgrowers Association.” In Weston County, the WPA developed plans and funds for the Beaver Creek Irrigation System.<sup>84</sup> With some exceptions, the WPA projects were large construction projects, not the average small improvement on the range.

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<sup>82</sup> “Big E. R. A. Program is Outlined for Johnson County,” *Buffalo Bulletin*, June 14, 1934

<sup>83</sup> Wyoming State Planning Board, “Public Works Program,” undated mimeographed publication available in University of Wyoming libraries and Wyoming State Archives. By context, the date of preparation and probably publication is 1936.

<sup>84</sup> Wyoming State Planning Board, “Public Works Program,” includes actual planning

The multitude of small projects, which were the most pervasive and which still dot the landscape of the area, most frequently came as a result of the range improvement programs of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The first step in the development of those programs came with the creation of the Resettlement Administration in the spring of 1935. Drawing upon existing appropriations under the 1935 Emergency Relief Appropriation Act, President Roosevelt created the Resettlement Administration with an executive order on May 1 of that year and named his close advisor, Rexford Tugwell, at that time Under Secretary of Agriculture, also to serve as its director.<sup>85</sup>

Of course, the Resettlement Administration was Tugwell's idea and he immediately set about to fulfill his vision for American agriculture. Recognizing that as the system of agriculture became increasingly consolidated into larger operations, many would be left out, and dismayed because he thought the AAA was dominated by big farmers and leaving behind the rural poor, Tugwell was concerned about the fate of those at the bottom, and the object of the Resettlement Administration, at least in part, was to provide assistance to those people by, as the name of the agency suggested, removing them from their farms and ranches and resettling them elsewhere. Usually cited as the most visible and enduring contributions of the Resettlement Administration to the American scene are the four new planned communities the agency established in New Jersey, Wisconsin, Ohio, and Maryland for people who had been removed from the land,

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forms for these projects identifying costs and justifications.

<sup>85</sup> The text of this executive order, unusual in the brevity of its text and the breadth of its scope, can be found at John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, The American Presidency Project [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available on World Wide Web at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=15048>.

but that perspective leaves out the much broader effort of the agency that reached across the countryside and even into the valleys and plains of the Powder River Basin.

The Resettlement Administration began its task in northeast Wyoming in the summer of 1935 and that task was large. In November 1935—just six months after the



“Drought committee visits a stock water dam near Gillette, Wyoming.” Photo: Arthur Rothstein, Resettlement Administration Photographs, Farm Security Administration – Office of War Information Photo Collection, Library of Congress. August 1936.

RA was created—the regional director of the agency visited Gillette and explained how extensive the job was. Elmer Starch estimated that it would take 225 man-years of work

in Campbell County to do the work the Resettlement Agency had in mind, and that work would “include the moving of all fences to section lines, cleaning and relining all wells and springs, building dams and reservoirs and seeding cultivated land to grass.”<sup>86</sup>

By sharing this common goal, the Resettlement Administration, the Emergency Relief Administration, and the Department of Agriculture programs all dovetailed into a single, coordinated effort to restructure farming and ranching in the area and by 1936 the endeavor was well underway. As if to underscore the importance of this work, Rexford Tugwell himself visited Campbell County in August 1936 to inspect the range improvements being developed. In July, Roosevelt had appointed a Great Plains Drought Area Committee to address the problems of the entire Great Plains, the committee to be chaired by Morris L. Cooke, the head of the Rural Electrification Administration, with Tugwell serving as one of its members. The next month, on a two-week tour of drought areas in the Great Plains, from Amarillo, Texas to Rapid City, South Dakota, Cooke and Tugwell and others on the committee went to some of the outlying parts of Campbell County to inspect dams and wells that had been constructed with federal funds. Either before or after their visit the group, including others on the Drought Committee, gathered at Ranch A in Crook County as a stop on their trip and to work on their report. Ranch A was a recreational ranch built in 1935 by publishing magnate Moses Annenberg, and Annenberg had allowed the governor of South Dakota to use it for visiting dignitaries the next year.<sup>87</sup> Those dignitaries evidently included Tugwell, Cooke, Dr. L. C. Gray, and

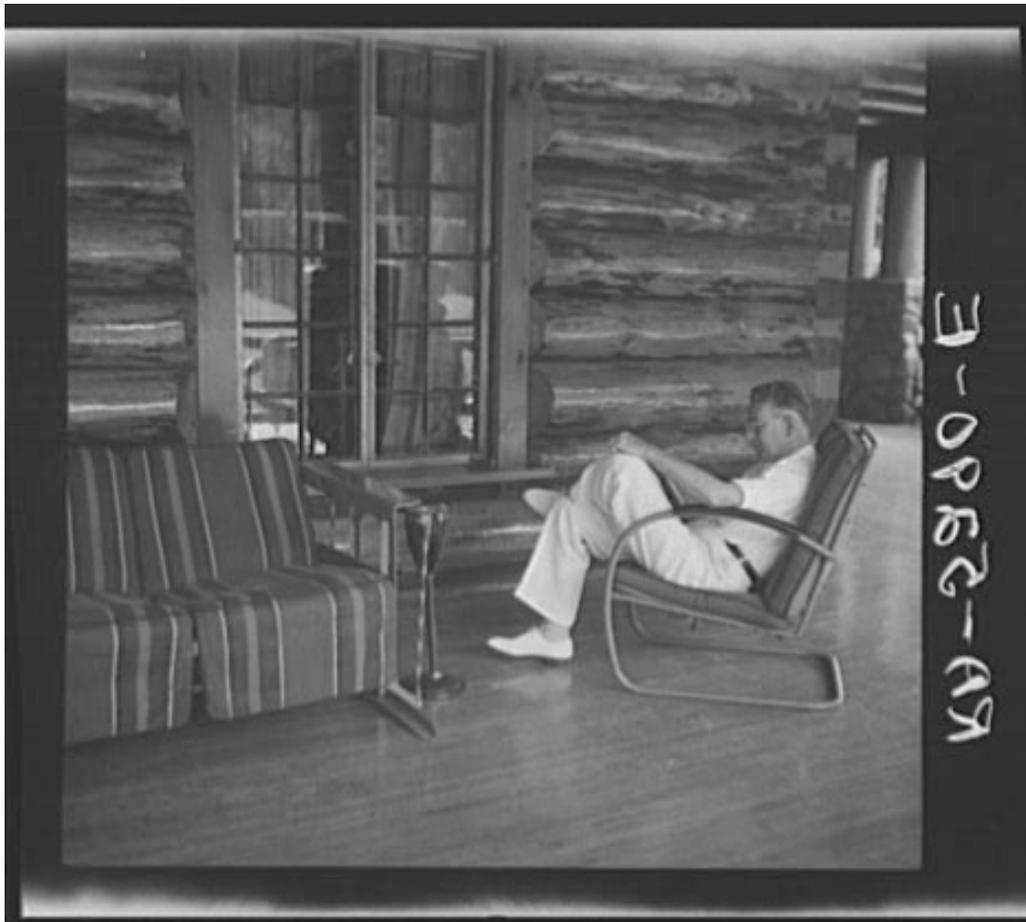
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<sup>86</sup> “Work Program Outlined will Employ Many,” *Gillette News-Record*, November 8, 1935.

<sup>87</sup> “Past Year Saw much Interesting News Here,” *Gillette News-Record*, January 6, 1937; this summary of the past year’s news noted that in August, Morris L. Cooke and Rexford

others serving on the Drought Committee or otherwise involved in the New Deal agricultural program.

They returned to Washington and had their report ready by the end of August. That report placed blame for the “present situation” on the Great Plains not so much on



“Dr. Tugwell at Ranch A, Beulah, Wyoming.” Photo: Arthur Rothstein, Resettlement Administration Photographs, Farm Security Administration – Office of War Information Photo Collection, Library of Congress. August 1936.

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the weather as on the historic agricultural practices there. The cause of it all, the committee argued, lay in the “attempt to impose upon the region a system of agriculture

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Tugwell had inspected the area; see also National Register nomination for Ranch A, 1997, files of Wyoming SHPO, and Tugwell, *The Democratic Roosevelt: A Biography of*

to which the Plains are not adapted to bring into a semi arid region methods which, on the whole, are suitable only for a humid region.” Then the committee charted the future of agriculture in the Great Plains, including this area, and urged the president to follow a course that would include major changes:

The region should be divided into sub-areas according to the types of use to which each portion of it may be best and most safely devoted; and, in addition, to determine the kinds of agricultural practice and engineering treatment required to fit each portion to its indicated use. Certain sub-marginal lands should be taken permanently out of commercial production. On arable farms such soil conserving practices as re-grassing, contour plowing, listing, terracing, strip cropping and the planting of shelter trees should be followed. Grasses of demonstrated fitness to local conditions should be developed and used.

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The regional agriculture must rest on the development of holdings which will actually support a family in independence and comfort. Undoubtedly these holdings must be larger than those now prevailing in many parts of the Plains. They can be made more adequate in some instances by reclamation, in others by the combination of smaller units. State and county governments may expedite this process by making available to grazing and other cooperative agencies the chronically tax delinquent lands which it is not to be expected will again be cultivated by their nominal owners. Such lands may be developed under a work relief program during the period of transition which must follow the drought and the development of new land policies.<sup>88</sup>

If there had been any doubt previously, the map to the future was now crystal clear. In November, the newspaper in Douglas could report that “the range improvement program started in this county in September has grown until there are 170 ranches signed

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*Franklin D. Roosevelt* (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1957), 422-425.

<sup>88</sup> The full text of the report, taken from the papers of Harry Hopkins at the Roosevelt Library, can be found online at <http://newdeal.feri.org/hopkins/hop27.htm>, and a discussion of the origins and evolution of the report can be located in Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, 192-197.

up with approximately one and one-half million acres of range land listed for improvements, or about one-half of the entire area of the county.” In that county about seventy-five reservoirs were being built, a hundred miles of fence were being “rebuilt,” and “possibly 80 or 90 springs are being developed and considerable water spreading and contouring is being done.”<sup>89</sup> In Campbell County, in November, County Extension Agent F. E. Dominy announced that the Range Improvement Program was moving fast and widely as “Four hundred and seventy-eight applications covering a total of 1,750,000 acres of range land are now on file in the county office with additional applications being received daily.”<sup>90</sup> In Niobrara County, the local extension agent reported 253 ranchers indicated that they were going to participate in the Range Improvement Program, representing about 650,000 acres, building fifty stock-watering reservoirs, about twenty wells, developing about fifty springs and seeps, and constructing about 120 miles of fence.<sup>91</sup> Each one of these projects had to start after September 9 and had to be completed by the end of the calendar year. The program paid “range operators” to undertake the following activities:

- Construction of earthen dams or reservoirs.
- Development of springs or seeps
- Drilling or digging of wells.
- Construction of contour furrows to hold back run-off and prevent erosion.

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<sup>89</sup> “Range Program is Under way in Converse Co.,” *Douglas Budget*, November 19, 1936.

<sup>90</sup> “478 Campbell Farmers Apply in Range Plan,” *Gillette News-Record*, November 6, 1936.

<sup>91</sup> “1936 Annual Narrative Report, Niobrara County, Wyoming, for Extension Work in Agriculture & Home Economics,” J. Melvin Stephenson, County Extension Agent, p. 47. I am grateful to Carl Hallberg for locating this county extension agent report in the Wyoming State Archives, the only one that has surfaced so far, although hope continues that more are located in the collections of the American Heritage Center.

Construction of dikes and ditches to spread water and prevent erosion.  
Re-seeding of depleted range land.  
The construction of range division fences.<sup>92</sup>

The amounts that the operators received for undertaking these range improvements generally followed a standard scale. The county agent would pay ranchers sixty cents per acre for contouring their land, fifty dollars for digging out each spring or seep approved by the county, fifteen cents per cubic yard of fill for constructing earthen reservoirs, a dollar for each linear foot of drilling or digging wells, and variable amounts for other activities such as water spreading—a crude form of irrigation that diverts, or spreads, intermittent channel water to adjacent fields.<sup>93</sup> County Agent Dominy in Gillette calculated his payments in the program at about thirty dollars per section of rangeland.<sup>94</sup>

The transformation of the land had begun in earnest and the county extension agents were directing it. “In past years,” the Niobrara County agent reported to his superiors, “Extension works have been considered to be mainly of educational service.” But that was changing, he said. “The farmer and rancher is now in an era when the results of the Extension service directly effect the financial status of almost every rural family.”<sup>95</sup> The extent to which the county agent had gone beyond education can be found especially in the example of the Campbell County agent, Floyd E. Dominy, one or two

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<sup>92</sup> “478 Campbell Farmers Apply in Range Plan,” *Gillette News-Record*, November 6, 1936.

<sup>93</sup> “1936 Annual Narrative Report, Niobrara County, Wyoming, for Extension Work in Agriculture & Home Economics,” appendix.

<sup>94</sup> “478 Campbell Farmers Apply in Range Plan,” *Gillette News-Record*, November 6, 1936.

<sup>95</sup> “1936 Annual Narrative Report, Niobrara County, Wyoming, for Extension Work in

years out of the University of Wyoming when he took his position at Gillette. “Campbell County was my kingdom. When I was twenty-four years old, I was king of the God-damned county,” Dominy later told writer John McPhee.<sup>96</sup> Dominy would later become the Commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation and build, most notably, the Glen Canyon Dam. In various interviews and other reflections on his career, Dominy says that he got his start in the dam building business in Campbell County as part of the Range Improvement Program. Even before he entered the range improvement business, though, Dominy established himself and his authority, and the government’s authority in the new system of agriculture, with the herd reduction program. According to McPhee, “He paid the eight dollars and shot the cattle.”

But he was serious, energetic, and even unstoppable when it came to range improvement. McPhee writes that “Ranchers got up at four in the morning, and sometimes Dominy was outside honking his horn to wake them. He wanted them to come out and build dams—dams, dams, dams.” Although McPhee says that “Dominy and the ranchers and farmers built a thousand dams in one year,” Marc Reisner recorded Dominy saying that they built three hundred in Campbell County.<sup>97</sup> The actual number will probably remain uncertain, but a likely possibility, given other records, is a combination of the two figures: three hundred in a year and a thousand over three years.

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Agriculture & Home Economics,” 55-56.

<sup>96</sup> John McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), 157.

<sup>97</sup> McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid*, 158; Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (New York: Viking Penguin Books, 1986), 226.

What is more precise is how Dominy accomplished this, paying as he did, less than the assigned wage schedule. “The government was paying farmers fifteen cents a cubic yard to move dirt. Hell, I wasn’t going to pay fifteen cents if it cost ten. I said to those ranchers, ‘I’m going to pay you cost—nothing more.’ Naturally, they bellyached. But with my relief allotment stretched further I could build a lot more dams.”<sup>98</sup> A new era had come to agriculture in the Powder River Basin.

The various accounts of Floyd Dominy follow him into the small communities of the county—“Soda Well, Wild Cat, Teckla, Turnercrest—single family post offices widely spaced,”—but what Dominy himself did there is less important than the projects the government was undertaking in those communities.<sup>99</sup> Turnercrest and Teckla, in fact, were within the bounds of the proposed Resettlement Administration project focusing on the Thunder Basin area, or, as it was originally identified, the Northeastern Wyoming Land Utilization Project and Soda Well was nearby. The Thunder Basin project had two objectives when it was approved in 1935. One was to restore “177 families now residing in the area to a higher standard of living,” and the other was “to make additional land available to those who remain in the area.”<sup>100</sup> Those families and that land lay in parts of Campbell, Converse, Niobrara, and Weston Counties.

The necessary work, after buying out the residents, included “restoration of land that should never have been plowed, by reseeding with native grass,” and “conservation and better usage, stabilization of grass resources through water development and

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<sup>98</sup> Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 226.

<sup>99</sup> McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid*, 157.

<sup>100</sup> “Thunder Basin Project OK’ed,” *Gillette News-Record*, October 16, 1935.

controlled grazing practices.” The director was enthusiastic about the opportunity for range improvement in the area and presented the plan: “Considerable run-off water will be stored in stock reservoirs. Additional livestock water will be developed by the opening-up of seep springs and piping water thus collected in stock tanks or small earth reservoirs. In a few instances, additional water will be obtained by drilling wells in strategic places.” All of this was essentially what the Resettlement Administration and the Department of Agriculture were already doing. What was new, though, was the removal of the people who had been farming the land. The agency would “remove farm families from waste land and transfer them to more productive sites where they can maintain life on an economic basis.” And the farm land those people would leave behind “will revert to grazing, with consequent conservation for vast areas now damaged by overgrazing, wind and water erosion.”<sup>101</sup>

At its inception, William Fischer notes in his research on the area, 309 families (not 309 individuals) resided in the Thunder Basin area planned for restoration. In February 1936, payments began to those who had indicated a willingness to sell to the government, and by July 1940, 172 families had left. Fischer notes that the schools in the community had been pronounced “far from desirable,” and they too were removed.<sup>102</sup> Once again the U.S. government became the owner of this land.<sup>103</sup> The Campbell County

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<sup>101</sup> “Work Program Outlined Will Employ Many,” *Gillette News-Record*, November 8, 1935.

<sup>102</sup> Fischer, “Homesteading the Thunder Basin,” 31-32.

<sup>103</sup> The records for the government’s purchase of these properties from the homesteaders represent an exceptional body of information for researchers investigating historic resources in the area. These records include transfer papers, land use and condition documents, itemization of improvements on the land, and income, assets, and financial

Rehabilitation Committee, which advised the county agent in the process, saw the benefits of the program and, as Fischer quotes the committee, endorsed the idea that the residents “be allowed to trade their land to the government for irrigated tracts.” County livestock operators in particular worked to see the project realized, including Ernest P. Spaeth who was also chair of the Rehabilitation Committee and Thomas A Nicholas who saw this project as important in “stabilizing the livestock industry.” The latter’s main concern, however, was that “outside livestock owners will be able to take advantage of government purchased lands to unfairly compete with us.”<sup>104</sup>

The range improvement work proceeded in the Thunder Basin project with dams being built, seeps and springs improved, and other alterations. The other results, however, appear not to have followed exactly as planned, or intended. William Fischer examined the project and determined that “Wyoming’s funding dwindled and the project ended with only the land purchases and subsequent reclamation work. Although several families were relocated, a large scale resettlement community for displaced farmers was never fully realized in Wyoming.”<sup>105</sup> The ability of farm families to relocate on their own depended on the usual range of factors, including how much they had in assets, what debts they had to settle, and how quickly they could find a farm better situated than the one they left (knowing also that their ability to secure a grazing allotment was

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records of the landholders who sold. The lands were acquired and managed by the Resettlement Administration, then the Soil Conservation Service, and then were transferred to the Forest Service in the 1960s and are part of Thunder Basin National Grassland. The documents are located at Douglas Ranger District of the Medicine Bow - Routt National Forests in Douglas, Wyoming. I am grateful to Judy Wolf and Ian Ritchie for this information.

<sup>104</sup> Fischer, “Homesteading the Thunder Basin,” 32.

nonexistent). Some, like Wyoming's Senator Joseph O'Mahoney, opposed farm and ranch buy-outs at the beginning for the reason that, as he wired the governor, "Feeling here [Washington, D.C.] is that buying program will not be particularly helpful since mortgage holders rather than stock owners would receive principal benefit."<sup>106</sup> What is clear is that the families were not relocated to "government owned irrigated tracts" or any other government land and that most (145 of the 172) requested and received no assistance in relocation. (Nationally, about three-fourths of the people removed from their homes received no assistance and about nine percent were resettled onto government land.<sup>107</sup>) When that last group was monitored by the project, "loosely" as William Fischer writes, most were found to be living "more or less on a 'shoe string basis.'"<sup>108</sup>

*iv. Family Farms and Factory Farms in Modernizing Society*

The changes wrought by the New Deal in the Powder River Basin were of two general kinds. One set of changes included the physical construction that took place, the dams and reservoirs built, the stock tanks put into service, the fences moved, the soil and

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<sup>105</sup> Fischer, "Homesteading the Thunder Basin," 31.

<sup>106</sup> "Government Agencies Unite to Alleviate Local Distress," *Gillette News-Record*, July 2, 1936.

<sup>107</sup> Mary W. M. Hargreaves, *Dry Farming in the Northern Great Plains: Years of Readjustment, 1920-1990* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 124.

