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WINTER LOSSES OF CATTLE IN THE OREGON COUNTRY, 1847-1890*

The cattlemen who exploited the open grass lands of the Pacific Northwest in pioneer days had numerous enemies. In some districts their herds were threatened by predatory animals; in others poisonous plants and rattlesnakes exacted tribute. Moreover, there were Indians to whom the boundaries of reservations were not as prison walls. At times the evidence was strong that they were killing white men's cattle, and the anger of stockmen waxed hot against them. Nor did this wrath subside when rumor accused the red men of setting fires which now and again swept over ranges in the late summer and early autumn months, destroying the dried grass relied on for winter feeding. And there were other grievances to enrage the cattlemen. Spitefully or in defense of growing crops, settlers shot down trespassing stock; and brands and marks failed to stay the hands of rustlers, the bandits of the open pasture lands. Such adverse conditions were in truth enough to set stockmen by the ears, but their tale of woe is not yet ended.

More powerful than any of the enemies yet mentioned, more vindictive than any which could be enumerated, if we except with the passing years the growing number of farmers and of sheepmen, was winter. Here was a foeman relentlessly dogging the footsteps of the cattlemen—capricious, implacable, remorseless. Rustlers and marauding Indians might drive exasperated stockmen into organizations for self-help; predatory animals might cause them to loosen their purse strings to provide bounties; losses from poisonous plants and blackleg might arouse them to adopt timely measures of prevention. But none of these engendered feelings of helplessness or of despair. Only wintry winds sweeping over snow-crueted ranges and frozen streams and water-holes, threatening their cattle with total destruction, could move the stockmen to pour out their souls to the god Chinook, the warm wind before whose breath ice and snow

* This article is a summary of parts of chapter seven of the writer's doctoral dissertation, entitled *The Range Cattle Industry in the Oregon Country to 1890*, a type-written copy of which is deposited in the Widener Library, Harvard University.

melted away. If he responded not to their supplications, they were helpless.¹

Winter losses of cattle in the Oregon country can not, however, be wholly explained by reference to acts of God. The cattlemen, it is true, could not have prevented the coming of winter storms, but they could have made in advance some provision to care for their stock during times of extraordinary stress. This, as a rule, they did not do, and the reasons therefor are not difficult to find. Competition is less keen in new than in old countries. Economic reverses were less serious on the frontier than in more highly developed regions. Moreover, from the days of the earliest white occupancy of the Pacific Northwest there had been building up a tradition of mild winter weather. Early writings had given currency to the assertion that in Oregon cattle and other live stock needed no especial care in winter. They could safely range at will. Here indeed, it came to be believed, was a land of promise.² Nor is it altogether astonishing that such belief tended to persist in the face of the accumulation of belying evidence. Winter seasons of unusual inclemency occurred so irregularly that the unwary were thrown off their guard. "Normal" winter losses cattlemen might expect and ignore. So they yielded to the temptation to gamble with fate, and lived on in their delusion. Of the consequences of their course they were repeatedly warned. Editors persistently lectured them on the inhumanity and the bad economics of letting cattle suffer or perish from inattention, but their efforts were largely in vain. Yet hoping ever, as pioneers were wont to do, they continued to exhort, and persuaded themselves after each severe winter that a lesson had been taught. But as late as 1890 Oregon journalists were admonishing Oregon stockmen. A few relatively mild winters dulled the recollection of less favorable seasons, and the warnings of the press

¹ See in the *Weekly Mountaineer* (The Dalles, Ore.) of January 6, 1872, "The Stockmen's Prayer," the first stanza of which runs as follows:

"O Stockmen's God! O Thou
To whom we always look
And humbly, trusting bow
In prayer and praise—CHINOOK!
On thee we more rely
Than all the hay and straw,
Or barley, oats and rye
For thy propitious thaw."

See also, *ibid.*, December 28, 1872, "The Rancher's Prayer," of which the last stanza reads as follows:

"Then haste, O Chinook, we can brook no delay,
Up from the southern sunfull sea,
With a greeting to bless, and soon, we pray,
My wife, my babes, my cattle and me."

² Typical of many such utterances spread over a considerable interval is an excerpt from a descriptive article written in 1869 by Philip Ritz. This excerpt may be read in H. N. Moseley, *Oregon: Its Resources, Climate, People and Productions* (London, 1878), p. 65.

were drowned in a rising tide of optimism. As early as the spring of 1859 one Oregon writer, less optimistic or perhaps possessed of greater discernment than his colleagues, declared: "Our farmers seem to learn little or nothing from experience, and we don't know that they ever will."³ Time abundantly proved the wisdom of this utterance.

No one knows how many cattle perished of winter rigors on the ranges of the Oregon country. No careful count was ever made; some stockmen knew only vaguely how many cattle they owned. It can not fairly be included in any enumeration of the virtues and shortcomings of Oregon cattlemen that they kept accurate books, or expended time in evolving a system of cost accounting. They lived before the days of income-tax returns. The government did not bother them—why should they bother themselves? If they failed, that was their own business. They could begin again. As returns of cattle to the county assessors were inaccurately given from year to year,⁴ so were estimates of winter losses formulated without nice regard to mathematical precision. Men guessed because they did not know, and no one can say whether they guessed well or ill. Nevertheless, the history of the range-cattle industry in the Pacific Northwest reveals the fact of heavy, almost continuous, winter losses extending over a long period. These varied from district to district, and rose and fell with the varying intensity of winter seasons. But winter was ever-threatening: the most relentless foe known to Oregon stockmen.

