

GETTING OVER THE GREAT DIVIDE: The first great expeditions and cattle drives in Western Canada

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Driving across the west in Canada or the USA is not difficult today, with major highways crossing the Rocky Mountains in several places. These days we just cruise on through, admiring the mountains. But 150 years ago, things were not so simple, or easy. In the time of white discovery of the American and Canadian west, the Rockies and the Great Divide posed a massive barrier to western or eastern movement, abetted by the presence of the Blackfoot (or Niitsitapi as they call themselves) and other tribes in Montana and Alberta.

The Rockies stretch from southern Colorado north to the south edge of the Yukon. The ranges that make up the divide are high and difficult to traverse from north of Jasper to south of the Bob Marshall wilderness area in Montana (west of Great Falls, Montana). South of there, the ranges break up between Yellowstone National Park and the Bob Marshall (Helena to Missoula area). The Missouri River, in its headwaters, opens up into a series of wide, grassland/sagebrush valleys that connect over low passes into the Bitterroot, Blackfoot and other rivers that flow west into the Clark Fork and the Columbia River. South of Helena and Bozeman, the Yellowstone mountain complex then provides more difficult terrain to traverse as far as the Red Desert and the drier country in southern Wyoming and Utah. Then there is more desert country, and low passes over the divide, before you run into the high mountains of the Colorado Rockies.

In digging around to understand how the various passes in the Montana and Canadian Rockies portions of the chain were used in the early days I have realized something that I didn't know, and I think, most people do not realize. The settlement of the west was not a steady movement from the east coast to the west coast. Rather it was a kind of wraparound process that saw development and cattle ranching developed very early in California, then later in Oregon, Washington and British Columbia (BC) well before the first big ranches were established in northern Montana and southern Alberta. These areas, though further west, were settled well before the buffalo disappeared or the North West Mounted Police came west.

BUT, I am getting ahead of myself. Were the early trappers and traders and settlers the first folks to make it over the Great Divide? Nah. All of us white folks came late to the game.

Walking over the divide

It would appear that indigenous people used many of the passes in the very early days. One of the more important trails traverses the divide from Tobacco Plains in northern Montana over to Waterton Lakes National Park on the Alberta side. There is evidence that the Ktunaxa or Kootenai tribe that lives in south eastern BC and north west Montana travelled over the mountains on a regular basis to hunt buffalo. The first evidence of early native presence in Waterton Park is from 7000 years ago, including some sites very close to the great divide. There is little good evidence as to which tribes lived in the area that far back, however the Ktunaxa and likely other tribes

travelled over the divide, on foot, well before 1725, when the horse arrived. They apparently carried loads of dried buffalo meat, on their backs, over the divide on a regular basis. They were the original back-packers in the Rockies and they did it in moccasins. They were one tough bunch of folks.

Riding over the divide

After the horse arrived in approximately early to mid 1700's, along with steel axes, metal pots and pans and guns, all about the same time; things changed in a major way. It would also be interesting to know if the diamond hitch and other elements of pack saddle gear used in packing a horse, arrived at the same time. It is one thing to pack a horse and have the load stay in place on flat ground on the plains, it is quite another to pack well enough that the load will stay in place on steep trails and in thick timber.

After 1725 there is good evidence that the many passes were used by the Kootenai/Ktunaxa, and raiding parties of Blackfoot, however from what we know from that era, South Kootenay Pass was Highway 1, the main route over the mountains. This pass was likely used by some rather large parties. One author suggests that entire Ktunaxa clans (80 families; 200 people, 200-300 horses) used the pass seasonally to go over to the plains to hunt buffalo. The Shuswap tribe, who have a community near Invermere, BC, were mostly salmon people from the Shuswap Lake and Fraser River area to the west. There is evidence that they may have also gone back and forth over the divide. They built pit houses that are indicative of their tribal presence, called *kekoulis*. There are several *kekouli* sites in the East Kootenay Trench, on the BC side of the divide, but also in the Banff area near Lake Louise, and in the Upper Red River further north on the Alberta side. This indicates movement of Shuswap people over the divide through the rather difficult passes in that portion of the Rockies.