<sup>108</sup> Fischer, "Homesteading the Thunder Basin," 33.

fields reclaimed, and other literally, earth-moving accomplishments. The other set of changes, however, were just as important, and perhaps more so, for they included the structural changes in the operation of farms and ranches in the area. Often less visible, these changes represented both a continuity with the past, and an intensification of forces at work already for decades, and a continuity with the future, as the programs, priorities,



“Resettlement stock water dam. Johnson County, Wyoming.” Photo: Arthur Rothstein, Resettlement Administration Photographs, Farm Security Administration – Office of War Information Photo Collection, Library of Congress. August 1936.

and assumptions of the New Deal agricultural program did not fade with the New Deal itself.

Exactly how many dams and reservoirs and springs and fences and other

improvements were constructed in the years when the New Deal was going strong in northeast Wyoming, from about 1935 to 1938 or 1939, can probably never be tallied. But the change was measured at the time in various ways. In Johnson County the county agent there noted in his annual report for 1939 that “There are more than 600 stock watering reservoirs constructed under the Range Conservation Program in Johnson County.”<sup>109</sup> Of course, Floyd Dominy claimed to have reshaped Campbell County more than anybody anywhere else, saying “Christ, we did more in that county in one year than any other county in the country,” and, although there may be some exaggeration in the statement, no one doubts that huge changes came to the county in those years.<sup>110</sup> In Weston County, Olaf Kongsli, one of the writers for the WPA Writer’s Project in Newcastle, described the change in 1940 with less bravado, but also pointed to the government’s role:

There was a time when water gushed down every little water shed in the hills, now only streams fed from underground springs are alive. This forces the cattle to go for miles to get water in some places, and they crowd around the water and soon eat up all the surrounding pasturage. To overcome this difficulty, the government has put out great galvanized tanks for the cattle to drink from right on their feeding grounds. These tanks are kept filled by the herders all the time. Wherever possible, wells are dug and water pumped for their herds by windmills.<sup>111</sup>

Agnes Wright Spring included this area when she wrote of the whole state in 1941, overemphasizing the role of the CCC, but generally getting right the change that

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<sup>109</sup> “1939 Johnson County, Wyoming, Annual Narrative Report, Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics.” This copy, evidently an annual report for public distribution, as opposed to the report that goes to state extension service offices, is located in the Johnson County Library.

<sup>110</sup> McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid*, 158.

had come to ranching:

Since 1933 much work has been done by Civilian Conservation Corps forces and others engaged under relief programs, to improve forage conditions and to facilitate the management of livestock on the ranges. Areas only partially utilized heretofore, because of lack of water, have been made suitable for sheep and cattle by construction of livestock watering ponds and reservoirs. Range fences have been constructed to separate range allotments and to reduce drift of cattle. Stock driveways, trails and bridges, corrals, and cattle guards that have been built will facilitate the use of approximately 5,000,000 acres of livestock ranges in the national forests in Wyoming.<sup>112</sup>

While the years between 1935 and 1940 were, with the exception of the downturn of 1938, years of economic growth, and while prices for farm and ranch products increased over what they had been in the depths of the



Fordson Tractor. Photo: J. E. Stimson Photo Collection, Wyoming State Archives, negative 4278.

Depression, the number of farms and ranches in the area declined dramatically in these

<sup>111</sup> Olaf B. Kongsliie, "History of Grazing," 9, typescript in WPA Collections, File 1358.

<sup>112</sup> Workers of the Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Wyoming, *Wyoming: A Guide to Its History, Highways, and People* (Lincoln: university of Nebraska Press, 1981; reprint of 1941 Oxford University Press edition), 104.

five years. The steady growth in the number of these operations had continued through years of prosperity and years of Depression but the process was reversed in the second half of the decade of the 1930s. In 1935 there were 6041 farms and ranches in this area, but by 1940 the number had fallen to 4635, a decline of twenty-three per cent in just five years. Only in Sheridan County where the number went from 1002 to 1019 farms was there any increase, and Sheridan County was already becoming a resort or destination area with not only dude ranches but second homes and hobby ranches, activities well outside the mainstream of livestock grazing activity. In fact, if Sheridan County with its anomalous small holdings is removed from the statistical portrait, the decline in the number of farms in the rest of the area is 39 percent, a loss of nearly two out of every five farms and ranches in a period of five years. At the same time that their total numbers declined, the size of the average farm or ranch increased, reaching 3249.5 in 1940, up from 2011 five years earlier, and up from 1703.5 at the beginning of the decade.<sup>113</sup>

Moreover, the farms and ranches were no longer operated by their owners as they had been in the past. Only 1545 of the 4635 units were operated by their owners, about a third of them. The other two thirds were operated by part owners, managers, and tenants. And of those 1545 farms and ranches operated by their owners, 631 (forty-one percent) were free of mortgage burdens at the end of the decade. If they were fewer and bigger and less likely to be operated by their actual owner, the farms and ranches were also becoming more mechanized by 1940. The small increase in farms and ranches with tractors may be difficult to explain at first glance; after all the hard times of the

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<sup>113</sup> These figures are all drawn from the county statistics provided in the *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940 Agriculture*, Volume I, Part 6 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1942), 186-191.

Depression certainly kept people who were trying to meet their existing mortgage payments and feed their families from investing in new, or even used, equipment. But the number of farmers using tractors did, in fact, increase in this area, from 1430 to 1624, about fourteen percent. What that meant was that by 1940 about thirty-five percent of the farms and ranches in this area had at least one tractor. In neighboring South Dakota, Gilbert Fite found two forces at work encouraging this mechanization. One was the increase in prices the farmers and ranchers received by the end of the decade. But the other was more direct: “Federal government benefit payments received for reducing acreage contributed considerably to their increased income,” and Fite argues that this increase went into investments in machinery.<sup>114</sup> Still, the mechanization was not complete, the primary power in the countryside continued to be horses and mules, and horses would remain the mainstay of the farm and ranch until World War II created a labor shortage and higher prices that stimulated even more mechanization.

The substantial increase in size of farm and ranches in the late 1930s came especially to the cattle ranches and sheep ranches of the area; the ranches had expanded physically, although they managed smaller herds. This generally came as a result of the decline in the numbers of the farms and in the decline in the amount of land used for crops, and especially because of the increase in grazing land. In 1940 the seven counties grazed over 263,000 cattle, a number that was down about forty-five thousand from 1935 and seventy thousand from 1930. This also represented, however, a further increase in the trend toward intensive management of the herds. In 1933 A. L. Brock of Johnson County compared cattle ranching methods of that year with what they had been just ten

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<sup>114</sup> Fite, “The Transformation of South Dakota Agriculture: The Effects of

years before. He maintained then that “What is termed open range on Government Lands in Johnson County, is practically something of the past. It is at present practically an inside proposition on owned and leased lands.”<sup>115</sup>

That was even more true by the end of the decade. In 1940 Olaf Kongslie described the practice of cattle ranching in Weston County. There were still ranches in that county, he said, that ran a thousand head or more, but they also farmed extensively to provide feed for their cattle, which were mainly full blood Herefords and also some dairy cattle. And while the cattle at one time were simply turned loose to forage for themselves, “now all stock is herded closely within the boundaries of fenced pastures. As a rule, the owner keeps his herds around his home ranch in winter where it is convenient to feed them, and in the summer takes his flocks to the hills . . . .”<sup>116</sup> In Sheridan County, by the end of the 1930s, one account noted that “most of the ranchers practice scientific ranching which is similar to crop rotation. Fences are built on a ranch so that cattle are excluded from a section where hay is being raised, one year, and the next year the process is reversed.”<sup>117</sup> The roundup tended now to be an activity performed at or near the headquarters or at selected permanent sites on the range, and the complexes of corrals and chutes and pens testify to the activity that once took place on the open range as cattle from multiple ranches were herded together and then sorted. The Midwest system of

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Mechanization, 1939-1964,” 283.

<sup>115</sup> A. L. Brock, “Comparison of Methods of Handling Livestock in 1923 and in 1933,” 6, typescript document in WPA Collections, File No.394.

<sup>116</sup> Kongslie, “History of Grazing,” 7.

<sup>117</sup> Ida McPherrren, “Ranches of Sheridan Valley,” 2, typescript, WPA Collections, File 394.

ranching had almost completely overtaken the Texas system.

The system of herding and fattening the cattle had become more scientific and systematic over the years, with increased reliance on information provided by the Agricultural Extension Service, but tradition still dominated parts of the process and the tractor would not replace the horse in many aspects of cattle ranching. On the other hand, the truck was replacing the cattle drive. While truck trails were not specifically mentioned in the range improvement projects of the late 1930s, attention obviously was being directed to them. Kenneth Platt in 1940 included truck trails as one of the central ways in which the Grazing Service increased grazing capacity. He noted that the Grazing Service, under the Taylor Grazing Act, continued to maintain the stock driveways, but “at the same time every effort is being turned toward developing truck trails which will permit trucks to load the stock directly on the ranges.” In fact, he noted that the stock driveways themselves had damaged the range significantly with herds of cattle repeatedly traveling the same corridors. Plus, “modern truck transportation is increasingly important in placing the range stockman on a more nearly equal footing with operators located near railway loading stations.”<sup>118</sup> It is at this point, some time in the 1930s, that loading ramps and their associated corrals and pens were being constructed not just at the ranch headquarters but at selected places on the ranch property and also on leased lands, wherever accessible by ranch roads. This even impacted the ranch headquarters itself, and one report notes that in Sheridan County, “on the smaller ranches the cowboys eat at the ranch house when branding while the larger outfits have permanent camps established

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<sup>118</sup> Platt, “The Taylor Grazing Act in Operation.” this mimeographed document is generally unpaginated, but one page is titled, “Trucks, Highways, Key to Modern Production Trends.”

where the crew stops during roundup time.”<sup>119</sup>

The ranch homes themselves had changed too. In Sheridan County Ida McPherren described the ranch houses of the wealthy estates in a WPA account of ranches in that county, and then she noted that the more typical ranches were different. “The ranch home on these ranches is generally built of logs and is western in design—low, rambling and with wide, long porches. It is built with a view to convenience and health, often standing on an elevation where the drainage runs away from the building instead of toward it. Water is piped into the house from a nearby stream or a well; electricity is furnished by means of some form of gasoline operated motor power and many of the homes have installed furnaces for heating purposes.”<sup>120</sup> Sheridan County, however, was not typical and these were not the norm for the broader Powder River Basin.

About forty per cent of the ranches and farms of Sheridan County did indeed have electricity from one source or another. Removing Sheridan County from the data, only twenty-eight per cent in the region had electricity in the home. As McPherren indicated, they often used a gasoline generator for the power plant, but it appears that a significant, though indeterminate, number used wind generators to create electricity that was then stored in batteries, from which the electric lights and small appliances operated.

Although precise data on the use of wind chargers do not exist, historian Robert Righter has noted their presence in Wyoming in the period marked at the beginning by World War I and at the end by the expansion of the Rural Electrification Administration into the

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<sup>119</sup> McPherren, “Ranches of Sheridan Valley,” 2.

<sup>120</sup> Ida McPherren, “Ranches of Sheridan Valley,” 2, typescript, WPA Collections, File

countryside, a time that ranged between the late 1930s and mid-1950s. “Numerous ranchers,” Righter has found through oral history accounts, “simply desired to have



“Shearing sheep. Converse County, Wyoming.” Photo: Arthur Rothstein, Resettlement Administration Photographs, Farm Security Administration – Office of War Information Photo Collection, Library of Congress. May 1936. This shearing is being done on a small operation. Note the children observing, and the single wool bag suspended, with steps for the shearer to carry the wool to the bag. The children, given their position on the roof of the shed, are probably involved in the operation by tramping the fleeces in the bag.

enough electricity to operate a few 40-watt lights and a radio.”<sup>121</sup> Photographs indicate that logs were declining as the building material of choice on the farms and ranches,

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<sup>121</sup> Robert W. Righter, “The Wind at Work in Wyoming,” *Annals of Wyoming*, 61 (Spring 1989), 35-36; see also, Righter, *Wind Energy in America: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996).

although in wooded areas they would remain so for some time; elsewhere, dimension lumber and even stucco buildings emerged. Water was available indoors, when the well could be made to serve indoors. Indoor plumbing, however, remained in the future for all but the wealthy outside the cities and towns.

The homes of the sheep ranchers—of the owners of the ranches, at least—remained, as they generally always had been, in town. Sheep growing activities out in the field, and especially the processing of wool, however, became more specialized. In the 1920s the use of feedlots for the sheep in winter had become increasingly common (and indeed had also been used some for cattle as well on some of the larger operations). Dan Greenburg had noted in the mid 1920s the emergence of the practice in Converse County, and predicted its wider use, saying that “Feeding operations have merely begun and it seems certain as time advances this industry will build up as the most substantial boost to the stock business in Converse County.”<sup>122</sup> One source noted that the feedlots were used in Sheridan County in 1938 and they were doubtless present elsewhere. The sheep would be brought to the feed lot, “depending on the condition of the sheep at the beginning of the winter, the condition of the range and the severity of the winter,” and would be fed alfalfa for roughage—suggesting thereby also the increased cultivation of crops by the sheep growers as well as cattle ranchers—although wild hay would also be fed some.<sup>123</sup> At the same time, it is important to note that the number of sheep continued to increase during the 1930s, increasing slightly from around 800,000 in 1930 to about 825,000 at mid-decade, but between 1935 and 1940 the number increased by nearly a

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<sup>122</sup> D. W. Greenburg, “Converse County’s Magnificent Resources,” 8.

<sup>123</sup> Minnie Williamson, “The Sheep Industry in Sheridan County,” typescript August 20,

hundred thousand to 923,433. The increased range of the larger ranches and farms, and the newer ranges that had once been farms, were being put to use by increased sheep.

Probably the most significant change on the sheep ranches came in the shearing process. Manual shearing continued, but it had become more routinized and even mechanized. Minnie Williamson in Sheridan indicated that as of 1938, “most of the sheep are sheared with machine shears, but some sheepmen think they take the wool off too close and expose the sheep to the danger of storms and for that reason have them hand sheared.”<sup>124</sup> The process for mechanical shearing impacted the physical arrangement of the shearing sheds. The mechanical shears were similar to hair clippers “only they are larger and are fastened to flexible shafts that lead from a gasoline engine. Some ranchers have a line shaft that runs along the shearing pens and the flexible shafts lead from this.” A form of assembly line had emerged in the shearing process as early as the 1910s, where the pens would be arranged for the most efficient handling so that the sheep would be shorn systematically, the wool handed to another worker to be placed in the huge wool bag which was suspended to, and then the wool tramped down by yet another worker who had the job of remaining in the bag to compress it, and then, when full, another would sew it shut and then the bag of wool would be delivered to a wagon or truck for hauling to market. The industrial process was already evident in the organization of the shearing, and it was being refined in the age of the machine, either internal combustion or electrical.

As for the farmers, their situation at the end of the 1930s was dramatically

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1938, in WPA Collections, File 403.

<sup>124</sup> Minnie M. Williamson, “How Sheep are Sheared,” handwritten manuscript, WPA

different from that of the large rancher and large sheep grazer. Their number had declined and at every turn they were discouraged from growing the crops they had customarily grown and harvested, and if they persisted, they did so only on smaller acreages, a feature that made it even more difficult for them to sustain their operations. The dry farmer, and even the small operator on irrigated land, was especially hard pressed in that situation. But there were other changes at work too. The system of calculating the profitability of agricultural production helped farmers identify which crops were their profit centers and encouraged them to focus their efforts on those commodities, even to the extent of purchasing feed for their livestock and groceries for their families instead of producing them on their own land. By 1940, sixty-nine percent of all farms and ranches purchased feed for their domestic animals and poultry, and one county agent reported that most of the farmers in his county went to town at least every two weeks for supplies.<sup>125</sup> The evidence is not conclusive, but increasingly farmers were turning, if not directly to a single crop system of production, at least to a form of production where they were much more dependent on a single crop, or two or three crops, than had been the case not long before.

And those lines of production where they experienced some success, they were encouraged to take seriously and to develop—again “scientifically” and with attention to the economic matrix of production costs and benefits. In the 1930s turkey production increased considerably in this area. What had been an infant industry only occasionally

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Collections, File No. 403.

<sup>125</sup> “1936 Annual Narrative Report, Niobrara County, Wyoming, for Extension Work in Agriculture & Home Economics,” J. Melvin Stephenson, County Extension Agent, p. 31.

mentioned in Agricultural Extension Service bulletins and census reports a mere ten years before, turkeys in the 1930s came to be seen not just as another form of poultry for home consumption, but, as one report indicated in 1939 in Sheridan County, “turkey raising is fast becoming one of northern Wyoming’s leading industries and thousands of turkeys are raised annually for eastern consumption.”<sup>126</sup> In Weston County the story was the same: “Extremely healthy conditions” and low losses, ample feed, assured that the turkeys would “command the highest prices in eastern markets.”<sup>127</sup> Instructions abounded on how to build a brooder house for turkeys and even how to convert existing structures into turkey brooders and incubators, using sewn-together burlap bags as a carpet over a sand or straw floor in the brooder house, and putting the incubator into the cellar.<sup>128</sup> There was, however, an underlying assumption in most of this turkey raising industry and one report made that assumption explicit: “as it is a business which the farm woman can handle successfully more and more farm women are raising turkeys along with other farm produce.”<sup>129</sup>

But the farms were no longer just the family farms and were increasingly large-scale corporate farms that extended over vast areas and used the system of tenancy that

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<sup>126</sup> Minnie M. Williamson, “Turkey Raising” handwritten manuscript, June 9, 1939, WPA Collections, File No. 1468.

<sup>127</sup> O. B. Kongslie, “History of Grazing Material: Grazing Resources of Weston county,” typescript document in WPA Collections, File No. 1358.

<sup>128</sup> Annette Heglar, “Pen to Platter: Turkey Production a 12 Month Job,” typescript document from Moorcroft, WPA Collections, File 1267. See the 1939 Annual Report of the Johnson County Agricultural Extension Agent, found in the Johnson County Library, for an example of converting a cowshed into a turkey brooder.

<sup>129</sup> Minnie M. Williamson, “Turkey Raising.” This too is part of a larger pattern. See Madeline Buckendorf, “The Poultry Frontier: Family Farm Roles and Turkey Raising in

was developing in the area in the 1920s for a source of labor. But they also used migrant labor more, and this, with the exception of the itinerant bands of shearers that had traveled from ranch to ranch with their families in the 1910s, seems to have developed in the 1930s. And this was most notable in the sugar beet farms. In Converse County sugar beet propagation had become a major industry and it depended on two particular ethnic groups. In 1938 one description of the sugar beet fields included a glimpse into a world that has been little recorded in this area. Mary Skelton, writing for the WPA Writers' Project in Douglas, described the farm labor situation in Converse County in 1938, saying "A large part of the labor in the beet fields of the county is done by contract labor, usually Japanese or Mexicans. The Japanese rent small farms, which they plant to vegetables and tend while working in the neighboring beet fields. The Mexicans usually contract several fields, rent a house in town where they and their family live, and travel from field to field, returning home when a field is finished."<sup>130</sup> A similar description emerged at the same time from Sheridan County:

As a large amount of hand labor is required in the thinning, cultivation, and harvesting of sugar beets, there are shipped annually from Mexico a great number of workers to be employed in the sugar beet fields. Each laborer and his family tend about ten acres of beets from the planting to the harvesting. They live in small houses, usually one or two rooms and are satisfied with cheap living conditions. Their chief food is beans and chile peppers and therefore they work for a small wage. They work hard through the beet harvest but most of them are idle during the winter months, unless they are kept over on one [of] the farms to help out with the farm work. In some localities the sugar factories keep them in company houses. Not being a progressive class of people they seem to be satisfied with the work in the beet fields.<sup>131</sup>

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Southwest Idaho, 1910-1940," *Idaho Yesterdays*, 37 (Summer 1993), 2-8.

<sup>130</sup> "The Sugar Beet," manuscript in WPA Collections, File No. 1399.

<sup>131</sup> Minnie M. Williamson, "The Sugar Beet Industry," handwritten manuscript, WPA Collections, File No. 1468.

