

The Hard Winter of 1886 and 1887 Dwan Green

It has been almost thirty years since the author of this paper, while enroute to the Black Hills, met an aging rancher, probably in his seventies, during the late 1970s. It was late June in the Pine Ridge and Toadstools (badlands) of northwestern Nebraska. Meeting Albert Meng was one of those things that happened for no reason and I had no idea just how much it would alter my life. I was not really lost (maybe just confused) and he let me drive my old International Scout all over his ranch. The International Harvester slogan of the day was “scout the America others pass by” and I was determined to do my best.

The old rancher was an incredible storyteller, and I was treated to tales of the Cheyenne Outbreak, the death of Crazy Horse, the Battle of Warbonnet Creek (the site I had been looking for) and what he called “The Winter of the White Death.” What followed was a most dramatic account of the hot and dry summer of 1886 when prairie fires swept parched grasslands and blackened them beyond repair. Tiny creeks and small rivers became only ribbons of water or vanished altogether. By late summer there were no longer enough beaver to dam and hold the precious water. By fall most animals had thicker coats than normal and wild fowl headed south earlier than usual. The warning signs had been there. From November through February bitter cold continued, with blizzard after blizzard, until the snow lay packed to six feet on the open range. Temperatures were said to have dropped to -40°F, -50°F and even -60°F. White snowy owls were said to have come down from Hudson Bay, the first time in white mans memory. Coulees and breaks where cattle may have survived were full of hard crusted snow. Wolves and coyotes grew fat feasting on half frozen cattle stuck in drifts. Starving pronghorns lost their fear of man and wandered into settlements. Meng described ranchers imprisoned in their homes by arctic temperatures that could do little or nothing to save weakened stock. Some, he said, tried to fight the blizzards to save a portion of their herds and lost their lives in “white outs”, sometimes only feet from their doors. I could almost see the thousands of half frozen cattle floating down high plains rivers when winter’s grip finally broke.¹ I never saw Albert Meng again.

¹ Albert Meng, conversation with author, Montrose, NE., June 22, 1978.

There have been many hard northern winters; the winter of 1919-1920, 1935-1936, 1948-1949, and 1967-1968, were extreme. The terrible winter of 1886-1887 is most often remembered because of the tremendous destruction to livestock that occurred. Although the winter of 1885-1886 had been a mild one in both Montana and Dakota Territories, it had been severe in Texas and the southern plains.

In western Kansas, January of 1886 is considered the worst on record with stock losses up to 85 percent along with the loss of settler lives. In some areas cattle were grazed at four times what the range could handle.²

Cheyenne County, Kansas lies as far northwest as one can go without stepping foot in either Colorado or Nebraska. Among many tragic occurrences on the plains of the county occurred on January 7, 1886, when Isaac Cherry and two other men lost their lives in the fiercest blizzard on record in the county. When they headed for Goodland, the sun was shining with no danger in sight as far as the weather was concerned. Only miles before their planned stop for the night, "a furious blizzard came upon them from the north." From all reports Mr. Cherry died on a sled and the other two men strapped him to the seat and tried to guide the team. Three days later, the three men and team were found dead. Mr. Cherry was on the sled and the horses were also frozen to death but standing upright.³ Kansas and eastern Colorado had two hard winters in a row. For some the first one was a warning and as 1886 rolled on, many northern stockmen prayed for a both mild summer and open winter for 1886-1887.

The temperature the following summer was reported at 108°F in Miles City, Montana (Miles City often reaches 110°F in late July or August). Range fires were more numerous than usual. Streams as large as Rosebud Creek stopped flowing. Grasshoppers formed dark clouds on the grasslands. Any autumn rains came too late to save the grass. Plains cottonwoods grew thicker and tougher bark, while cattle put on thicker and shaggier coats. On October 22, a huge prairie fire was accompanied by high northwesterly winds, which charred twenty square miles of prime prairie grassland near North Platte, Nebraska. Besides the rangeland, 1,500 tons of hay had been lost, along with many miles of fencing.⁴ To this point the weather had been warm, dry and clear, with greater extremes of both heat and cold.⁵ The Nebraska Weather Service at Doane College, (Crete), reported the temperature for the month had been about three degrees above normal with less rain fall since 1878, being about half the expected amount. North Platte ranged from 77.8°F to 25.6°F, with Dodge City from 86.4°F to 28.3°F.⁶ There had been only small amounts

² Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 1979), 83.

