

ROCKING P RANCH AND THE SECOND CATTLE FRONTIER IN WESTERN CANADA

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The Extended Family Period: Riddle and Macleay Brothers

Once in the high country south and west of Calgary for what they believed would be the long term, the four young men experienced the exhilarating sensation that comes from a sense of rebirth. As they began exploring the hill country around Emerson's place for a location for their new ranch, some of the scenery they encountered plainly added to this. Rod was thrilled when he and Billy McKeage came across a beautiful area nestled among the hills with lots of grass and good water, with a stream meandering through it. He wrote in his diary: "struck on the best location on the whole of Alberta"—a valley with "lots of water and thousands of tons of hay."¹ This was section 32, township 16, range 1 west of the 5th meridian. Rod, Alex, Douglas Riddle, and Marvin Morrill ultimately claimed all of the section, each filing for a homestead on one of the four quarters.² Uncle John Riddle then bought section 31-16-1-W5, a C & E Railway section, to provide a neutral location on which the partners would build their company house.³

Morrill, who evidently had different long-term plans from the beginning, left the partnership after less than a year. However, for the time being, the three remaining partners all clung to the belief that the future would be bright, and they bought him out. Now known as Riddle and Macleay brothers, they proceeded to acquire more land through lease and purchase.⁴ By 1904 they controlled a contiguous block of six sections, nearly 4,000 acres.⁵ The partners also invested, mostly in the form of their own labour, in infrastructure at the home place. They started with living quarters for themselves. At first, they slept in a hastily constructed

wall tent, which kept them a little too close to nature for comfort. For one two-week period in May 1901 it rained more or less constantly while they drove wagons back and forth daily from the terminus at Cayley, hauling in lumber and supplies from their settler's railway cars. On 10 May, a cold rain turned into two feet of snow covering the hills. Rod had made a trip for supplies and spent the night in town. When he arrived back at the camp he found the others all under the collapsed tent canvas, shivering in the cold. This no doubt ignited their enthusiasm for a permanent structure.

Following their original plan, they soon began using the precut lumber to start their new home on a hillside on the southeast quarter of section 31. They built the basic 24-foot by 36-foot two-storey frame house from sill to shingles in just twelve days (15–27 May). Willis Wentworth, a Danville friend who came from Calgary with his carpentry skills, and the firm in Danville that had originally cut the lumber, made their job much easier than it otherwise might have been. The finished product was an early 1900s version of a prefabricated house. As soon as it was habitable they moved in, happily folding the tent and quickly turning their attentions to other buildings and fences. The poles and lumber for the barn they got from the Findlay Brothers Mill on Timber Ridge, about fifteen miles southeast of the home place. “The Colonel” (Rod’s nickname for George Emerson) and Uncle John put up the pole frame structure, mortising the posts and beams in a typical Eastern Township style. On the “fine day” of 6 July, they all pitched in and built a henhouse and then “a House of Parliament,” as they called the outdoor toilet. At that point, the home place was more or less complete.

The partners’ diet in these days was based largely on beef, and for greens and the all-important potato staple, they planted a vegetable garden on the top of a hill about a mile east of the house. Once that was done they, like most homesteaders in those days, made a start at enclosing their pastures in order to control their roaming livestock. In two weeks, they constructed some six miles of three-strand barbed-wire fence. The work was not easy. Most of the posts, which they drove into the ground at intervals of fifteen paces, they had to cut out of the crooked, tangled mess of indigenous willow bush growing locally, and sharpen them by hand.



FIGURE 2.1. Macleay home place circa 1930. Photograph property of the Blades and Chattaway families and their descendants.

Thereafter, erecting fences around their pastures and constructing corrals at the home place became the main order of business whenever the men were not preoccupied with other matters. Even if the necessary materials had been available, purchasing them was an unthinkable expense. Eventually, to find enough logs for posts and rails, they had to look well beyond their immediate area. They would take a crew of up to four farther west to the coniferous forests nearer the mountains some twenty miles away for a few days, to fell, trim, and section trees. They would bring back what they could and stockpile the rest. Later, one or two of them would go back out whenever possible on a day trip to draw more of the wood home. When the stockpile was gone, they would repeat the process.

In this second frontier period, ranchers needed to add to their supply of posts to enclose their pastures if and as their land base expanded and also to replace existing posts as they were broken by falling trees and as they aged and succumbed to rot. Therefore, the job of cutting the logs out of the bush was, for many, like fencing itself, something they had to attend to on a regular and long-term basis. For Rod Macleay, this was to be the case over and beyond the next two decades. The other task to which

he and the others soon turned their attention was haying. Seeing that the tall native grasses—the rough fescue on the uplands and the wheat grass on the lower elevations—were in full bloom and voluminous, they started on 29 July 1901. Working with two hired men, they managed to put up 202 wagonloads by 22 August. From that point on, haying became a major part of the annual cycle, as the feed proved essential. In early 1904, Rod wrote in his diary: “This has been a long, long winter for me. Will be almighty glad when spring sets in.” They had not started feeding their cattle until 21 December but then had to do so continuously through to 7 April. “With a ‘hurrah,’” Rod wrote, “that was it for the year. Though two inches of snow had fallen the night before, it was all gone by evening and the hills were greening up.” Even so, “when April came so did the occasional spring blizzard.”

