

The First American and His Range Resource¹

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Highlight

Beginning with the introduction of livestock by the Spaniards, the Navajos have been prominent in the livestock industry. Stock raising has become so much a part of the Navajo life that its origin and development are involved in the religious ceremonies, social functions, and economic status of the people. The Sioux, on the other hand, have had to undergo significant cultural and social change to adapt to range management and livestock raising as a means of obtaining their livelihood. This transformation is proceeding at an accelerated pace. The history of the Navajo and the Sioux, their trials and frustrations, are relevant to other tribes in the production of livestock and involvements of range management.

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About 100 years ago, armed conflict with the American Indian had virtually ended and the settling of the West was in full swing. In 1868, peace treaties were signed at Bosque

Redando with the Navajos and at Fort Laramie with the Sioux, thus marking an end to two of the major conflict areas. In negotiations prior to signing peace treaties the Indians agreed to relinquish claims to vast areas of what is now the western United States. With the exception of specific reserves or reservations which were to remain exclusively theirs, a proud people submitted to a new philosophy and a colorful period in the history of the United States drew to an end. Great stories have been written and told of this particular era dealing with the conflicts of war, the settling of the West, and growth of the livestock industry. Numerous authors have written volumes on the social systems and values of Indian people which I recommend as not only

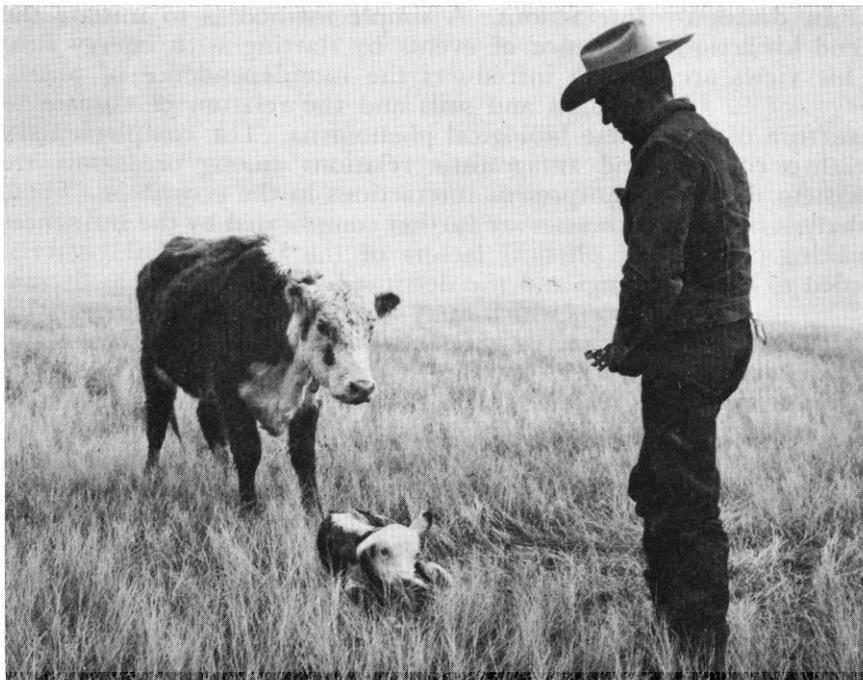


FIG. 1. A start in the cattle business is the dream of many of our First Americans. The Resource is available; training and financing limit the opportunity.

enlightening to read, but educational and thought-provoking in reconstructing this period of history.

It is fitting and proper that the American Society of Range Management should apprise itself of the history, the present impact and the objectives of Indian people in the use and management of their valuable range resource. The American Indian, unlike all others in this great Nation, have had a vital interest in the range resource since long before Columbus decided to make his historic trip. In the western United States, the development of the livestock industry is closely associated with the history of the American Indian (Fig. 1).

Approximately 55 million acres of Indian land belonging to individuals and tribal groups, represent the "home land" to 450,000 tribal members. Indian land, by comparison, is equal to 2.5 percent of the total area of the United States, while the Indian population represents approximately one-fourth of one percent of the total population. Predominantly, the land in Indian ownership is best suited for and most used as grazing land. There

is a tremendous contrast, however, from the Everglades of Florida, to the deserts of Arizona, and from the timbered mountains of the Northwest, to the frozen tundra of Alaska, with probably the best range land located in the Great Plains Regions.