³ *Cheyenne Land and its Heritage* (St. Francis, KS: St. Francis Herald, 1972), N.P.

⁴ United States Signal Service: *Monthly Weather Review* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1886), 295.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 301.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 291.

of snow in Montana and Wyoming.⁷ Wellington, Kansas reported the driest November during the previous eight years.

On November 15, North Platte endured a snowstorm from early evening until late the next day, with forty mile per hour winds and snowdrifts from six to eight feet deep. By November 16 and 17, Omaha reported fourteen inches of snow, with some trains delayed.⁸ Dodge City, Kansas recorded a range from 73°F to 7.3°F degrees for November of 1886.⁹

In Dakota a severe drought had begun during late June and lasted through November 1. In addition, the region had suffered from many prairie fires that devastated much ground cover.¹⁰ Fort Robinson, located in far northwestern Nebraska, recorded an extreme range of between 72°F to -13°F during November. Fort Meade, situated just north of the Black Hills, had also plunged to -13°F.¹¹ The Nebraska Weather Service reported an extreme range of highs and lows with the highest snow depth for November, all having fallen during the storm of November 16 to 18.¹² By December 18, Fort Keogh (Miles City, MT.) had dropped to -30°F, while having reached a pleasant 55°F. In Dakota, Fort Yates posted a frigid -44°F, and Fort Niobrara, located just below Dakota, plummeted to -18°F.¹³

The mercury in the southern plains did not fare much better and in southern Kansas, Wellington reported a record of -20°F on January 3.¹⁴ On February 1, the Signal Service at Fort Assinaboine, Montana, near Havre, submitted a reading of -55.4°F. An unofficial -63°F was reported from a ranch in eastern Montana. At Helena the mercury ranged from -61.0°F to -40.5°F, a range of 101.5 degrees in only one month.¹⁵ While it is often extremely cold in this region, these February readings were a full ten to twenty degrees below the normal extremes.¹⁶

From Huron, in eastern Dakota, “during the first decade of the month many trains on the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad were delayed.” On February 11, the road to the east of Huron became completely blocked by heavy compact snow, and on February 13 no trains arrived from the east or west. The track between Huron and Chicago remained closed until the end of the month. The snow was said to be too compact to yield to the force of snowplows. “The continued succession of ‘blizzards’ and deep snow, with very low temperatures even for this region, have been disastrous to every interest,

⁷ Ibid., 287.

⁸ Ibid., 317.

⁹ Ibid., 326.

¹⁰ Ibid. North and South Dakota achieved statehood in 1889.

¹¹ Ibid., 329. The Signal Service was part of the War Department and post surgeons often reported weather.

¹² Ibid., 331.

¹³ Ibid., 351.

¹⁴ United States Signal Service: *Monthly Weather Review* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1887), 11.

¹⁵ Ibid., 43.

¹⁶ Ibid., 42.

especially along the line of the Northern Pacific Railroad in Dakota and Montana, where heavy mortality among cattle had occurred.” On February 3, the mercury at Poplar River, Montana, hit -44.6°F, with strong westerly winds prevailing. The monthly average temperature for Poplar River was a brutal -8.5°F. “Numbers of cattle in the vicinity were said to have perished from cold.”¹⁷ It was feared that both settlers and herders lives would be lost. On February 8, at a stage station near Valentine, Nebraska, a severe snow storm was reported with winds at 52 miles per hour all day and drifts of four to ten feet deep. A soldier and five settlers froze to death only six miles from the station.¹⁸ Although the northern and central plains could be a land of savage extremes in many seasons, summers were usually mild.

During the early years of ranching, Montana was a wonderful, healthful country for cattle. Fresh air, clear water, and moderate summer heat with ample forage kept stock strong and disease resistant, though when the range became overstocked, contagious disease appeared. Most rainfall fell during late May, June and July, being sufficient to insure a good stand of native grasses. Billings and Miles City, Montana receive only around twelve inches of rain, while Fort Robinson and the Indian reservations of Dakota, west of the Missouri, average about sixteen inches of rain annually. Due to long northern days and little August rain, by fall grass was cured standing on the stem and considered equal to the finest hay. Two of the greatest dangers were summer droughts that prevented growth and a deep snowfall that crusted. Although either could be disastrous, it seldom happened. The best ranges were already at the saturation point. Over 100,000 head had been driven to Montana from the south. By 1886, prices were very low and many cattle that would have been sold were held over on the range, depleting forage.