Douglas Riddle’s sister, Margaret, came out from the East to help out wherever she could, and she and at least one other woman were on hand during haying in 1904. The crops were some distance from the buildings, so the haying crew set up a camp with a wall tent near a creek. With two mowers, a dump rake, a sweep, and an overshot stacker, a five-man crew was required. The women kept them supplied with baked goods such as bread and pies. There may also have been a camp cook and possibly an extra hand to catch up fresh horses for the midday change and sharpen mower sickles. With a minimum of five teams in the field, there would have been at least twenty horses in camp and more in reserve at the buildings. The crew started on 27 July and, after a short rain delay, hayed straight through the whole month of August. They finished the field work on 7 September. By measuring the length, breadth, and over throw of the haystacks, and applying a standard formula, Rod and his partners calculated they had about 400 tons of hay.

In all probability, the cattle they brought west were Shorthorns. We do know that they were stockers to economize shipping (220 yearlings and 61 two-year-olds were selected with the help of Doctor A. Lyster, a well-known veterinarian), with the plan of selling them when ready and then buying a herd of cows, which they did in 1903. These, naturally, were Shorthorns, as they are a hardy breed and were most popular in this period. The male calves would be castrated and kept for three to five years until finally large and fat enough to be sold on the slaughter



FIGURE 2.2. Mowing Hay. Charlie Waddell, ranch hand, A7 Ranch, Nanton, Alberta., [ca. 1910-1912]. Glenbow Archives, NA-691-26.



FIGURE 2.3. Richard Shore raking hay, with a dump rake, which rakes the hay into piles for the sweepers to collect. Springfield Ranch, Beynon, Alberta. [ca. 1900]. Glenbow Archives, NC-43-43.



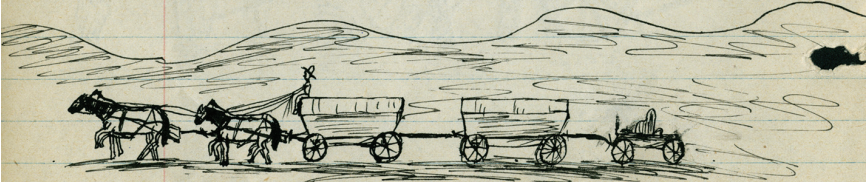
FIGURE 2.4. Haying in Pincher Creek area, Alberta, [ca.1900-1903] with an overshot stacker with two sweeps, which collect the mown and raked hay and haul it to the overshot stacker. Glenbow Archives, NA-2382-8.

market. The best females would be kept too but, on reaching maturity, bred and made part of the mother herd. The poorer ones would be neutered by spaying and eventually sold for beef with the steers.⁶ Because the men so quickly fenced in their holdings they were able to realize important economies that had never been possible on the open range. As well as insulating their stock from inclement weather and protecting it from outside breeds, disease, wolves, and rustlers, they were able to time birthing so that their calves were born in the spring—March through April. In that period, the weather was likely to be moderate and birthing death losses small, and yet it was early enough to give the calves the full summer to grow and develop on their mother's milk and the prairie grasses. The calves were then weaned and converted to hay by the time winter set in.⁷ Enclosed pastures also enabled the partners to make sure they missed none of the calves during the June roundups.⁸ At the same time they were able to keep close enough watch on their animals to identify unproductive cows and sell them on the slaughter market when

Cartoons.



Toppin' out the last stack at
the Calf Camp Oct. 27th.



Ed Davis bringing out the
grain tanks from Layley.

FIGURE 2.5. The last stack at the Calf Camp. One man forks the hay to the other who places it and stomps it down to pack and finish off the top. *Rocking P Gazette*, October 1924, 20. Property of the Blades and Chattaway families and their descendants.

pulling off their “fats” during the September gatherings.⁹ It was important to turn these animals into cash rather than allow them to absorb the precious grasses and the salt “licks” purchased to keep them healthy, as well as the hay they required when snow covered the ground.¹⁰

The partners kept a close watch on their cattle throughout this early period, grazing them most of the time and feeding them when necessary. By the summer of 1905 the herd had grown to 720 head. At that point, they made a monumental decision. They recognized that the area they had chosen was already occupied to a great extent, mainly by the Bar U ranch and the Bar S to their immediate south (then owned by Peter Muirhead), and that it was fast filling up with homesteaders. To expand in their current location would be a long, drawn-out process. They decided, therefore, to look elsewhere. To this end they took a huge leap of faith, and in 1905 they acquired a CPR lease on the Red Deer River that vaulted them from settlers to cattlemen in one fell swoop. It was too late in the season to do anything the first year, but by the summer of 1906 the future looked promising, and they stocked the lease with 1,500 head

The lease contained nearly two townships of land—37,342 acres; the cost was 40 cents per acre, for a total of \$1,493.68 per year. In heading out to the Red Deer River area, they were following the lead of some well-known foothills ranchers, including their friend George Emerson, and also John Ware, both of whom had moved east to avoid the hordes of homesteaders pouring into the more fertile western regions; they were also following the example of future famous westerners George Lane of the Bar U and A. E. Cross of the A7, who leased new holdings to supplement their western pastures.¹¹