To the south in southern Montana it was easier to get over the divide and many tribes traded and raided back and forth, mostly south and west of Helena where the mountains are more broken up and the passes are lower than those found in northern Montana and Canada. It is unfortunate that we know so little of this era. But it is obvious that indigenous people were the first people to use the passes over the divide and they likely built pretty good trails once the horse and steel axe arrived. So that was the situation when the first European explorers arrived. The mountains provided a major barrier; the natives of the plains provided another. So how did the first explorers and fur traders deal with this challenge? At first, they simply went around the Rockies to the north.

Dragging a canoe over the divide at the north end of the Rockies

The Hudson Bay Company (HBC) was well established in the west far earlier than the trading posts, like Fort Benton, Montana, that developed on the US side. And HBC employees had significant problems with the Blackfoot. Fort Edmonton was established in 1794 at the north edge of Blackfoot country. As the company expanded west from there, the initial solution for getting around the Rockies was to go travel by foot north to the Peace/Mackenzie river system, and then canoe up the Peace and Parsnip rivers to a very low pass called Pine Pass (north of Prince George, B.C.), and into the Fraser River system. Alexander McKenzie used this route in 1798. A series of trading posts was established soon after in BC, well before any settlement or trading

forts were built in southern Alberta or northern Montana. That system extended well south into Idaho and Washington states. The HBC, and its competitor the North West Company, finally built trading posts within sight of the mountains at Rocky Mountain House in **1799**, also at the northwestern edge of Blackfoot territory.

Breeching the divide on the US side

The first Americans to breach the divide did so in **1804** when Lewis and Clark travelled up the Missouri River from the east. They got their boats high into that system, near present day Dillon, Montana. They then went over the divide via a low pass by horse into the Salmon River watershed and then went north over Lost Trail Pass, and into the Bitterroot valley on the far side of the divide. The Bitterroot drains into the Clark Fork and into the Columbia. Their big problems were not on the divide, but on the Lolo Trail, which was the route they used from the Bitterroot Valley over the next range to the west. They used this route with the Shoshoni people they were travelling with to bypass the Flathead and Salish folks who lived down the Clark Fork (west of present day Missoula).

When Lewis and Clark returned east, they came up the Clark Fork to Missoula and then went up the Blackfoot River and over the divide via a pass named after them, just slightly further north. They took advantage of a relatively broken up portion of the Rockies where they could use dry mountain valleys for most of their travels to reach relatively low and easily travelled passes. The difference between their two trips, west and east, was a big deal. Going west on the Lolo trail there was 100miles/160 km of rough mountain country. You can do it today on Highway 12. The Lewis and Clark Pass, from the Blackfoot River to the plains is only 10 miles/15 km of timber and tough travelling (Highway 200). They came out at the Dearborn River, a tributary of the Missouri. This is still some of the prettiest and least altered country in North America.

Breeching the divide on the Canadian side

Only a couple of years later, the Canadian fur traders made it over the divide, but they used passes much to the south of Pine Pass. These were steep, difficult passes, especially on the BC side. David Thompson and his crew went over the divide from Alberta via Howse Pass in **1806** to the Upper Columbia valley and built a trading post near what is now Invermere, BC. This is a very tough pass, even on foot, and it remains so today, despite the presence of logging roads on the BC side in the lower portion of the Blaeberry River valley. The traders were effectively sneaking over the divide to trade with the Ktunaxa without the Blackfoot and other plains tribes knowing about it. The Blackfoot were used to going over the divide to lay a licking on the Ktunaxa since they had guns and the Ktunaxa did not. That changed suddenly as the Ktunaxa also obtained guns.

The Blackfoot were not amused and actually set up camp near the divide to blockade the Howse Pass route used by Thompson. Thompson had to start using another, equally difficult pass further north to get around the Blackfoot. Returning east, they moved fur down the Upper Columbia River by boat to a place called Boat Encampment and then carried the fur up over the divide through Athabasca Pass to Jasper House, a trading post in what is now Jasper National Park. There was no grass or easy way to get horses to this pass, so their carried the furs over the pass on the

backs of the Métis and natives that worked for the company. There are records suggesting that in some years 30 tons of fur were carried over the pass each year.