In such dry country, where grass was everything, there had always been great danger from dry lightning. Cowboys become very skilled firefighters and were formed into fire brigades. The prime method of fighting fires was to kill a steer, cut its back, tie ropes to front and hind feet, attach it to saddle horns and drag the carcass along the burning grass. The blood and moisture from the entrails of the steer would smother the fire.¹⁹

Much of the vast grasslands were still in the public domain; giant herds (some owned by foreign interests) fattened on lands belonging to the American people. A stockman could neither buy nor lease from the government, but could claim possession of his range by simply publishing the limits of the range and brand in the nearest newspaper. The only problem was enforcing it.²⁰ By late 1886 and early 1887, many open range cattle would be alone and far from care.

¹⁷ Ibid., 44.

¹⁸ Ibid., 29. Valentine is just below South Dakota.

¹⁹ James M. Hamilton, *History of Montana: From Wilderness to Statehood* (Portland, OR., Binford and Mort Publishers, 1957), 396.

²⁰ Bruce Nelson, *Land of the Dakotahs* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 208.

During the first week of February 1887, a man received a letter from a friend living on a 5,000 acre ranch in central Montana's Judith Basin, near Lewistown. "Were having the worst weather ever heard of in this country. For the last six days the mercury has been from 20 to 40 below zero and storming most of the time...It is so cold that when an animal lies down their legs freeze... I think from 25 to 40 percent of the cattle in this range will die." In the same letter he advised his friend to "sell an interest in your Texans...and you had better do it for I think you will lose all that are not fed, and a large percent of those that are fed." On the very day the letter was written the temperature plunged to a Siberian -55.4°F at Fort Assinaboine in north central Montana and -40.5°F at Helena.²¹

For the stockmen of Montana, much like those in other areas, the winter of 1880-1881 had been a rough one, but the heavy snow produced a fine crop of grass. This was the first warning that stockmen should provide shelter and feed, but was laughed down in the rush to capitalize on the huge beef boom. Ranchers knew they needed to divert all the water they could to meadows in order to raise ample quantities of hay. A few large outfits did begin haying operations and small irrigation projects, but most just gambled. Many felt a loss of 5 to 10 percent was not all that bad. Many "pilgrims" from Texas and the Midwest were brought in late in the season and were too weak, unfit by breeding or acclimation to endure a hard northern winter. To make matters worse, some were not accustomed to foraging for themselves.²²

By Valentine's Day it was thought a loss of 75 to 80 percent was possible on the Musselshell (flows between the Yellowstone and Missouri, then north into the Missouri). The good news was that only 10 percent had been lost so far in the Judith Basin, however, there were very heavy sheep losses.²³ Sheep could switch from range to range much faster than cattle, but required greater care.²⁴ Musselshell ranchers were "falling cottonwood trees for horses to feed upon." Another rancher on Wolf Creek in northeast Montana had lost about three hundred heifers he had bought in the fall of 1886. The Signal Corps reported snow had fallen in the "northern slope" region, which included Deadwood, Cheyenne, North Platte, Fort Laramie and Montana stations, all but three days in February. By March of 1887, it became apparent that the imported cattle had been a horrible gamble. One rancher said he did all in his power to save them and many died while being fed and sheltered. He had no doubts of the outcome of those out on the range.²⁵ In the spring of 1887, the Chinook they called "Gentle Annie" arrived one month and thousands of cattle too late. The snow finally melted and the hide buyers fought over the remains

²¹ Barbara F. Rackley, "The Hard Winter 1886-1887," *Montana, The Magazine of Western History* 21 (1971): 50-51.

²² *Ibid.*, 52.

²³ *Ibid.*, 58.

²⁴ Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation And The Gospel Of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999), 54.

²⁵ Rackley, "The Hard Winter 1886-1887", 58.

of once great herds. Many of the old, weather-beaten skeletons were ground up into meal for fertilizer, while the choice ones went for buttons, combs and fancy bone knife handles.²⁶

After "Gentle Annie," ranch manager Granville Stuart thought "the rancher with a good body of hay and from one to two hundred head of cattle was the man that profited", for "in the spring he was able to buy cattle cheap." As a result, recalled one old-timer in Wyoming, "In some instances the little cattlemen of the 80's remained in business and are the big men of today."²⁷ Stuart estimated his losses at 60 percent. This placed him in the group of large outfits with the heaviest losses. The terrible winter marked the end for Stuart and his herd.

