Montana

(Historical Essay on Agriculture and Rural Life)

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From its beginnings as a territory, residents of the state of Montana have depended on its abundant natural resources for survival. The American Indians were the first hunters and gatherers followed by the fur traders and missionaries in the decades between 1820 and 1850. The fur trade increased as American Indians traded pelts at British and French posts and trappers from the eastern states arrived to take advantage of the plentiful supply of fur-bearing animals. A decline in the fur trade grew from conflicts between trappers and American Indians, a shrinking market in the eastern states and Europe and the exploitation of fur-bearing animals. As the fur trade languished in the 1840s, Jesuit priests in the Bitterroot Valley launched Montana farming and a new era began.

During the early 1860s, the gold rush and other mining enterprises drew thousands of fortune-seekers to Montana. The increased population and resulting need for food launched agricultural enterprises as farmers quickly took up residence in response to the demand. In the mountain valleys of southwestern Montana, livestock herds, dry land and small-scale irrigated farming became well-established. If farmers protected their crops from late spring and early fall frost, they were successful in harvesting grain, vegetables, and some fruits. Small farms dotted the Jefferson, Ruby, Madison, Bitterroot, Deer Lodge, Prickly Pear and other valleys along the Continental Divide. The broad and beautiful Gallatin Valley surpassed all others in the Montana Territory in productivity and housed three flour mills by 1867.

As the population slowly moved from the southeastern areas of Montana, so did agriculture. Farming developed along the rich river bottoms, while the marginal plains and bench lands were dedicated to cattle and sheep grazing. The livestock industry had moved beyond the Rocky Mountains into the north-central part of Montana by the mid-1870s. The greater abundance of grass lured these stockmen from Montana's southwest to its eastern plains. The first Montana agriculture newspaper, *Rocky Mountain Husbandman*, follows this same movement; first published in the southeast Montana town of Virginia City, it later moved to White Sulphur Springs in central Montana. During the 1870s and early 1880s stockmen from the south, mainly Texas, entered the eastern plains of Montana. All across the plains, cattle and sheep ranches thrived on the free grass in the public domain. During the last decades of the nineteenth century, the open range dominated Montana. The image of the cowboy and the values of freedom to roam, fierce independence, and living for the moment had its roots in this era and are documented in the literature of the day.

The literature also documents the political and social issues surrounding agriculture. Beginning in the early 1870s, Montana ranchers tried, without success, to create a territory-wide organization to pursue their interests. To deal with Indian theft of cattle, northern ranchers formed the Shonkin Association in 1881, the territory's first effective cattleman's association. It was followed by the Eastern Montana Livestock Association in 1883 and the two merged in 1885 to form the Montana Stockgrowers Association. The Association wielded economic and political power in stiff competition with large mining

interests. During the 1885 legislative session, cattlemen were successful in establishing the all-important Board of Stock Commissioners, which would conduct brand inspections at marketing points and supervise the range industry. Montana sheepmen also organized speaking out as a political force and demanding--among other programs--a protective tariff on wool.

While prior to 1880 most Montana ranches were family-owned, after 1880 most of the livestock enterprises were large, corporate ranches both west and east of the Continental Divide. In 1881, two books appeared that brought attention to eastern Montana rangelands: James Brisbin's *The Beef Bonanza: or How to get rich on the plains* and Robert Strahorn's *Montana and Yellowstone National Park*. Inspired by books, pamphlets and articles, investors joined Montana's livestock industry from all parts of the world but especially Texas, England, and Scotland. Foreign capital continued to support the sheep and cattle industries until Congress passed a law in 1887 denying foreign investors the right to own property in U.S. territories.

Open range declined after the hard winter of 1886/87 while the acreage devoted to hay crops nearly tripled in the 1890s. Even so, large, unfenced ranches persisted--thriving in the Milk River Valley and other choice northern areas. Sheep weathered winter better than cattle giving cattlemen an incentive to diversify. In 1890, Montana ranked sixth in sheep production in the U.S. and by 1900 had climbed to first. However, the literature of the day documents that the conflict with homesteaders over choice grasslands was coming--eventually it would put an end to the open range.

Montana became a state in 1889 and in 1893 established its land-grant college and agricultural experiment station (and later extension service) in the Gallatin Valley at Bozeman--the state's premier agricultural center. While westward moving farmers passed by Montana heading for the inviting valleys of the Rocky Mountains and Pacific Coast, all that changed in the early 1900s. Boosters lobbied to Congress to finance the conversion of rangeland to farmland through irrigation. However, when federal irrigation projects provided proof that Montana would benefit little from irrigation, promoters turned to dry farming as the next promise for Montana's eastern semi-arid plains. Promotional campaigns emerged from such diverse groups as chambers of commerce, bankers, newspaper editors, real estate firms, state agencies, the state college, and last, but not least, the railroads. Pamphlets and brochures published by the Northern Pacific, Great Northern, Burlington, and Milwaukee railroad lines all promoted Montana farming--some accurately and some not so accurately.

The literature also documents the conflict over dry-farming. Researchers at Montana Agricultural Experiment Station in Bozeman favored diversity in livestock and crops and the development of drought-resistant crops. They were overpowered, however, by the promotional efforts of James Hill, owner of three railroad lines, who held a well-attended "Dry Farming Congress" in 1909 embracing dry farming techniques. Montana and dry farming was aggressively promoted in the U.S. and Europe--especially Germany and the Scandinavian countries. The barrage of propaganda peaked in 1911 and the homestead rush climaxed in 1914. Grains were cultivated successfully, but most other crops familiar to the new homesteaders weren't sustainable. Immigrants to Montana brought their agricultural heritage and also their social customs and values--enriching the social fabric of the region.

