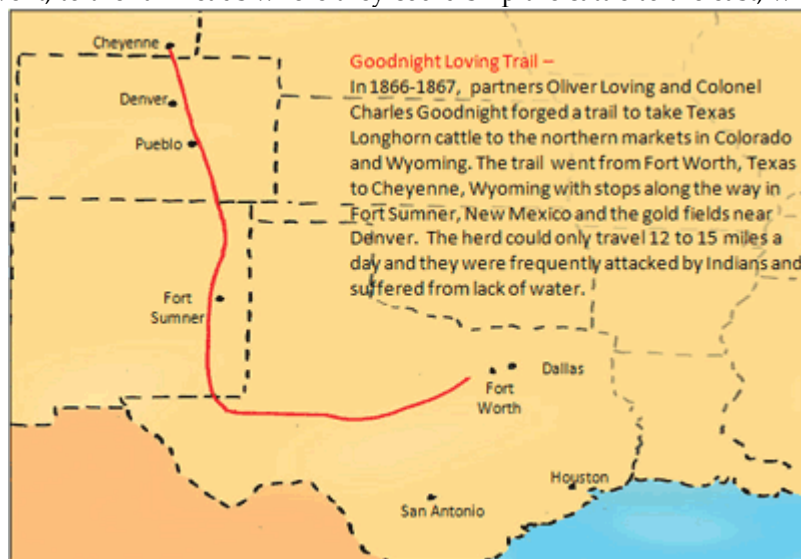


History of Wyoming Cattle Ranches

Between 1840 and 1867, thousands of Americans crossed Wyoming on the Oregon Trail, bound for Oregon or California. Migration began as a trickle, but with the discovery of gold in California in 1848, the trickle became a flood. Although thousands of Americans crossed Wyoming during this period, very few stayed in this harsh region.

The event that brought settlers to Wyoming was the coming of the Union Pacific Railroad. Railroad towns such as Cheyenne, Laramie, Rawlins, Rock Springs, and Evanston sprang up as the transcontinental railroad leapfrogged across the region in 1867 and 1868. By the late 1870s, Wyoming became a center for cattlemen and foreign investors who hoped to make a fortune from free grass and the high price of cattle. Thousands of Texas longhorn cattle were driven to the southeastern quarter of the Wyoming territory. During this time cowboys and cattlemen could put a herd together in Texas and travel north, grazing the cattle as they went, to the rail heads where they could ship the cattle to the east, where



demand for beef was high.

In 1887 cattle ranching became the biggest business in the Wyoming territory. Wyoming became a state in 1890, but population growth was slow. Attempts at farming proved unsuccessful in this high, arid region, and Wyoming to this day remains a sparsely settled ranching state.

A few people saw the opportunity to use the prairies, foothills and mountain meadows for grazing and ranching. Ranchers hired young men to help round up and care for the cattle. They called the cow herders "cowboys, cowpokes, cowpunchers, buckaroos and vaqueros." Ranchers worked together to round up the cattle with the help of cowboys. The cowboys would ride out and move the cattle to a central location. While riding well-trained horses, the cowboys would sort the different ranches' cattle and attempt to keep the herds apart. Then the cowboys would rope and brand their ranch's cattle so they could identify who owned which cows and calves.

As more people homesteaded, farmed and settled in Wyoming the period of open range ranching (huge areas of unfenced land which was free for anyone to use) came to a close. Barbed wire fences began to mark private land and divide the range into smaller units.

(City-Data.com, 2010)

What is Cattle Ranching?

Cattle ranching can be described as..."the year-round care of cows and bulls for the purpose of producing calves to raise and sell," but it's really much more. Ranchers must also be stewards of the land, caring for soils, grasses, other plants, wildlife habitat and water.

There's also another way to describe what ranchers do for you. Range and pasture land is used by the rancher to collect sunlight. That sunlight, soil and some water grow grasses and other plants. We might like to look out and see those open spaces, but we can't eat those plants. The rancher uses cows to harvest those grasses and turn the grass into a source of high-protein food and other by-products we can use. Today, Wyoming's cattle industry is the state's largest agricultural industry and cattle production is the largest segment of American agriculture. Agricultural animals have always made a major contribution to the welfare of human societies by providing food, shelter, fuel, fertilizer and many other products and services.