Between **1806** and **1809**, **David Thompson** established several trading posts on the US side of the Columbia Basin. In **1810**, Finan McDonald, who worked with Thompson, made a trip with a group of Flathead hunters from Flathead Lake to the plains via Marias Pass, just to the south of Glacier National Park (in Montana). He was the first white person to use that pass, though it was likely used by natives for many years prior. In **1811**, David Thompson and his crew headed down the Columbia and ended up in what is now Astoria, Washington at the mouth of the Columbia River. That same year John Astor had led an expedition from St. Louis across the plains and down the Columbia, using the same route as Lewis and Clark. They met a ship that had travelled around South America and together the two expeditions built a trading fort at Astoria.

Meanwhile, far to the south, South Pass is discovered

In **1812**, Robert Stuart led a group of fur traders living in Oregon across the divide to Wyoming via a pass much to the south of the Lewis and Clark route, basically where the main range of the Rockies end, south of Yellowstone National Park. They took this southern route to get around the “very troublesome Indians” in the areas further north in the area of the passes that Lewis and Clark used. They discovered South Pass, a relatively easy way around the south end of the Rocky Mountains. However, the pass didn’t see any further white use until a decade later. In **1823**, a group of trappers and traders led by W. H. Ashley used the pass to go west and trapped for one summer in the areas around the pass. The next year, in **1824**, they returned and used the pass to go over to Utah and the Salt Lake area, where they set up a trading post. Twelve years later the pass was first used by wagons (20 wagons, 110 men) when Benjamin Bonneville came through the pass as far as the Snake River. He did not continue on to Oregon but he did demonstrate that one could get over the divide with wagons. The route was open enough to allow the use of wagons and had grass for horses and oxen most of the way.

Meanwhile, back in Canada.

In Canada, there was finally an attempt to build a HBC trading post in Blackfoot country. Old Bow Fort was established on the Bow River near Morley, west of Calgary, in **1832**. It only lasted two years. However, in this era, there were HBC forts through much of BC and down into Oregon. The only American fort was at Astoria. The nearest trading post on the US side east of the divide was Fort McKenzie, established in **1833** just downstream of present day Ft. Benton. It was burned down a few years later. But then, the game had changed. In **1837**, smallpox arrived on the prairies and broke the back of native power in the west.

The first settlers cross the Rockies on the Canadian side

Just a few years later, an almost unbelievable journey took place, one that is almost entirely unknown. In **1843** the first major, non-native party to bring stock over the divide occurred. It was a large group of Métis people from Manitoba. (Natives likely came back and forth with parties of similar size, on a regular basis before then). The Métis were led by a Scottish/Cree guy named James Sinclair. Their story is almost unknown on both sides of the 49th. These folks were promised livestock and land by

the Hudson Bay Company, to encourage “British” settlement of Oregon to forestall a sovereignty claim by the Americans. In **1843**, 102 people and their stock (probably 120-150 head of horses and oxen) travelled across the plains to Edmonton, then down to present day Canmore with red river carts. There they abandoned the carts and packed their horses and oxen and went up over a pass just south of Banff called Whiteman’s Pass. They travelled over a high alpine pass with horses and oxen that had never seen a mountain, let alone a rock slide. I am sure it was most entertaining. There is a tiny alpine tarn there, just below the pass, wild and beautiful now, but in 1843 it would have been pounded brown by hungry and thirsty stock.



The Spray River meadows, on the Alberta side, in Banff National Park. Sinclair would have stopped here on his way to Whiteman’s Pass (to the right, out of the picture).



Whiteman's Pass looking west from the Alberta side, 2015. This is the last grass on the Alberta side, provided by a series of avalanche slide paths that come down into the valley bottom.



The small tarn on the Alberta side of Whiteman's Pass.



The Whiteman's Pass trail looking southwest into BC. This was the way west in 1843. The descent from the pass is easy going compared to the Alberta side, but it is a long two day ride to the next patch of grass in the Upper Kootenay valley.