From Helena, Montana, Kaufman and Stadler inquired of their foreman in the Judith Basin the extent of their losses. One of the outfit's young riders was Charley Russell, a then little known cowhand from Missouri. On a postal card he painted a skeleton of a starving steer and a grimly waiting coyote that was first known as "Waiting on a Chinock." This was later re-named "The Last of Five Thousand."²⁸

On September 3, 1887, the *Yellowstone Journal* reported: "The small stockmen are very much encouraged this year. Their cattle were within reach all the time and loss was nominal. This winter they will more than ever before close herd them, having learned by experience that care and plenty of hay is the proper care."²⁹

The view from Wyoming was that winter losses and stock shrinkage were part of the open range system. During a hard winter a cow might drop from 1,100 to 800 or 900 pounds and "the usable meat in a typical steer was only about 55 percent of its body weight."³⁰ It was thought better to lose three or four head out of one hundred than to cut, put out hay, provide shelter, hire herders and other hands to haul feed and cut holes in the ice. As noted before, the winter of 1880-1881 had been a bad one and cattle were dying from lack of feed and water in several parts of Wyoming. By February of "81" many were browsing on shade trees and dying in the streets of Laramie, yet, this was quickly forgotten over the next few years. The popular image of cowboys trailing cattle down from high summer pastures after the first heavy snowfall to sheltered areas near the home ranch was likely to belong to the smaller outfits.

One major cause of stock loss rarely mentioned was the difficulty of open range cattle to find water. In 1885, Governor Warren of Wyoming stated "probably four times as many cattle die for want of water as for want of food." Once again in 1887, Governor Thomas Moonlight reported, "I am convinced

²⁶ Wayne Gard, *The Great Buffalo Hunt* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959), 296.

²⁷ Leland Stuart, "The Winter of 1886-1887 - The Last of Whose 5,000?" *Montana, The Magazine of Western History* (Winter 1988): 37-38.

²⁸ Nelson, *Land*, 218.

²⁹ Stuart, "The Winter of 1886-1887," 34.

³⁰ William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), 236.

from conversations with practical cattlemen and what I have seen that losses from want of a sufficiency of water are greater than from [want of a] sufficiency of food.”³¹ Ice shards cut the legs of the cattle seeking water where they broke through the ice. Many anxious and thirsty cattle followed them, only to be forced into holes and drowned or frozen to death. Most that survived the frozen rivers, lost too much strength, could hardly stand, and finally died from exhaustion or were stalked by wolves and coyotes. Some were picked to death by birds of prey. To many in Wyoming, Montana and Dakota, this was known as “The Big Die Up.”³²

On February 5, the *Yellowstone Journal and Livestock Reporter* concluded the impact of an early February storm might be extremely disastrous to Wyoming ranges. A letter printed in the *Laramie Daily Boomerang* described a winter equally harsh in Wyoming. Lander had recorded a mid-January temperature of -30°F. A record snowfall buried Laramie. Between Lander and Rawlins four feet of crusted snow supported stagecoaches. Cattlemen in the Big Horn basin who usually supervised their herds were driven off the ranges by Christmas. In valleys where cattle had always sought the protection of cut banks and cottonwood groves, deep snows had covered their natural shields. Only months earlier settlers near Buffalo at the foot of the Big Horns were certain the coming winter would be a mild one.³³ In addition to the seasoned residents, open range ranching had become quite popular among British upper classes, as both an investment and a vocation. A number were drawn to the Tongue and Powder Rivers of the Thunder Basin region of eastern Wyoming and Montana. Most would fail in the crisis of 1886 and 1887.

The Swan Land and Cattle Company was one of a few well know cattle outfits that was founded in Scotland by Alexander Swan with \$3,000,000 in capital and managed from Edinburgh and London, although operated out of Chugwater in eastern Wyoming. Going into the winter of 1886, the company listed 113,000 head and controlled over 600,000 acres of Wyoming and Nebraska range. During its heyday, it was one of the largest ranches in the west. The brutal months that followed reduced their number to 57,000 and the outfit went into bankruptcy, reduced inventory and capital. In 1893, they ran around 40,000 head and in 1904, switched to sheep.³⁴

Although Montana and Dakota suffered more than Wyoming, (many estimates ran from as low as 15 percent to only a few at almost 100 percent) cattle that survived were in very poor condition and brought little when sold. Many had suffered bloody and swollen noses along with frozen ears and tails. In addition, the 1887 calf crop was very small. Many ranchers held on to stock

³¹ T. A. Larson, *History of Wyoming* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), 190-91.