These brief descriptions of the new system of labor only hint at the larger picture, but those hints are piercing: hard work, seasonal employment alternating with seasonal unemployment, low wages, poor, cramped living conditions, meager diet, and a pervasive set of prejudices that assigned them to such a life without a blink. If there was any doubt that the era of active homesteading was over when President Roosevelt signed the Taylor Grazing Act into law a few years earlier, that doubt vanished with this picture. Instead of homesteads dotting the landscape and instead of the wild, free life of the cowboy and the independent rancher on the open prairie, the industrial and market models were reshaping life in the Powder River Basin. In some instances agriculture was even becoming what some termed factories in the field.

The industrialization of agriculture and the decline of the family farm and ranch were but parts of a larger process of change in which the use of the land became increasingly commercialized, increasingly organized, increasingly “scientific,” or at least technical, increasingly mechanized, with bigger units of production, and with greater integration into and linkages with the national, and international, economy. This was common enough everywhere else in the nation, but in this area the process was especially striking. After the removal of the Indians from northeast Wyoming in the name of the expansion of white civilization so that the area could become the home of independent farmers and ranchers, it had been settled by people carrying the hope and promise of a freehold democracy, where farming and ranching were not just parts of the economy but proud ways of life. A huge transformation was taking place, and would continue to evolve, during World War II, and well beyond.

The source of this transformation can be found in a variety of factors, and while it is customary to attribute the demise of farms to homestead laws that unrealistically promised opportunity in an arid province or to blame the climate itself, and while that perspective holds considerable merit, the story is more complicated than that. After all, people had succeeded, often in modest ways, in the years before the agricultural crisis of the late 1930s and some of them would continue to succeed as farmers and small ranchers in this area. And it is not just that drought drove them out, for there had been droughts before. What was especially different, however, and what was especially powerful, was the new set of social and economic circumstances shaping agriculture in the 1920s and 1930s, circumstances that derived from organizing society to conform to the priorities of the marketplace.

This was a social crisis as much as it was a natural crisis, and perhaps more social than anything. And it may be that the real crisis was not just the drought, and not even the specific changes underway in the name of range improvement. The real crisis was deeper, and had to do with the changing framework of life itself. The homesteads, farms, and ranches throughout the area had been at the core of a way of life that was itself complex, evolving, and full of dreams and aspirations, but those homesteads, farms and ranches increasingly became just another sector of the economy the measure of which was not so much framed in traditional terms as it was more and more calculated by costs of production and returns on investment. As the small farms began to wither and the people who lived on them moved away, they left behind the relics of their existence as monuments to both success and failure, to dreams and realities, and to the passing of one way of life and its replacement with another. And they continued doing this for decades

into the future just as they had for decades already.

The end of the decade of the 1930s should not be taken to represent an end to an era. The New Deal, in the sense that it represented a coherent set of policy changes and programmatic initiatives, was dead by 1937 when Roosevelt introduced his plan to restructure the Supreme Court and thereupon lost the support of much of his own party. Many historians have concluded that the New Deal was over well before that and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., stopped his three volume history of the New Deal with the achievements of 1935. The New Deal programs, the New Deal's emphasis on planning, and the New Deal's effort to mobilize society in a coordinated effort, however, continued on and with often greater success in World War II. And the Depression that lingered throughout the decade, the Depression that the New Deal had not been able to bring to an end, finally came to an end, not at the end of the decade, but with exactly that total mobilization for war in the 1940s.

Yet the economic growth of the war intensified the trends that were already evident on the farms and ranches of the Powder River Basin, as the depopulation of the countryside continued, as the small operations yielded to the expansion of the large, as a system of monoculture became even more pervasive, as tractors and combines became not only available but necessary, and as the industrialization of farms and ranches continued on the same course in the years of prosperity following the war that had been evident during years of Depression.<sup>132</sup> Modernization had roots deep in the past and would continue to form the pattern of the organization of society, and the operation of

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<sup>132</sup> See a fuller discussion of this in Michael Cassity, "'In a Narrow Grave': World War II and the Subjugation of Wyoming," *The Wyoming History Journal*, 68 (Spring 1996), 2-13.

crop production and livestock grazing into the future.

While it is sometimes said that Wyoming is what the nation used to be, it is clear with the process of historical change in the Powder River Basin, that even there, Wyoming was becoming what the rest of the nation already was.

## **Chapter 7**

# **Management of Historic Resources in the Powder River Basin**

The history of homesteading, stock-raising, ranching, and farming in the Powder River Basin generally can be found in two broad repositories: (1) the written record found in libraries, archives, official documents, family records, photographs, land records, and the oral traditions and accounts passed on by family members and others; and (2) the built environment that these people created in the Powder River Basin. Both parts of the historical record are essential to gain a more accurate and deeper understanding of the past of the area and this context is an effort to help managers link these two groups of resources. Putting those two sets of resources together provides a rich opportunity for understanding both the physical remnants we see on the ground and the historical patterns of which they are a part. But those opportunities need to be encouraged, nourished, and focused, and the resources they draw upon need to be protected. The buildings and structures and other resources that survive in the Powder River Basin are threatened and are impacted every day so that they require careful and constant management. In addition, the fulfillment of the potential of these resources includes the active pursuit of several broad historical issues that need additional investigation. Finally, the assessment of the sites themselves requires a sensitive, conscientious, and research-oriented approach so that the properties will be evaluated consistently and appropriately.

*i. Impacts and Threats to the Resources*

By the beginning of World War II, agriculture and the organization of society in the Powder River Basin had already changed enormously from the days following the removal of Native Americans from the area and the introduction of people hoping to establish farms and ranches in what, to them, was a new area of opportunity. That does not mean, however, that their ambitions were always focused on growth and development, for clearly the homesteads accommodated dreams of refuge and sanctuary and modest independence more than they did visions of wealth accumulation. In the intervening years, ranching and farming not only grew but evolved, transformed, became more extensive and more complex. In its broadest contours, homesteading was no longer being initiated and the older homesteads, and some of the newer ones too, were declining in number and in size. By the late 1930s ranching was once again ascendant, even dominant, and was starting to replace farming, a neat trick that its earlier leaders had dreamed of in the 1880s but had been unable to achieve even with force of arms. The system of small family farms and ranches was increasingly being replaced by what would soon be called agribusiness—larger economic organizations that were organized on an industrial basis. Where once the people who owned the land also tilled it and herded their livestock on it, the people at work in the fields now tended to be employed by someone else who often did not live on the land, and the employees were, in growing numbers, seasonal and even migrant. The operations were much larger and they were

worked by machines increasingly and the mules and horses were being traded for tractors, gasoline-powered headers and binders and harvesters and soon combines. Previous systems of working the land, and the livestock on it, became anachronistic and were being relegated to the smallest of the operations, to those that were perhaps unable to afford the technologies and acreages necessary for the new system, but at any rate, to those that were outside most of the currents of change, and all that was left often was just a memory and some buildings.

By the end of the 1930s, those memories and those buildings were already evident, but both were threatened. One of the New Deal workers who was helping to preserve records and memories of the region also provided an account of some of the physical remains evident at that time. Annette Heglar, who worked with the Works Progress Administration in northeast Wyoming, described a tour she and others made of abandoned buildings on the farms and ranches of Crook County. There she found, for example, an abandoned board and batten cabin made of rough native lumber, “and the stove pipe stood like a soldier on the east slope near the south end. From the west door one could see the sun fade into the bluish haze of the prairie.” And her group “stopped at a soddy whose walls looked like the earth had climbed the door and window frames and wrapped itself around and around then settled down for life . . . after pulling the sod roof well over until it fit snugly on every side.” And there was a cabin that she described as a “mansion on the prairie:” “Long low windows on the south and west give one a marvelous view of the prairies. As the sun comes up over Inyan Kara one is tempted throw open the door and flood the cheerful room with golden light regardless of the door[']s four panes of glass.” Another building was a log cabin, but of such a size—with

two stories—that she hesitated to call it a cabin. “It looked a little out of line as it sat out on the open prairie with the sage brush growing at the rock foundation.”<sup>1</sup> Thus went an early survey of historic homesteading, farming, and stock-raising resources in the Powder River Basin, with the result that some descriptions of a few of the representative buildings were preserved, and their descriptions evoke images familiar to land managers and historians seven decades later. But those buildings themselves were vulnerable and were left behind. They were, after all, abandoned. Perhaps now all that remains of them is the set of descriptions Ms. Heglar created.

Those resources, and the others like them, even those created after this particular “cabin hunt,” are important elements of the past, yet they are fading with each season, and they are disappearing not just as a result of the forces of nature, but at the hands of organized society. As with the agricultural operations they were built to serve, their disappearance is neither natural nor inevitable, and the prevention of their demise is what the management of these resources is all about.

These three-dimensional parts of the historical record are notoriously fragile and delicate, sometimes so delicate as to be just a wisp of their former selves and sometimes so common as to be taken for granted. The relics of the past sometimes still endure, although too many of them have been lost, either to neglect or to active forces of destruction. Those active forces have already been seen in the Powder River Basin. Consolidation, a trend patently evident during the years covered by this historic context study, has itself taken a toll. In 1940 there were in this area 4635 farms and ranches.

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<sup>1</sup> Annette Heglar, “A Cabin Hunt,” WPA Collections, File 1270. Given the content and placement of the account, it was probably written in 1937.

This was a number much smaller than it had been in the peak census year of 1920 (6085), but even so was far greater than the number evident in the year 2002. At the beginning of the new millennium, the seven county area held only 2608 farms and ranches.<sup>2</sup> The average farm size in each county is now generally two or three times the farm size of the late 1930s. Farms and ranches in the Powder River Basin have consolidated into fewer and larger operations.

The impact from consolidation is two fold. In the first place, buildings and structures that were once active components of the operations were no longer needed as intensive agriculture was replaced by extensive. Those that were not needed, those that were not to be recycled into another kind of building, were generally not maintained. Sometimes they have even been destroyed. Sometimes they have been moved to another location. Often they have been modified so that they could be put to another use. But many times they have just been left to decay. That is one impact and it has been adverse to the extreme. A building that is unused is generally also a building that is not maintained, and building that is not maintained is a building that falls ready prey to natural elements as well as to other forces of destruction.

But the demise of the farms and ranches in the Powder River Basin has not been the only, or sometimes even the major, impact on the buildings remaining. This area that once attracted farmers and ranchers from far and wide with its promise of the future has not always remained an agricultural area. As the farming population has declined—moved to town, sold out, or otherwise left the family operation—and as the farmers and

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service, “2002 Census of Agriculture Data, Wyoming,” located on World Wide Web at [http://www.nass.usda.gov/census/census02/volume1/us/st99\\_2\\_008\\_008.pdf](http://www.nass.usda.gov/census/census02/volume1/us/st99_2_008_008.pdf).

ranchers left behind their homes and barns and corrals, the mineral industry has moved in and grown—and grown. Of course, settlers often noticed the abundant coal deposits in the area, and sometimes these deposits provided a small benefit to them. Homesteader accounts not infrequently point to their main source of fuel in a large part of the Powder River Basin; they would, as accounts relate, “haul coal from the nearby outcroppings.” The coal was an asset, but it did not contribute to the growing of crops or the production of livestock. Plus, there was more than coal. J. Tom Wall, and others too, went to work in the Salt Creek oil field and Wall was able to make enough to sustain his cattle ranching homestead through hard times, and drilling for oil ultimately spread into other areas as well. The drilling for oil and the mining of coal—plus also the mining of uranium in the Pumpkin Buttes area—can not be underestimated in this area, and the surge in activity from the 1950s to the boom of the late 1970s and early 1980s itself left a huge mark on the land even as it often obliterated older marks from the agricultural heritage on that same land.

As to the extent of the mineral activity, the current writer, in 1981, was involved in identifying and investigating historic resources that were then threatened by the boom. When, in the course of a broader conversation, he innocently asked a Campbell County commissioner just how extensive the coal lands were in the county, how much of the land had coal under it, that commissioner optimistically looked to the horizon, and into the future, and said with a huge smile, “Every. Square. Foot.” Even allowing for some exaggeration in that response, and even with the qualification that the minerals may sometimes be many feet under those square feet, the point remains valid: you are never very far from mineral deposits, often world class deposits, in the Powder River Basin.

The minerals, to many, represented and continue to represent a valuable resource—a tangible resource, a spendable resource, and sometimes an urgently needed resource—with a ready market, while the cultural resources on top of them held much less of a marketable potential and were even in the way. Getting at those mineral resources has come at a cost to the historic resources. And the cost has been great. In 1981 one broad assessment of that impact, as identified in a survey of Powder River Basin historic resources threatened by the extensive mineral activity, concluded that the cost was intangible, but nonetheless precious: “Given that so many of our values and judgments are based on perceptions of the past—things like honor, pride, and sense of purpose—something precious is lost when the material remains of the lives of people are swept up in the inundation of development. In such a case not even the shadow of memory remains. History not only comes to an end but is obliterated. A heritage is lost forever, beyond recovery.”<sup>3</sup>

Uranium mining faded, the oil industry is less pervasive, but still present, and coal mines continue to set records of production, but the boom years for those minerals faded at various points by the 1980s. There was, however, still more to come. When the writer Allan Seager reflected back on the summer of his youth in 1923, which he spent at the ranch of a relative outside Sheridan, he recalled one experience in which he and some other young men took a herd of horses to a ranch far to the east, across Powder River. Seager was a newcomer to the ranch, and to the locale, and the rancher introduced him to the area in a curious way. Seager tells that the rancher he identified as Hargraves “asked

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Cassity, “Wyoming Trying to Save Shadow of Its Past,” *Fort Collins Regional Review*, November 25, 1981, 8, 11.

me if I had ever been on Powder River before, and when I said I hadn't, he took me to his artesian well. Water was flowing out of a four-inch pipe. Hargraves struck a match and held it to the mouth of the pipe, and I had before me the entertaining spectacle of fire and water coming from the same point. The match lit a blue flame about a foot long that whistled straight out of the pipe, like a torch.”<sup>4</sup> While this gas could have been butane or propane, the odds are that this Powder River rancher was cursed with the nuisance of coal bed methane gas in his water. And in that gas lay the basis of the recent boom in the Powder River Basin.

Of course, in the last decade or more, the extraction of coal bed methane gas has been enormous, and the drilling for and capturing of it continues to increase. This has generated an impact and it will continue to cause an impact on the historic resources of the area. Some estimates suggest that another fifty to one hundred twenty thousand coal bed methane wells could be drilled in the next fifteen or twenty years. The roads for drilling, the drilling rigs themselves, the well pads remaining, and the associated ponds for the water extracted with the gas, as well as the increased traffic and general infrastructure, has overlaid a topography where once the windmills and stock dams were sometimes the most prominent built features, and this activity and its potential impact on historic resources continues to grow. Resources may be compromised simply by being located where a well is to be drilled, where a pond is to be created, or where roads are planned to access the well pads, and in those cases the adverse impact is unmistakable and concrete.

But there is also the matter of viewsheds and indirect impacts. The integrity of

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<sup>4</sup> Allan Seager, “Powder River in the Old Days,” *The New Yorker*, August 17, 1957, 32.

the resources includes not just its physical authenticity and location, but its association with, in this case, ranching and farming and homesteading, and its feeling, the ability to convey what it would have felt like to have lived or worked on that ranch or farm. Since an essential element of that life was often a conspicuous degree of isolation, the presence of nearby modern mineral activity can obviously compromise that integrity of feeling. The National Register defines feeling as “a property’s expression of the aesthetic or historic sense of a particular period of time.” Thus mineral or industrial development within the viewshed becomes a critical matter to be addressed, not in a black and white, absolute, manner, but in a way that examines the integrity of the building or structure and the nature of the development and how visible and obtrusive the threat is—how much it compromises the sense of the period of time that the resource would otherwise be able to convey. The adverse impacts can be, thus, not just actions that take place physically on top of the resource but also those that occur some distance away, even across a property line. They can be not just obvious but also extremely subtle.

Industrial or mineral development can (and has and will) seriously and permanently impact these historic resources. But an equally powerful and destructive force and an equally adverse impact as the *active* obliteration or compromising the integrity of the resources, has been the process of what is sometimes, but mistakenly, referred to as “benign neglect.” It is neglect, but it is not benign. Sometimes that neglect has been intentional, but often it has not, under the flawed assumption that if someone is not actively and consciously prying the boards loose or burning the buildings down, it is being managed in accordance with responsibilities under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended. The default choice of “not managing,” is itself, of

course, only a more subtle form of management with equally devastating results, the same as sanctioning the destruction of the building. To watch while the remnants of the past crumble or are carried away, or to turn away from the fatal process of “mouldering ruins” while structures continue to decay, is to contribute to the erosion of the marks of historic human activity in the area. “Benign neglect” constitutes an abdication of the responsibility mandated by law and violates sound resource management principles.

At a minimum, the threats and impacts to the historic resources of the Powder River Basin require a pro-active program of identification, determination of eligibility, and sustained preservation management.

#### *ii. Research Needs and Priorities*

The technical mandate for a National Register of Historic Places statement of historic context is to provide “a standardized means of describing and explaining the significance of a wide variety of properties.” To take this further, however, and to repeat the point at which this study began, the notion of “historical context” involves the effort to identify the larger set of circumstances and forces that illuminate specific events by suggesting broader patterns of which those events may be a part or to which they may even be exceptions. Historical context thus is identified by determining what else is happening at the same time and also what happened before and after—there and elsewhere. Facts and events alone do not carry the meaning, or significance, that they do when they are combined with other facts and events and patterns emerge. And this study

has articulated some of these patterns to help others identify the significance of particular resources they encounter.

This study is not, however, the last word on the subject. This study, rather, is designed to serve as a starting point for the investigation of the history of homesteading, ranching, and farming in the Powder River Basin. There is much yet to be learned. Some of this information and meaning—a honing and perfection of context—will come from surveys of historic properties in specific areas or properties of a specific type. Some will come in further studies to be commissioned or undertaken in-house. Some will come incrementally in the preparation of National Register nominations or determinations of eligibility of specific properties. Multiple property and thematic nominations are an excellent way to both identify associated resources and to increase our knowledge of the activities with which they were associated. Additional study is necessary to fill in some of the data gaps, revise prevailing assessments, and chart new territory to be explored. This is in the nature of historical inquiry. It is always subject to revision and to greater inquiry. Without that thoughtful and creative historical analysis of the past, we will be locked into the views of others, hoping, with our eyes closed, that they were right and will continue to be right no matter their human limits and no matter what new evidence suggests.

The following areas for exploration present significant opportunities for adding to our knowledge of the area generally and also of the specific resources within the seven county area.

1. **Ethnicity.** One of the most important issues that needs additional attention in this area, and perhaps elsewhere in Wyoming too, is the matter of ethnicity. This study

has raised that issue at a number of points, but the role of different groups cries out for additional study. There is yet to be a coherent study of the different peoples of the area, although some attempts have been made. The widely recognized Basque population of Johnson County, is an important example. Many studies and accounts refer to the Basques, but more is known of this group nationally and internationally than is known of their history in Wyoming. Too often, in fact, the Basque culture is reduced to a one-dimensional caricature with little effort to explore the dynamics of the culture, the social roles within the family, and the contribution of that group of people to the development of practices within, most notably, the sheep industry of Wyoming. Sources are available and the need is present. The Hispanic population is another example. It has been relatively recently that the growing and vibrant Hispanic population has even been acknowledged in Wyoming, although more studies are starting to recognize the Hispanic presence. What is needed now are the studies that will explore the complexity and diversity within that population, the strength of the pressures to which they have been subjected, the resilience they have exhibited in the face of those pressures, and the ways in which they have altered the environment—physical, cultural, social, and economic—in which they have lived.

In this, of course, it is imperative to examine not just the distinctive cultural patterns of these groups but also the complex relationship, with concepts of accommodation and resistance being key, between work and culture. In the case of both Hispanic and Basque experiences in Wyoming, there is often an intriguing dynamic where pre-industrial cultures and work patterns—in a sophisticated and even global meaning—existed next to systems of work that were increasingly industrial in their

organization, mechanical in their operation, impersonal in their regard for the worker, and corrosive of social bonds in their application.

