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REFERENCE SERIES

**OWYHEE HORSE AND CATTLE RANCHES (NINETEENTH CENTURY)**

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Like many other parts of Idaho, Owyhee County had an unusual early history. Experiences of early ranchers naturally reflected other aspects of local history there. For more than three weeks early in 1864, Owyhee County had a far greater area than really was needed to accommodate some early miners around Ruby City, mostly along Jordan Creek and on War Eagle Mountain, where unbelievable silver discoveries--some of them far richer than Nevada's celebrated Comstock lode, but much more limited in extent--were just beginning. In that brief initial phase, Owyhee County was about as large as Kentucky, Ohio, Virginia, or Tennessee, and thus could match a reasonable sized eastern state in area. Along with a distant Mormon town of Franklin (north of Salt Lake), Owyhee's mining communities were small spots in a vast area that included about as much of present Wyoming as land that remained in Idaho. South Pass (an Oregon Trail landmark) along with a lot of later Yellowstone National Park and Jackson Hole, and all of Green River in Wyoming were part of original Owyhee County. But Idaho's legislature quickly (after three week's more contemplation) reduced Owyhee County to a somewhat more manageable size of 12,000 square miles--still larger than eight existing states. Finally in 1879, Owyhee County was reduced to something close to its present size. It still is larger than New Jersey.

As late as 1860, no one had settled in Owyhee County, and at that time Stephen A. Douglas (an Illinois senator in charge of arranging for new territorial governments who became Democratic candidate for president that year) was confident that not enough people would settle in Owyhee County or in other parts of southern Idaho to need a territorial government for another half century--until around 1910. Then in 1862 a Boise Basin gold rush began, and that situation changed abruptly. Within less than a year, a mining stampede to Owyhee started a new era. By 1864, when ranching could begin, Owyhee County was organized and ready for settlement in areas adjacent to mining communities. Even yet, though, almost all of Owyhee County can be occupied only by an Indian reservation and some scattered ranches. Some narrow strips along parts of Snake River have towns and irrigated farms. But ranches offered a reasonable opportunity for potential settlers to occupy other lands.

Most early nineteenth century Pacific Northwest cattle came from Spanish sources in California, but in 1841, Hudson's Bay Company authorities imported more attractive beef varieties from England to their lower Columbia farms. Some of these joined Spanish cattle in places like Fort Boise and Fort Hall before those sites were abandoned as fur trade and Oregon Trail supply centers. As an Owyhee River base, Fort Boise became an initial Owyhee ranching center.

Shortly after 1840, emigrant cattle added variety to Fort Boise's stock. Many Oregon Trail oxen and other cattle could not manage to go any farther, at least in one season, so they became an important source for Owyhee--as well as many other Idaho area--ranching activities. Prior to major Boise Basin gold discoveries in 1862, practically no one aside from Indians paid serious attention to occupying Owyhee ranch lands, but mining activities transformed that situation abruptly. A mining rush to Jordan Creek followed a year later, so local markets for ranching products brought a new era of horse, sheep, and cattle ranching to that suddenly prosperous area.

A large influx of cattle from Willamette Valley reached a number of Boise and Owyhee gold rush areas in 1863 and 1864, and local cattle ranches suddenly emerged in those areas. By 1866 and 1867 cattle herds from Sacramento valley ranches around Red Bluff also were supplying Owyhee miners who created a significant market.

By 1868, construction of railroads in Utah and Nevada began to transform cattle ranching practices in Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. A transition in Willamette Valley from cattle ranching to farming also became evident in 1868. Eastern Oregon, eastern Washington, and Idaho cattle ranches expanded to replace earlier western Oregon sources for sheep, cattle, and horses. Then in 1869, a series of annual cattle drives from Texas helped to diversify Owyhee ranch stock. By 1870, a good number of Owyhee cattle growers who had commenced operating there as destitute emigrants had become prosperous ranchers. By 1874, they were opening large Owyhee export markets in Arizona and California for cattle and horses driven to Winnemucca for rail shipment to new homes. That development, however, reflected declining prices and losses incurred during a severe national economic panic of 1873.

Long cattle drives began by 1876 from eastern Oregon and Washington across Oregon Trail routes to Cheyenne and other railroad shipping places in Wyoming or Nebraska. Outlets in processing centers like Kansas City, Omaha, or Chicago could be found without much difficulty as cattle buyers used to turn up along those routes. That system reduced freight costs and provided grazing opportunities along roads that reduced depletion of grass resources in northwestern ranching areas. Owyhee ranchers took advantage of such opportunities. Midwestern farmers took advantage of Owyhee cattle sources to acquire stock they could fatten for market. During that era, northwestern producers also stocked cattle ranches in Colorado and Wyoming. By 1882, with an approximation of its present boundaries, Owyhee County had 24,559 cattle, 15,150 sheep, and 2,046 horses. These livestock accounted for about half of its total assessed valuation. Together with private lands and buildings, these values indicated that ranching already exceeded mining, farming, transportation, and all other activities in economic significance before railroad construction brought a new era to that area's history.