A decade later, Sinclair led another party west, this time with about 200 head of cattle and got lost and/or picked an even tougher pass. They came up the Kananaskis River to the lakes and then went up over North Kananaskis Pass. (We think; the record is very poor on which pass, North, or South Kananaskis pass they used.). Now this trip would have been even more entertaining than his previous trip. The Alberta side is steep, up onto a rocky plateau, with a canyon cut through the rocks that doubtless created a few breathless moments. On the BC, side the trail is rocky and steep. That would also have been very challenging. There is then a stretch of rocky slide paths that would have provided some grass for the stock, but after that it is a long trip down the Palliser River with very little grass until you get to the main Upper Kootenay valley. From there they went down to Thompson's fort on the Upper Columbia and worked their way south to Oregon.



The North Kananaskis Pass looking north and west from Alberta, the likely route of Sinclair's second trip in 1854.



The upper Palliser River just below North Kananaskis Pass. James Sinclair came this way in 1854. The stock would have been hungry by the time they got here.

This, almost unknown part of western history, was overshadowed by the first movement of American settlers via the Oregon Trail (led by Marcus Whitman) who arrived in Oregon in the fall of the same year, i.e. **1843**. They came west via South Pass in Wyoming, along the route that would come to be called the Oregon Trail. They arrived in the fall, just after the Métis party arrived. Much larger parties arrived in the following years. So it was that Oregon was settled by Americans who made their way around the south end of the Rockies by wagon. By **1845** there were several thousand American settlers in Oregon.



South Pass and the Oregon Trail in southern Wyoming. This was a much easier route than passes further north.

East of the divide, the first permanent trading post in Montana was established at Fort Benton in **1846**, the first European presence on the Montana plains. The nearest white presence to the north was the HBC fort at Rocky Mountain House, north and west of Calgary. Meanwhile, west of the divide, settlement continued in Oregon and Washington. Those settlers brought the first cattle herds to come west of the divide, (north of California). By **1850**, there were 43,000 cattle in Oregon.

In the following years some of these cattle were then trailed north into BC to feed the miners at the gold rush towns there. The first such drive that we know of occurred in **1858**. Joel Palmer ran the cattle drive (probably a few hundred head) from Washington state north up the Okanogan valley to Kamloops where the cattle were sold. He did the same the next year. In the 1850's and 1860's, some 22,000 head of cattle were trailed from Oregon and Washington up to Barkerville, the big gold strike further north up the Fraser River. The drives would have been through open country and grassland most of the way. Some of the drovers brought mother cows and began ranching in the Okanogan and Kamloops valleys by **1860**, 20 years before cattle first

arrived in Alberta. There were several large, well established ranches in central BC, long before large ranch operations began in Alberta in **1881**.

So, finally, cattle come to Montana, but to the grasslands west of the divide.

Meanwhile, the first ranches were being established in southern Montana, but their source of cattle was not what one would have thought. And the first ranchers were not cowboys from Texas but a Jesuit priest from Belgium and a French Canadian fur trader. In **1841**, Father De Smet established a mission in the Mission Valley (west of the divide, north of Missoula) with the Flathead and Salish Indians. He brought in cattle from Oregon and by **1854** they had 1000 head there. His idea was to provide a source of meat for the Flathead so they didn't need to go across the divide to hunt buffalo and mix it up with the Blackfoot and other plains Indians. At the same time there was a smaller group of cattle (50-100?) at Tobacco Plains, 100 km/60 miles to the north that were being managed by another missionary outpost and the Ktunaxa folks there. So, the first ranches in Montana were actually west of the divide and were stocked with cattle from Oregon. And they were run by natives and a missionary or two.

The first ranch east of the divide was started by Richard (Johnny) Brand who settled in the Ruby/Beaverfoot valley in southern Montana (near present day Deer Lodge, north and west of Yellowstone Park). He was a former HBC employee who had run Fort Hall in Idaho for the Company. Fort Hall was established by Nathaniel Wyeth, an American, in **1834**. In **1837**, the post was sold to the HBC. In that year, Johnny Brand left the company and established the first ranch in southern Montana, stocked with oxen brought in from Ft. Hall. The oxen were used by travelers on the Oregon Trail to pull their wagons. He bought their worn out stock at Fort Hall and trailed them to the rich grasslands of the Beaverfoot valley and fattened them over a year. He then trailed them back to Fort Hall and sold them as fresh, fat oxen to the migrants so they could complete their journey to Oregon.

