

ROCKING P RANCH AND THE SECOND CATTLE FRONTIER IN WESTERN CANADA

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Go West Young Men

At the turn of the twentieth century, Roderick Riddle Macleay was a twenty-one-year-old living in the small town of Danville in the Eastern Townships of Quebec. He was still single, and he was suffering from what was considered a life-threatening case of chronic rheumatoid fever. One day he met a family friend and former neighbour, George Emerson, who was on a return visit to his earlier home in Danville from his cattle ranch in the Alberta foothills. Emerson made an indelible impact on the young Macleay as he proceeded to fill Roderick's head with his own experiences on the western frontier. We cannot be sure *exactly* what Emerson said, but we do know that he had been on the frontier from the beginning—that, indeed, he had been one of its most important players and that, therefore, he knew the entire story.

Emerson unquestionably knew that cattle had first appeared in the foothills and mountainous regions of western Montana after making the long journey north from Texas along the Chisholm and the Goodnight-Loving trails. Starting in the 1870s, increasing numbers of these cattle were driven across the border to Alberta to feed Indigenous people facing starvation with the destruction of the bison herds. Emerson himself, and Tom Lynch, who had migrated west from Missouri, had driven in hundreds of horses and cattle to sell to a number of small ranchers, many of them former North West Mounted Police officers. In 1879, the two men had also brought a thousand cattle and horses north to start up their own ranch along the Highwood River west of the town of High River.¹

It was in the late 1870s and early 1880s that the era of the so-called “great ranches” began and suddenly turned this northward bovine trickle into a fast-running stream as new grazing corporations suddenly

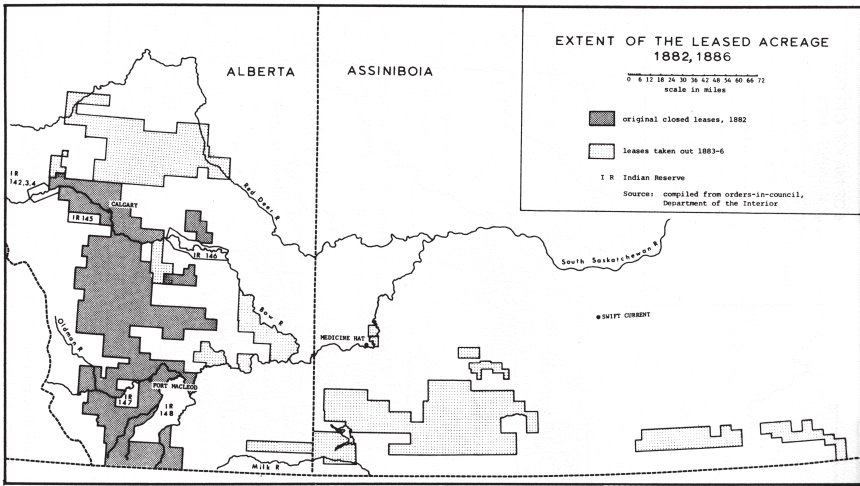


FIGURE 1.1. Extent of the leases in western Canada, 1886. Derived from Orders in Council, Department of the Interior. Simon Evans, "The Passing of a Frontier: Ranching in the Canadian West, 1882-1912." Unpublished MA thesis: University of Calgary, 1976, reprinted in David H. Breen, *The Canadian Prairie West and the Ranching Frontier* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1983), 46.

became infatuated with the opening frontier. Almost overnight, big joint-stock companies originating in Boston, New York, Edinburgh, London, and Montreal began to invest pools of surplus capital in the western cattle business. Many of them were situated south of the border, but a number, including the four mentioned above in the Introduction (the Cochrane ranch, the Bar U, the Walrond, and the Oxley) established themselves in the foothills directly south and west of Calgary. Others, including the Circle ranch, occupied the hills of the Milk River Ridge along the American border, and still others, including the Canadian Agricultural Coal and Colonization Company, or 76 ranch, the Turkey Track, the Circle Diamond, and the N Bar N, settled in the region running farther east from the Cypress Hills to the Wood Mountain area in Assiniboia Territory.² The cattle numbers in western prairie Canada rose in less than a decade from a few thousand to over half a million.³

