

Early Days in the Sand Hills

By Dan Adamson. *Nebraska Farmer*, March 22, 1930. p. 7.

In looking backwards over my 45 years' experience in handling cattle in this big western cattle country, I remember that I landed at Valentine, the spring of 1884. Valentine was the end of the railroad at that time and was a typical western cow town. There I got my first introduction to the personality and peculiarities of the western cowboy, the fellow so necessary in handling cattle on the then big unfenced tracts of government land. In a good many cases the ranch buildings were on land which had not even been filed on.

If readers will pardon me for bringing the saloon into this subject, I will describe my first impression of the rather peculiar and emphatic way the cowboys had of inviting some people to dance. With a flourish of six-shooters a couple of colored-boys were invited to dance for the entertainment of the crowd, and they surely could dance. But, as the drinks were coming pretty regular, they did not seem to mind the gun play.

Big Outfits Moved On

About the time I came to Valentine the transition period from the old methods of open range days to the safer method of providing winter feed had started. As there was a big influx of settlers, some of the range outfits commenced to move out, while some small outfits commenced to move in. Some of the smaller range outfits such as Buck and Waite and Enlow and Foley commenced winter feeding their cattle. The outfits that stayed here were in luck as most of the outfits who had moved to Wyoming and Montana were hit by the hard winter of 1886-1887 and suffered severe losses.

There were very few of the old cowboys left who helped move those herds. A few are Ed Ross of Gordon, Gene Hall of Alliance, and Nels Rowley and Bill Erickson of Valentine. The latter two helped move the Russell Watt's herd, the Running W, to Montana in 1885.

Strange to relate, some western outfits moved down into the Sand Hills country in the 90's. The 101, the Spade, the UBI, and the Box T were some of them. It was known at that time that the 160-acre homestead in the Sand Hills was pretty much of a failure, but some of the homesteaders who got started out on the right track, laid the foundation for some of our present-day successful ranchmen.

Few Old-times Left

There are very few of the old open-range-day cattlemen left, but they built up a wonderful system for handling cattle. Through the Wyoming Stock Growers' association, which was organized about 1879, western Nebraska, western South Dakota and all of Wyoming were organized into roundup districts.

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I have an 1884 roundup circular gotten out by that association, and the range country in the three states mentioned, was divided up into the 31 roundup districts. Each district was described, naming the rivers or creeks worked over, when and where the roundup commenced and who was roundup foreman. I had a wonderful opportunity to understand this roundup system thoroughly, as I have worked on 11 of the 31 roundup districts.

It would make a very lengthy article to explain everything in detail, so I will just give a short outline of roundup work. Wagons were equipped for camping purposes and usually a bed-wagon was taken along also. A full roundup crew consisted of eight cowboys, a cook and two horse wranglers. The cook drove the mess wagon when moving camp and the night wrangler the bed wagon. Each cowboy was furnished a string of seven to 12 saddle horses, but he furnished his own bed and riding outfit.

Big cow-outfits had three or four roundup wagons out. There was a difference of 40 days between the commencement of the first roundup which was started in the spring, and the last one. Therefore, one roundup wagon might work on two or three roundup districts. For instance, the CY outfit, in 1887, ran three roundup wagons. I was with the wagon bossed by John Harris. We started on the Wind river roundup, but turned back when we had gathered a fair sized herd. One of our men was left and worked through the roundup with some other outfit's wagon.

Roundup Experiences

These men or representatives we called "reps" for short. To roundup districts where it did not pay to send a wagon crew, a "rep" was sent. Our wagon then dropped in on the upper Powder river roundup at the Bridger crossing on the south fork of Powder river. We had had a "rep" with that roundup from its starting point on the north fork of Powder river. We worked through the balance of this roundup and were ready to start in on the Laramie plains roundup which started in the Bates Hole country on the Platte River. As the other two wagons of CY were working similarly on other roundup districts, it will give you an idea of the immense territory over which one big cow-outfit worked.

Now, I want to give you an idea of the size of some of those early-day outfits. The Swan land and cattle company had a book count of 102,000 cattle at one time. In Wyoming a half dozen outfits might be occupying the same range and, in my time, about ten wagons is the most I have seen on one roundup.

The cowboys took their turns standing day herd and night guard. Over most of the roundup districts the following was the usual days work: Each morning the wagons were moved to new roundup grounds, some 12 to 15 miles distant.

All cattle found were driven to the roundup grounds. The cattle thus gathered were bunched in from three to five or six different bunches so that the different outfits could cut out their cattle at the same time, changing from one bunch to another as they finished. The cows and calves were always cut out first and the same routine carried out in cutting out the dry cattle.