Finally, while it is often assumed that Americans of Japanese ancestry were first visible in Wyoming when Heart Mountain “Relocation Center” was constructed at the beginning of World War II, it is clear that Wyoming had a growing population of Japanese Americans before that time, presumably both Issei (emigrated to the U.S.) and Nisei (born in the U.S. of immigrant parents). Much more needs to be learned, and one question that can serve as a starting focus for such a study is the connection of the stream of labor with the increasing industrialization of agriculture in the state. The utilization of this group of people in the sugar beet industry before the war is clear and there are scattered references to their presence before the 1930s. This raises two questions that need to be addressed. One concerns the extent and size of the pre-World War II Wyoming population of Japanese Americans, and the other involves going beyond work and into culture to explore the institutions, values, and traditions within that community of people. It is important to note that each of these research inquiries represents not just an effort to direct polite attention to people who have too often been neglected and marginalized but is part of a vital, critical effort to understand the larger social arrangement of which they were an important part; to understand the people on the margins of an established society is also to understand better the people at the center.

**2. Women and Homesteading, Farming, and Ranching.** There is another group that demands attention in this corner of the Equality State. Even a quick reading of the above pages will reveal an omission that is embarrassing for the writer and should be for others who have written about Wyoming’s past. When Allan Seager wrote about his

visit to the isolated ranch near Powder River and witnessed the flame burning out of the water pipe at the well, there were other features of that ranch that his careful eye and his eloquent pen caught. But one image stands out above all the rest. He called the owners of the ranch Hargraves, though that was probably not their real name, and the husband was a big man about forty years old. “His wife,” Seager wrote in haunting language, “had that weatherbeaten, male look women get when they have been lonely and overworked.”<sup>5</sup> In this description Seager hinted at something we actually know too little about. The formal political experience of women in Wyoming has been examined frequently. The lives of individual women who have risen to prominence or notoriety have also been chronicled. Yet the gendered contours of life on the ranch and farm are probably still best articulated in fiction, not in historical analysis. Even the most famous woman homesteader, in the diagonally opposite corner of Wyoming, Elinore Pruitt Stewart, falls short of offering a frank, unvarnished, or even reliable account of her own experience.<sup>6</sup>

The pages above, while not focusing on gender systematically, have attempted at least obliquely to raise the question and to suggest that the portrait of womanhood on the farms and ranches of northeast Wyoming is a complex picture. There is the photograph of Hazel and Lena Porath shocking the wheat in the Nine Mile area of Johnson County before the job became mechanized. And there is an equally compelling image in the words of Margaret Dillinger Bowden in Campbell County: “Mother came behind with a

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<sup>5</sup> Seager, “Powder River in the Old Days,” 32.

<sup>6</sup> See Sherry L. Smith, “Single Women Homesteaders: The Perplexing Case of Elinore Pruitt Stewart,” *Western Historical Quarterly*, 22, (May 1991), 163-183.

four-horse team and a sulky plow, which had a seat about 3 ½ feet off the ground. She would sit on the seat with her legs straddling the tongue and the lines firmly grasped in her hands. She worked the lever with her foot and could manage the four horse team nearly as well as Dad.”<sup>7</sup> There is another photograph of two unidentified women in dress finery outside Remington and Armstrong’s ranch on Clear Creek, the women standing apart from the men. Plus, the elegant dance at Frewen Castle where there were many men and few women should not be neglected. And there is also the hint that the home economics programs offered by the greatly expanded and influential Agricultural Extension Service offered a much more narrowly domestic role for women. All these images in words and pictures raise questions about the role of women on the farm and ranch, about the family as an integrated unit of production (or, conversely, as a part of a system of specialized labor where they were relegated to a particular sector), and about relationships between and among women and the bonds they formed in homesteader society. The source material is available to explore this set of issues and Dee Garceau has suggested the complexity of the subject and the many variables at work in another part of Wyoming, and her study could serve as a framework to explore in this area.<sup>8</sup>

**3. Land Law, Land Issues.** Yet another area where more information is needed has to do with claims to the land itself. The homesteading experience has long been a subject for national and statewide discussion, with the prevailing judgment that the homestead laws were abject failures because the centerpiece of the legislation, the

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<sup>7</sup> Margaret Dillinger Bowden, *1916: Wyoming, Here We Come!* (Gillette, Wyoming: privately printed by James H. Bowden and Jessie Outka, 2002), 17.

<sup>8</sup> Dee Garceau, *The Important Things of Life: Women, Work, and Family in Sweetwater County, Wyoming, 1880-1929* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

Homestead Act of 1862, provided far too little land for the homesteader to make a living on in the arid parts of the nation. John Wesley Powell argued as much while the homesteaders were still pouring onto the prairies. Paul Wallace Gates, in a number of important books and articles, developed this view in the twentieth century and he pointed regularly to the number of entries taken out and the number of claims that were given up or otherwise unsuccessfully completed. There is doubtless great merit to this work, but its applicability to a particular region has rarely been explored. For example, as noted in Chapter 2 above, the M.A. thesis by Francis Henry Tanner examining land claims in early Johnson County suggests that the Homestead Act was seldom used as a vehicle for claiming and transferring land; other laws were more important as a basis for homesteading in that county. A more extensive study of land records to indicate the land laws used and to what result in specific areas across the Powder River Basin would of necessity be large and complex, but it could shed light on not only the process of settlement and homesteading in the Basin, but also on the role of the land laws in U.S. history.

4. **Ranching-related Issues.** An issue that is not central to the study of homesteading and ranching and farming, but is nonetheless related to it, has to do with the rise of hobby ranches and dude ranches. Probably few of the hobby ranches—where wealthy people purchased properties that they would call a ranch—were active livestock operations, but that is a subject that needs to be explored, and especially in Sheridan, Crook, and Johnson Counties those “ranchettes” have sometimes replaced actual ranches. On the other hand, often the dude ranches started out as productive cattle operations but

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moved away from that focus to one that was more genteel and sometimes more profitable too. Struthers Burt, a Princeton-educated writer who started his own dude ranch in Jackson Hole and who wrote about the Powder River country in a book famous at the end of the 1930s, explained that “the dude wrangler saved the cattle business and the horse business just when the folly of men had about wrecked them. The dude wrangler brought round hard money into the country. If he was a cattleman, he found himself able to continue in his profession. If he was a horseman, he could do the same.”<sup>9</sup> Dude ranching was different from cattle or horse ranching in many ways aside from the fact, as Burt often noted, that the dudes wintered much easier than the cattle. But some of the cattle ranches found the transition to duding an easy one. It is useful to note that HF Bar Ranch in Johnson County, one of the handful of ranches in the area listed on the National Register, is one of those ranches that turned to the wrangling of Easterners instead of Herefords. The dude ranch is a cousin to the cattle ranch, but a world apart from the homesteaders and dry farmers.

*iii. Strategies for Site Assessment.*

To expect to understand a single feature, or a cluster of features, related to homesteading, stock raising, or farming / ranching, exclusively on the basis of their physical remains may not be an impossible task, but it comes close. And limiting the inquiry to physical remains, uninformed by research in the historical record, is

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<sup>9</sup> Struthers Burt, *Powder River: Let 'er Buck* (New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc.,

unnecessary and omits critical sources and information, arguably doing an injustice to the resource in the process. Indeed, the effort to identify the historic significance of a property is one that requires constantly relating a specific feature to others elsewhere. Unless it is a feature of obvious architectural or engineering significance (Criterion C), its potential eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places can only be determined by careful research, both on site and in the records. If there is one fundamental point of this historic context, it is that historical significance derives from our effort to connect any given feature to a larger system, both conceptually and physically.

Such a conceptual framework has been articulated in this historic context, and it includes the emergence of ranching and farming within (and also outside) the land laws of the nation, the evolution of the various practices associated with farming and ranching (including several forms of livestock raising), the forces at work reshaping the organization of society and economy relating to rural life, the role of technology in agriculture, the patterns of ethnicity associated with agriculture, the architecture associated with this activity, and the winners and losers in agricultural life at different times. In each instance, it has attempted to address the marks on the land left in this evolution. The conceptual framework, of course, is large, is complex, is often subtle, and is incapable of being reduced to a static set of categories or pigeonholes into which resources can be reduced and by which their significance can be mechanically defined. It is essential that the site evaluator ask of any resource: What larger patterns and processes is this feature associated with? What does it reveal about the patterns of change and continuity in ranching, in homesteading, in farming?

The starting point for this inquiry into the significance of individual sites is with several admonitions that are familiar enough to historians but bear repeating for anyone who undertakes the assessment of historic properties:

1. Everyone is someone.
2. Every place is someplace.
3. Every place has a story.

It may seem either meaningless or an empty cliché to state that everybody is somebody, but it has only been within the last four decades that historians have systematically directed attention to the men and women who have made up history with sensitivity to their genders and to their different cultures, ethnicities, and social classes. Indeed, older studies of the Powder River area sometimes conveyed the impression that the area was entirely and exclusively a white man's domain. As this study has shown, sometimes the dominant ranchers in the area actively suggested that this was the case and even narrowed the hegemony to include only their own select number in the 1880s. But the population was never so monolithic and the women, the farmers, the Hispanics, and others also lived a life there that is worthy of contemplation and documentation. Understanding the relationship between those in power and those out of power ultimately illuminates both populations better.

Contrary to historians of generations ago and some outside the profession who believe that history is just the record of the literate classes, the history of what is sometimes called "the inarticulate" has flourished so that these people are no longer in any sense either anonymous or voiceless. They paid taxes, they were listed in the census, sometimes they owned or leased land, they often joined churches and clubs, they attended

and participated in specific forms of recreation, their activities were mentioned in newspapers, and they were sometimes involved in court proceedings. The historical record is far broader than was previously conceived, and even the most conventional sources can reveal far more than their creators intended. Everybody is somebody, and it is possible to find out who the person was who was associated with a specific property.

Likewise, every place is someplace. Any place where there was a structure built for specific use, or any place that has otherwise shown the marks of use, as in a trail that has worn into the soil, or even a place where the human footprint has been light, but served human purposes, as in a natural landmark, that place has entered into human history. It then becomes incumbent upon the researcher to identify the role that structures or sites played in the lives of earlier generations of people who used that place. It is, thus, not only the palatial houses and barns which remain that convey information about the past, but also the remnants of dugouts, of ranch roads, of watering troughs, of windmills, of dams, and even of fences that need to be examined and assessed.

And every place has a story. Every one of these stories has a beginning, a middle, and an end. What is the origin of that structure? Was it built at a time when people were moving into the county and into the Basin in a noticeable trend? How did its use change over time? Why did people quit using it, quit living in it? What is the end of that story? Was it abandoned? Why? What were the circumstances that caused its occupants to move away? Were they foreclosed? Did they acquire other properties and use this set of structures in a different way? And how did it get from its origin to its end? The building or structure has a life, an evolution. It is not frozen in time. It is not timeless. It changed over time. Those changes are the reflection of history. The task of the site evaluator is to

understand that story so as better to understand the resources left on the ground. And understanding is different from categorizing or pigeonholing something. Each resource needs to be explored. In this way, the resource can even shed light on the larger historical context and cause it to be modified.

Archaeologists Donald L. Hardesty and Barbara J. Little have helped approach these questions in site assessment by using the concept of “feature system.” As they write, “The concept of feature system emphasizes the need to understand the whole system in order to understand smaller pieces of it that may seem insignificant.”<sup>10</sup> This is also what Margaret Purser has pointed to when she has noted that the remnants of western ranches sometimes can be identified only by considering a much broader geographic focus in which dispersed artifacts and structures need to be connected to each other.

The key to the system is in its grand spatial scale, and the key to archaeological analysis is to keep looking ever farther away from the initial test pit: the ranch’s water may come from four miles away through a series of ditches, and the house sited where it is because that location was optimum for the gravity flow. The property around a given ranch house may be relatively small, but the “ranch,” as a productive unit, included summer grazing lands miles away in the mountains, and hay lands for winter feed leased on the other side of the valley, where the water was better. Linking all these elements was a crazy-quilt of property relations, from squatting to tenancy to leasing to homesteading, and ultimately to large-scale corporate industrial cattle and sheep ranching, financed by speculation out of places like New York and London.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Donald L. Hardesty and Barbara J. Little, *Assessing Site Significance: A Guide for Archaeologists and Historians* (Lanham, Maryland: AltaMira Press, 2000), 119.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret Purser, “Archaeology on Western Ranches,” on World Wide Web, “Unlocking the Past: Celebrating Historical Archaeology in North America,” located on the World Wide Web at <http://www.cr.nps.gov/seac/unlocking-web/sidebars/sidebar9.htm>.

By approaching the site as something more than a building or structure that some unknown person happened to have built at some point in the past and thereby relegating it to historical anonymity and obscurity, it is possible to determine the significance of the specific feature, or to determine that it lacks necessary significance. By contemplating the story behind that site—its beginning and end—and how it changed over time, how it was used and by whom, and by relating the house, the barn, the corral, the campsite, the related auxiliary structures, to the historical context that has been developed in these pages, the significance of the site can be determined. This will involve careful site analysis, broad conceptual thinking, and basic historical research in land records, water well records, census documents, local archives, and newspapers—the kinds of things that historians do every day, and the result can be a more meaningful understanding of the material remains on the ground.

The process for putting the archival research, the site analysis, and the historic context together is not complicated, but it does require a logical approach that attempts to relate the individual site to larger patterns of history. This process is not a lock-step approach and it is likely that the evaluator will need to return to a previous step just because something examined earlier will take on new meanings in the light of subsequent discovery.

1. First of all, it is important to recognize that any historic resources located on a specific property form but the tip of the iceberg of the heritage of that area. This again gets to Margaret Purser's and Donald Hardesty's point about identifying feature systems by looking at total relationships.
2. Ask the questions: How do these parts fit together on the ground? (This may

involve looking over a broader area and across boundaries.) How do they fit together over time? Is there any indication of evolution, or at least change, over time? What kind of a feature system, exactly, is this?

3. Once the feature system is identified, the relevant property types in this historic context study can also be determined. (See Appendix.)
4. Then the historical research regarding this property can be conducted to determine its associations with the various themes and issues discussed in homesteading, stock raising, and farming and ranching. What significance does this resource have?
5. Consult the property type information in this context to determine the eligibility requirements. What are the historical associations that must be clear? Under which criteria will this property be eligible? Does the property meet the integrity requirements?

This process can most readily be seen if there is an intact ranch complex or other cluster of resources that constitute a complete, or nearly complete, whole. It is more challenging with isolated features sufficiently far from other resources and unable to be clearly and easily associated with them. When the researcher encounters such an isolated feature, say, a windmill, the first question to ask is, “Whose was this?” An examination of the land records at the courthouse will establish a chain of title for the land on which the feature rests. An online research of well drilling activity in the office of the state engineer may—or may not—provide a name for the owner of the well and a date at which it was drilled. A phone call to a current or past owner will often generate information to be found nowhere else. (Was this well near a ranch house that is no longer

present? Was it built by the government as part of drought relief?) If the property was filed on as part of a claim under one of the federal land laws, that information in the General Land Office records will generally indicate the extent of the built features the person developed on the land, often enumerating them with considerable specificity. The census manuscripts readily available in archives and genealogical centers throughout the nation will be able to provide more information about the families and individuals already identified and associated with the property and a visit with the custodians of the local history collections in the county library system will often turn up a surprising amount of relevant information. Was the well drilled (or dug) following a drought? During a drought? During an economic recession? Was it used to fill a stock tank or to water a field? Consult standard references on windmills in history such as those by T. Lindsay Baker and Bower Sageser.<sup>12</sup> What kind of a windmill was it? Where does it fit in the technology of windmills? This, obviously, is not a complete list of questions and each site, each feature, each property is different and will generate its own set of questions.

Bit by bit, step by step, a picture starts to come together. A story begins to emerge. The relationships between the component parts become visible. The pieces on the ground start to fit into the larger context. The significance of the feature becomes precise, and it is a documented significance with which others who follow the same procedure would concur.

Because they are far from any other building or structure, remote and lonely

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<sup>12</sup> A. Bower Sageser, "Windmill and Pump Irrigation on the Great Plains 1890-1910," *Nebraska History*, 48 (1967), 107-118; T. Lindsay Baker, *A Field Guide to American Windmills* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985).

features, like windmills or stock tanks and dams, may often appear to be completely isolated, disconnected from anything else in place or time and therefore not even worth the bother of investigating. Given the nature of ranching, however, that remoteness is actually integral to the operation and is part of what gives them significance. By developing water sources at distant locations, the rancher was able to open a wider area for grazing. Thus, once again, it is important to determine who owned or put in the well and windmill, stock tank or pond (or other remote feature), and how that related to the larger function of the ranch. This is exactly the “feature system” approach discussed by Hardesty and Purser.

Not every property, of course, will be eligible for the National Register. Despite careful investigation into the ways they may have been connected with the larger course of social, economic, and agricultural processes, some features will ultimately stand as isolated in history as they are on the plains. That such features may not be eligible, however, should be a determination that comes *after* investigation, not as a matter of convenience, not as a way to avoid historical research. Even if such a windmill or stock tank is ultimately determined not eligible, or not contributing, however, it is still important that the site evaluator record the feature, for knowledge of that feature is essential to understanding the whole pattern of what has happened on the land. Even when those pieces do not fit into the puzzle at hand, that itself is important information.

#### Coda

Page one of this historic context study began the discussion of historic resources relating to homesteading, stock-raising, and ranching in the Powder River Basin with the

notion that the remnants of farming and ranching are spread across the land in ways that make them appear to be pieces of a puzzle, and the proper understanding and appreciation of those pieces require that we know what the finished puzzle looks like.

This context statement has endeavored to provide such a picture by charting the contours of change over a period of more than six decades and by identifying important themes in the evolution of social, economic, technological, and cultural patterns in that time. It has also attempted to guide evaluators in the process by which those patterns—the completed puzzle—can be related to the individual pieces. It is only when those linkages are made that the whole and the parts, either one, can hold historical meaning and significance.

# **Appendix**

## **Property Types and Registration Requirements**

### **Areas of Significance**

Eligible (contributing) properties will need to be associated with one or more areas of significance and each area of significance needs to be identified. The areas of significance developed in the context include Agriculture, Conservation, Ethnic Heritage, Exploration / Settlement, and Social History under Criterion A and Criterion B and Architecture and Engineering under Criterion C. Under Criterion D, the area of significance would most likely be Archeology with the Subcategory Historic-Non-Aboriginal, although the categories of Agriculture, Ethnic Heritage, Exploration / Settlement, or Social History will also be relevant.

### **General Integrity Requirements**

The integrity requirements for these resources emphasize primarily their historic function and appearance—the ability of an individual building or structure to convey a sense of past time and place by providing evidence of the specific function or role it served during the period of historic significance (not its ability to perform that function today) and the relationship of that function to the larger homestead / ranch / farm operation. In this, the evaluator must be careful in two broad areas that sometimes

perplex the person who examines historic resources. One is the need to avoid confusing condition with integrity. Integrity refers to the authenticity of a property and depends especially on evidence of the “physical characteristics that existed during the property’s historic or prehistoric period.”<sup>1</sup> Since a property with historic integrity permits it to illustrate significant aspects of the past, the essential characteristics of that property must be authentic. The property may have deteriorated over the years, it may be in need of repair, and its condition may be such as to render it unlivable or otherwise unusable for its historic purpose, but it can still possess integrity. The integrity of the property should be examined for the standard seven qualities of integrity indicated in National Register guidelines.<sup>2</sup> Those elements of historic integrity include:

- **Location:** the building or other object must be in the location it occupied during the period of historic significance, although it may have been moved prior to or during the period of historic significance. It was not uncommon, for example, for all but the largest of buildings to be moved around as needs changed on a ranch or farm. If that relocation took place during the period of historic significance the integrity would not be compromised and the move may even be an indication of the larger evolution of the property, thereby giving it additional historic significance.
- **Design:** the organization of a property and its subordinate components (whether it is a single unit or a cluster of related resources) constitute the form, plan, space, structure, and style of a property. The important factor here is not whether the design

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<sup>1</sup> National Register Bulletin: *Guidelines for Completing National Register of Historic Places Forms, Part A: How to Complete the National Register Form* (1997 Revision), 4.