The intention of this presentation is to give some insight into the range and livestock programs of the Indian people and its impact on their social and economic progress. The subject is as divergent as there are numbers of tribes (approximately 300) and therefore, generalizations are not only difficult to make, but often misleading. A study of the contrast between the Navajo in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah and the Sioux of the Dakotas, is a revealing story in the problems, and progress, of the various tribes in their dependency on the land resource and their ability to prosper from its use.

The Navajos own a rather contiguous, unsurveyed, 16 million acre block of land with title held in trust by the United States Government for the entire tribe. The Sioux Reservations, on the other hand, are predominantly 160 acre tracts of

interspersed land held in trust for individuals and the tribe. The individual ownership exceeds the holdings of the tribe and both are mixed in most areas with fee patent non-Indian land.

The Congress of the United States declared its jurisdiction over Indian affairs in 1775 when the United States Constitution was adopted. The States ceded to the federal government the power of regulation of commerce with Indian tribes which by statute and judicial decision was broadened to the management of Indian affairs in general. The Federal Government's administrative agency to deal with Indian affairs was originally the War Department, and in 1849, transferred from the War Department to the Department of the Interior.

History indicates in the struggle for development of our Nation numerous approaches were conceived and instigated to integrate the American Indian into the frontier society and make him a full-fledged citizen. Typically, the General Allotment Act of 1887 was the result of much deliberation and the general conclusion by Congress that the Indian-owned land should be allotted to tribal members individually instead of held by the tribe collectively if the Indian was to assimilate and prosper. Although the early frontier was settled by strong-willed, fiercely independent people, their philosophy was generally contrary to Indian culture and the Act fell far short of the intended objectives.

Another significant era in the history of Indian affairs came about during the period of the early 1930's when most of the Nation was in the grips of a severe drought and congressional attention focused on the Indian range country.

Professional people in forest and range management were given the task of conducting an "Economic Survey of the Range Resources and Grazing Activities on Indian Reservations," throughout the United States. The results of this survey are basic to many of the present day

concepts of range management and economic advancement in Indian country.

The conclusions of the study were that a grazing permit system was needed to correct the over-grazed conditions of the range, get a fair return for the Indian landowner, and promote the Indian livestock industry.

On June 18, 1934, the Congress of the United States passed the Indian Reorganization Act (Public Law 383, 73d Congress, 48 Stat. 984) which states in part (Section 6): "The Secretary of the Interior is directed to make rules and regulations for the operation and management of Indian forestry units on the principle of sustained-yield management, to restrict the number of livestock grazed on Indian range units to the estimated carrying capacity of such ranges, and to promulgate such other rules and regulations as may be necessary to protect the range from deterioration, to prevent soil erosion, to assure full utilization of the range, and like purposes."

The methods of implementing and enforcing the provisions of the Indian Reorganization Act were applied universally, but acceptance and response varied tremendously. To the Navajo, this meant "stock reduction," a term which today creates a wave of apprehension among the Navajos. To the Sioux, the opportunity was provided for them to get into the livestock business and make use of the excellent Indian-owned grazing lands.

The Navajos prior to their surrender and the signing of the peace treaty had already become proficient in the raising of livestock and had gathered together vast herds of sheep, goats, cattle, and horses. In fact, the military efforts against the Navajo were aimed primarily at stopping their depredation of the livestock of other Indians, Spanish and Anglos and not the hostile acts of war. Their natural love for tending of animals had resulted in the development of the livestock industry to the point that they

rapidly depleted their range. It is significant that by the time General Kearney arrived in Santa Fe in 1846, stock raising had been the established way of life of the Navajo people for so long that its origin was lost in the midst of Navajo tradition and mythological accounts were evolved to explain the origin of sheep, goats, cattle, and horses.

The Navajos, upon returning from captivity at Bosque Redondo to their 3.5 million acre reservation in 1868, numbered approximately 12,000. They were encouraged by the United States Government to rebuild their livestock herds as a means of subsistence. Records indicate Government grants of 30,000 sheep, 3,000 goats, and 500 cattle in those early days following the signing of the treaty. Additional assistance was given through the years with additional grants and loans and their herds multiplied rapidly.

The population multiplied rapidly also, and by the early 1930's the reservation had grown to 15 million acres, but would not support the one million three hundred thousand sheep units (4 S.U. = 1 A.U.) of livestock belonging to an increased population of 45,000 tribal members.