In contemporaneous writings and in the recollections of pioneers, three winters in the Pacific Northwest stand out as exceptionally severe: the seasons of 1861-62, 1880-81, and 1889-90.⁵ These were undoubtedly times of widespread suffering, attended by appalling losses of live stock. Because of their extraordinary inclemency such winters were remembered, while others, damaging but less devastating, passed into the limbo of forgotten things. The winter of 1846-47 was without precedent in the recollection of the oldest Oregonian, but the Oregon country was then young and that exceptional season could teach no lesson to a new generation of frontiersmen who knew nothing of the rigors thereof. In 1874-75, and again in 1879-80, winter weather of more than ordinary in-

³ *Oregon Argus* (Oregon City, Ore.), March 12, 1859.

⁴ See the statements of cattlemen in Tenth Census, *Agriculture*, III, 1090, 1091.

⁵ A. J. Splawn, *Ka-mi-akin, the Last Hero of the Yakimas* (Portland, Ore., c. 1917), pp. 151-154, 318-323; D. M. Drumheller, "Uncle Dan" Drumheller Tells Thrills of Western Trails in 1854 (Spokane, Wash., 1925), pp. 61-65; John C. Lawrence, of Winlock, Wash., to J. Orin Oliphant, March 10, 1926 (letter). Other references to these winters will be cited hereafter.

tensity was experienced, and several other winters brought anxiety and losses to stockmen. It is not only the purpose of this paper to show that untoward seasons were a recurrent menace to the range-cattle industry in the Oregon country, but also to make known the fact that the stockmen of that region, considered as a group, suffered large pecuniary losses because of inadequate planning or as a result of indifference to the needs of their herds.

Winter losses of live stock were principally due to insufficient feed and to lack of water. A heavy snowfall was not necessarily dangerous. Cattle could paw through dry snow to the grass beneath. But alternate thawing and freezing caused an icy crust to form, and in such times the cattle on the ranges suffered severely. Where possible, they huddled together in sheltered places and were loath to move. Even if, as was sometimes the case, hay had been stacked for winter feeding, cattle that were widely dispersed over the ranges might have died of starvation before they could be got to the feeding places. Frozen watering places intensified the suffering and increased the number of casualties. Sometimes sheer exposure killed cattle that were fed. In the very nature of things, some destruction of live stock was inevitable in winters like those of 1861-62 and 1880-81. But it appears that many Oregon cattlemen made little or no effort to take care of their herds, and to their indifference and want of business acumen heavy pecuniary losses and an untold amount of animal suffering are directly chargeable.

The winter of 1846-47, far-reaching in its devastation, was the first of that character, as far as is now known, since the beginning of the recorded history of the Oregon country. It was a revelation and it should have been a warning. In January, 1847, the temperature dropped to seven degrees below zero in Oregon City, and the artist, Paul Kane, wrote that the intense cold had a disastrous effect on the cattle, which were "never housed."⁶ His testimony is supported by that of missionaries and of other persons who were then in Oregon. Snow was deep and still falling in the Willamette Valley on January 15, cattle were suffering and dying, and wild beasts were making "considerable havoc" among the herds.⁷ On February 1 the Reverend George Gary was reliably informed that hundreds of cattle, including the most of "those which came over the mountains in 1846," were dead.⁸ East of the Cascade Mountains, at the missionary stations and at Fort Colville, the winter was equally

⁶ Paul Kane, *Wanderings of an Artist* . . . (Toronto, 1925), pp. 131-132.

⁷ George Gary, "Diary," *Ore. Hist. Quart.*, XXIV (December, 1923), 387.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 389.

if not more severe. Cattle and horses alike, property of the missionary stations, of the Hudson's Bay Company, and of the Indians, succumbed to hunger and cold. The oldest Indians of the country had no recollection of such terrible weather; no one was prepared for it; the calculations of many years were rudely upset.⁹ The scanty records afford no accurate data for an enumeration of live-stock losses during that unfavorable season, but contemporaneous estimates are not without interest and value. In May, 1847, the editor of the *Polynesian*, relying upon information brought to him by the supercargo of the *Toulon*, informed his readers of the severity of the late winter in Oregon. "Much snow has fallen," he wrote, "and in consequence of the scarcity of food and bad weather, 6,000 cattle have perished—a severe loss to the settlers."¹⁰ To this statement the editor of the *Oregon Spectator* took exception. "It is true," he admitted, "our past winter was 'one of uncommon severity,' but instead of 6,000 cattle having perished, if a computation could be made, it would be found that our loss did not exceed *six hundred head*."¹¹

Rigorous weather, accompanied by losses of live stock, was experienced in the winters of 1848-49 and 1849-50, and noticeable losses were reported for the winter of 1852-53;¹² but the scantiness of the testimony precludes any broad generalization. For the next six years the record is bare. But early in the year 1859 cattle were reported to be dying in large numbers in western Oregon and in western Washington.¹³ "It has been a terrible time on stock," declared the *Oregon Argus*, "and very many cattle have died, while hundreds more are candidates for the boneyard."¹⁴ A few weeks later the editor of the *Oregon Farmer* made an enlightening addition to the tale of bovine suffering in Oregon. "From every part of the country we hear of great loss of stock—principally cattle," he asserted. "The long continued rainy weather, with lack of food and shelter has been the cause of much suffering on the part of poor

9 H. H. Spalding to D. Greene, February 3, 1847, quoted by W. I. Marshall, *Acquisition of Oregon* . . . (Seattle, 1911), II, 161; Marcus Whitman to D. Greene, April 1, 1847, *ibid.*, p. 260; Cushing Eells to D. Greene, April 6, 1847, *ibid.*, pp. 260-261; H. H. Spalding to D. Greene, April 2, 1847, *ibid.*, p. 164; Jesse Applegate to Thomas Ewbank, Commissioner of Patents, December 28, 1851, reprinted from the *Report of the Commissioner of Patents for 1851*, Pt. II, in the *Ore. Hist. Quart.*, XXXII (June, 1931), 140.