<sup>2</sup> The relevant guidelines can be found on the World Wide Web at [http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/publications/bulletins/nrb34/nrb34\\_8.htm](http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/publications/bulletins/nrb34/nrb34_8.htm)

is especially artistic or even attractive, but whether it is authentic. In dealing with the modest abodes and utility structures of small ranches and homesteads, it is important not to hold the design of a structure up to an outside standard, but to compare it to the building's own historic design. And it is important to recognize that those buildings often evolved over time, in which case it becomes important to identify which changes came during, and which changes came after, the end of the period of historic significance, and that could be as recently as fifty years prior to present.

- **Setting:** Setting is a subtle aspect and has as much to do with the environment surrounding a property as with the property itself. Farm or ranch properties that are surrounded by developments inconsistent with the historic character of the property will probably have been compromised
- **Materials:** the historic materials from which a resource was constructed will be a fundamental aspect of integrity. A windmill with plastic vanes, for example, would raise immediate questions of integrity.
- **Workmanship:** Workmanship may or may not be of exceptional quality in the construction of a particular resource, but it must be authentic. To take a common, but inverted, example, a log building constructed in a crude, but effective manner, would retain integrity of workmanship if the evidence of that construction survives; if, on the other hand, that crude workmanship had been improved and refined after the period of significance, the workmanship would have been compromised.
- **Feeling:** Feeling is an intangible aspect of a property that is all but impossible to define, and all but impossible to miss if in the presence of the property. If that property conveys the feelings of the past period of time and its associations, it retains

integrity of feeling.

- Association: Does the property carry a direct link to the person, theme, or event that makes it significant?

As the guidelines explicitly state, “All seven qualities do not need to be present for eligibility as long as the overall sense of past time and place is evident.” And very, very few properties will possess one hundred percent integrity. This places a critical burden on the evaluator to exercise careful, and considered, professional historical judgment in the evaluation. Most basically, the evaluator should address these seven elements of significance in the Statement of Significance, indicating where possible weaknesses, or outright compromises, in integrity exist and what general circumstances cause those compromises to disqualify a property as eligible for the National Register, or, conversely, to be insufficient to disqualify the property.

The evaluator must also recognize that some ranches / farms / homesteads will have fewer historic features, not because they are less significant, but because they just were historically smaller operations. In fact, one important pattern identified in this study is that often properties were abandoned or taken over or otherwise were altered in their ownership and usage simply because they were small. They have been vulnerable to the forces of modernization for more than a century and a third at this point, and it is vital that they not become further vulnerable in the eyes of the evaluator because of the very conditions that have given them, and continue to give them, historical significance.

### **Period of Significance**

The period of significance for properties significant for their association with

stock grazing, cattle and sheep ranching, and homesteading will generally begin at the date at which activity is begun to develop the resources that exist. This may be the date when a house or a barn was built, when a well was dug or drilled, when a fence was constructed, or other such constructive activity was undertaken. The point is that the beginning date is the date at which the activities began that mark the property's historical significance. The end of the period of significance must be approached carefully. If the beginning marks the start of the historic significance of a property, the end must mark the date at which that significance concluded, at which the association with the historic events or patterns could no longer be demonstrated. If the property was abandoned or put to another use, that would often mark the end of the property's period of significance. The property could have, and often did have, a series of owners, but so long as the association with the historic patterns of ranching / farming / and homesteading discussed in the context statement that gave it significance continued, the period of significance will not end earlier. This means that many properties will retain their historic significance up to the fifty-year threshold used by the National Register of Historic Places. Indeed, although this study ends in 1939 or 1940, the historical processes reshaping the landscape of the area did not cease at that time. In fact, with World War II those forces accelerated and intensified and in the decades after the war it became clear that the forces of change associated with prosperity were as devastating to the farmers and ranchers of the study area as the years of Depression had been. Moreover, there is every reason to believe that those trends will continue into the future and that history happens even to people who look back upon it as something remote and separate from their own lives.

The different criteria used by the National Register of Historic Places shape the

eligibility of a property for listing. As of this writing, only a handful of ranching or homesteading properties in the seven county Powder River Basin have been listed on the National Register of Historic Places and all of them were listed under Criterion A. One was also listed under Criterion B and another under Criterion C. Obviously more homesteading and ranching properties have been determined eligible and certainly more should be, and will be, listed on the National Register.

<b>National Register Property</b>	<b>County</b>	<b>Eligible Criteria</b>
Braehead Ranch	Converse	A, B
Ranch A	Crook	A, C
HF Bar Ranch Historic District	Johnson	A
TA Ranch Historic District	Johnson	A
Big Red Ranch Complex	Sheridan	A
Quarter Circle A Ranch	Sheridan	A

These properties are unrepresentative of the larger universe of eligible ranching and homesteading properties in the area simply because they are each large, prominent ranches and they are each in generally excellent condition. This should come as no surprise since such extraordinary properties are usually among the first to be nominated anywhere, whether in cities or in the countryside, whether commercial or domestic, whether in Wyoming or elsewhere. The list is representative, however, in that Criterion A is predominant with only a scattering of other criteria. The vast bulk of context-related properties nominated to, and eligible for, the National Register will be under Criterion A. Some properties may also be eligible under another criterion.

*Criterion A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.*

The events that make up history at one time were viewed as restricted to those that were associated with the nation's leaders, with activities in the halls of power, or with other kinds of activities that exhibited singular talent, or, at least, eminence. The study of history in the last several generations, however, has been far more inclusive of the American people in all their activities, classes, ethnicities, genders, ages, and beliefs and historians have mined their lives and cultures assiduously. The social history of the nation, as a result is a much more complex picture than it once was, and also much richer and more vibrant too, and it includes a great deal more people than it once did. The "events" in the history of the American people, as a result, may include acts of Congress, Presidential decrees, treaties signed, and battles fought, but they also include those aspects of life that reflect and shape the values, institutions, work, priorities, discipline, and goals of the broad American public and its many parts on both national and local levels. The bibliography for this study provides a starting point for inquiring into those broader patterns of history that are relevant to ranching, farming, and homesteading in this area.

The homesteading and ranching / farming properties currently listed on the National Register under Criterion A in this area are generally associated with the themes of settlement and agriculture; some are old enough that the forms used for their nomination did not indicate an area of significance. The TA Ranch is possibly the ranch that is most representative of the broader array of properties while the others are the large, showcase operations. The TA Ranch was clearly selected for nomination because of its role in the Johnson County War, but even that nomination includes information on settlement and the evolution of ranching practices. In truth, there are many ranches and

farms comparable to the TA from one side of the Powder River Basin to the other, and the fact that they did not figure into any dramatic shootouts or otherwise violent episodes does not detract from their historical significance. They are, perhaps, all the more representative and revealing of ranching, farming, and homesteading because their founding, their evolution, and sometimes their passing can be connected to the larger historical forces shaping the area. The nomination of those properties, or the determination of their eligibility, of course, would need to focus on that history and explain where the specific ranch or farm fit into it.

*Criterion B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.*

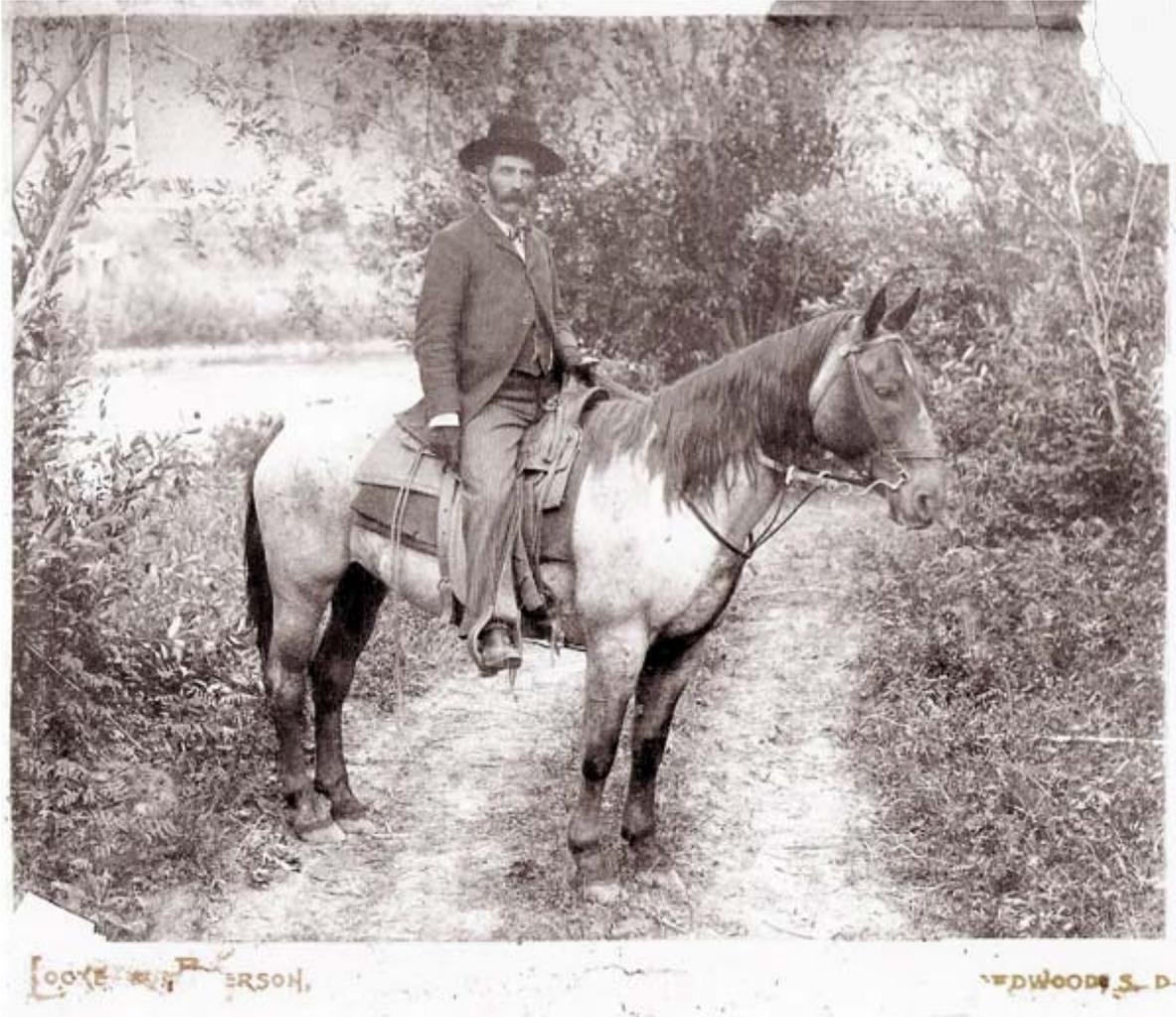
Criterion B is, by almost all accounts, a demanding criterion to apply in the evaluation of properties for their eligibility to the National Register because it includes two major tests that the property must pass. The first is the significance of the individual. Usually that significance can be measured in some form of recognition that the person attained, either during or after his or her life, for accomplishments during the period of historic significance. That person's achievement can be intellectual, economic, artistic, political, social, or otherwise. Often it has to do with leadership in some form or another, but it can also be more subtle. A schoolteacher, for example, may have left an enduring mark on a neighborhood over a period of years, or a rancher or farmer may have taken a stand that was symbolic against large forces of change that earned the person some acclaim and respect from people in the community. There is no clear and automatic qualification as a significant individual; it is the duty of the evaluator to demonstrate that significance. The second test, once the significance of the individual has been

documented, is that the historic property, when compared to other properties associated with the individual, is the most appropriate one for demonstrating that person's contribution. Being born at a place usually does not suffice. A place where that person, however, formulated a strategy or prepared a plan or worked with others linked to the person's significance will confirm this important linkage.

Listing under Criterion B, however, is possible and the Braehead Ranch in Converse County suggests how it can be done. The person of significance for the Braehead Ranch was George H. Cross, one of the county's first county commissioners and long-term state senator. Cross achieved state-wide stature, holding the distinction of declining his party's nomination as candidate for governor. In this regard, some of the elements of distinction qualifying an individual as a person of significance are evident—most notably, public recognition and influence. There were the nationally prominent individuals from this part of Wyoming, people like John Kendrick and Robert Carey, but each county also had people whose names are not familiar today, but who nonetheless emerged into leadership positions in state and local government, people who otherwise gained the respect of their neighbors and whose actions and ideas benefited and shaped the course of their communities. It is always dangerous to list these people, since such a list can not be complete and other people of equal or greater significance are surely omitted, and because in the case of those listed, a case would still need to be made that the individual actually was significant and that the property with which he or she was connected is directly related to that significance. But as examples, a case could be made for local or state significance for people like Congressman Frank Mondell, Nels Smith, and Albert and Kathleen Rochelle (Weston County); John and Sarah Morton and John

Hunton (Converse County); Frank Lusk and Schuyler Van Tassell (Niobrara County); George Beck, Edward Dana, and Dan Hilman (Sheridan County); Fred Hesse and Jim Gatchell (Johnson County); R. A. Wright, T. N. Matthews, and Stocks Miller (Campbell

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Dan Hilman, Sheridan County rancher. Only research into the life and career of an individual can determine if that person would qualify as a person of significance (“why the person with whom the property is associated is important to the history of the community, state, or nation”) under Criterion B, and the case must be made for that person’s significance and also why the specific historic property is the surviving property best associated with that person’s life and career. Thus the evaluator must focus on both the individual and the property and also the connection between the two to make the case under Criterion B. Dan Hilman was a prominent rancher, but more importantly he was a leader in the evolution of ranching in the area and ultimately shaped the rise and growth of dude ranching in Sheridan County. Unfortunately, his ranch buildings no longer exist. Photo: Courtesy Ross Hilman.

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County). Many of these people gained significance through their ranching and farming practices alone, but often that agricultural success became connected to, and served as a base for, other political and economic activities.

For a property associated with these people, it would be necessary to demonstrate that the specific property directly reflected or shaped their influence—that it was not peripheral or tangential to the activities for which the person became significant. This was the place that was important in making them significant. In the obvious case of Frank Mondell, discussed in this context statement, Mondell’s dry farming activities were probably less significant than his mining ventures in terms of his monetary holdings, but he was intimately involved in dry farming, used his own experience as an example for others to follow, and used the lessons from his own farming to shape national legislation to aid other dry farmers. Even as Majority Leader in the U.S. House of Representatives, Mondell evidently discussed his own farm as an example of the opportunities and problems of dry farming. The nomination of a farming property associated with Mondell would need to demonstrate each of these points.

*Criterion C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.*

The distinctive architectural features of a building, the eminence of the person who designed it, or the engineering features involved in a corral gate, windmill, dipping vat, or shearing arrangement would make a resource eligible for the National Register under Criterion C. Documenting the property’s eligibility generally requires attention to the features that are distinctive. Thus a particular method of construction that once was

common, as for example, piece-sur-piece log construction, but has largely faded from use, would be a type of construction that could qualify a barn or a house or other building under Criterion C. Or, some of the grand showcase ranches that emerged early in the twentieth century were sometimes designed by leading architects and their buildings serve as enduring legacies of their craft. The existence of a wind generator for the production of electricity would similarly fall under Criterion C as an example of engineering put to use on the isolated farms and ranches. The construction of a stock dam for the watering of livestock likewise would represent an engineering accomplishment, one that received considerable attention especially in the 1930s when their construction was widespread, but which also could be found earlier. Because the structure, building, or object is important for its own architectural or engineering features, integrity of materials, workmanship, and design will be much more critical than, say, under Criterion A. And because the workmanship that goes into an architectural or engineering property is sometimes what gives the resource its significance, the period of significance for Criterion C properties will generally be confined to the year, or period, in which it was built. Of course, many of these properties will be eligible under both Criterion A and Criterion C.

The only example of a ranch / farm currently listed on the National Register under Criterion C is Ranch A, which arguably was not even a working ranch or farm, which was constructed in the late 1930s, and which was built as a hobby ranch or retreat. Its architectural qualities are outstanding, but there are other properties with architectural significance that could also be listed. The Moncreiffe Ranch (Quarter Circle A) and the Big Red Ranch Complex doubtless could also have been listed under Criterion C. These

examples, though, can be misleading, for a property does not have to be large, elaborate, and designed by an architect. The distinctive construction style and materials that would qualify under Criterion C could be found in dwellings and structures that are much more modest, such as that in a dugout or a log ranch building. Vernacular construction is as important to the development of homesteads and farms and ranches in this area as palatial designs might be to other areas.

*Criterion D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.*

The ability of a property's physical resources to yield important information represents an invitation for archaeological investigation. As always, the productivity of any investigation depends on the questions asked, and a focused, clearly-articulated research design must identify the significance of the findings anticipated. It is not sufficient to issue a blanket statement that any and all properties will yield important information; what kind of information and how this site may reasonably be expected to yield that information are essential.

In this particular context, archaeological investigation is best seen as complementing the historical research rather than duplicating or replacing it, for the two fields draw upon different source materials with different potentials. There is obviously a considerable diversity of opinion within the archaeological community over the value of investigating sites from the recent (twentieth century) past, and this context statement will not attempt to resolve those different views. But it is clear that if archaeologists approach the issues of this context with an eye to addressing the questions raised by this

study, the fruits can be significant. Indeed, many of those questions have to do with the forces of modernization that reshaped the countryside of northeast Wyoming in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

And in that regard two particular archaeological perspectives are relevant to the task of determining the eligibility of properties under Criterion D. One is the position articulated by Margaret Purser regarding archaeology on western ranches. Purser suggests that in locations like those found in the Powder River Basin the sheer geographic scale can be daunting, but also informative. While elsewhere a system of production may be enclosed in a small area, in the West the economic unit may literally cover an expanse of miles and miles, beyond the horizons even, its different components widely scattered, physically nowhere near the functionally adjacent unit. But that is only part of her insight. Even more fundamental is her observation that the activity over that vast expanse is, in fact, a *system*, not just an assortment of different activities. It would be an oversimplification to suggest that this is just a matter of not seeing the forest for the trees or vice-versa, but Purser encourages the evaluator to put the individual artifact or site into the context of the larger operation which may not be immediately visible. And the aggregate of those sites will lead to a closer appreciation of the system itself.

Moreover, she notes that

Visibility in western ranching sites is also an archaeological visibility: preservation here is dramatic, and it pushes excavators to radically expand what counts as material data. For instance, you can see the entire valley settlement system because, in the arid environment, the presence of trees means the presence of people, at least at some point in the past. So the cottonwoods and imported Italian poplars that ring old homestead sites are artifacts, as are the relic fence posts, the trampled bare ground of abandoned corrals, the rutted scars of old wagon roads, and the myriad ditches, gates, dams, and flumes that channeled the western rancher's most prized possession: water. Trash from a camp tossed into the brush over a

hundred years ago looks like it could have come from last week's meal. Even in the fire-prone areas, standing structures of a wide variety of functions can still be present, at least as scattered spars of lumber, crumbling stone walls, or dusty mounds of old adobe melting slowly into the sagebrush. So although the archaeological record of ranching can often be sparse, it is equally often marked by radically wide ranges of artifact types, and equally broad spatial scales.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, Donald L. Hardesty and Barbara J. Little have focused on what they call a "feature system," a notion that Purser borrows from Hardesty's work on mining, and they emphasize the way in which artifacts and structures fit together to make a sense that is greater than the individual components are capable of suggesting separately.<sup>4</sup> This is not a difficult concept, is one that social historians often use, and is one familiar in other areas of inquiry where it often takes the simple, but holistic, form of "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts." System is key. Relationships between component parts—the spaces between—say as much as the parts themselves.