White guys finally find Highway 1 (South Kootenay Pass, the main route over the mountains used by native people)

In all of this time, the pass most used by native people had still not been discovered or used by European explorers or traders. Finally, in **1858** the Palliser expedition explored several passes in the Canadian portion of the Rockies. One of the parties, under Thomas Blakiston, used North Kootenay Pass (slightly further north and a much higher and rougher route) to come west of the divide. He got as far west as Tobacco Plains (present day Eureka) and then used the Grave Creek trail and South Kootenay Pass to return to the prairies. They started off from Tobacco Plains on Sept. 2, 1858. He made it through without mishap; however, they would have had a better tale to tell if he had come through a month or so later.

Riding at a gallop over the divide on Highway 1.

In the same year, **1858**, only 6 weeks later, Bill Hamilton and Alex McKay camped at St. Mary's Lake in Montana. They were on a scouting expedition for the US military. Attacked by the Blackfoot, they killed 3 warriors and then headed north around Chief Mountain. Near Waterton Lakes they met a party of Kootenai. The combined parties had another fight in which five Blackfoot were killed. They then headed over the

divide, via South Kootenay Pass. They did so a dead trot, looking over their shoulders. 250 Blackfoot attacked the party close to the summit. Several more people were killed on both sides. The next day the Americans and the Kootenai party, followed by the Blackfoot, travelled all the way down the west side to the Flathead valley. This was no mean feat. They covered 30 km/22 miles of rough mountain trail in one day. There they were attacked again, just west of the river. A party of 40 Ktunaxa showed up from Tobacco Plains in the middle of the battle and turned the tide. 9 dead Ktunaxa were tied to pack horses to take them home. They were met by 100 warriors coming to help. They retreated to Tobacco Plains via the Grave Creek portion of the trail.

In **1859**, just a year later, another white party used the pass. A Col. Nobles used the route in an expedition to find a wagon route across Canada close to the border. James Thibodo in the party kept a journal. They were the third white party that used the pass.

Finally, in **1868** an English adventurer named John George ‘Kootenai’ Brown travelled from Ft. Steele and the gold strike there south to Tobacco Plains in Montana. He then went east over the Grave Creek trail to the Flathead and thus to the prairies via South Kootenay Pass. He described seeing buffalo for as far as one could see; where he came out of the mountains. He eventually was hired as the first warden for what would become Waterton National Park. His was the fourth white party to use the trail that we know of.

In the **1860s**, several gold strikes occurred in southern Montana. Cattle were trailed in to feed the miners, but they came initially, not from Texas or the east, but from Oregon. Conrad Kohrs provided much of this supply. He then bought the Grant ranch in the Beaverfoot valley and used it as a headquarters for his expanding ranching and meat supply business. At one point, years later, the ranch ran 50,000 head. This ranch was well established in **1866** when the first Texas longhorns arrived in Montana, brought north by Nelson Story. Nelson came west as a bullwhacker to Colorado, then came north to Montana just in time for the Alder Creek gold strike (southwest of Bozeman). He made \$20,000.00 in the placer mines there, which was serious money in those days. Rather than spend it on wine, women and expensive steaks he went to Texas and bought a herd of 1000 cattle and brought them north along what would become known as the Bozeman Trail. It was quite an adventure. However, it was an adventure on flat ground. He then established a large ranch south of Livingstone, Montana, just east of Bozeman.

The overall situation in the west, in **1860 to 1870**, was something like this. At that point there were 182,000 cattle in Oregon and Washington. There were also several large ranches established in central B.C., and a few large ranches in southern and western Montana. But in northern Montana and Alberta, on the last of the great plains, there were none. And damn few pale faces.