Emerson very likely described the young men who stayed in Canada after trailing in the herds to work on the big company outfits, and who

imported the riding, roping, and droving skills of the cowboy with them—men including the famous black cowboy, John Ware; the manager and then part-owner of the Bar U, George Lane; the celebrated bronco buster, Frank Ricks; the one-time foreman of the Bar U, Everett Johnson; the Cochrane ranch cowboys, W. D. Kerfoot, Jim Dunlap, and a Mexican known as CaSous; and the first Walrond ranch foreman, Jim Patterson. All these men had, like Emerson and Lynch, learned their trade on ranches in the American West. They were practised cowhands, and they became the role models for a lot more young men who followed them in from eastern Canada and Great Britain. Many of these men were “wannabes” who, immediately upon stepping off the train in Calgary, headed to local shops to secure the wide-brimmed hat, the boots, the bright shirt and bandana, and the spurs and chaps they needed to look the part of the working cowboy. Some, known widely as “remittance men,” had been sent to the frontier with family financial support, mainly to avoid disgracing their parents at home. Many of them failed miserably, turning to drink, prostitutes, and general dissipation. Others, though, signed on with one of the cattle operations and learned to ride, rope, brand, and even handle a six-shooter. Together, they and their American teachers transformed life in the western foothills. In the 1870s, one rancher stated, “no one” on the northern Great Plains had even “heard tell of a cowboy,” but by 1883, “leather chaps, wide hats, gay handkerchiefs, clanking silver spurs, and skin fitting high-healed [*sic*] boots ... had become an institution.”⁴

Emerson’s stories about life in the West came at a time when Rod Macleay, like many young men from eastern Canada, the eastern United States, and Europe, was being subjected to a great deal of promotional literature advertising the vast potential of cattle ranching on the Great Plains from Texas all the way north to Alberta. One pamphlet the Canadian government had recently published seemed to be lauding the very region that Emerson was talking about. This land “stands unequaled among the cattle countries of the world,” it asserted, and “is now looked upon as one of the greatest future supply depots of the British markets. Great herds of cattle roam at will over seemingly boundless pastures.” Herds are “now being sent into this country all the way from Ontario to fatten on the nutritious grasses of these western plains and it is reckoned that after



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DEADWOOD DICK'S EAGLES; OR, THE PARDS OF FLOOD BAR.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER.



"HOLD! STAND, YOU RUFFIANLY CREW, OR, I'LL MAKE BUZZARD FOOD OF YOU!"

FIGURE 1.2. Edward L. Wheeler, *Deadwood Dick's Eagles; or, The Pardes of Flood Bar* (New York: M.J. Ivers & Co., 1899). Image courtesy of the Northern Illinois University Libraries' *Nickels and Dimes* site, <https://dimenovels.lib.niu.edu/>.

paying the cost of freight for 2,000 miles the profit will be greater than if those cattle had been fattened by stall feeding in Ontario.”⁵ Young male easterners had also been inundated in their adolescent years by a host of dime novels eulogizing cowboy types like Stampede Steve, Buffalo Bill Cody, or Kit Carson, who had attained celebrity by performing heroic deeds in the opening West like killing “savages,” or saving a damsel in distress from a charging bull, or imposing justice on frontier outlaws.⁶ Many easterners had also been influenced by a multiplicity of romantic novels about young males heading West and ultimately achieving great things on a cattle ranch by testing their previously untapped physical and cerebral talents against the stimulating qualities of the western environment.⁷ St George Henry Rathborne’s *Sunset Ranch*,⁸ Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*⁹ (for which the hero was modelled on Everett Johnson who moved to Alberta in 1888), H. L. Williams’ *The Chief of the Cowboys*,¹⁰ and Canadian Ralph Connor’s *Sky Pilot*,¹¹ to name but a few, made a very distinct impression on maturing youngsters and helped eventually to draw many of them to the opening cattle frontiers on both sides of the forty-ninth parallel.