For the purpose of this study, with its focus on the process of historical change in a rural environment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, another study offers assistance from a slightly different angle. Drawing upon the same broad pattern of modernization that this context statement employs, Melanie A. Cabak, Mark D. Groover, and Mary M. Inkrot have shed light on rural life in the twentieth century in the American South. Examining dwelling types, midden size and contents, and other aspects of the farmsteads of the Aiken Plateau of South Carolina, these archaeologists have concluded that "20<sup>th</sup>-century resources, contrary to popular attitudes, possess archaeologically useful

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<sup>3</sup> Margaret Purser, "Archaeology on Western Ranches," on World Wide Web, "Unlocking the Past: Celebrating Historical Archaeology in North America," located on the World Wide Web at <http://www.cr.nps.gov/seac/unlocking-web/archofwork/index.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Donald L. Hardesty and Barbara J. Little, *Assessing Site Significance: A Guide for*

information” and that, in particular, “rural modernization occurred differently among southern households.”<sup>5</sup> Of special attention in that study were areas of inquiry where conventional historical documentation provides scant information. Thus consumption patterns reveal the extent of subsistence agriculture for home use as opposed to commercial purchasing of foods and supplies, while the prevalence of indoor plumbing and electricity and their impact on the location of family activities shed light on other aspects of life. Most suggestively, that study demonstrated that “households were gradually transformed from producers to consumers,” and that “at the same time that households were becoming acclimated to consumerism, traditional material elements in the built environment, particularly domestic architecture and household level technology, remained relatively static in rural settings.”<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps of greater importance than the particular conclusions of that single study, however, are the questions asked, and those questions directly parallel those that this context study of farming and ranching and homesteading in northeast Wyoming attempted to raise. Instead of listing specific questions that are pertinent to today’s research and that will be revised in the light of tomorrow’s findings, this study hopes that the issues presented in the content will guide historians and archaeologists alike in their future investigations. Those issues range across a wide horizon of inquiry, from the development of poultry farming and its impact on gender relations, to levels of

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*Archaeologists and Historians* (Lanham, Maryland: AltaMira Press, 2000), 119.

<sup>5</sup> Melanie A. Cabak, Mark D. Groover, and Mary M. Inkrot, “Rural Modernization during the Recent Past: Farmsteads Archaeology in the Aiken Plateau,” *Historical Archaeology*, 33 (1999), 38.

<sup>6</sup> Cabak, Groover, and Inkrot, “Rural Modernization during the Recent Past: Farmstead

subsistence agriculture practiced in different areas, by different classes of people, and differences between those agriculturists who adopted monoculture, extensive farming practices, compared with those who retained traditional diversified, intensive practices, and the technologies used—and the impact of those technologies—on different sizes and kinds of operations. It was the object of virtually every page of this context to raise these questions and hopefully the investigators will use them to frame their own research designs.

### **Property types**

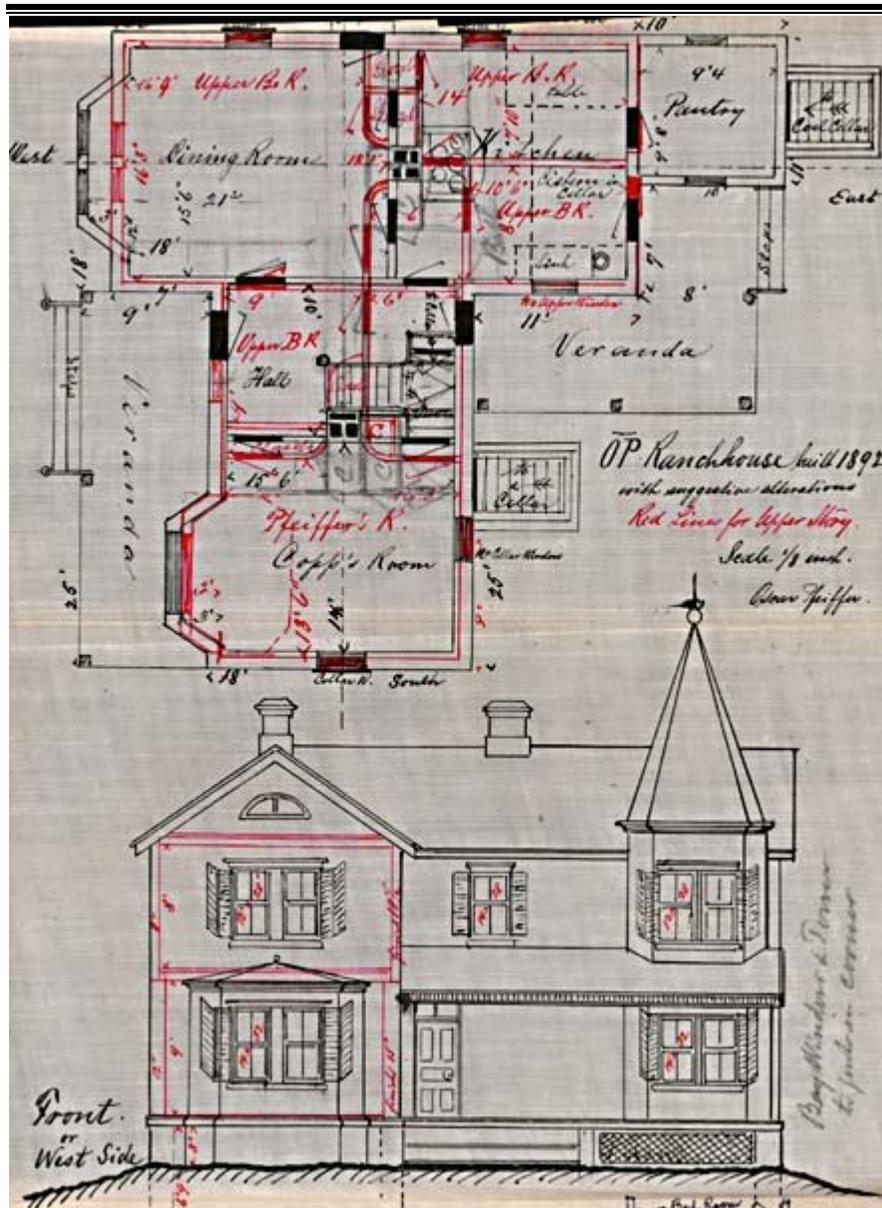
1. Ranch / Farm Houses
2. Auxiliary Ranch / Farm Buildings and Structures
3. Watering Facilities and Windmills
4. Fences
5. Herder Camps
6. Cemeteries and Graves
7. Sheepherder Monuments
8. Privies and Dumps

#### **1. Ranch / Farm Houses**

Description:

The ranch / farmhouse can consist of a single building or multiple buildings (for example in a multiple generation ranch or farm family) that provided the base of operations for the ranch or farm. The primary element is a residential building of some kind, ranging from a modest dugout or sod house to a palatial residence. This residence

reflects the integration of economic activities and domestic habitation with ranching or farming as a way of life. In the sometimes complex and sprawling ranches and farm



Few building plans remain for early ranch buildings, but occasionally drawings will surface. Oscar Pfeiffer's Johnson County 1892 Bar OP Ranch House was a substantial building and we have the diagram that Pfeiffer drew to indicate the layout and function of its component parts. From Oscar Pfeiffer Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie.

operations, the house served as residence and as ranch headquarters, the center of gravity for the ranch operation. It was not always the largest structure on the ranch, and was often dwarfed by barns and other functional buildings; sometimes the other buildings even showing greater attention to style and workmanship than

the ranch house, a telling indicator of ranch and farm family priorities. Many of the

ranch / farm houses are built in a vernacular style with simple lines and design; some are more elaborate and a few are even opulent. They will ordinarily be categorized as National Register historic function: DOMESTIC, single family, but there are exceptions.

Significance:

These ranch / farm houses are associated primarily with the context of cattle and sheep ranching and dry farming and homestead activity in the Powder River Basin and



*J. W. Battles Homestead house*

The J. W. Battles homestead house with its plank siding, gambrel roof, and twin dormers, was recognized as a landmark in the Ninemile area of Johnson and Campbell Counties because of its imposing size. This photograph probably dates from the late 1920s or 1930s. Photo: Johnson County Library, Local History Collection.

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they must relate in a significant way to these activities. Most of them will be considered eligible under Criterion A because of their association with the broad patterns of stock growing and grazing and homesteading (which includes crop production as well as

livestock grazing) during the period of significance. Under Criterion A, they may, according to the nature of the ranch / farm house and its associations, be eligible in the Area of Significance Agriculture, although other Areas of Significance to consider are Exploration / Settlement and Conservation. Some properties might be considered eligible under Criterion B for their association with an individual important in the history of



The intriguing caption on the back of this photograph provides a thumbnail social history of the house: "October 1937. Lute Porath homestead residence, occupied at that time by Otis Bebout family. Sold 1943 to John Zezas and now with porch removed is bunk house at Zezas ranch." Photo: Johnson County Library, Local History Collections.

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ranching and farming in the area, although the requirements for Criterion B eligibility can prove daunting (see below). A ranch or farm house can also be considered significant under Criterion C because it is either a typical and representative example of domestic

architecture and design, or, conversely, because it is an outstanding example. Finally, the ranch or farm house can be significant under Criterion D if the property has yielded or has the potential to yield important information about homesteading, cattle and sheep ranching, and farming, including construction techniques associated with these activities, provided they can be shown to yield potentially important information with the use of a specific research design.

Registration Requirements:

The requirements for registration for ranch / farm houses are relatively uncomplicated, but they do vary according to the criterion under which the resource is eligible. In order to be eligible under Criteria A and B, the ranch / farm house must have been used as a house in homesteading, stock-growing, and farming activities within the period of significance and must convey a feeling of operation as an agricultural activity (Agriculture) and / or homesteading (Exploration / Settlement). It should retain its rural setting and evoke the rural life associated with the area of significance. The general appearance of the building needs to remain much as it was during the period of significance although it is expected that some deterioration and / or modification will often have taken place both during the period of significance and afterwards. If it is associated with other features (below) that confirm its homesteading / ranching role, the building's integrity is enhanced.

In assessing the integrity of buildings under Criterion A and Criterion B, consideration needs to be given to the factor that if abandoned and deteriorated, there is the likelihood that deterioration began even while it was occupied, and that the neglect of the property passed through several stages before the final departure of the residents /

operators that left the building permanently vacated, and this is as relevant to the association with homesteading and ranching as the building's initial construction. Farm and ranch buildings are seldom abandoned at the peak of their productive period. On the other hand, if buildings are currently in use they will often have been modified over the years, a natural part of the evolution of use and enlargement of the operation, which, again, does not automatically compromise the integrity of the properties but is a factor that needs to be addressed (for example to show how the modifications in the building reflected changes in the ranch / farm operation or agricultural market forces).

To be eligible under Criterion C in the area of significance Architecture, the ranch / farm house must demonstrate the association with homesteading / ranching / farming in the period of significance, but must additionally retain those distinctive elements of workmanship, design, and materials that give the building stylistic integrity. It may qualify as a particular style listed in the National Register Guidelines, or it may be vernacular, which most will be, but it will need to retain the general form, floor plan, and materials that evoke the time of construction and agricultural life of the period of significance. The integrity of association and feeling is enhanced by the presence of related buildings and features nearby.

While Criterion D ordinarily will apply to the Area of Significance, Archeology, in the assessment of livestock grazing, ranching and farming properties in the Powder River Basin, and in the subcategory Historic: Non-Aboriginal, it can also be applied to the other areas of significance like Agriculture, Conservation, and Architecture, especially when employed in conjunction with professional historical research to document and evaluate these ranch / farm house properties. The major requirements for

Criterion D resources are, first, the general requirement that the homestead / ranch house must have been used as a house in homesteading, stock-growing, and farming activities within the period of significance should retain its rural setting and evoke the agricultural life associated with the Powder River Basin. In addition, it is necessary that the resource retain its location and setting and hold the potential to yield information. The determination of eligibility of these sites under Criterion D must specifically demonstrate what kinds of data are contained in the site and explain how that information might be used to answer definite research questions. The importance of the information to be gained should be established by discussing the site as it relates to the current knowledge of agricultural practices in the Powder River Basin and related issues. For sites consisting largely of buried deposits, demonstration of the potential to yield important information may involve subsurface testing. The necessity for, and scope of, subsurface testing must be decided on a property specific basis.

## **2. Auxiliary Ranch / Farm Buildings and Structures**

### Description:

A wide variety of other buildings typically emerged on a homestead / ranch / farm in the Powder River Basin to supplement the house that served as headquarters.

Depending on the size of the operation, the ranch or farm would often include buildings that were specific to the agricultural operation such as bunkhouses, sheds, granaries, barns, stables, mess halls, corrals, loading pens and ramps, dipping vats, scale houses, shearing sheds, silos, trench silos, poultry houses, and buildings that were related to the domestic life on those farms and ranches such as root cellars / storage cellars, icehouses,

and also the more broadly social structures such as school buildings and post offices that sometimes appeared on larger ranches.

These buildings and structures provided working and living spaces for ranch families and employees and served specialized functions within the ranch / farm operation. The same caveats apply to these buildings that have been noted for the farm / ranch houses, in that they are often utilitarian in design rather than stylish or decorative in appearance. The materials used in their construction will usually be of reasonably local origin and the methods of construction will tend to the homespun. They may be in a serious state of disrepair and deteriorated condition although their integrity remains solid. In addition to their similarity to the ranch / farm houses, however, these buildings, aside from reflecting particular parts of the agricultural process, are important because they demonstrate that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, and spatial arrangement is an important element of the complex in establishing the way the ranch or farm worked. Usually, the greater the number of specialized auxiliary buildings and structures near the ranch headquarters, the more extensive the holdings and operation of the ranch or farm. Plus, it is unlikely that all of the buildings will have been constructed at the same time, so the evolution of the ranch or farm can often be discerned in developing a timeline of construction and modification. If multiple resources are included in a complex or district, not all contributing resources must meet the requirements of an individual building.

The following list of Property Subtype descriptions is not intended to be exhaustive since there is no standard list of buildings that all operations have followed. But it should provide an indication of the most common buildings and structures and should also provide guidance in the evaluation of other buildings that are not identified.

Moreover, there are additional buildings and structures that could occasionally be found on farms / homesteads / ranches that were not exclusively related to agriculture but were essential for the domestic life and social arrangement of an agricultural community, including schools and post offices, many of which were initially located on the property of a ranch / homestead owner before taking on an independent existence elsewhere.

Those buildings would also be considered contributing resources if they otherwise meet registration eligibility requirements consistent with those enumerated below.

Property Subtype: Bunkhouses

It is important to separate popular mythology from fact in identifying bunkhouses. Contrary to cinematic portrayals, bunkhouses were often quite small and accommodated only a few hired hands. They would, however, usually be characterized by an open, one- or two-cell interior and with an outhouse not far away.

Property Subtype: Tenant Quarters

There is a fine line between bunkhouses and tenant quarters and there are doubtless instances where the two overlap both in function and in time. One difference is that the bunkhouse will customarily, but not exclusively, serve the cattle ranch while the tenant quarter will more likely be found in a crop-raising operation. In addition, the bunkhouse will ordinarily house individuals, and groups of individuals, who work on the operation, where the tenant quarters will at least theoretically accommodate families.

Property Subtype: Sheds

Sheds for storage or other use were notoriously individualistic, or even idiosyncratic, in appearance and design and sometimes their dimensions and configuration actually depended on the available materials; they would, however, ordinarily have walls and a roof as opposed to being open-air shelters.

Property Subtype: Granaries

The granary on a farm / ranch / homestead was a simple rectangular building without windows in which the owner / operator would store harvested grains usually for domestic consumption. One panel or section of wall would commonly be removable to provide access to the interior supply of grain. One common identifying feature of a granary is that which is ordinarily associated with Mormon agriculture in Utah, but that also spread to Wyoming early in the twentieth century, which is an “inside-out” design of the walls. By placing the planks on the inside of the wall studs, a worker inside the building would be able to use a shovel to scoop up grain without encountering the studs and without the additional expense of a second layer of siding.



Barn at 41 Ranch, 1915. Coincidentally, the barn, with its adjacent corrals and branding taking place, illustrates the shift from the open range roundup to branding near the home ranch, a significant shift in cattle ranching practices. Photo: Johnson County Library, Local History Collections.

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Property Subtype: Barns

Barns, which seldom conform to a standard design but frequently have two or more stories, a gambrel or gabled roof, and shed-roofed wings, are places for sheltering or treating livestock and / or storing equipment and hay or grain.

Property Subtype: Stables

Stables are structures for the purpose of providing shelter and feeding for (usually) horses but could also be used for other livestock, almost invariably with

separate stalls or pens for individual animals or groups of animals. Historically they have tended to follow one of two configurations, one with an outdoor entrance / exit to each stall and the other with the stalls opening in the interior onto a throughway usually in the center of the structure, running lengthwise. Sometimes stables would be the most elaborate building on the ranch, with careful decoration and ornamentation presumably reflecting the quality of the horses housed there.

Property Subtype: Mess / Dining Halls

At roundup (both during the period of the open range and afterwards) / shearing / harvest times, even moderate sized ranch / farm operations found themselves with additional, temporary hired help on the premises that had to be fed. Some operations had to feed those workers on a year-round basis. A dining / mess hall was often a feature of those operations. The dining / mess hall could be put to other use, such as recreation or indoor work / repair projects. It would usually be constructed of materials and in a design consistent with other buildings, including the residence. In some instances a kitchen would be attached, and in others separate.

Property Subtype: Corrals

Corrals are pens for the temporary enclosure of livestock and are usually arranged in a configuration that allows the transfer of stock from one enclosure to another in various processes such as calving, branding, castrating, vaccination, weighing, and shipping. Sometimes the corrals would be simple affairs, but on the large operations they would even take on a maze-like configuration. They almost never used barbed wire because of the presence of horses and humans in the corrals while working the other stock, and they generally used planks or poles.



Loading Ramp, Tipperary Road, Johnson County. Date of construction not known. The proliferation of loading pens and ramps indicated the movement from driving livestock to the railroad to loading them on the range with trucks, beginning in the 1930s. Photo: Michael Cassity, 2006.

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#### Property Subtype: Loading Pens and Ramps

These loading pens and ramps facilitated the transfer of livestock to awaiting trucks for transportation to markets, and thus were a sign of the movement of the ranch

operation from the practice of herding to market on a trail or road to the use of motorized transportation. The ramps, which were enclosed on either side with plank or pole fences, usually were associated with corrals and chutes to control and direct a certain number of head of livestock in a systematic fashion.

#### Property Subtype: Dipping Vats

With the development of the livestock industry, sheep and cattle ranchers came to use various chemical formulas to treat their livestock and prevent disease or kill parasites. The most effective way of applying these chemicals was to mix them in a bath in which the livestock would be submerged. The vats containing the dip solution would be substantial troughs, deep enough that the livestock would be completely submerged at first and then would have to swim through to leave. These vats were, like other parts of the livestock management process, associated with a configuration of corral fences and chutes to direct the flow of livestock, one at a time, into and out of the dipping vat. The vats were important, and while not on every ranch, they were located sporadically and sometimes used cooperatively by neighboring ranches. A description of one near Powder River as it looked in 1923 indicates their general configuration. Alan Seager recalled how he helped dip a herd of cattle: “At last, we had all the cattle penned in the corrals, objecting. By government order, we had to immerse each in a concrete vat full of a solution of warm water and nicotine sulphate, to kill the ticks. The vat was about thirty feet long, eight feet deep, and the width of a cow. A chute of cottonwood logs ran up to one end of it, and a ramp led down into the fluid.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Allan Seager, “Powder River in the Old Days,” *The New Yorker*, August 17, 1957, 33.