The homestead boom kept the Agricultural Extension faculty busy educating the farmers of Montana and advising the ranching industry. There were numerous breakthroughs in animal diseases and control; discoveries in new wheat, barley, and potato varieties; and research into cropping systems. Controls for pests were developed--especially for grasshoppers and Mormon crickets. Faculty members took to the road, conducting Farmer's Institutes to deliver the latest agricultural information and four regional experiment stations were created between 1907 and 1913 to help the one in Bozeman.

The land rush of homesteaders and "sod busters" from 1904-1918 created the rural life in Montana of small towns with their focus on churches and schools. Other organizations followed including Garden Clubs and the Women's Society which was active in the Montana temperance movement. Rural life in Montana is documented through the activities and publications of these organizations and reflects the settling of the last agriculture frontier. Extension programs also benefited farm families. Faculty research found preservatives in sausages and meats to be unsafe and convinced Montana butchers to discontinue their use. Faculty also lead efforts to improve nutrition for rural children through hot-lunch programs and dietary education and promoted their views in Extension Service publications.

The lumber industry in Montana developed alongside mining and represented another rural subculture. Wood was needed to power smelters and other machinery as well as to provide lumber for construction and railroads. During World War I, union workers with antiwar sentiments started a wildcat strike at the Eureka Lumber Company in western Montana protesting working conditions. Other strikes followed, including the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) strike that shut down the entire lumber industry in the Northwest. Montana's two largest lumber mills were closed until the federal government stepped in and arrested IWW leaders. Eager to avoid further work stoppages, the Montana Lumber Manufacturers Association agreed to make some desperately needed improvements in working conditions.

In 1917, a severe drought and the concurrent decline of farm prices produced a depression that launched a mass exodus from Montana during the years 1918-1925. The cycle of drought, typical of the Great Plains climate, coincided with a bust economy after World War I. Even Montana's lumber industry was affected. The literature of the day reflects the effects of drought, wind, and poverty on Montana's collective persona. The spectacular growth that ended the frontier period ushered in an era of economic stagnation and population loss. Between 1919 and 1925, approximately two million acres ceased production and 11,000 farms were vacated--20 percent of Montana's family farms. During the same period, over half of Montana's commercial banks failed.

The rains returned in 1925 for in a brief period of prosperity that ended with a drought in 1929 and the crash of the stock market. Once again drought and depression marked Montana's agriculture and lumber industries and resulted in a mass exodus of farmers. The experience of two major depressions in the space of less than twenty years taught the remaining farmers and ranchers to diversify. In addition, farmers and ranchers would acquire more property, mechanize their operations, experiment with new scientific methods, and, inevitably, require aid from the federal government to make a living.

Documentary resources chronicling the decades of the 1920s and 1930s reveal that Montanans were pioneers in agrarian reform. Research resources that are candidates for preservation include scholarly materials documenting the innovations introduced by the Montana Extension Service and the Agricultural Experiment Station at Montana State College and how these efforts affected rural life. By using such imaginative techniques such as "farm success" studies and the "Fairway Farms" project (which set up experimental farms around the state) scientists, economists, and county extension agents generated ideas that gained nationwide attention. In 1931, Helen Mayfield published the results of her pioneering research on the vitamin content of common vegetables including potatoes, carrots, green peas, and cabbage.

Other notable Montana rural programs contributed greatly to the social and economic well-being of the state including a land classification tax assessment program that enhanced unified county planning, and a plan to retire sub-marginal farmlands and relocate the impoverished families who had been working them--the first resettlement plan of its kind in the United States. Montana also introduced model programs in ranching. In 1928, Montana created the first cooperative grazing district, leasing public and private land to a group of ranchers who carefully managed the rangelands. The program was the model used for Congress's Taylor Grazing Act of 1934. Last but not least, the literature of the era documents that Montana contributed greatly to developing the mystique of the western way of life. By 1930, over a hundred dude ranches--former working ranches--had opened their arms to tourists and outdoor enthusiasts. Easterners and Europeans on vacation in Montana learned to ride western style, do cowboy work, and hunt game.

Articles in agriculture journals provide a key to the impact of FDR's New Deal on rural life and document the important roles that Montanans played in the reform movement. The ambitious Agricultural Adjustment Administration began operations in 1933 with Montanans prominently involved. Montana State College Professor M.L. Wilson helped plan the AAA and a Bozeman farm editor, Chester Davis, directed the agency. AAA paid price supports to farmers and ranchers to not work the lands. For some, this was their first income in years and the program breathed life into families and communities all across Montana. Equally important was the building of rural electrification systems; the Civilian Conservation Corps which employed thousands of young men on forest and range lands to plant trees, seed lands, and eradicate groundhogs and gophers; and the Works Progress Administration which employed over 14,000 Montanans. However, the greatest New Deal boost to Montana was the construction of the Fort Pick Dam on the Missouri River. Research resources chronicling this period show that Montana state politics and government were stimulated by support from the federal government--creating new boards and agencies and building additional dams and reservoirs across Montana--but also came to rely heavily on the federal government for assistance.

As Montana and the nation started to recover from the Great Depression, ample rainfall and the start of World War II created an agricultural boom. While labor shortages were common, the war ushered in an era of prosperity. The literature of the era documents the concurrent growth and change in Montana agriculture and ranching with increased consolidation and mechanization and their corresponding impact on rural life.