The safe carrying capacity of the grazing land had fallen to about 600,000 sheep units by the mid 1930's and drastic control measures were necessary. The Commissioner of Indian Affairs evolved three alternatives to meet the situation.

1. Exercise his legal authority and compel the individual members to reduce livestock numbers to the carrying capacity.

2. Assign the responsibility to the tribal council for complying with the Government regulations.

3. Go to the hundreds of local communities of Navajo people and sell the general population on the need for conservation.

The second alternative was chosen and the burden was handed to the tribal council. The council affirmed the conservation program and faced their constituents who bitterly rejected the program and

consistently re-elected new leaders over a 10 year stock reduction period. The program was accomplished through hard work and dedication on the part of the tribal officials and Government employees and tremendously benefited the range resource. In fact, the 600 thousand sheep units of livestock, remaining after controlled reductions, produced more meat and wool than had the previous one million sheep units due to better animals and improved range conditions. However, the bitterness evoked by this program of buying livestock from individuals under duress and disposing of them was never accepted by the majority of Navajo people and the social implications still linger.

The methods of bringing about the reduction involved many ramifications and was misunderstood by nearly all of the Navajo stockmen. The first attempts in soliciting community action to reduce livestock numbers resulted in the poorer class people becoming even more impoverished while the more influential held their herds intact. The Bureau of Indian Affairs became concerned for those who would become destitute from the loss of their small flocks of sheep and goats with little prospect for other means of making a living. It was then determined that every family head should have some livestock for subsistence and that the reduction should be made primarily among the large operators.

This approach was contrary to Navajo social culture and when the large livestock operators were forced to sell down to a maximum number, he was not only financially destroyed but his status in the community was also destroyed. In addition, range management was made more difficult since it created more than 7,000 small individual family operations and permits among a group of people proudly independent in livestock operations and unwilling to organize for management purposes. At that time and for many years, the small herds of live-



FIG. 2. The small flocks of sheep were the primary source of support of many Navaho families.

stock were the Navajos primary source of supporting an ever increasing population (Fig. 2).

The Navajo stockman, predominantly uneducated, but with extreme dedication to his sheep, cattle, goats, and horses, is able to maintain or increase his small holdings to the limit that the land will support. We may wonder if a concentrated effort had been made, not only to educate the Navajo to the 3R's, but to educate him in animal science and range resource use would have expedited the adjustment program and produced the most dedicated stockmen in the United States.

If you were to ask most any Navajo today, young or old, what the most desirable and acceptable means of providing a living is, he would unhesitatingly respond, "ranching."

The 16 million acres of Navajo range lands are grazing 600,000 sheep units equivalent in horses, cattle, goats, and sheep with a total value of 15 million dollars and an annual income of 3 million dollars. Related to the total economic needs of the Navajo population; presently numbering 120,000, this is obviously grossly inadequate; however, related

to the culture and the love of the people it remains number one. It then behooves the professional people in range management and the officials of the tribal government to provide to the Navajo people their best scientific knowledge of how to perpetuate and improve their range resource to maximum support capacity.

Now let us direct our attention to the Sioux Nation of the Dakotas. The Sioux, in contrast to the Navajo, did not take to ranching and herding the "spotted buffalo," but preferred to live from an abundant supply of wild game, buffalo, fruits, and berries. The Sioux Indians of the Great Plains numbering approximately 25,000 in 1868 were given a reservation of several million acres in the highly productive grazing lands of Nebraska, South Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, and North Dakota upon signing the peace treaty at Fort Laramie. Within a few years, however, they were confined to the diminished reservations that we know today; the Pine Ridge, Rosebud, Yankton Santee, Lower Brule, Devils Lake, Crow Creek, Cheyenne River, Standing Rock, Sisseton, and Fort Totten. These reservations are pri-

marily west of the Missouri in North and South Dakota and typical of the Great Plains Region.

The Sioux country was first encroached upon by trappers, traders, and frontier hunters primarily of French ancestry without too much conflict. However, when gold was discovered in the Black Hills, and when immigrant farmers began to cultivate the land, serious conflict arose. The Sioux contested the immigrants movement West by bitter fighting immortalized in the battles at the Little Big Horn and Wounded Knee.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs in the few years following the signing of the treaty embarked on several programs that have had an important impact on the progress of the Sioux. Initially, an assimilation program was instigated to bring the Indian population into full citizenship status and after a few years of frustration that policy was abandoned and followed by an isolation or segregation policy. The expressed desire of Congress and the Bureau in both instances was that the Indians must be made full-fledged citizens of the United States with all its privileges and responsibilities.