At a time when print was still by far the most significant form of media, images created by these sorts of publications could, and we would argue did, have a much greater impact on the reading public than scholars have previously assumed. Even if Macleay was relatively impervious to the more outlandish representations, he must already have had an upbeat image of what could be achieved on the first cattle frontier when he heard from Emerson. One thing the latter could not have told him, because he would not have known at this time, was that in relatively short order all the company ranches would be gone.¹² However, he did know, and he almost certainly did inform Macleay, that a new type of cattleman was now pouring into the foothills to take up ranching on a much smaller scale. The individuals who were of this type were, like Emerson himself, settling on a quarter section (160 acres) of more or less free land under the Dominion Lands Act of 1872 and then leasing or purchasing further holdings on which to pasture their smaller herds and to put up enough wild hay to sustain their stock through the long winters.¹³

The homesteaders were particularly relevant to Macleay. He was in a sort of holding pattern in his own life. He had been working with his

father running a lumber mill in Quebec, but he was also trying, without much success, to make up his mind about what he wanted to do for a living in the longer term. Suddenly, through the homesteaders, he was able to see his way to a new future on land of his own. Shortly after his conversations with Emerson, therefore, he decided he was going to join the “settler revolution” and to fill as much as he could of whatever life he had left working cattle on the western prairies.¹⁴ His exuberance was infectious, and when he announced to his friends that as soon as possible he would be making an exploratory trip to southern Alberta to see first-hand what the country was all about, three other Danvillites decided they wanted to go with him.¹⁵

A few weeks later, Rod, his cousin Douglas Riddle,¹⁶ Uncle Joseph Riddle,¹⁷ and their mutual friend, Marvin Morrill, climbed aboard a Canadian Pacific Railway train for Calgary. From there, the men took the C & E (Calgary & Edmonton) line some twenty miles south to the town of Okotoks, where they acquired a team and wagon for the final leg of their journey to a ranch on the lower Highwood owned and operated by Joe Riddle’s son-in-law, David Thorburn. Thorburn was delighted to see them, and he showed them the western hospitality, which Emerson had told them to expect, immediately offering them a hot meal and accommodation for the night. The next morning, after consuming an ample breakfast of fresh eggs, toast, and coffee, Rod, the younger Riddle, and Morrill left Uncle Joe to visit with his daughter and son-in-law and headed to Emerson’s place some thirty-five miles west on Pekisko Creek, a tributary of the Highwood.

During the next few days the three were able to feel they were experiencing the life of true westerners. Rod got his first try at roping livestock from the back of a horse, and he and his companions pitched in and helped put up fresh hay for two other former Danvillites, the McKeage brothers, Billy and John. They also stoked green feed and helped track down some missing horses. They found some time to go hunting and fishing, too. On one outing they shot seventeen sharp-tailed grouse and a goose, and on another they pulled a 24-inch trout from the Highwood River. One day Rod and yet another former Danvillite, Willis Wentworth, went to a big lake to hunt ducks. Rod was thrilled with it all. “We have our larder well filled,” he wrote in his diary. “What a contrast between what I am now

doing and what I would be doing if I were at home. Willis fired a shot and the noise of the ducks rising up from the water is simply deafening. There are thousands upon thousands congregated on this lake.”

For the time being, the western spirit of all three men was and remained high. When they returned to Quebec, Rod, Douglas Riddle, Marvin Morrill, and Rod’s brother, Alexander, who had not been able to make the earlier trip, signed a contract to form a ranching partnership. They also pooled their resources (and presumably, accepted financial help from their respective families), to purchase the basic items they felt they would need to get started in the West.¹⁸ When the spring of 1901 arrived, they packed 295 head of cattle, some horses, haying machinery, kitchen utensils, furniture, bedding, clothes, and lumber, onto railway cars and headed back out to the Alberta foothills for a more prolonged stay.

