

THE CATTLE INDUSTRY AND THE HOMESTEADER

Gray County, Kansas

Written by Juanita Trebilcock

Consultant: D. W. "Doc" Barton, Ingalls, Kansas

Reference: "Conquest of Southwest Kansas" by Leola Howard Blanchard

For several years after Western Kansas opened for settlement, the counties in this region were unorganized, and the only population was cattlemen. They were the kings of the range and they ranged their cattle over thousands of acres without the restriction of a single fence.

The supremacy of the cattlemen was of short duration. The railroad, which was the chief means at the beginning of the cattle industry, was also the principal inducement for the people to homestead the land. An abundance of moisture fell in the spring of 1878, and for miles, the prairie was covered with grass. The only civilization was from the iron rails of the Santa Fe railroad.

As the days passed, covered wagons could be seen advancing over the cattle trails from the east. Hardy pioneers were looking for a place to settle and make their homes. Naturally, the cattlemen were resentful towards the coming of settlers. They knew it would eventually mean the end of the cattle industry in Western Kansas. The cowboys did their best to discourage the pioneers from settling here. They told them that Dodge City would be as far west as civilization would ever go. So, there was a struggle between the farmers and the cattlemen as to who would occupy the land.

Nature seemed to favor the efforts of the first settlers. Everything planted the first year yielded bountifully, which lured many settlers the first year into Gray County and other Western Kansas counties. Yet, their hopes became ruined by the drought of the succeeding years. The hot winds succeeded in driving many out of the county.

The elements seemed to be favoring the cattlemen again, and they viewed this clearing of the range with satisfaction. The free-range laws were still in effect, and there were cattle and cowboys everywhere. The few remaining settlers found it difficult to homestead on the open range. There were many snowstorms during the winter of 1880 and 1881. During the severe storms, cattle would drift from as far north as the Smoky Hill River and other localities in Northwest Kansas and Western Nebraska, Colorado, and Wyoming. Many cattle companies had representatives stationed at Garden City in Finney County to look after their cattle industries along the Arkansas River. After a severe storm, they would go up and down the river to haul sand over the ice so the cattle could cross the river without danger of injury from falling. They would then gather them up and travel to the south side of the river. This was necessary to protect the interests of both the cattlemen and the settlers. No

homesteaders were living south of the Arkansas River in this region, and the cattle could drift and graze where they pleased. However, north of the river, there were settlers scattered all up and down the valley. They had small crops, and they showed no mercy for those storm-driven cattle from northern ranges that would sweep down and destroy and eat all of their food in a night's time. So they were driving them away day and night, chasing them with dogs, and even shooting them.

It was also necessary to keep the cattle on the south side of the river because they would get on the Santa Fe railroad track, and the train would often kill many of them. The Santa Fe railroad officials fenced their right of way to protect themselves from the roadbed at Dodge City, Kansas, to La Junta, Colorado.

After the cattle crossed to the south side of the river, they would travel day and night, up and down the river, and they could be heard bawling by the thousands. Then another storm would come, and all the cattle would be gone. Drifting on to the south with the blizzard, another bunch would come down from the north, and the settlers were again troubled. The entire crossing process then had to be repeated. Thousands of cattle died that winter from starvation. Many of the cattle companies went broke.

That spring, the cattle outfits went as far south as the Canadian River of Texas, where they gathered up what was left of their herds and brought them back to the Arkansas River, where they had a big round-up sometime in May of 1881. For days they were busy separating the cattle so that the different outfits could take their cattle back to their range.

There were never any very serious feuds among the cattlemen in this region. Although the cowboys tried to discourage the homesteaders, they were always very respectful toward them and the pioneer women.

The prolonged drought ended in 1882. There was abundant moisture all during 1883, and the homesteaders came into the county by the thousands. By the spring of 1885, the settlers were coming in so fast that the range was so broken up and destroyed that it was impossible to manage large herds.

The last blow to the free-range cattle industry was the blizzards of 1886, which destroyed thousands of livestock and financially ruined many of the biggest cattle dealers. D. W. (Doc) Barton* of Ingalls lost over 11,000 head of cattle.

It seemed as though nature and law joined forces and brought about a complete victory for the homesteaders, for the herd law went into effect here in the summer of 1886. This law's impact was to prevent the running at large of all cattle, horses, sheep, and other domestic animals.

The day of the open range and the life of the cowboy have passed. But not yet, for the old-time cowboys and cattlemen are still here with us.

A few of the men who made the early history of Gray County and Western Kansas are still living. One of them is D. W. "Doc" Barton. The stories he tells about his early life here are quite real and vivid.

* *See story; D. W. (Doc) Barton, Gray County, Kansas*