A new era in Owyhee cattle ranching came by 1884 with completion of transcontinental rail service from Portland to midwestern Union Pacific lines. Along with Washington and Oregon distributors, they could ship directly to remote markets. Sheep and cattle still managed to take summer grazing tours to places like Cheyenne, but a lot of Oregon Trail grassland had been lost over a period of four decades of emigrant travel. So new alternatives had to be employed to preserve ranching opportunities. Instigated by those developments, ranchers from Baker County, Oregon and Elko County, Nevada met with Idaho cattle growers at Silver City in 1883 to organize a regional cattle owners association. Another national financial panic of 1884 restricted ranching possibilities for a time, and a still worse national panic of 1893 contributed

additional economic disorder.

During that era after 1884, ranchers showed more interest in gaining title to their grazing lands instead of utilizing public domain. President Grover Cleveland's Interior Department administrators began to oppose land frauds and unrestricted use of forest and grazing resources on public lands. Places like Silver City began to protect themselves by taking up an unpatented mining claim for a townsite, and ranchers started to hold desert land act or homestead claims. From then on, they gained stability that came with permanent ranching opportunities. Some of them also dealt more in horses, although with automobiles gaining currency, their horse market took on a very different aspect not long after 1910. But during that time, many major Owyhee cattle ranches avoided a transition (popular elsewhere) to farm operations. Remote from major irrigation canal projects, they preserved a traditional ranch culture that gives them a special historical significance of their own.

A vast tract of arid ranch land extends from Owyhee County through Arizona and beyond, with occasional intrusions (mostly along rivers) to accommodate places like Reno and Las Vegas. Farther west, much of Oregon forms part of that terrain. Even if a number of substantial eastern states (such as New York, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Virginia, and North and South Carolina) are combined, their area fails to match this domain of ranch land. Except for scattered mining tracts (which occupy very little territory) and occasional high elevation forests, little economic development can be managed aside from ranching. Early transportation routes, with small enterprises like stage stations, crossed this area. But aside from Indian sites, its cultural resources, with exceptions for relatively small tracts, tended to be oriented to ranching.

Arid ranch land that could not be developed into extensive farms did not support any kind of dense population. Several ranches often could be grouped in a valley with an appropriate water source, while others might be located far from any neighbors. So a standard feature of early Owyhee ranches was their broad distribution and frequent isolation. Ranch buildings would be concentrated around a home base, where owners might eventually secure title to a small tract or two, but their ranch lands extended over large, unfenced tracts of public domain that were utilized only by custom. Ranch products varied over time and place, but cattle predominated in earlier years. Any ranch would have had horses--at least for local use. Extensive sheep herds developed as time went on in some areas with combined sheep and cattle operations a feature of more ambitious projects. A number of Owyhee ranches grew to accommodate large herds--but they remained as individual family units. Some ranchers became wealthy employers of cowboys and other staff, but they got that way as successful individual operators. Although most early arid ranching valleys attracted settlers who came in response to initial marketing opportunities offered by mining camps, ranchers found that they could spread out over a vast territory because they could make long sheep or cattle drives to distant railroad centers. Mobility of their cattle, from places like California and Texas, allowed them to occupy grazing lands far from gold camps that gave them their initial impetus. Owyhee ranchers profited from that feature of their economy, as did other operators over a vast, but similar, area.

Between 1920 and 1942 (when wartime travel restrictions interrupted motor vehicle service over roads that ran substantial distances), automobile and truck traffic provided access to remote Owyhee County ranches. Highways or any kind of paved roads did not penetrate that livestock interior, but ranches could be reached with faster and more convenient equipment than

wagons or pack strings. As time went on, ranches had to depend less upon local families that needed schools and other facilities: transient herders could be supplied from distant communities, and livestock could be transported by trucks, so herds did not have to rely upon uninterrupted grazing lands along their entire route to railroad lines or to Idaho markets. Sheep and cattle empires continued to flourish during times that commercial markets provided economic incentives to stock raisers. An era of severe agricultural depression after 1920 prevailed for several years. Then a still more severe economic depression after 1929 restricted livestock operations for another decade. Then when wartime markets improved, travel was curtailed. But ranching operations survived all of that information.

**(This information has not been edited.)**