10 *Polynesian* (Honolulu), May 22, 1847.

11 *Oregon Spectator* (Oregon City, Ore.), June 24, 1847. The present writer has not found in the *Spectator* earlier references to the winter of 1846-47.

12 Jesse Applegate to Thomas Ewbank, *loc. cit.*; testimony of Dr. W. F. Tolmie, September 25, 1865, in *Evidence on the Part of the Puget Sound Agricultural Company, Claimants*, (n. p., n. d.), p. 126; testimony of Simpson P. Moses, in *The Evidence for the United States in the Matter of the Claim of the Puget's Sound Agricultural Co.* . . . (Washington, 1867), p. 249; testimony of Edward I. Allen, *ibid.*, p. 301.

13 *Pioneer and Democrat* (Olympia, Wash.), March 25, 1859; *Oregon Argus*, March 26, 1859; *British Colonist* (Victoria, V.I.), March 19, 1859.

14 *Oregon Argus*, March 12, 1859.

dumb animals, and a great loss to the stock-growers generally throughout the Willamette Valley. How long will this plan of raising stock without shelter from the cold blasts of winter, and without food, be continued in Oregon? Not long, we think, should each succeeding winter be like the past. When, in a number of the *Farmer* last fall, we expressed a desire to see the wintering of stock without shelter classed as 'cruelty to animals,' we little thought it an attempt to shield them from so severe an ordeal as many were compelled to pass through. We have been informed that in some sections, nearly, or quite one-fourth, had died in the last two months—the greater portion cows. . . . When stock is well protected from the cold and wet, they [*sic*] require much less food, and there is *economy* in it. We trust to see the day in Oregon when our stock will be so improved that the same investment will be fed in half the number of mouths that are now fed."¹⁵

The winter of 1861-62 was probably the worst in the history of the Pacific Northwest. For few episodes in the annals of the Oregon country is the evidence more abundant and satisfactory to the student of history. Men were simply appalled at the extent of the disaster. Circumstances for once at least brought the customary extravagance of frontier journalism into substantial agreement with the facts. Newspaper accounts are corroborated by official reports and by contemporaneous writings not intended for publication.¹⁶ To reproduce in full the records of that winter would be to compile a volume. The effect on the live-stock industry may easily be surmised. Optimistic as ever—or perhaps lazy, as an Olympia newspaper put it¹⁷—the stockmen had made little or no provision for the winter needs of their live stock. Deep snow covered the earth, and the watering places froze over. Very low temperatures were registered, and by January, 1862, cattle were literally dying by thousands.¹⁸ In all the settled parts of the Pacific Northwest—western

¹⁵ *Oregon Farmer* (Portland, Ore.), April, 1859, p. 136.

¹⁶ On this subject see especially the files of the following newspapers and periodicals: *Overland Press* (Olympia, Wash.); *Washington Statesman* (Walla Walla, Wash.); *Weekly Oregonian* (Portland, Ore.); *Oregon Farmer* (Portland, Ore.); *British Colonist* (Victoria, V.I.); *Washington Standard* (Olympia, Wash.). Useful information may also be obtained from John Owen, *The Journals and Letters of Major John Owen* (New York, 1927), I, 238-251; Granville Stuart, *Forty Years on the Frontier* . . . (Cleveland, 1925), I, 196-298; A. J. Splawn, *Ka-mi-akin*, pp. 151-152; D. M. Drumheller, "Uncle Dan" Drumheller Tells Thrills of Western Trails in 1854, pp. 63-65; *Illustrated History of Klickitat, Yakima, and Kittitas Counties* . . . (Interstate Publishing Company, 1904), pp. 95-97; *Rebellion Records* (Washington, 1897), Series I, L, Pt. I, pp. 830-860, 885, 886; James Watt, of Cheney, Wash., to J. Orin Oliphant, January 23, 1926 (unpublished statement).

¹⁷ *Overland Press*, February 2, 1862.

¹⁸ In January, 1862, the temperature was at twenty-nine degrees below zero in Walla Walla. *Washington Statesman*, January 25, 1862. The journal of P. W. Winans shows that the temperature ranged from thirty to thirty-three degrees below zero at Colville, Wash., January 15-18, 1862. P. W. Winans, *Stevens County, Washington:*

Oregon, western Washington, Vancouver Island, eastern Oregon, and eastern Washington—a great tragedy was witnessed.¹⁹ And farther eastward, in the Bitter Root and Deer Lodge Valleys, cattle in unprecedented numbers succumbed to the hardships of winter.²⁰ It was asserted that nearly all the cattle which had been driven from the Willamette Valley into the Walla Walla country late in the preceding autumn had perished.²¹ Springtime brought a ghastly sight to view. The decaying bodies of cattle polluted the air of the Walla Walla Valley. “Whose duty is it to abate the nuisances that abound on every hand about the whole valley in the shape of dead cattle?” the editor of the *Washington Statesman* was asked by a correspondent, in March, 1862. “You cannot walk out one thousand yards from the main street of Walla Walla but you encounter the festering and decaying carcasses of animals.”²² The editor of the *Statesman* admitted that the nuisance should be abated,²³ but three weeks later the health of the residents of Walla Walla was still menaced by these unburied bodies.²⁴ Surely, as the editor of the *Statesman* had previously asserted, the experience of that winter “furnished sufficient argument to induce preparation hereafter, if like results would be avoided.”²⁵ In the autumn of 1862 the *Oregon Farmer* declared that the boast of the early pioneers—that cattle in Oregon needed no winter care—was desproved.²⁶ Yet the present writer has discovered little evidence to warrant the belief that stockmen in general in the Oregon country profited by the experience of

Its Creation, Addition, Subtraction, and Division, MS. Library of the State Normal School, Cheney, Wash.), p. 4. For forty days the temperature varied from five to twenty degrees below zero at The Dalles, Ore. *Rebellion Records*, Series I, L, Pt. I, p. 861.

