

Central Arizona College Agriculture Professor Karen Geldmacher requires her students to write papers on natural resource concepts including The Dust Bowl, wildland fires, & the historic open range cattle industry. Jeremy is a CAC Agriculture major and a 3rd generation agriculturist from Coolidge, Arizona. He will earn his Associate of Agriculture degree in May and plans to earn a BS in Agribusiness.

The Close of the Open Range Jeremy Simpson - Central Arizona College

The open-range is rangeland where cattle run freely regardless of land ownership (Gray, Ratliff & Anaya, 2014). The culture of the Open Range was basically dictated by the unstructured Code of the Range, which neither drew boundaries nor created strict regulations and allowed for a common sharing of the American frontier. In the mid 1800s ranch hands or cowboys transported cattle across the country by hoof due to lack of more efficient alternatives. Herding cattle across the frontier brought about animal weight loss, trespassing claims and even the loss of life. It was time for a change in the way things were done in the cattle industry. Some factors that caused the open range to come to an end were overgrazing, the invention of barbed wire and the growing railroad.

The Open Range era brought about rangeland overgrazing resulting in soil erosion. There were only so many square miles of prairie to be grazed. In later drives, cattle began to lose weight as they travelled due to malnutrition. The passage of the Taylor Grazing Act in 1934 gave order and federal administrative authority to public grazing lands, preventing overgrazing and bringing stability to the livestock industry dependent upon the public range (Wimmer, 2015). Policies such as this one helped to control overgrazing but also limited the free range that cattle could graze. Policies controlling overgrazing weren't the only issue that cowboys came across. The invention of barbed wire sent the cowboy era into a tailspin.

Barbed wire was invented by J. F. Glidden in 1874. This invention meant that large areas could be fenced cheaply (American West, 2014). The open range was just that, open. Cowboys had the freedom to herd their cattle across the lands to the feedlots and shipping yards. Ranchers and homesteaders began to purchase barbed wire to fence off the property that was rightfully theirs. This became popular and many land owners joined the fencing wars of the late 1880's. With open range becoming non-existent in some spots cowboys were desperate to find another way to transport their cattle. This is where the railroad came in.

When the railroad came about people were able to transport goods from one place to another much more efficiently. Cattle were not excluded in this. In fact whole rail cars were constructed specifically to haul cattle. The rapid development of railroads in the United States was accomplished with the help of some of the largest government subsidies ever granted (Westward, 2017). When the railroad was run through Texas, ranchers and cowboys used it to transport cattle in a fraction of the time. Other benefits were obviously apparent, some being the fact that men no longer have to risk their lives or the lives and the health of their cattle on the trail.

Using the Open Range to drive cattle to market was an important part of this country's history. If these cowboys had not risked their lives to accomplish this task our agricultural community would not be where it is at today. The successful American ranching systems of the 21st century may have never replaced the open range without the invention of barbed wire or the railroad. The factors that ended the open range are important to our critical agricultural timeline and forever transformed the way we raise cattle today.

References

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