Cattle ranchers (and all livestock owners) work very hard to take proper care of their animals. They provide the cattle with nutritious food like hay, grain and corn; clean water, shelter and medical care. In today's cattle industry, a successful rancher wears many hats – cowboy, herdsman, nutritionist, businessperson, land manager and financial manager among others.

Today's cattle ranching in Wyoming

Wyoming agriculture helps feed the world, provides wildlife habitat, protects the environment and helps fuel the state economy. Today, Wyoming ranches and farms produce, raise, care for and sell approximately 1,350,000 head of cattle. This represents about \$1.23 billion and accounts for 61 percent of all cash receipts in Wyoming. In 2010, 11,000 farms and ranches were operating in Wyoming with a total land area of 30.1 million acres. Wyoming ranks 11th in the nation in total land in farms and ranches and first in average size of farms and ranches.

The majority of Wyoming's ranches and farms that raise cattle are from 50 to 179 acres. The next highest group has 2,000 acres of land or more. More than 80% of Wyoming ranches are family or privately owned. The average age of Wyoming's farmers and ranchers is 57 years but the majority of them are 70 years or older! They employ almost 10,000 people. The majority of ranching and farming families make less than \$25,000 per year. Profits, if and when they exist, are put back into the business and ultimately back into the land.

How do cattle help our environment?

Grazing exists in harmony with range, forest and grassland ecosystems. In fact, grazing benefits ecosystems. Grasses have evolved with animals eating them and grazing helps the plants grow strong and healthy in the same way that you help your lawn grow when you mow it. Similar to an aerator, the cow's hooves are able to break the top crust of the soil and allow more moisture and nutrients to reach the plant's roots. Breaking up the soil also allows plant seeds a place to germinate and start growing. Grazing cattle is a good tool for managing grasses in range, forest and grassland ecosystems.

Ranching is different than it was 100, 50, 20, even 10 years ago. Today, success in the ranching business requires the rancher to be a conservationist. Ranchers need to be good land and water managers.

Ranchers and wildlife managers share the same goal – a healthy grassland resource. Through sound management techniques, wildlife and livestock can co-exist. The key is “managed” grazing. Both livestock and wildlife, when left unmanaged, can do harm to the land.

While many ranchers still ride horses, they also drive pickups and use computers, the Internet, fax machines and other current technologies. The modern rancher, schooled in range science, is a grass manager. They understand how, in the arid West, damaged habitats can take from 25 to 200 years to recover. In some respects, the rancher is the caretaker of the land for America. Since the federal government cannot afford to employ enough people to manage the almost half-billion acres of federal land in the West, it partners with ranchers using their expertise to manage the land.

Ranchers depend on healthy natural resources for their livelihood. They use environmental practices that conserve and improve natural resources. This improves the productivity of the land and makes good business sense. This is especially true as ranches are passed on from generation to generation. Cattlemen and women participate in many environmental practices. These practices include developing water systems, using rotational grazing, planting trees and many more. They know that if they are to survive and pass their ranch on to their children, they must take care of the land they depend on.

Ranchers – avoiding wear and tear on range land and plants

Grazing land is found coast to coast. About one-half of the land in the United States is pasture and range land. Most of this grazing land is too high, too rough, too steep, too dry, too wet or too fragile to grow cultivated agricultural crops. Although these areas aren't suitable for cultivated crops, they often are perfect for grazing. Cattle can roam the land and convert these otherwise inedible and inaccessible plant resources into food and other products for people.

Beef cattle spend most of their lives on pasture and range. Grazing is a natural biologic process and a fundamental part of the food chain on planet Earth.

Most ranchers manage their herds to encourage plant growth by carefully managing herd size as well as timing and duration of grazing. Controlled and rotational grazing limit soil erosion while allowing stimulation of grass and plant growth. It is similar to mowing a lawn. Ranchers also manage the grass knowing that there is wildlife roaming and grazing the land.

Above article provided by [Wyoming Agriculture in the Classroom](#)