³² Harold E. Briggs, “The Development and Decline of Open Range Ranching in the Northwest,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 4, no. 20 (1934): 521-536.

³³ Stuart, “The Winter of 1886-1887,” 37.

³⁴ Work Projects Administration, *Wyoming A Guide To Its History, Highways, And People* (New York: Oxford University Press, April, 1941), 290.

until the fall of 1887 and were finally forced to sell very low to satisfy creditors.³⁵ In the fall of 1887, after an extensive tour through the Territory, Governor Moonlight thought the “day of the vast herds is coming to a close.” He felt the cattle industry would continue to be important, “but instead of one man or one company owning 10,000, one hundred men will own them. The day of great losses, too, will then be over. Honest cattlemen concede this. It is inevitable.”³⁶

The hard winter supported thoughts of many small ranchers in both Montana and Wyoming who fed, bred and herded their cattle for a decade prior to 1886-1887. That winter experience also confirmed the fears of many large outfits that worried about both overstocked ranges and harsh weather. “Closer herding” and ample feed in winter seemed to be the cure. To the east, things looked a lot better after the winter of 1886-1887.

During 1886-1887, the Nebraska Sandhills were not hit as hard as the surrounding country and most ranchers were seasoned westerners that understood the value of haying, which was as much a part of the cowboy’s life as riding the range. Cowboys put up hay for a couple of months in summer and fed it for the long months of winter. Many of the lush, lower mixed grass pastures were cut and stored for winter. Following the frigid winter of 1886-1887, short horns, Herefords and Angus replaced the Texas long horns in the vast Sandhills. The rolling grass and yucca-carpeted hills are well watered that occupy the western two thirds of the state north of the Platte River and are largest formation of dunes in North America. Shallow, narrow, and winding rivers like the three forks of the Loop, Dismal, Snake and Niobrara Rivers either did not freeze completely or were easier to break through for stock. The Dismal and some other streams are fed by 52°F springs. Fenced lands replaced the open range and “closer herding” practices kept losses very low.³⁷ To the west, the Pine Ridge escarpment, between the White and Niobrara Rivers country, was known as “the garden at the end of the Sandhills.”

Edgar Beecher Bronson, who sold his huge Deadman Ranch that straddled the Nebraska-Wyoming border between the White and Niobrara Rivers, remembered “the year 1882...marked the dead line between good times and bad.” Bronson felt the signs were so plain that any rancher could read them. In his book, *Reminiscences of a Ranchman*, first published in 1908, Bronson describes four impending clouds “that the cow-weatherwise were quick to recognize meant early injury and ultimate ruin to their business.” First, tremendous profits were attracting investment from the east and abroad. Annual trail drives from Texas, Utah, Oregon and Washington were doubling, which insured ranges would soon become horribly overcrowded and profitable breeding and fattening would no longer be possible. Second, emigrant farmers, known as “grangers,” were arriving by the hundreds from the east and south.

³⁵ Larson, *History of Wyoming*, 190-91.

³⁶ Stuart, “The Winter of 1886-1887,” 37. Montana and Wyoming achieved statehood in 1890.

³⁷ James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1957), 198.

To Bronson settlers meant fences and valleys along watercourses would be occupied and enclosed. He believed the free range would be over and ranchers should move on to the northwest or leave the business. Third, news of railway extensions from the Union Pacific, the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy railroads, and west from the Missouri River meant the coming of thousands of settlers, and “the instant extinction, immediately upon their arrival in our midst, of the of the free range industry.” “And then, fourth, under the law of weather averages, we were about due for a winter of still falling, deep lying, long staying snow, such as there, was sure to come at intervals, and when it came, wiped out whole herds.” There had no been no killing winter weather on his vast Deadman Ranch since a March blizzard in 1878. He noted that both the winters of 1885-1886 and 1886-1887 were quite severe.³⁸ Bronson’s ranch was on Deadman’s Creek, five miles south of Fort Robinson.³⁹ The year after he sold his ranch, the cattlemen of eastern Montana met to discuss the problems of range overcrowding. This group would become the Montana Stock Growers Association.⁴⁰