¹⁹ *Weekly Oregonian*, January 25, February 1, February 15, February 22, 1862; *Oregon Farmer*, April 1, 1862, p. 128; *North-West* (Port Townsend, Wash.), March 22, 1862; *British Colonist*, March 24, 1862; *Washington Statesman*, January 25, February 22, 1862; *Washington Standard*, March 29, 1862; reports of the agents at the Umatilla and Warm Springs Indian Reservations, in the *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*, 1862, 37th Cong., 3d Sess., H. Ex. Doc. No. 1, II, 413, 435.

²⁰ *Washington Statesman*, April 12, 1862, reporting an interview with a man who had recently arrived from Lieutenant John Mullan's command; John Owen, *op. cit.*, I, 238-251; Granville Stuart, *op. cit.*, I, 196-198, 200.

²¹ *Washington Statesman*, January 25, 1862. “The unprecedented severity of the winter and the influx of strangers has destroyed and consumed nearly everything in the country. Nearly all the cattle have or will die before spring. Many men who had at the beginning of winter from 300 to 400 head have not now over fifty or sixty living. Fresh meat must be very scarce here in spring. The beef consumed by the garrison at this time would not be eaten by the poorer class of San Francisco. It must be worse in a month from this time, and I doubt very much if it can be had at all.” Lieut.-Col. H. Lee, Fort Walla Walla, to Brig. Gen. George Wright, San Francisco, January 28, 1862, in *Rebellion Records*, Series I, L, Pt. I, p. 830.

²² Letter signed “Occasional,” Walla Walla, March 25, 1862, in the *Washington Statesman*, March 29, 1862.

²³ *Washington Statesman*, March 29, 1862.

²⁴ “Medicus,” writing from Steptoeville, April 10, 1862,” in the *Washington Statesman*, April 19, 1862.

²⁵ *Washington Statesman*, January 25, 1862. Other journals which declared that the losses in the winter of 1861-62 were due to inadequate preparation were the *Overland Press*, February 2, 1862; the *British Colonist*, January 29, 1862, and the *Oregon Farmer*, February 1, 1862, pp. 87, 93.

²⁶ *Oregon Farmer*, October 1, 1862, p. 28.

the winter of 1861-62. Few of them were as foresighted as F. M. Thorp, who in 1862 accumulated stacks of hay on his ranch in the Yakima Valley. Five years later these stacks stood intact. The intervening winters had not required feeding.²⁷

For a full decade after the winter of 1861-62 the Pacific Northwest was visited by no winter comparable in severity with that which has just been described, and stockmen were encouraged to persist in their careless habits. It is true that adverse weather was experienced in eastern Oregon, southern Idaho, and parts of eastern Washington in the winter of 1864-65, but the losses suffered by cattlemen generally did not approach those of the winter of 1861-62.²⁸ A rise in the price of cattle was reported in the Walla Walla Valley at the beginning of March, 1865, and this was attributed to the fact that many cattle had died during the preceding winter "in the valleys east of the mountains."²⁹ In the following winter extreme weather attended by some loss of live stock, was reported from the Grande Ronde and Powder River Valleys, but apparently there was little or no destruction of cattle in the Yakima Valley or in other areas of the intermountain region.³⁰ During the next five years one encounters only sporadic references to winter losses of live stock in the Oregon country, while newspaper comments on the mildness of the winters are numerous.

The winter of 1871-72 was, however, one of more than ordinary inclemency. In the first issue of his newspaper in 1872 the editor of the *Weekly Mountaineer* declared: "Up to the present time this has proved to be the most severe winter we have had in Eastern Oregon since the never-to-be-forgotten winter of 1861-62."³¹ Cattle which had been taken in the preceding autumn from the Willamette Valley to Klickitat County, Washington Territory, were dying rapidly by the first of February.³² Killing weather was experienced in the Yakima and Kittitas Valleys, in the Palouse country, in southeastern Washington, in eastern Oregon, and in the Snake River Valley in Idaho.³³ The losses were, however, not so great as they had

27 J. Ross Browne, *Report of J. Ross Browne on the Mineral Resources of the States and Territories West of the Rocky Mountains* (Washington, 1868), p. 553.

28 *Walla Walla Statesman*, January 6, March 31, April 7, April 28, 1865; *Washington Standard*, February 11, 1865, quoting the *Boise Statesman* of January 13, 1865. *Rebellion Records*, Series I, L, Pt. I, p. 400.

29 *Walla Walla Statesman*, March 3, 1865. It is not clear whether the writer refers to the Cascade Mountains or to the Blue Mountains.

30 *Walla Walla Statesman*, January 5, January 12, 1866, reporting interviews with expressmen; *Pacific Tribune* (Olympia, Wash.), March 17, 1866. There was some loss of live stock in the Bitter Root Valley. John Owen, *op. cit.*, II, 19.