At the same time, they took an opportunity to invest in freehold property in the region. The partners were looking for a place in the area on which to base their operation, when a tragedy occurred. While checking cattle on his range in September 1905, John Ware was thrown from his horse and killed. Ware had lost his wife, Mildred, to pneumonia some months earlier, and the Royal Trust Company of Calgary was appointed to take over negotiations to sell his property for his five orphaned children.¹² The partners were able to buy Ware’s half section, N½ 19-21-14-W4, all his cattle, hay, and improvements, and his five brands, for \$12,500.¹³



FIGURE 2.6. John and Mildred Ware and two of their children, Robert Lewis and Amanda Janet “Nettie,” circa 1896. Glenbow Archives, NA-263-1.

Now Riddle and Macleay brothers had room to pasture one- to three-year-old steers that could be readied for market relatively quickly compared to newborn calves, which improved cash flows. They obtained most of these cattle from small farmers in Manitoba. Rod went east on one of many buying trips in 1906. The results can be traced along trails he left of cheques and receipts. A receipt written on 3 June on Albion Hotel paper in Portage la Prairie reads: “From C Knox, 627 head, 3 year olds

\$25.50, yearlings \$19.50.” The freighting charge was \$40.00 per car from Winnipeg to Brooks. Cost per head landed at Brooks was \$21.29 plus \$1 commission. Charlie Knox was a well-known cattle buyer in the West and one of the few who competed for the cattlemen’s business with the West’s wealthiest cattle buyer and slaughter plant owner, Patrick Burns of Calgary, and with the beef brokering firm that regularly colluded with him, Gordon, Ironside and Fares out of Winnipeg.¹⁴

Initially Uncle John Riddle helped finance some of the cattle. A letter arrived in May 1906 advising Rod that there would be a credit of \$6,000 at the Bank of Montreal for the purpose. It suggested purchasing yearlings, as they would be able to buy a greater number than if they bought older, heavier stock. With this money and advice Rod went back to Winnipeg and got five carloads of “doggies.”¹⁵ These cattle cost \$22 per head, plus the one-dollar commission to Knox. On 1 June 1906, Uncle John brought in 300 steers of his own and had them branded with Bar M7 on the right rib and then turned out on the Brooks lease. He was helping the partners financially by subleasing grazing privileges from them.

Since all the steers came from Manitoba rather than Ontario, where many western ranchers got their supply in those days, the partners’ herd would have been of an acceptable if not the highest quality.¹⁶ Manitoba milk producers normally bred their cows to Shorthorn, Hereford, and Angus bulls rather than the lankier dairy varieties, including Holsteins and Ayrshires, that Ontario farmers often used. Consequently, the offspring were only 50 percent dairy bred and “fleshed up” and put on weight comparatively more efficiently. It was likely Emerson’s tutelage that accounts for this decision. In 1900, a neighbouring rancher had remarked: “G[eorge] Emerson of High River bought over one thousand [Manitoba cattle] this year. He has been buying for some years and seems satisfied with results.”¹⁷

The beef market in these years was on a very slow but somewhat steady climb, which suggests Riddle and Macleay brothers probably made, or at least did not lose, money buying doggies and pasturing and selling them within one to three years as “fats.” The average price of slaughter steers nationwide between 1901 and 1905 rose from \$.0436 to \$.0452 per pound.¹⁸ The one-year-olds landed at the Ware ranch at \$27.00 per head (transportation and commission included) would probably

have weighed 400 to 500 pounds. If the grass was lush and the partners grazed the animals for 100 days that summer, wintered them, and then grazed them for 100 days again the next year, they would have been able to put around 600 pounds on each of them over two and a half years.¹⁹ If they sold them at the average price of about \$.0452/lb. they would have got $1300 \times \$.0452$ or \$58.76 per head on the fall market. Of course, there were costs such as for death losses, which might be around 5 percent, for the CPR transporting the stock to market, for hay over the winter, and for incidentals like salt. Much of the labour was their own, but more and more they were relying on employees, especially on the Red Deer River property. By 1907, besides the three partners, there were up to twelve men on the payroll. This clearly separates the partnership from the average family farm on which virtually all labour was home-grown. However, as we will see, family strategies and practices would also be a major part of their operation's future.

To say as much is not to argue that Riddle and Macleay brothers had money to spare. Overall startup costs were high. They had invested in cattle, lumber, and provisions before coming west and then had built the home place, purchased barbed wire for their fences, and paid for all the necessities of life. For the time being, they had to maintain their breeding stock while they waited for the calves born to their own cows to mature, fatten up properly, and eventually contribute to their liquid position; and, of course, they not only required capital to bring in doggies but also to make payments on land purchased and leases. This clearly put them in the realm of borrowers far beyond the average settler. As a consequence, the partners felt obliged to diversify their forms of production. In so doing, as we will now see, they were to be setting (and following) what was to become a well-trodden path for their settler kind in western prairie Canada.