Ranching and homesteading began around Medora in the early 1880s when the Northern Pacific Railroad pushed its track to the tiny Dakota badlands town. Like so many other northern ranges, the cattle boom was devastated by a deadly combination of drought, grasshoppers, and widespread fires during the summer of 1886. A few of the first reports had been optimistic and for some cattlemen the full amount of loss was not known until the summer roundups. By late summer of 1887, the *Mandan Pioneer* estimated losses at 75 percent. The Medora newspaper, *The Badlands Cow Boy*, went out of business in 1887.⁴¹ After the Siberian-like winter released its grip, a rancher from Medora noted: “one had only to stand by the Little Missouri River bank for a few minutes and watch the grim procession going downstream to realize the full depth of the tragedy that had been enacted within the past few months.” The “grim procession” was made up of the bodies of tens of thousands of dead range cattle. At times, dead, bloated cattle drifted up against cut banks and forced streams from of their banks. It marked the end of many of the great cattle barons.⁴² By 1889, Medora was deserted.

One smaller Medora rancher who eventually sold his remaining few hundred survivors never to return was Theodore Roosevelt. In the fall of 1886 Roosevelt lost his bid for Mayor of New York City. That winter he was married in England and honeymooned there. Reports of the hard winter and horrible stock losses brought him back to Medora to survey the situation. From Medora

³⁸ Edgar B. Bronson, *Reminiscences of a Ranchman* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), 293-295.

³⁹ Thomas Buecker, *Fort Robinson and the American West 1874-1899* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 121.

⁴⁰ Stuart, “The Hard Winter 1886-1887,” 41.

⁴¹ National Park Service: Department of the Interior, *Theodore Roosevelt National Park: Elkborn Ranch* <http://www.nps.gov/thro/historyculture/elkborn-ranch.htm>, November 14 2007.

⁴² Nelson, *Land*, 218.

he wrote to his friend, Henry Cabot Lodge: “Well, we have had a smashup all through cattle country of the northwest. The losses are crippling. For the first time I have been utterly unable to enjoy a visit to my ranch. I shall be glad to get home.” To his sister he added: “I am bluer than indigo about the cattle; it is even worse than I feared: I wish I was sure I would lose no more than half the money (\$80,000) I invested out here. I am planning to get out of it.” Sometime between 1890 and 1892 he abandoned his Elkhorn Ranch. In May of 1892 the *Dickinson Press* reported, Roosevelt still had 1,000 head in the Little Missouri Badlands.⁴³

By the early 1890s open range had vanished from all but northeastern Montana. The big outfits of the boom period were gone and ranching practices had undergone a complete change. After the brutal winter hay was carried to cattle during the cold months and ranchers built barns, shelters and corrals where they stacked hay. Still, only six years after the disastrous winter, southern drives resumed and the regions ranges were restocked even more than before, but the huge one man or one outfit herds were gone forever.⁴⁴

How did those confined on northern plains reservations, with near total dependence on stock raising fare? As late as the mid 1880s many Northern Cheyennes in southeast Montana and Sioux on western Dakota reserves huddled in canvas tents as there were no longer bison available for traditional teepees (most were gone in the north by 1883) and many had not yet built log homes. Some on Montana reservations had built log homes, but awaited doors and windows.

“They said the bones of cattle that starved that winter could be seen for years afterwards, in one place along the river between Birney and Ashland. Two or three hundred had crowded in under some rock cliffs and died.”⁴⁵ In his annual report, written in autumn of 1887, Indian Agent R.L. Upshaw stated: “the loss of Indian ponies and cattle last winter, which was unparalleled in severity aggregates at least 250 head. The loss to the agency herd of cattle did not exceed 5 percent, but the agency stock had hay to feed on.” Upshaw added that outfits off the reservation had suffered losses at 30 to 60 percent.⁴⁶ When the settlers on the Tongue River suffered such dramatic losses, the Cheyennes had a difficult time too. An Indian named Wolf Tooth said it was the only time when the Indians failed to reach the agency at Lame Deer to get their rations. They organized a pack of fifteen young men with shovels that took turns breaking the trail.⁴⁷

On the bordering Crow Agency, the agent stated there was actually an increase of four hundred and fifty calves, “a creditable exhibit considering the

⁴³ <http://www.nps.gov/thro/historyculture/elkhorn-ranch.htm>, November, 14 2007.