31 *Weekly Mountaineer*, January 6, 1872.

32 *Ibid.*, February 3, 1872.

33 *Walla Walla Union*, February 17, March 16, 1872; *Willamette Farmer* (Salem, Ore.), January 6, January 20, February 3, February 17, March 9, 1872; *Idaho Signal* (Lewiston, Ida.), March 9, 1872. A few years ago the writer collected the reminiscences

been in the terrible winter a decade earlier. The cold was less intense, and in some districts feed had been provided for live stock.³⁴ One is puzzled by the contradictory testimony, but the newspaper space devoted to the subject of winter indicates a widespread feeling of anxiety. Losses in the aggregate were undoubtedly large. Again editorial voices were lifted in pleas for more humane treatment of live stock. The lesson of the winter was said to be, "Cut hay and put up sheds."³⁵ But a feeling that he was pleading a lost cause seemed to possess the mind of the editor of the *Willamette Farmer*, for, turning away from his prediction of heavy losses, he exclaimed: "And yet notwithstanding all this loss, give us three good mild winters and we will find hundreds of people rushing off to these great public pastures to raise cattle and sheep without hay or shelter in the winter."³⁶

For nine years following the winter of 1871-72 the curve of winter losses of cattle rose and fell. From the testimony available, it appears to be fairly certain that the losses were localized until the winter of 1874-75.³⁷ After that season there followed four winters of relatively mild weather. Here and there, of course, cattle died from lack of attention,³⁸ but if the average winter loss of a county or of a district did not exceed ten per cent, the outcome was not considered bad. For the winter of 1878-79 it was estimated that the losses in Walla Walla County would total not quite ten per cent; heavier losses were thought to have occurred in the Palouse and Crab Creek districts, north of the Snake River.³⁹ The following winter brought intensely cold weather to several districts in the states and territories west of the Rocky Mountains,⁴⁰ but when it

of several Whitman County pioneers. Their recollections were in substantial agreement respecting the winter of 1871-72 in the Palouse country. See, for example, a reminiscent article by Mrs. W. E. Basket, in the *Colfax Commoner* (Colfax, Wash.), July 16, 1920. For additional comments on that winter see the *Weekly Mountaineer*, January 13, February 3, February 24, May 4, 1872.

³⁴ Oscar Vansycle to J. M. Vansycle, reporting on conditions in the upper Yakima Valley, February 3, 1872, cited by the *Walla Walla Union*, February 17, 1872; "C. R. M.," writing from Baker City, Ore., February 15, 1872, in the *Weekly Mountaineer*, February 24, 1872. The editor of the *Walla Walla Union*, March 16, 1872, asserted that the losses had not been so heavy as had been feared. But he continued: "Yet there has been more or less loss all over the country, and much more than would have been necessary had feed been prepared." See also the *Weekly Mountaineer*, February 6, 1872.

³⁵ *Willamette Farmer*, February 3, 1872.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ This statement is based upon a careful examination of the files of newspapers heretofore cited.

³⁸ For reports of losses in southern Oregon in the winter of 1875-76, see quotations from "private letters" in the *Weekly Mountaineer*, April 1, April 8, 1876.

³⁹ *Walla Walla Union*, March 1, 1879.

⁴⁰ Tenth Census, *Agriculture*, III, 1080; *Weekly Mountaineer*, March 18, 1880, quoting from the Jacksonville *Sentinel* a letter describing the winter in Lake County, Oregon; *Idaho Tri-Weekly Statesman* (Boise, Ida.), March 6, 1880; *Yakima Record*, March 20, 1880; reports from the Klamath and Warm Springs Indian Reservations, August 9 and August 16, 1880, in the *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*, 1880, 46th Cong., 3d Sess., *H. Ex. Doc. No. 1*, IX, 261, 271; *Palouse Gazette* (Colfax, Wash.), January 12, 1881; *Idaho Weekly Statesman* (Boise, Ida.), March 27, 1880.

appeared that the loss of cattle in Yakima County would probably be slightly less than ten per cent, there was rejoicing. "This is remarkably light," exulted the editor of the *Yakima Record*, "and we congratulate our stock raisers."⁴¹ Men's hearts had become hardened to their own pecuniary misfortunes as well as to the suffering of their herds.

But before the decade of the seventies had half spent itself the winter of 1874-75 broke with fury over the Pacific Northwest. Many letters emanating from widely separated communities found their way into the columns of the newspapers and kept the country informed of the state of the weather.⁴² They revealed a growing anxiety which no pretense of optimism could conceal. At the outset it appeared that the correspondents wavered between the desire to tell the truth and the wish to escape the charge of pessimism. Perhaps the rapid march of events made an accurate description of one day a false account of the next. But gradually certain facts became obvious. In some localities the snow was deep, and cattle were dying for the want of feed;⁴³ elsewhere, streams and other watering places were frozen over, and cattle were succumbing to thirst.⁴⁴ The Snake River Valley, which heretofore had been reckoned a winter paradise for live stock, was fast in the deadly clutch of winter. Cattle were perishing everywhere from Fort Hall to the mouth of the Snake.⁴⁵ In that area scavengers grew proficient in reaping a grim harvest. "Up on Snake River some people are trying to make the best of a hard winter, and are now making good wages skinning dead cattle," the *Weekly Mountaineer* averred, in March, 1875. "They have a quicker process than is usually employed, they tie the head of the dead animal to a stake driven in the ground, cut the skin around the neck and rip the hide open down the legs and belly, then hitch a span of horses to the skin at the neck, and in a minute pull it clean off, quicker and easier than any other way. Two

41 *Yakima Record*, March 20, 1880.

