

CATTLE RANGES OF THE SOUTHWEST

A History of the Exhaustion of the
Pasturage and suggestion for its
restoration

-By

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Ranges have been grazed for fully 35 years - Date back to 1863.

"The dangers that confront Texas cattlemen and which must surely follow continued overstocking should serve as a warning to other similar pastoral regions."

Area covered - Stonewall, Haskell, Throckmorton, Fisher, Jones, Shackelford, Nolan, Taylor, Callahan, Runnels, Coleman, Tom Green, Concho, and McCulloch, and parts of Kent, Scurry, Mitchell, Coke, San Saba, Brown, Eastland, Stephen, and Young Counties.

Characteristics:

1. Scattered growth of mesquite trees away from streams
2. Numerous streams that furnish an abundance of stock water
3. Annual rainfall - 20 to 35 inches

Early Range Condition:

In 1865 herds of buffalo ranged at will.

1876-77 herds of cattle & sheep along the water courses.

1876- 2-- people in Taylor and Jones Counties.

"It is interesting to late comers to listen to the description of the range as it then appeared. One can form a poor idea of what this country was like 25 years ago (1873) from its present appearance."

Stockmen traveling in San Saba, Tom Green and Taylor counties in 1876 said, "Grass everywhere 1 to 3 feet high sometimes as high as cows backs on uplands as well as bottoms." At that time there is little doubt that the ranges would have supported 300 head of cattle per square mile!! (= 2.13 Ac/AU)

"The carrying capacity of the range has steadily decreased until it is an exceptional property that can carry 1 head of stock to 2 acres" (128 a.u. per section).

"It is claimed that was the common average rate 10 years ago!! (1888)
"Today it requires at least 10 acres per head (64 A.U. per section) and it is often considered not the best policy to put more than 50 cows to the section. (= 12.8 Ac/AU)

Final survey of railroad in 1882; owners begin to come in to look up property. Cattlemen reassured it best to make hay while sun shines and stocked ranges heavily.

Cattle \$20 to \$25 per head and sheep \$5 to \$6 in 1882-1883. Inflated price because of demand.

Rancher with 25,000 cattle on 100,000 acres came through winter of 1882-1883 with only 10,000 cattle.

• General collapse came in 1884.

Present Condition of ranges:

This overstocking of the ranges has continued year after year through good seasons and bad ones, until it is the opinion of some of the most experienced cattlemen of central Texas that the injury has gone almost beyond the point where redemption is possible.

Prairie dog and Jack rabbit have increased.

Lease of Lands:

"Before a sick man can be induced to take medicine, he must be made to recognize that he is sick and that the prescription will in all probability benefit him."

"The cowman is, in a sense, a sick man, but strangely, in view of his experiences just mentioned, he seems not to recognize the fact in a practical way."

Ranchers then as today had ideas of getting all good out of leased land. How long will the idea carry into future? (A.T.B.)

"A burnt child ought to dread fire" but when this and that man are known to have cleared large sums in the cattle trade, others with feverish desire to become suddenly rich have no doubt of their ability to make equally large profits.

Lack of Interest in Range Improvement:

Not one ranchman in ten has any scientific knowledge of grasses.

At a meeting of stockmen recently held those present were questioned about the native grasses growing on their respective ranges. One of the best informed undertook to describe the habitat and characteristics of certain varieties that were especially mentioned. In ten minutes he had been frequently interrupted, in a pleasant way by the others, his statements questioned, and his conclusions laughed at. One ranchman offered resolution."

"Resolved that none of us know, or care to know, anything about grasses, native or otherwise, outside of the fact that for the present there are lots of them, the best on record, and we are after getting the most out of them while they last."

Fifty distinct varieties of grasses found on one ranch less than 5 miles square.

Periodical Drought:

Close grazing does not injure grass.

Stock pull up roots during droughts and trample out near water holes.

Animal Posts:

Ten prairie dogs destroy enough grass to support a cow.

Prickly pear spreading rapidly on overgrazed ranges.

GRASSES AND FORAGE PLANTS

of

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By: H. L. Bently

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Experiments at Abilene, Texas

1898

A scattered growth of mesquite on the land away from the streams.

No attempt was made at settlement until the building of the T. & P. Railroad in 1883. When owners started coming in to look up their land the cattlemen bought more stock to graze the country out. Thousands of cattle or sheep were crowded on ranges where half the number was too many. The grasses were entirely consumed; their very roots were trampled into the dust and destroyed. In their eagerness to get something for nothing, speculators did not hesitate at the permanent injury if not total ruin of the finest grazing country in America.

From that day to the present, but little intelligent effort has been made to improve the pastures and again cover them with the rich vegetation which the soil is capable of supporting.

(1) There must be no more overstocking of the range. Some of the leading stockmen are now dividing up their holdings into several pastures, one being held exclusively for winter use, another for spring,

and another for mid-summer or autumn. To be successful there should be rotation in the seasonal use of these pastures. Thus a pasture which is grazed closely during the winter for three or four successive years should be grazed only in the summer for a like term.

(2) It will be necessary also to provide hay and forage which may be used during storms or in case of unusually severe winters, or in years when through drought or other causes, the natural herbage is less than the normal.