⁴⁴ Nelson, *I, and*, 218.

⁴⁵ John Stands In Timber and Margot Liberty, *Cheyenne Memories* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967), 255.

⁴⁶ R.L. Upshaw, *Report of the Secretary of the Interior* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1887), 2-229.

⁴⁷ Stands In Timber and Liberty, *Cheyenne Memories*, 255.

severity of the winter, which resulted in great loss among stockmen generally.”⁴⁸ A report from the Blackfoot Agency (near Cut Bank, Montana) supported “closer herding.” “This past winter was unprecedented in its severity, snowstorms and blizzards almost daily during the months of December, January, and February causing enormous stock losses to stock owners all through the Territory.” The loss reported to the agency was very small when compared to the loss to white stockmen of the region. Their success was believed possible due to a good supply of hay put aside for use during extreme cold weather.⁴⁹

The report from Pine Ridge Dakota Agent, H.D. Gallagher, noted that severe drought had taken everything planted on the reservation. By the mid 1880s it was very clear that raising stock was the Lakota’s only salvation as the majority of crops were generally destroyed by summer winds. Many Agency cattle had died during the winter and there were often horrible losses during their first year or from blizzards during calving season. Ironically, Gallagher penned little about such a polar beginning to “87” in his annual report.⁵⁰ Former agent Dr. Vallentine T. McGillicuddy, as well as H.D. Gallagher, had little use for stock from Texas, Indian Territory or even Kansas, and wanted only cattle bred in far northern Nebraska or Dakota.

Agent James McLaughlin of the Standing Rock Agency, of Dakota, reported the severest winter known in the history of the country in 1887 with Indian cattle losses of about 30 percent, while the agency beef herd lost 21 percent. The sub title in his annual report read “Rigorous Winter And Loss Of Cattle.” He stated the loss was unavoidable. His Indians had fed cut cottonwood trees, along with wheat, oats and corn held over for seed. The agent thought they had done an incredible job of bringing so many cattle through when the experienced stockmen of the region lost 75 percent. He added the mercury at Standing Rock fell to 50 below during many years.⁵¹ During the summer of 1887, stockmen from as far west as the Little Missouri Badlands searched for their stock all the way to the Standing Rock Agency. But after all, was this not really bison country?

When millions of bison and pronghorn vanished, deer and elk also became scarce; wolves, coyotes and mountain lions turned to calves and weakened cows. The wolves were the most destructive and would attack cows with calves, wearing out the mothers. After bison hunting and trapping played out, many old hunters and trappers switched to wolves and coyotes.⁵² Did the big outfits choose the wrong grazing animal or at the very least, the wrong variety?

With the tremendous advantage of nearly a century and a quarter of hindsight, one might conclude eastern and southern cattle did not adapt well on

⁴⁸ Henry E. Williamson, *Report of the Secretary of the Interior* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1887), 2-217.

⁴⁹ M.D. Baldwin, *Report of the Secretary of the Interior 2* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1887), 211.

⁵⁰ H.D. Gallagher, *Report of the Secretary of the Interior 2* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1887), 122-124.

⁵¹ James McLaughlin, *Report of the Secretary of the Interior 2* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1887), 130.

⁵² Hamilton, *History of Montana*, 336.

a stage created for the native bison. For at least three hundred years after the arrival of European man, the bison dominated the western plains. When Texas longhorns were driven north after the civil war, they did not do well on their own.⁵³ Possibly a horribly crude, yet heartfelt analogy, would be that of dumping a trout into a southern river in July. Was this what happened with so many poorly acclimated Texas cattle being transplanted onto northern ranges? It had worked pretty well for the past five or six years. There had been major warnings, but profits and investments were high, no one had a crystal ball, and it had almost always worked out. Most young cattle had done well foraging for themselves and losses of three or four per hundred were thought better than hiring hands for herding, hauling hay (if they had it) or chopping holes in the ice. When the November storms hit, thoughts must have been it would quickly pass.