42 *Willamette Farmer* (supplement), March 5, 1875; *ibid.*, March 12, 1875; *ibid.* (supplement), March 26, 1875; *ibid.*, April 2, April 9, 1875; *Walla Walla Union*, February 6, 1875, quoting a letter from Kittitas; *Weekly Intelligencer* (Seattle, Wash.), March 6, 1875, quoting a letter from E. T. Boyles, Yakima City.

43 *Northwestern Farmer* (Olympia, Wash.), February 27, 1875, quoting the *Walla Walla Union*; *Weekly Intelligencer*, March 6, 1875, quoting from the *Walla Statesman* an interview with W. S. Malloy, a stockman who had just returned from the ranges north of the Snake River.

44 *Walla Walla Union*, February 13, 1875, reporting an interview with Joseph Freeman, a prominent cattleman of Washington Territory.

45 *Walla Walla Union*, February 13, 1875; letter from W. M. Allen, McKay Creek, Wasco County, Ore., April 5, 1875, in the *Willamette Farmer*, April 23, 1875 (supplement). Mr. Allen, who said that he had lived in that country through five winters, declared that cattle losses in the winter of 1874-75 were greater than some persons were willing to admit. He believed that no harder winter had been experienced in eastern Oregon since 1861-62.

men with a span of horses can make \$20 a day in this way."⁴⁶ Estimates of losses varying from ten to fifty per cent were made for several localities.⁴⁷ Nothing definite was known except that losses were slight where cattle had received proper attention and heavy where they had been left to their own devices. As usual, many cattlemen had trusted to luck and had made no provision for winter feeding. Editorial advice issued in plentiful measure from the newspaper presses of the country. The evil of keeping larger herds than could be properly cared for was taken by the *Walla Walla Union* as a text for a sermon,⁴⁸ and appeals to principles of humanity and to motives of self-interest were made by the *Idaho Tri-Weekly Statesman* and the *Willamette Farmer*.⁴⁹ But there is little or no evidence that these efforts were fruitful. The return of mild weather lulled most of the stockmen into the feeling of security from which a little while before they had been rudely shaken. The old ways were continued. In truth, the memory of the average cattleman was short, and the train of his thought seemed at times to run counter to common sense.

The winter of 1880-81 was comparable in severity with that of 1861-62. Like its predecessor of nineteen years before, it was uniformly rigorous over wide areas. There came a heavy fall of snow which, in many districts at least, partially melted and crusted over.⁵⁰ This was disastrous to live stock. "The unfortunate sheep and cattle tried in vain to scratch through the icy crust, and died of starvation within but a few inches of their food," wrote an observer.⁵¹ Watering places froze. Cattle of the white men and of the Indians went down, frequently in heaps, never to rise again. Feed which had been stored up by some stockmen gave out and generally could not be replaced, even at exorbitant prices; starving cattle were offered for sale at buyers' prices, but there were no buyers.⁵² "There is no use of denying or trying to conceal the fact that large numbers of cattle, horses, and sheep have perished and will perish in eastern Wash-

⁴⁶ *Weekly Mountaineer*, March 27, 1875.

⁴⁷ *Walla Walla Union*, April 10, 1875, quoting Captain James Ewart, of Whitman County; *ibid.*, May 1, 1875, quoting H. D. Cock after he had returned from a visit to the Yakima Valley; *Willamette Farmer* (supplement), April 23, 1875, quoting W. M. Allen, of Wasco County, Ore.; *Weekly Mountaineer*, March 27, 1875, quoting the *Walla Walla Spirit*.

⁴⁸ *Walla Walla Union*, February 13, 1875.

⁴⁹ *Willamette Farmer*, May 14, 1875; *Idaho Tri-Weekly Statesman*, January 26, 1875.

⁵⁰ Report of the agent at the Yakima Indian Reservation, August 15, 1881 in the *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1881, 47th Cong., 1st Sess., H. Ex. Doc. No. 1, X, 231*; *Spokane Times* (Spokane Falls, Wash.), January 20, 1881; *Washington Independent* (Pomeroy, Wash.), February 10, 1881; letter from Sprague, Wash., January 31, 1881, published by the *Idaho Semi-Weekly World* (Idaho City, Ida.), March 11, 1881; Splawn, *Ka-mi-akin*, pp. 319-321.

⁵¹ Wallis Nash, *Two Years in Oregon* (New York, 1882), p. 171.

⁵² *Yakima Record*, January 22, 1881; *Willamette Farmer*, February 11, March 4, 1881.

ington and Oregon this winter for lack of feed and shelter," the *Walla Walla Union* stated, in January, 1881.⁵³ As the winter wore on, the extent of the disaster became distressing. Correspondents writing from cattle districts and travellers making their way through the country reported ghastly tales of dead and of dying cattle. These stories were spread broadcast by the newspapers.⁵⁴ Few indeed were the regions of the Pacific Northwest that did not report heavy losses in that winter.⁵⁵ And the severity of that season was felt even beyond the boundaries of the Oregon country.⁵⁶ Cattle which had been driven out of Oregon and Washington perished by the hundreds in Montana.⁵⁷ West of the Rockies the disaster would have been even greater than it was had not the summer of 1880 witnessed the largest of all cattle drives from the Northwest to lands eastward of the continental divide.⁵⁸ But there was tragedy enough in all conscience. Winter's passing disclosed scenes like those of 1862, recollections of which were still vivid in the memories of the older pioneers of the Oregon country. Putrefying carcasses defiled the balmy air of springtime,⁵⁹ and in Yakima City a public meeting was called to devise means of getting rid of the dead cattle.⁶⁰ Again the words of a familiar song were chanted by newspaper editors and correspondents, probably with the momentary approval of stockmen.⁶¹ But whether the "lesson" of 1880-81 was to be more beneficial than that of preceding winters was a secret still locked up in the bosom of time.