Property Subtype: Scale Houses

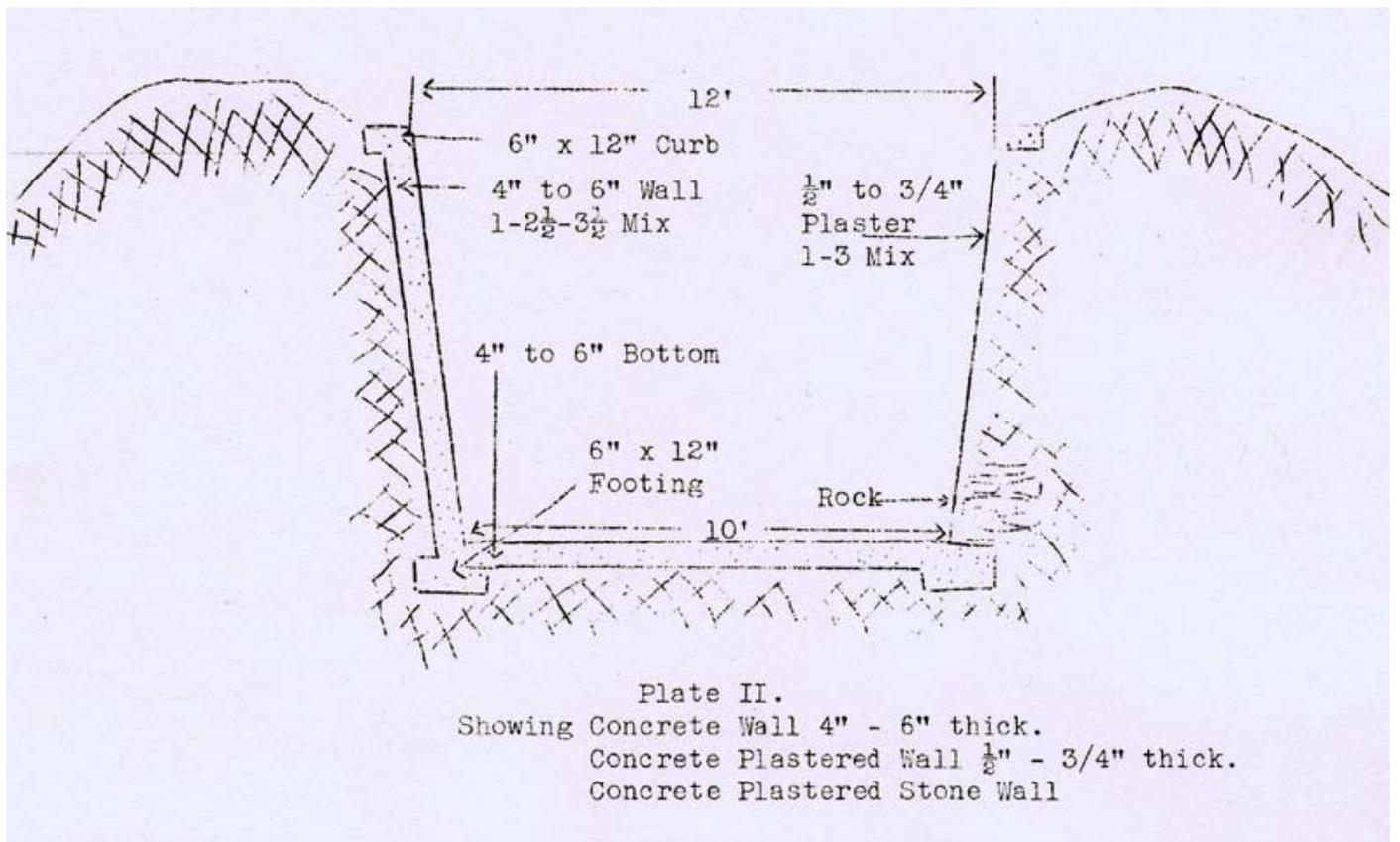
The presence of scale houses—where livestock would be weighed prior to shipping to market—represents the advent of a more “scientific” or at least more careful approach to commercial livestock production since it would enable the owner to have an accurate awareness of the live-weight shipping out. Previously, the rancher had depended on estimates and on the scales of the purchaser. Sometimes the scales would be located in or adjacent to another structure—an appendage to a barn, for example—but would usually be a small, single room (or stall) enclosure with scales between two doors. The livestock would be forced by the narrowness of the passageway to stand on the scale platform and the weight would be read by an attendant.

Property Subtype: Shearing Sheds

Although in the early years shearing took place in the open, or under a canopy for protection from the sun, by the 1920s the sheep industry moved to indoor shearing facilities to secure cleaner fleeces. On some sheep ranches, these shearing sheds were elaborate facilities with multiple stories so that the fleece would drop through a chute into a bag that hung through a portal onto the lower story, where the bags would be stuffed tightly and then moved—assembly line fashion—to a waiting wagon for transport to the railroad. In other instances, the shearing shed was smaller and simply provided a protected working space.

Property Subtype: Silos

While not as common on the plains of the Powder River Basin as in the Midwest where they have achieved iconic status, the silo would usually be a vertical, cylindrical tower-like structure for the airtight storage of silage (grains and grasses that have been stored and allowed to partially ferment to then use as fodder). It could be made of wood, concrete, or metal, or other materials such as stone.



Trench Silo diagram. Source: "Build a Trench Silo," Mimeographed publication, University of Wyoming College of Agriculture, Agricultural Extension Service, 1936, 5.

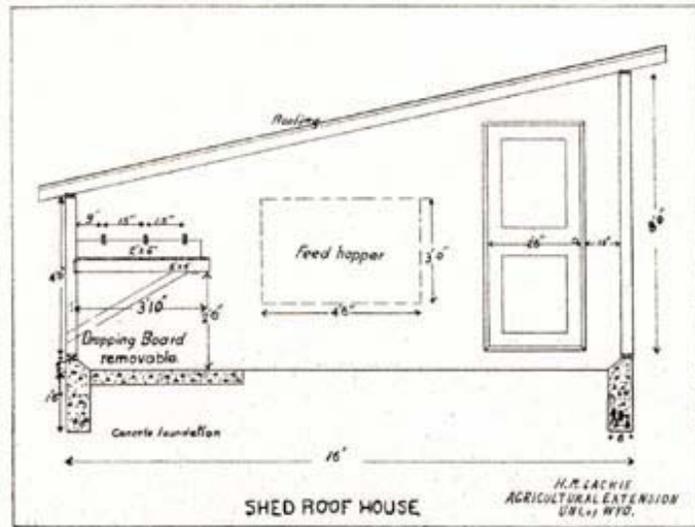
Property Subtype: Trench Silos

More common in this area than tower silos, trench silos were encouraged by

Wyoming agricultural extension agents who freely distributed design plans for their construction. Of course, not all farms and ranches used those designs. The common element, however, was the creation of a large trench (think of the dimensions of a silo resting on its side), and then lining it, preferably with concrete, for the storage of the fermenting fodder. It would be covered with a temporary covering (planks or sheets of various material) that could be removed for access. Ideally, these silos would be built into the side of an incline so that one end would permit drive-in / walk-in access.

Property Subtype: Poultry Houses

Rare in the twenty-first century, poultry houses, especially for turkeys, were common in Wyoming until well after World War II. The buildings in which turkeys were raised, both for domestic consumption and for commercial markets,



Plans for Poultry Shed, Source: H. M. Lackie, "A Farm Poultry House," Wyoming Extension Service, Circular No. 4 (September 1920), 6.

varied substantially according to the scale and aspirations of the owner / operator as well as by the breed of fowls. The poultry house interior would usually include a roosting room with separate levels for perches, for feeding shelves, for a dropping board, and for a brooder coop, and an additional room used as a scratching room for inclement weather. The typical poultry house would be a shed-roofed structure with an open or curtained and

closable south elevation (to catch sunlight), although some instances of salt-box roof or other configurations are also to be found. The two main requirements for poultry houses in the Powder River Basin were ventilation and heat, both adjustable to maintain a delicate balance.

Property Subtype: Root Cellars / Storage Cellars

The root cellar was once a standard feature on homesteads, ranches, and farms since it was the only way to keep foodstuffs cool in the summer and prevent them from freezing in the winter. Ordinarily the root cellar was dug into the ground, often given a wall of bricks or stone, and covered with planks and then a thick layer of sod. Access was usually gained by a small entrance that tended to be (but was not always) located on the east end. It was usually located near the kitchen. They could be quite modest or very large. Often the root cellar was shaded by trees.

Property Subtype: Icehouses

On larger operations that had access to a body of water where ice could be harvested in the winter, the icehouse often replaced the root cellar. The icehouse usually conformed to standard design considerations (if not standard appearance) which included alignment to prevent the broad side from catching the sun in the warmest part of the day, protection with shade trees, the use of double thicknesses of siding material, a door sill that extends up to a foot above the outside elevation (to prevent the loss of cool when the door is opened), minimal fenestration just sufficient for ventilation, and an entrance on the east (or shaded) elevation.

Significance:

The buildings and structures, and their remnants, that can be found in the Powder River Basin's agricultural areas are important artifacts of an earlier time that serve to chart the changing dynamics of agricultural production and rural land tenure. Bearing in mind that each building or structure that emerged on the landscape served a particular need in the production and harvesting of crops and livestock, these artifacts can often be traced to the circumstances of initial settlement, enlargement and specialization of the farm or ranch, and ultimately to the transfer or abandonment of the holding. The adaptive reuse of buildings from one purpose to another also reflects the evolution of the farm or ranch, as a building that once held a poultry house may be refitted to serve as a shearing shed. The movement of buildings from one part of the operation to another (within the period of historic significance) also reveals elements of the significance of the larger complex.

Registration Requirements:

The registration requirements for auxiliary ranch / farm buildings and structures under each of the National Register criteria are generally the same as for the ranch / farm houses. Those resources that are eligible for the National Register under Criterion A in the area of significance Agriculture or Exploration / Settlement must have been used in the broad pattern of homesteading, farming, and livestock ranching in this area, within the period of significance. A combination of historical research in relevant documents and careful site analysis will establish the association and significance of the buildings

and structures.

The integrity requirements for this group of resources (and others in this context as well) under Criterion A and Criterion B emphasize primarily their historic function and appearance—the ability of an individual building or structure to convey a sense of past time and place by providing evidence of the specific function or role it served during the period of historic significance (not its ability to perform that function today) and the relationship of that function to the larger homestead / ranch operation. In this, the evaluator must be careful to avoid confusing condition with integrity and to recognize that some ranches / farms / homesteads will have fewer historic features, not because they are less significant, but because they were smaller operations. Each property needs to be evaluated with regard to what existed during the period of historic significance, and the period of historic significance usually terminated when the property no longer had an active association with the historic patterns of ranching / farming / and homesteading discussed in the context statement, or fifty years before the present.

Under Criterion B, the property subtypes must meet the requirements for association with an important individual discussed under Ranch / Farm Houses. An individual auxiliary building or structure is unlikely to qualify under Criterion B, but the complex of buildings, the larger “feature system,” that includes a coherent set of buildings and structures could qualify. Under Criterion C, the elements of design, workmanship, and materials will be the critical factors that determine eligibility, although additionally the spatial arrangement may be an important ingredient. In this last consideration, it is important to note that while the transfer of a building or structure from one location to another usually entails a certain loss of integrity, if that removal takes

place within the period of significance and if that building continues to serve the larger ranch / farm function, it will be considered a contributing element. In Criterion D, a greater opportunity may exist for establishing significance since some of these auxiliary buildings tend to be among the most fragile, and ephemeral, of the ranch's built environment. Again, however, to be eligible under Criterion D, the research design for the data to be acquired is an essential ingredient. As in the ranch / farm house, the determination of eligibility of auxiliary buildings and structures under Criterion D must specifically demonstrate what kinds of data are contained in the site and explain how that information might be used to answer definite research questions. The importance of the information to be gained should be established by discussing the site as it relates to the current knowledge of agricultural practices in the Powder River Basin and related issues.

Property Subtype: Bunkhouses

Requirement: The bunkhouse must retain its historic location, usually near the center of the ranch / farm / homestead complex and its use as a bunkhouse must be clearly indicated either by configuration (often the interior of the building being one or two open areas), or circumstances of arrangement with other buildings. It should be kept in mind that with the mechanization of agriculture smaller numbers of workers were employed and bunkhouses were often put to use for other purposes, uses that would not necessarily compromise the integrity of the building.

Property Subtype: Tenant Quarters

Requirement: The tenant quarters must retain their historic location, which could

be either centrally grouped or broadly dispersed on individually assigned acreages, and their use as tenant quarters by their configuration, by records, or by artifacts must be clear. Tenant quarters may have been moved to the historic location from other places, they may have begun as homesteader cabins, and they may have been subsequently put to use for other purposes (such as bunkhouses or storage), and it will not be uncommon for those quarters to follow a pattern of evolution beyond their life as tenant quarters. In rare instances, multiples will be found but it is not a requirement that all tenant units be intact. A single unit with integrity can be eligible.

#### Property Subtype: Sheds

Requirement: Sheds are to be found virtually everywhere on farms and ranches and homesteads, and as individual buildings will almost never be eligible. But as a contributing feature of a complex they will be eligible if they remain reasonably intact and their integrity will be enhanced if the particular use (storage, blacksmithing, equipment repair, etc.) to which they were put can be suggested by the existing structure.

#### Property Subtype: Granaries

Requirement: The character defining element of granaries must be present, i.e., generally a rectangular configuration with windowless walls, and with an opening that will allow access to the interior. While granaries were sometimes adapted for general storage use after grain was no longer produced on the homestead / farm / ranch, or once the grain became a staple of commercial production and was transported to a local elevator until it could be shipped to other markets, this modification would not disqualify

the structure.

Property Subtype: Barns

Requirement: Barns must show that they were used as places for sheltering or treating livestock and / or storing equipment and hay or grain. That can be demonstrated by the existence of stalls, lofts, hoists, feed bins, and equipment service bays in the interior and wagon and equipment-size entrances and livestock-appropriate fenestration and doorways on the exterior.

Property Subtype: Stables

Requirement: Stables must have clear evidence of their use by livestock and the historic organization of the interior and configuration of the stalls. The presence of storage facilities and related elements (for example, saddle racks, tack rooms, blacksmith equipment, oat bins, etc.) enhance the integrity of the stable.

Property Subtype: Mess / Dining Halls

Requirement: The ability of the structure to feed a crew of workers on either a temporary or permanent basis will be evident by size, open interior space, proximity to a kitchen (which may or may not be attached), and sometimes proximity to a bunkhouse.

Property Subtype: Corrals

Requirement: Corrals need not be complete and usable, but the perimeter, design, and materials of the corral must be consistent with its historic use. As with buildings, so especially with the less-permanently constructed corrals; when they are not used, they

deteriorate quickly. The deterioration is often a reflection of their condition, not their lack of integrity so careful examination is essential. And while the arrangement of corrals may appear to be a maze or a haphazard jumble of fenced areas, it is important to remember that that particular design was used for a purpose and that purpose should be accorded appropriate attention.

Property Subtype: Loading Pens and Ramps

Requirement: Loading pens and ramps need not be complete and serviceable, but the contour and operation of the ramps and pens must be clearly discernible.

Property Subtype: Dipping Vats

Requirement: While dipping vats vary in sophistication, the entrances ordinarily employed a sharp drop-off at the entrance to the vat forcing the livestock to submerge completely in the dipping solution as they enter and, at the other end of the vat, a gradually inclined ramp for the animals to clamber out under their own power, and this, or a similar system of operation, must be discernible. The presence of entrance and exit chutes and corrals for waiting enhances the integrity of dipping vats.

Property Subtype: Scale Houses

Requirement: The scales in scale houses have sometimes been removed and are not necessary for the structure to be considered intact. Since a defining characteristic of the scale house is the presence of entrances opposite each other for the livestock to be channeled completely through (and thus not turning around to leave by the same opening

through which they entered), these entrances must still be visible, even if they are currently sealed. The existence of fences and chutes and nearby loading pens and ramps to facilitate the movement of the cattle into and out of the scale house enhances integrity.

Property Subtype: Shearing Sheds

Requirement: The organization of the shearing process must be discernible from the building design. Ideally, this will consist of two building entrances and at least one holding pen and one shearing pen in the interior, but the existence of any combination of relevant exterior and interior features in such a way as to define it as a shearing shed will make the building eligible.

Property Subtype: Silos

Silos are notorious for their deterioration once they ceased holding the fodder that they were designed for. If a silo retains its basic design and materials, even with the loss of the domed (or other) cap, and its role in the operation of the complex is discernible, it will be eligible.

Property Subtype: Trench Silos

Trench silos that are no longer in use have sometimes been filled with dirt or other material as a safety measure. If the walls of the trench silo are evident and it is clear that the concrete is not the foundation for another kind of building or structure, it will be eligible as a contributing property to the complex. Integrity will be enhanced if the full contour and depth of the trench silo is evident from one end or if the cavity

remains open.

Property Subtype: Poultry Houses

Requirement: The poultry house must be plainly evident as such either because of its distinctive exterior or because of its interior which was fitted for chickens or turkeys. The presence of a ventilation system (usually with adjustable outlets under the rafters on the north elevation) and a system of heating (either passive solar or stove) enhances the integrity of the structure.

Property Subtype: Root Cellars / Storage Cellars

Requirement: If the root cellar has not caved in it is eligible, and if it has collapsed, it may still be eligible if its size and root-cellar function can be definitely determined. A depression in the ground that may or may not have been a root cellar is not eligible, although it should be marked as a possibility in a survey or determination of eligibility of the ranch complex and if another root cellar location has not been identified on that complex.

Property Subtype: Icehouses

Requirement: Even on ranches that have been maintained and preserved, the ice house will in the vast number of cases have been put to other uses, but some can still be identified as icehouses. To be eligible, the icehouse must retain a combination of any of these identifying features: building alignment to protect from solar heat, fenestration and entrances appropriate to an icehouse, extra thickness of walls, raised door sill, icehouse

ventilation system (such as cupolas or gable vents). The presence of shade trees in the appropriate location enhances integrity.

### 3. Watering Facilities and Windmills

Description:

This property type includes the variety of ways homesteaders, dry-farmers, and stock growers drew water from beneath the soil and preserved the moisture that came from the sky so as to obtain a steady source for their livestock and crops, and indeed for their own consumption. The users of the range developed a variety of means for acquiring and holding water and the broad, open land of the Powder River Basin is often punctuated at uneven

intervals with the remnants of these structures.

Wherever one exists—whether it is an improvement upon a spring, a well head, a rock cistern, a windmill and stock tank, or a dam and reservoir—the remnant is an indicator of effort on the part of an earlier inhabitant



“Natural spring cleaned and fenced on land use project. Converse County, Wyoming.” Photo: Arthur Rothstein, Resettlement Administration Photographs, Farm Security Administration – Office of War Information Photo Collection, Library of Congress. May 1936.

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in historic times to provide water to thirsty livestock and crops in a dry land and thereby

to both make their endeavor a success and to transform the Powder River Basin into a productive agricultural area.

The range of subtypes in this system includes the following:

Property Subtype: Springs

Springs are naturally occurring outflows of water from the surface of the earth. While the natural features are not themselves historic resources, sometimes they have been modified in a way to make them more productive in the ranching / farming operation, often with concrete or pipes or with guards to keep livestock from destroying it.

Property Subtype: Wells

A well is a system for drawing water from beneath the surface of the land so that it can be put to use. Wells may be deep or shallow, hand dug or drilled, but the purpose remains the same. In the Powder River Basin, most wells are drilled, albeit many of them were drilled with a hand auger device before more sophisticated drilling machines eased the labor. A pump at the well head—which may be powered by hand, by wind, by gasoline / diesel engine, or by electric motor—is often an integral part of the well, and sometimes will have changed from one system to another over time.

Property Subtype: Well Houses

The well house is the shelter constructed to protect the well and pump.

Property Subtype: Cisterns

Cisterns are containers often buried or partially buried in a location where rainfall or snowmelt will collect and be preserved. Cisterns are often quite simple in construction, something like a rock-lined or concrete-lined cavity, or even a manufactured container like a wood or steel barrel that has been partially buried. They usually possessed, at least originally, some kind of cover to impede loss by evaporation and some kind of an outlet at the base to allow the water to be directed to one use or another.

Property Subtype: Windmills

The technology of the windmill in history is a sometimes arcane study in itself and the mention of a windmill can summon images of the huge whirling vanes on a Dutch windmill as easily as it can generate images of the Halladay-type, commercially manufactured farm windmill so prominent on the American prairie. Despite the differences in appearance, the operating principle is the same: wind turns the vanes which rotate a drive shaft that turns gears to pump water to the surface.

Property Subtype: Water Tanks

A water tank may be any kind of large receptacle made of wood, metal, stone, or concrete and is used for holding water that is pumped from an adjacent well.

Property Subtype: Stock Tanks

A stock tank is also a receptacle (perhaps gouged from the earth) for holding water to be used by livestock, but it is usually of substantially greater size and will get its

water from a source other than a well. The stock tank is ordinarily positioned at an optimum location where it can collect tributary water from rainfall or snowmelt.

Property Subtype: Dams / Reservoirs

The critical distinction between a dam / reservoir and a stock tank is that the dam is located on a stream, albeit in this area often an intermittent stream, where the stock tank is not on running water. Located on the stream or creek, the dam creates a reservoir of water for livestock consumption. While dams and reservoirs (and stock tanks too, for that matter) can be found that date to early homesteading and grazing activities, it was especially in the 1930s with the advent of tractors and with an active range conservation program by the U.S. government that stock tanks, dams, and reservoirs began to be built in very large numbers throughout the Powder River Basin.

