

The End of Open Range Grazing

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, cowboys were plentiful. A cowboy's goal was to look after their herd of cattle on the open range of the United States. The open range allowed a rancher to have low input costs on feed for cattle so they would have higher margins when the cattle were sold. Sooner or later the open range grazing had to come to an end. Three factors that led to the end of open range grazing were the arrival of settlers, overgrazing, and the implementation of the Taylor Grazing Act.

The arrival of settlers to the United States had a great impact on the end of open range grazing. In the mid to later 1800s many European and Spanish settlers came to the new world "with the intent of earning a living from farming" (Camp, 2009). Many of the settlers also became cattle ranchers. With so many cattle on the open range from cattle markets being strong, chaos started to occur. Ranchers had to come up with a way to identify their cattle; the solution was brands. The days of long trail rides to transport cattle to market were thriving. The open range was soon flooded with too many cattle and overgrazing started to occur.

Overgrazing of the open range became an apparent problem. According to the book *U.S. Forest Service Grazing and Rangelands*, the open range between "1865 to the 1890s was marked by chaos, violence, and depletion of the ranges through overgrazing" (Rowley, 1985). The cattle ranchers of that time had little experience in conservation the grasslands. Due to overgrazing, the soil was exposed and became dried making it harder for the grasslands to revive. The cattle packed the open range reducing the native feed. "The depletion of pasturage led cattlemen to dump their livestock on the market, quickly depleting the prices" (Colorado Preservation, n.d.). The open range was slowly but surely coming to an end.

The Taylor Grazing Act was implemented to protect the grasslands from overgrazing. The weather, overgrazing, and the arrival of many settlers brought up "questions of who should control the ranges and whether they should raise cattle" on the range (Rowley, 1985). In 1934, the federal

government implemented the Taylor Grazing Act to conserve soil and control the grazing of the open range. Not surprisingly, many ranchers opposed the idea, but they soon realized that something had to be done if cattle were to continue grazing natural grasslands. “The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) took responsibility for the Taylor Grazing Act in 1946 (Camp, 2009). The BLM created grazing districts in which ranchers could lease the land and implement conservation practices. With these new regulations cattle ranchers fenced land with barbed wire to keep their cattle in the proper pastures. The Taylor Grazing Act played a major role in ending open range grazing.

Cowboys worked on the open range for many years. The arrival of settlers, overgrazing, and The Taylor Grazing Act snowballed to end open range grazing. Cowboys had to modify their techniques to accommodate cattle grazing in rotational pastures. Although there is no longer open range grazing, “cowboys are still much of the backbone of the beef cattle industry in the United States today” (Colorado Preservation, n.d.) Even though these factors ended open range grazing, Americas vast grasslands benefited from the conservation techniques that were established.

References

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