Grievous though the losses of 1880-81 had been, the situation was not altogether desperate for the cattlemen who emerged from that winter with some cattle alive or with their credit unimpaired. Prices of cattle were rising in the Pacific Northwest; the years of depression had passed by. Eastward movements of live stock and

53 Quoted by the *Palouse Gazette*, January 28, 1881.

54 *Willamette Farmer*, February 11, March 4, 1881, publishing letters from Oregon and Washington correspondents; letter from the Kittitas Valley, March 30, 1881, in the *Morning Oregonian*, April 13, 1881; *North-West Tribune* (Cheney, Wash.), February 4, 1881, quoting the *Lewiston Teller*; *Morning Oregonian*, March 24, 1881, quoting the *Yakima Record*; F. H. Cook's report of a trip through the Yakima Valley, *Spokane Times*, June 16, 1881.

55 Losses in the Colville Valley, Washington, were reported to have been insignificant. See news-letter from Fort Colville, April 13, 1881, in the *Spokane Times*, April 21, 1881. This report was exceptional.

56 On losses of cattle in Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, and Nevada, see Tenth Census, *Agriculture*, III, 1005, 1018, 1025, 1058.

57 See an article entitled "Stock Losses in Montana," based upon a letter received from E. G. Brooks, who had driven cattle from the Oregon country into Montana. *North-West Tribune*, April 29, 1881.

58 J. Orin Oliphant, *The Range Cattle Industry of the Oregon Country to 1890*, MS., chap. v.

59 *Morning Oregonian*, March 29, 1881, reporting the situation at Pendleton, Ore.

60 News from Yakima County, in the *Walla Walla Union*, March 19, 1881.

61 "A Little Advice to the Provident," *Yakima Record*, January 22, 1881; *The West Shore* (Portland, Ore.), February, 1881, p. 35; *Pataha City Spirit* (Pataha City, Wash.), January 25, 1881; *Morning Oregonian*, April 13, 1881. "Then and there I resolved to own no more cattle than I could take care of." Splawn, *Ka-mi-akin*, p. 319.

the storms of winter had wiped out an embarrassing surplus.⁶² On the high plains the cattle industry was booming,⁶³ and hope began to stir again in the hearts of stockmen who recently had seen their fortunes swept away. Within a few years, it is said, Benjamin E. Snipes, long a "cattle king" of the Oregon country, had built up a new fortune.⁶⁴ Late in the winter of 1882-83 he was reported to be at his ranch on the lower Yakima River, "looking after the welfare of his stock." By the same authority it was asserted that Mr. Snipes, who not only had "cattle upon a thousand hills" but also "a goodly number down in the canyons," never became too rich to stay near them and protect them in their hour of need.⁶⁵ He was a stockman of extraordinarily good judgment.

For a few years after 1881 cattle fared reasonably well in the Pacific Northwest. The pressure on some of the ranges had been considerably reduced, a fact of especial significance since the cattle pastures in several districts were rapidly shrinking before the advance of sheepmen and of farmers.^{65a} There were some losses in the winter of 1882-83, but no widespread disaster.⁶⁶ "In the vicinity of the mouth of the Yakima River the loss of cattle has not been to exceed three per cent, by reason of the cold this winter," declared the *Yakima Signal*, in March, 1883. "On the Indian reservation the loss has been much greater. Perhaps much of the loss was occasioned by the frozen condition of the watering places."⁶⁷ Stockmen of the Yakima Valley were said to have profited by the experience acquired two years before;⁶⁸ yet the continuing general negligence of cattlemen in the Pacific Northwest prompted the *Yakima Record* to endorse an editorial in which the *Portland News* had expressed surprise at the extent of the cattlemen's improvidence and revealed bewilderment that the disaster of 1880-81 had been so lightly regarded. "The *News* is right," affirmed the *Record*, "and the *Record* for years has endeavored to induce our farmers to adopt a more provident policy. However, it is possible experience is the best teacher. The losses of two or three winters may teach them prudence."⁶⁹ The decade of the eighties moved toward its

62 Oliphant, *op. cit.*, chap. v.

63 E. S. Osgood, *The Day of the Cattleman* (Minneapolis, 1929), chap. iv.

64 Splawn, *Ka-mi-akin*, p. 323.

65 *Yakima Signal* (Yakima, Wash.), March 10, 1883.

65a As an illustration of a general tendency, see a communication from Grant County, Ore., in the *Weekly Drovers Journal* (Chicago, Ill.), May 18, 1882, p. 6.

66 *Democratic State Journal* (Dayton, Wash.), February 9, February 16, 1883; *Morning Oregonian*, February 15, February 21, 1883; *Idaho Tri-Weekly Statesman*, March 6, March 20, 1883 (correspondence); *Pomeroy Republican* (Pomeroy, Wash.), February 10, 1883.

67 *Yakima Signal*, March 17, 1883.

68 *Yakima Signal*, February 17, 1883.