When veteran Pine Ridge rancher Edgar Bronson embarked upon his career in 1872, the period of open range was just beginning north of the Platte River. This time when ranchers fattened their cattle on public domain lasted no more than twenty years, and in most regions, less than a decade. In the beginning, cattle were driven north to railheads and shipped to market. Later, cattle were driven to northern ranges to fatten over winter and shipped out the following year. And finally, the northern plains were stocked with breeding cattle from Texas.⁵⁴ By 1882, he clearly saw many dark clouds beneath his big western sky and sold out. He no doubt loved his Deadman Ranch and an exciting life most could only dream about, but felt there was just too much to overcome. Bronson thought they were long overdue for the big one.⁵⁵ And by late 1886, the big outfits were extremely worried, probably were unable to get to their stock even if they had hay, and the arctic cold had already forced out many that normally supervised their stock from Wyoming's Big Horn basin and the Tongue River drainage of both eastern Wyoming and Montana.

Many absentee owners were nowhere near their herds and lacked current news of the critical situation. Stagecoaches were irregular at best (trains had dropped rail cars onto the frozen Yellowstone River) were stalled in eastern Dakota and telegraph lines were buried in snowdrifts, mail routes were often piled high with it, and on a distant range, a typical owner may have known little until it was hundreds of cows too late. At the end of January 1887, a rancher from near Lewistown, Montana wrote that they were "weak, weaker than I thought they were." He had seen about 8,000 head gathering on the protected Judith River bottom, where they may have been warmer, but also where they had no feed.⁵⁶ During the same period, a Montana stockman complained the

⁵³ Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 279.

⁵⁴ Bronson, *Reminiscences*, x. Although Bronson sold out, he remained in the area, active as a newspaperman, big game hunter and author until his death in 1917.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁵⁶ Rackley, "The Hard Winter 1886-18887," 59.

“lack of care by cowboys had much to do with the bad condition of the herds.” One local cattleman wrote, he had hired men who “talk big in the summer but won’t stir in the winter when cattle require attention.”⁵⁷ Fellow Kansan and Osage Questa stockwoman, Constance Wood, has told me that her cattle would probably survive extreme cold for no more than a week without feed and water. “They need feed to keep warm.”⁵⁸

As the years rolled on, it became pretty clear that much of Indian country was suited for raising only northern-bred cattle. “Because of the government’s responsibility for providing annuity goods (beef) on contract, there were a few ranches established fairly close to Indian agencies.”⁵⁹ Nevertheless, Indian purchasing practices were slow to change, and as late as 1898, many Texas cattle had died during the winter. The country was said to have no value except for stock raising, which was increasing each year, and many Indians excelled at it.⁶⁰ The extreme climate offered little hope of any subsistence farming with the exception of small family or day school garden patches near creek bottoms. In dry years, these often failed, when streams evaporated into ribbons or dust.

The greatest surprise of all was that those, so terribly dependent on their herds, were able to avoid much of the devastation. Agency cattle were mostly on government land and possibly better supervised, but reservations were not placed on the garden spots of their regions, with the finest grass. In fact, a former Department of Interior Solicitor General and present day consultant to the Assinaboine tribe of Montana has told me: “most reservations were placed on or near what is considered the armpit of Montana.”⁶¹ Yet, many on Montana reserves experienced very little loss in spite of such extreme, prolonged cold and the vast Crow Agency actually experienced a significant increase in calves.

The hard winter dealt a “death blow” to the open range cattle industry of the northern plains. The Swan Cattle and Land Company, capitalized from Scotland, lost half their cattle and nearly went under. Many large outfits were backed by eastern or foreign capital and could no longer hold on, while those on reservations that chose not to just gamble, kept stock within reach and put out hay, fed grain held over for seed or cut cottonwoods for their ponies and cattle, did well. A few surviving open range cattlemen negotiated individual grazing leases with the government so they could keep their cattle within reach.

“I never again want to hear of the open range,” said one embittered stockman who had been forced to witness the suffering of his herd during the disastrous season.⁶² Charley Russell’s famous watercolor of the poor, starved

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Constance Wood, conversation with author, Severy, KS., 27 October 2007.

⁵⁹ Bronson, *Reminiscences*, x.

⁶⁰ W. G. Clapp, *Report of the Secretary of the Interior* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1898), 276.

⁶¹ Richard Aldrich, conversation with author, Billings, MT, December 1, 2007.

⁶² Nelson, *Land*, 218.

cow may have said it best of all. On the other hand, an older, maybe, “Hollywood” image of cowboy’s heading their cattle from high snowy pastures down to sheltered valleys was the right one. When it all was over, survival, it seemed, came down to preparation and care.