Property Subtype: Canals and Irrigation Ditches

Canals are open waterways (though in some parts of the year quite dry), constructed along a course that allows a continuous, gradual fall in altitude by which water is taken from a running source such as a river or stream or from a reservoir to provide water for fields of grass, grain, or other crops. They will usually be associated with a headgate at their upper terminus and at the points where branches leave the main canal, and with branches and laterals as the network of channels spreads into the fields.

Property Subtype: Pipelines

Pipelines perform the same function as canals but are enclosed and tubular in construction, thus preventing loss due to evaporation.

Significance:

The Powder River Basin is an arid or semi-arid environment and access to water has historically played a determinative role in the success or failure—or even the inauguration or avoidance—of homesteading, ranching, and related activities. The ability to either control nature or adapt to it has been one of the character-defining qualities of not only agriculture, but life itself, in the area. From early convictions that plowing the land would by itself bring rainfall, to scientific and pseudo-scientific efforts to dry-farm and graze cattle and sheep in that environment, the homesteaders, farmers, and livestock raisers have developed a variety of techniques to provide water for their operations—never an easy task to accomplish. As they did so, they left multiple structures as evidence of both their success and failure to harness the precious water that fell from the sky or that lay protected beneath the surface of the Powder River Basin. The earliest settlers and ranchers located near the streams and creeks where they would have a steady supply of water, but later settlers had to devise other ways of securing water. They might locate near a spring and then make improvements on the spring to make it more productive or accessible. But in many cases they had to dig a well, and that well usually was dug even before they built a home. The wells were supplemented with pumps, many of them hand-powered, but increasingly the ranchers and homesteaders turned to windmills to extract water for their operations. Of necessity, these would be scattered throughout the range to accommodate the needs of the livestock as they grazed over a wide area. Where there was a windmill, usually there would also be a water tank to collect the extracted water for livestock consumption. In the early twentieth century, and

most notably and systematically, in the 1930s, ranchers developed, often with government assistance, dams and reservoirs that could hold more water than could stock tanks. The windmill or dam that may stand as a lonely sentinel on the plains of the Powder River Basin usually is the tip of the iceberg of a system of water development and storage that has deeply influenced the pattern of land use in the area.

Registration Requirements:

Those watering facilities and windmills that are eligible for the National Register under Criterion A in the area of significance Agriculture or Exploration / Settlement must have been used in the broad pattern of homesteading and livestock ranching in this area, within the period of significance. A combination of historical research in relevant documents (for example, but not limited to, the well permit records in the office of the State Engineer) and careful site analysis will establish the significance of the watering facilities and windmills.

The integrity requirements for this group of resources, as with the auxiliary ranch / farm buildings and structures, place primary emphasis on their functionality and form—the ability of an individual watering facility or windmill to convey a sense of past time and place by providing evidence of the specific function it served during the period of historic significance and the relationship of that function to the larger homestead / ranch operation.

Under Criterion A and Criterion B, the various Subtypes of watering facilities and windmills are unlikely to be evaluated as eligible for the National Register as isolated, individual structures. Much more probable is that they will be eligible if they are

considered as contributing features for a ranch complex or district. Because of the potential for distinctive design and construction, however, they may be eligible independently under Criterion C. In fact, Criterion C holds an important value for assessing the eligibility of individual sites in remote locations if the engineering features represent a coherent system of providing water for livestock or fields. In this case, the operation of the windmill and related watering system must be clear and the mechanism and critical parts must be intact. Similarly, if there is reason to believe that the structure holds potential for yielding additional information, the structure may be eligible under Criterion D provided that the research design is clear and pointed about the importance of the data that may be gathered.

The requirements for the various subtypes in this system include these general requirements and more specifically the following requirements:

Property Subtype: Springs

Requirement: A spring that is a naturally occurring point where water rises to the surface is not, in itself, an eligible property type, but when these springs were modified to provide easier access for livestock—and for storage—that modification qualifies as an eligible subtype. The modification may simply be a rock lining that is placed around the source, or some form of concrete or pipe system that served as a conduit for the spring instead of its natural channel, or it may be a device to keep the livestock who use the spring from destroying it. The modification must clearly be historic and it must retain enough of its historic appearance and design that its function is plain.

Property Subtype: Wells

Requirement: The well does not have to be functioning, but its certain existence, even if capped off, can make it a contributing element to a complex. If that well is associated with pumps and other watering features, or with other structures and buildings, the integrity is enhanced.

Property Subtype: Well Houses

Requirement: The well house was often subject to rot from moisture, an ironic development in an arid or semi-arid environment, but the house, if clear in its function and reasonably intact, can be a contributing property.

Property Subtype: Cisterns

Requirement: Cisterns are not always obvious and are often concealed in brush or undergrowth fed by the water they preserve. Over time they may have developed cracks and leaks to make them inoperative, but the design, materials, and configuration need to be plainly evident. Portable cisterns are not eligible unless they were permanently affixed to another feature or buried.

Property Subtype: Windmills

Requirement: As with most watering facilities, windmills will be eligible for the National Register under Criterion A mainly as part of an eligible ranch / farm / homestead or district instead of isolated features on the landscape. To be eligible as a contributing feature, the windmill must retain its design, even if some of its elements—such as vanes or sucker rod—are no longer present or operable. The integrity of the

windmill is enhanced by being a complete structure, its proximity to a water tank, and its continued operation.

Property Subtype: Water Tanks

Requirement: A water tank must retain its historic condition and material.

Property Subtype: Stock Tanks

Requirement: A stock tank can easily deteriorate through the process of erosion, but it can qualify as a contributing element if it retains enough of its design to definitely identify it as a stock tank.

Property Subtype: Dams / Reservoirs

Requirement: Like the stock tank, the dam, which was generally an earthen structure, has been subject to erosion and deterioration if not periodically maintained, and the reservoir associated with the dam has sometimes dissipated. But the dam can qualify as a contributing element if it retains its essential design features.

Property Subtype: Canals and Irrigation Ditches

Requirement: Canals and irrigation ditches are problematic because of their extensive length and sometimes complex configuration. That quality, however, enhances their significance as a critical element of a broad system of irrigation. The presence of headgates on canals and ditches and other canal-related features enhances the eligibility of the feature as a contributing element under Criterion A but is not necessary. The canal

and irrigation ditch made a vast difference in the lives of the owner / operator of the ranch / farm / homestead and is a contributing element if the canal and ditch remain as definable features.

#### Property Subtype: Pipelines

Requirement: Although less common than canals and ditches, pipelines can sometimes be found. They will be regarded as contributing if they remain in their historic location and retain their identifiable features. Scraps of disconnected, loose piping and tubing that is not located in a network configuration will not be eligible, but this is different from a network, or part of a network, of piping that is intact and in its historic location but is no longer connected.

## **4. Fences**

### Description:

Fences may be made of a variety of materials, most commonly barbed wire, wood plank, or pole, or in some rare instances they are constructed of stone or other materials. They serve to restrict movement of humans or livestock (and wild game) into or out of defined parcels of land or simply to mark a boundary.

### Significance:

Fences may often appear to be the bane of the existence of the historic resource evaluator since a fenceline can go for miles in an unpredictable direction, be of an indeterminate age, and occur in places understood only by bovines, sheep, or their human

herders. Yet they were an essential element of the development of the range, although the way they were viewed varied, of course, according to which side of the fence the observer was on. Homesteaders and ranchers fought over them. In some instances the government required homestead claims to be fenced. After the end of the open range, ranchers used them to confine their livestock in one area of the ranch while preserving another area from grazing. Indeed, the rise of fencing was one of the features that defined the end of the open range. Fences were of great importance in the development of stock growing, grazing, homesteading, and farming in the Powder River Basin.

Registration Requirements:

The historic association with homesteading / ranching / farming activities in the period of historic significance is essential under Criterion A. This excludes modern (within the past fifty years) fences that have been built along roads and highways. Thus also location is a critical element of integrity, and so also is materials. The complication of materials is that maintenance and wear may have caused sections of fence to be replaced. Under Criterion A, a modern fence (within the past fifty years) or a replacement of a historic fence with modern fencing would not be eligible, but if the association is there, and if the location and materials remain historic, the fence may be considered a contributing element of a ranch complex or district. The fence will very rarely be eligible for the National Register as an independent feature under Criterion A or B, although if it contains distinctive design elements (such as a rip-gut fence which is outside the normal area where it may be found) it may be considered eligible under Criterion C. It will be eligible under Criterion D if the fence can be demonstrated to yield

important information in a specific research design. Scraps of fencing, or long strands or wire, that are loose on the ground are not eligible, but this is different from, for example, a buck and rail fence that has deteriorated since the latter retains the integrity of location. In remote areas where the historic context of the fence is not clear, the presence and location of the fence should be noted and its probable association recorded even though it may not be listed as a contributing feature.

## **5. Herder Camps**

### Description:

Because ranchers and their herders for both cattle and sheep have worked livestock throughout the range of the northeast quadrant of Wyoming, the camps of those herders—and the remains of those camps—are common features. While the camping locations of ranch workers who tended the sheep or cattle may appear to lack any physical features or permanence because the camps would move from time to time, those camps were anything but random, and favorite locations were used repeatedly and season after season.

Most of these camps in the Powder River Basin will probably be sheepherder camps, but cowboy drive camps, camps used while working in remote parts of the ranch or grazing area, and also roundup camps during the years of the open range will also be found. Sometimes the sheep and cattle-related camps are difficult to distinguish and the identification of specialized tools or other artifacts (like sheep shears or animal bones) in the area can help identification. One additional complication is that over time, and with sustained use season after season, some of the sites that are ordinarily ephemeral become

relatively built up. In those cases, the site may be well known in the area and those sources of information should be tapped.

Marcel Kornfeld has developed an important analysis of cattle and sheep grazing-related sites in the western Powder River Basin that can guide researchers of historic resources there and more broadly as well. The important distinction that Kornfeld makes is that the strategies for the sheep and cattle operations are different because the cattle ranch activities frequently tend to the livestock as they forage freely over the range and are herded only on special occasion, but the herders (cowboys and others) are kept busy building and repairing fences, checking on cattle for depredation or disease, availability of water, and so on. On the other hand, sheep operations direct the movement and activity of the sheep constantly. Although both cattle and sheep grazing follow transhumant patterns, the human activities related to these patterns are often different and evident in the sites that the herders have left.<sup>8</sup> Kornfeld has thus identified four property subtypes for cattle ranching and three property subtypes for sheep ranching. The ranch headquarters site type has already been described and the requirements stated as in the property type, Ranch / Farm Houses.

#### Property Subtype: Cattle Line Shacks or Camps

These camps are important in the history of cattle ranching and a discussion of Senator Kendrick's ranch in 1926 recalled its history, noting that in the early years of Wyoming cattle ranching, "Some of the big outfits would maintain winter 'line camps' at

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<sup>8</sup> Marcel Kornfeld, "Stockraising Settlement Strategies," M.A. Thesis, University of Wyoming, 1982, 55-66; see also, Kornfeld, "A Model of High Plains and Intermountain Stockraising Settlement Systems," *North American Archaeologist* (1983), 51-62.

the limits of their range, stationing two riders there to keep the cattle, driven before the storm, within their own range.”<sup>9</sup> The line shacks or camps, according to Kornfeld, “are locations from which fences are mended, watering places and pastures are continually monitored, and other management activities take place.”<sup>10</sup> These “camps” may have a modest built shelter and even a corral nearby that will facilitate the work with the livestock.

#### Property Subtype: Cattle Drive Camps

The drive camps are occupied for shorter terms, even nightly, since they are used while moving cattle to a different location—to and from the mountains—and their presence will generally leave a much lighter footprint on the ground than line camps or shacks which are occupied for longer periods. An identifying characteristic is its association with a cattle driveway, and thus also can be connected to a pattern of transhumance.

#### Property Subtype: Cattle Roundup Camps

Roundup sites will be used by cowboys, bosses, and cooks and will often use wagons or tents. Size will be dependent upon the number of cowboys and others involved in the activity, so they can be quite extensive. They can even reach for miles since the different camps had their own horses to graze. Location will be useful in

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<sup>9</sup> Malcolm C. Cutting, “A Cattle Magnate Sits in the Senate; Kendrick of Wyoming Applies Efficiency Methods to the Beef Raising Business and Takes the Gamble Out of It,” *New York Times*, December 19, 1926.

<sup>10</sup> Kornfeld, “Stockraising Settlement Strategies,” 63.

identifying the roundup site since they will be associated with either the autumn roundup for marketing or the spring roundup for branding and castrating. The older roundup sites from the open range days will typically be distributed in a pattern as the wranglers worked their way progressively farther down the major drainages. On large ranches dating from the 1930s or possibly earlier, roundup camps can even have built features. Ida McPherran wrote that in the 1930s on small ranches, the cowboys would eat at the ranch headquarters, “while the larger outfits have permanent camps established where the crew stops during roundup time.”<sup>11</sup>

Property Subtype: Sheep Outfit Central Camp

The central camp is different from the residence of the ranch owner, which is often the functioning headquarters of the ranch, and is generally located in town. The central camp is located on the ranch and will generally be identified by built structures (such as the pens and chutes identified in Auxiliary Ranch / Farm Buildings and Structures) and will often serve as a site for spring shearing and docking other activities. A key functional characteristic of the central camp is its access to herder camps so that it can supply the herders and sheep with both scheduled deliveries of supplies and other attention as needs arise. Those camps are not necessarily located in proximity to foraging and watering locations. The central sheepherder camp may include some kind of cabin, outbuildings, wood and refuse piles, and shearing / docking / shipping facilities.

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<sup>11</sup> Ida McPherran, “Ranches of Sheridan Valley,” typescript in WPA Collections, File

**Property Subtype: Shearing Facility**

The shearing facility will sometimes be separate from the central camp and sometimes part of it. The older and smaller shearing facilities will be open-air arrangements while the larger and more recent facilities will be enclosed, though with some provision for adequate ventilation. One common feature, though not necessary, of large, open-air facilities is the presence of some sort of canopy to provide shade for the shearers. Some sites may, of course, have just the shearing / docking / shipping features.

**Property Subtype: Shepherdder Camp**

The individual herder camps are sometimes difficult to identify and the more abundant since the herders tend to move frequently to keep the sheep moving to fresh foraging areas. Kornfeld reports that “frequently, the only archeological remain is a hearth,” but some camps may even contain “small one room cabins.”<sup>12</sup> Grazing and watering will be nearby almost by definition. And the seasonal location of these camps will correspond to the transhumant pattern of the sheep strategy itself—mountainous summer pastures, basin and range winter pastures, and protected areas for spring lambing. Although the shepherdder camps and the cattle drive camps are sometimes next-to-impossible to differentiate, the location of items such as sheep shears, sheep remains, and shepherdder monuments can aid identification.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Kornfeld, “Stockraising Settlement Strategies,”57.

<sup>13</sup> Kornfeld, “Stockraising Settlement Strategies,”80-98.

Significance:

In an area like the Powder River Basin where the physical dimensions of the range over which cattle and sheep would graze were vast, the livestock and ranch facilities (like wells and windmills and fences) could be maintained best by sending workers to the various parts of the ranch (and leased or otherwise accessed areas of public land) on a temporary or rotational basis (for cattle) or a continuing basis (for sheep). Indeed, these remote activities of ranching rather than the activities that took place at the ranch headquarters often provide the enduring icons of both sheep and cattle ranching and for good reason. The livestock came to the headquarters only at select times, the majority of the time having been spent in the outlying districts of the ranch or grazing area. These camp sites thus provide a critical association with the livestock industry and a valuable point for understanding and documenting the history of that industry and individual ranches.

Registration Requirements:

Property Subtype: Cattle Line Shacks or Camps

Requirement: The site must retain a visible association with the cattle ranching activity of which it was a part. This can be established by some combination of the structure itself and its design and materials, the presence of artifacts like fencing materials, veterinary supplies, and other cattle-related activities, its location, and even its conspicuous presence in an area known as a base for remote activity and its proximity to fences, trails, dams, and other features that required maintenance. Eligibility under

Criterion A will be demonstrated by making that concrete association with reference to specific ranches and boundaries and activities and eligibility under Criterion D will be demonstrated if the site can be shown to yield potentially important information with the use of a specific research design.

Property Subtype: Cattle Drive Camps

Requirement: The cattle drive camp must be located on or near a known or demonstrated driveway and to be eligible under Criterion A the destination of the driveway must be clear, even if in general terms (e.g., Shell Creek pasture area, pens on Recluse Road, etc.) or it can be associated with a known major cattle trail (such as Texas Trail) or one of its tributaries. The use of the area as a cattle drive camp will presumably exclude other uses, such as for sheep, but if a site was used by both sheep and cattle at different times, that would need to be demonstrated with reference to changing land use patterns. Eligibility under Criterion D will be demonstrated if the site can be shown to yield potentially important information with the use of a specific research design.

Property Subtype: Cattle Roundup Camps

Requirement: Because cattle roundup camps were very busy places, because of the multitude of activities and peoples associated with them, and because they were customarily used and re-used year after year, or season after season, identification should not be speculative and can be based on size, location, artifacts, and historic sources. To be eligible under Criterion A, the roundup activity must be located in time and in the context of cattle grazing at that time. As with other campsites, the roundup camp will be

demonstrated eligible if it can be shown to yield potentially important information in a well-articulated research design. Roundup sites that were used in years after the demise of the open range will include some of the following: corral, fences, loading ramp (indicating activity after the advent of trucks on the range), trash dump, and hearth.

Property Subtype: Sheep Outfit Central Camp

Requirement: The function of the camp must be plainly visible by the structures it contains, such as shearing pens or even lambing pens and the complexity of the site will separate it from shearing facilities in the field. The presence of identifiable routes to sheep herding areas from the facility will contribute to the functional identification of the site, but are not necessary for eligibility under Criterion A. The completeness of the facility so that the different steps of the process can be identified enhances the integrity of the site. Criterion D eligibility will require a clear research design to demonstrate the utility and value of the information to be gained.

Property Subtype: Shearing Facility

The shearing facility need not be large, and it can be as simple as a one-person operation, but some of the stages of shearing must be evident (i.e., the chute or pen containing the sheep to be sheared and a system by which they can be diverted into the shearing area, the way in which the fleeces were sacked, and then a system for loading the sacks onto a wagon or truck). Not all steps in the process need to be complete, although integrity is enhanced by the presence of more of the full system.

**Property Subtype: Shepherd Camp**

The physical remains must be identifiable with herding and other uses excluded (unless it is also significant for associations with those other uses) and the location of the site within the specific pattern of transhumance, within the precise “feature system,” of which it was a part, must be explicit and demonstrable. Criterion D is especially appropriate with the shepherd camp, but to be eligible under that criterion, the research design must indicate the kind and value of information anticipated.

**6. Cemeteries and Graves**Description

Graves and cemeteries are resting places for the dead that may range from burial sites with simple (or deteriorated or even nonexistent) markers to elaborate markers and fenced borders.

Significance:

Graves and cemeteries are not exclusively associated with homestead / ranching / farming activities, but they sometimes formed a part of life on those ranches and homesteads and can be found in complexes that are eligible for the National Register. They sometimes appear as small family plots near the ranch or even at special locations on the land owned and used by the operation.

Registration Requirements:

It is important to note that burial places are not ordinarily eligible, but if a burial place is located within or near otherwise eligible features of a ranch / farm / homestead complex, the burial places can be considered a contributing feature under Criterion A.

## **7. Shepherdder Monuments**

### Description:

Shepherdder monuments are cairns located at scattered and prominent points where sheep range, usually constructed by herders who stack flat rocks atop one another.

### Significance:

Shepherdder monuments are closely associated with livestock grazing practices but the relationship has not been conclusively documented. Increasing speculation suggests that they were only partially the product of idle time recreation on the part of a herder and were more significantly practical markers indicating campsites and other locations.

### Registration Requirements:

Shepherdder monuments may be eligible for the National Register under Criterion D if they can be shown to yield potentially important information with the use of a specific research design.

## **8. Privies and Dumps**

### Description:

Privies and dumps are grouped together because they share as common

depositories of ranch / homestead / farm refuse.

Significance:

The artifacts contained in material cast off in the period of historic significance are capable of providing information about daily life significance on a ranch / homestead.

Registration Requirements:

The privies and dumps will be eligible under Criterion D if they can be shown to yield potentially important information with the use of a specific research design. The site must retain its integrity of location.

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