The theory was long advocated that Indians in general would become assimilated much sooner if they owned their land in severality rather than communally as a tribe. This theory was put into law in 1887 when the "Dawes Act or General Allotment Act" (as mentioned previously), was passed by Congress. The Act "provided for the allotment of lands in severality to Indians on the various reservations, and to extend the protection of the laws of the United States and the territories over the Indians, and for other purposes." The Act also provided, under certain conditions, for the allotting of public domain lands to Indians. Prior to this time, the Bureau of Indian Affairs had been generally unable to interest the Sioux in farming or ranching. Attempts had been made through the use of grants of equipment and live-stock, agriculture loans, and many

other methods of stimulating interest. However, with the exception of some "mixed bloods," success was very limited.

An early report states, "The livestock industry with its wild, free life on the open range, is especially well-suited to the temperament, disposition, philosophy, and physical characteristics of the Indian and the plane of development which has been reached by him in his evolution." This assumption was not necessarily true of the Sioux and he did not rapidly grow into the livestock business.

The effect of the Dawes Act was to break up the Sioux reservations through allotment of lands to individuals and in many cases the allotments were then acquired by non-Indians. The complicated land status pattern and non-Indian competition for leases soon made it extremely difficult for a Sioux to get started in ranching. Non-Indians characteristically leased strategic tracts of land and grazed over large areas of tribal and individual lands.

After several years of allotting land to tribal members, there still remained large areas of un-allotted lands within the reservation boundaries. In several instances, the reservations were then open to the Homestead Acts for non-Indians which further alienated the Indian lands and complicated the land status.

The Navajos were not faced with this set of circumstances, because all of their land was being used, or over-used, and there was little pressure from the non-Indian for homesteads in Navajo country. The Navajos did take advantage of the opportunity to acquire allotments from the public domain and gained control of approximately another million acres through this process.

The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, (previously mentioned), was major legislation aimed at preserving the Indian land base and promoting the Indian use of the range resource.

To this end the Bureau developed regulations governing the grazing of



FIG. 3. Indian range lands in the Sioux Country are in good condition and contribute significantly to the economy of the Dakotas.

Indian trust lands that were dedicated to: (1) improving the range resource and its environment, (2) affording Indian livestock operators a preference in the use of Indian land, and (3) obtaining the highest possible income to the Indian landowners consistent with these objectives.

Generally speaking, these regulations have been very effective and the range lands of the Sioux have improved rapidly. In fact, in many parts of the Dakotas, Indian grassland is in much better condition than their neighbors' and grazing privileges are very much in demand (Fig. 3).

The Sioux have increased the use being made of their grazing land from 2 percent in 1930 to 66 percent in 1969 and show an increased annual income to the Indian stockmen and landowners from \$269,925 to \$9,568,000. The range resource is an extremely important resource to the 34,000 Sioux of the Dakotas and is a major contribution to the area's economy.

The economics of ranching has changed to the point that to be competitive a rancher must be well-informed and well-trained. His investment in livestock, land, and machinery has made the ranching

industry a business proposition ranking high in the Nation as a complex individual enterprise. Probably most significant, ranching as practiced in Indian country today has become the envy of the crowded urban American public. For here the wide open spaces, fresh air, and "room to roam" are real. The dollars and cents received for the livestock sold are only a part of the value of ranching and particularly the Indian rancher who cherishes the "wild, free life of the open range."

The livestock industry is one of the more important natural resources that can be expanded, while developing recreation and providing manufacturing employment simultaneously for over-all economic improvement of the Sioux people.

The need today, to capitalize on this multi-million dollar industry, is for Indian people educated in business, trained in management, and involved in the activities of their community, state, and Nation.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs through these periods of transition has now assumed a new role as advisors to Indian people. Assisting them in a manner so that they choose the direction of the program

and we encourage them to take advantage of all the services and benefits any citizen of this great land would be entitled to. The 1970's

will see a younger and better educated generation of Indian people capitalize on the use of this valuable resource. We are sure that

their objectives will be consistent with good management, conservation and overall improvement of the environment in which we live.