69 *Yakima Record*, March 10, 1883.

close, however, without leaving in its wake evidences of widespread animal destruction. Some losses of cattle in Idaho were reported for the winter of 1886-87, and the Lewiston *Teller*, exasperated because cattle had been allowed to die of starvation, expressed a wish for a law that would compel every stockman to put up hay adequate to the needs of his live stock during the winter months.⁷⁰ The Oregon country in general was fortunate in that winter; in Montana and in other regions eastward of the Rockies live-stock losses were expressed in large figures.⁷¹

The transition from the decade of the eighties to that of the nineties was marked in the Pacific Northwest by inclement weather which took a heavy toll of live stock. The tragedy of 1880-81 was re-enacted. Inadequate provision had been made for winter care, although it was plain to one who had eyes to see than range feed had become dangerously short. The dry summer and autumn of 1889 were followed by heavy snowfalls, and the farming population rejoiced at the prospect of good crops in 1890.⁷² But for the owners of live stock which must range at large there could be no feeling save those of anxiety and sorrow. If the number of cattle which perished on unfenced pasture lands in that winter was smaller than the number which died in 1880-81, it was because there were fewer cattle running at large in the later than in the earlier winter. Yet in proportion to the number in the country the destruction was very great. Killing weather was experienced everywhere.⁷³ The diary of Benedict Gubser recites a dismal story of suffering and of death in the Okanogan Valley.⁷⁴ It was believed that half of the estimated twenty thousand head of range cattle in the Yakima Valley perished,⁷⁵ and on the open spaces of the Big Bend country live stock died by hundreds.⁷⁶ Some of the cattle which perished in the latter area

⁷⁰ *Teller* (Lewiston, Ida.), February 17, 1887.

⁷¹ *National Live-Stock Journal* (Chicago, Ill.), January-May, 1887 (weekly edition); *Spokane Falls Review* (Spokane Falls, Wash.), March 10, 1887; *North-West Tribune*, April 7, 1887, quoting the *Helena Independent*; Osgood, *The Day of the Cattleman*, pp. 220-221.

⁷² *Illustrated History of Klickitat, Yakima and Kittitas Counties*, p. 253, quoting the *Ellensburg Capital*, April 10, 1890; *Teller*, August 8, 1889; Eleventh Census, "Irrigation," III, 207, 211; *Spokane Falls Daily Chronicle* (Spokane Falls, Wash.), March 17, 1890 (dispatch from Almira, Wash.); the governor of Idaho to the Secretary of the Interior, 1890, 51st Cong., 2d Sess., *H. Ex. Doc. No. 1*, XIII, 544.

⁷³ See Note 72. Consult also *Illustrated History of the Big Bend Country* . . . (Western Historical Publishing Co., 1904), p. 92, quoting the *Lincoln County Times* (Davenport, Wash.), March 7, 1890; special correspondence from The Dalles, Ore., to the *Morning Oregonian*, quoted by the *Cheney Enterprise* (Cheney, Wash.), March 6, 1890; files of the *Spokane Falls Review* and of *The Spokesman*, newspapers of Spokane Falls, Wash., January-March, 1890.

⁷⁴ Excerpts from this diary are published in *Glimpses of Pioneer Life (Okanogan Independent, Okanogan, Wash., 1924)*, pp. 104-106.

⁷⁵ *Illustrated History of Klickitat, Yakima and Kittitas Counties*, p. 181, quoting the *Yakima Herald*, March 6, 1890. Another estimate put the loss at "three-quarters of all the cattle in the Yakima Country." *Idaho Weekly Statesman*, April 12, 1880 (extra sheet).

⁷⁶ John C. Lawrence to J. Orin Oliphant, March 10, 1926 (letter). See also references in Notes 72 and 73.

had recently been driven in from Oregon, and in respect of their owners one man hinted at what many another probably was thinking: it served the intruders right.⁷⁷ In Idaho stockmen suffered a severe blow, the immediate reaction to which was disclosed a few months later when the governor of that territory reported to the Secretary of the Interior that those engaged "in this business are now guarding against future heavy losses by providing winter feed."⁷⁸

* * *

Within the brief compass of a few pages there has unfolded to our vision the outline of the history of winter losses of cattle in the Pacific Northwest during a period of more than forty years. Since journalists of that region have furnished many of the original sources from which this tragic narrative has been written, it is fitting that what is offered by way of a concluding observation should be drawn from an editorial published in an Oregon magazine. "The winter just past, while hard on the stock interests east of the Cascade mountains, was not without a lesson that can be turned to profit on the ranges. The range stock business must be more carefully conducted. The recent losses were owing more to mismanagement on the part of those having the care of stock than to the severity of the weather. Last fall grazing was poor and stock was in bad condition to start in the winter. Instead of providing food for their animals most stockmen trusted to luck to get through the winter without heavy loss. But the winter was of exceptional severity, and, while stock properly cared for got through in reasonably good condition, that left to shift for itself suffered severely.

. . . But, as a result, better provision will hereafter be made for sustaining stock on the ranges, and the tone of the business will be appreciably improved. To properly feed and tend stock is cheaper than to suffer the losses inevitable from careless treatment. . . . The experience of the past winter will tend to secure that care in the future."⁷⁹ This was published in the spring of 1890, but the sentiment thereof was at least a generation old.

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⁷⁷ "Mr. Urquhart, of Urquhart Bros.," quoted by *The Spokesman*, March 9, 1890, p. 6. The Urquhart Brothers were stockmen of the Big Bend country.

⁷⁸ 51st Cong., 2d Sess., *H. Ex. Doc. No. 1*, XIII, 544.

⁷⁹ *The West Shore* (Portland, Ore.), March 22, 1890, p. 356.