The first railway is built across the continent, far to the south

In **1869** the railway was completed across the USA, via Colorado and Utah to California. This fundamentally changed the economics of the cattle business in the west and shifted the direction taken by the great cattle drives. Cattle were driven all the way from central BC to Utah to sell at the rail heads there.

In the same year, small pox again decimated the native populations in Southern Alberta and Montana. This would break the strength of the tribes there. It was a strange time. Northern Montana and Alberta were still wild, the land of buffalo and Indians. Yet just a few miles to the south, in **1872**, Yellowstone Park was established by Teddy Roosevelt. This occurred four years before Custer discovered that he wasn't nearly as smart, or tough, as he thought.

Cattle in northern Montana

Very little cattle ranching was established in northern Montana until relatively late in the 1800's. Most of the land north of the Missouri was actually native land under the Lame Bull treaty of 1855. The area reserved for the Blackfoot was reduced severely in **1887**, leading to settlement and ranching east of the present reservation and the creation of Glacier National Park to the west. But for many years cattle going to Alberta had to traverse this area of legally defined native lands.

And, finally, cattle arrive in Alberta

The very first cattle arrived in southern Alberta in **1874** when the McDougall brothers (missionaries) and a "gold miner" brought 25 head in from Fort Benton to the mission at Morley, west of Calgary. The North West Mounted Police arrived in the same year.

And this is where it gets interesting. The first big herd of cattle brought into Alberta did not come from the south, from Ft. Benton in Montana, or from Texas, but from the Okanogan Valley in BC in **1875**. John Shaw brought 450 head from the Okanogan Valley, over the divide to Morley, west of Calgary. He did not use a direct route. He drove the cattle south into Washington state, then east through Idaho and Montana, using a route where there was grass for the stock. A more direct route would have taken them into heavily forested and very steep terrain in B.C. He made his way into western Montana and to the Tobacco Plains. From there they headed north and east on the Grave Creek trail and came over the divide via South Kootenay Pass. Here is what we know about this first great cattle drive into Alberta.

*"In the fall of 1874) a man named Shaw drove five hundred head of beef stock across the mountains into Alberta, headed for Edmonton, where he expected to find a good market. There had been cattle on the valley ranges of British Columbia for many years, even then. **This drover came down through the Kootenay Pass**, and turning north through the foothills, arrived at Morley, where the McDougalls were located".* (Page 81-The Range Men, a quote from an interview with people from that era).

It would have been quite a trip, especially getting up and over the divide. They likely stayed a few days at Tobacco Plains on the west side to put some lard on the cattle. The Grave Creek part of the trail goes through the Galton range, though a relatively mild pass but a route without much grass. They would have given the cattle a rest and

a feed in the grasslands of the Flathead Valley. (called the North Fork on the US side). They would have then saddled up and headed up Akimina Creek to just below the divide, then north to the pass. There is almost no grass in this valley today and it was likely the same at that time. The trail is steep and the cattle would have been hungry and unhappy. It would have been quite a scene with 450 head of cows making their way up and over the pass. Over the divide they came into the top of Blakiston Brook (Red Rock Canyon) in what is now Waterton Park. Upper Blakiston Brook has several slides that would have provided forage just below the pass. Happy cows again. They would then have had a short ride down to Red Rock Canyon. There is today some grass in the lower portions of Blakiston Creek/Brook but the cattle would have been pretty hungry by the time they got to the plains on the Alberta side. They were then trailed north through the foothills (Highway 22 route likely) to Morley. It would have been a hell of a trip. (I love doing long horse trips, but this one? I think I would have taken a pass). Yet in that day, it was just par for the course. In **1876**, Thadeus Harper, another central BC rancher, drove 1200 head from the Kamloops area south to Utah to the railway there. He didn't like the price offered, so he got pissed and drove the herd west, all the way to California before selling them for an extra buck or two. The trip took over 18 months. Now that was a cattle drive.

In the same year, **1876**, Custer suffered from early onset baldness, by the lovely rushing waters of the Little Bighorn. Then a year later, in **1877**, Treaty #7 was signed with the Blackfoot Confederacy, in which they traded southern Alberta for a few bits of land and a promise of beef that was never kept. Also, in that same year, Chief Joseph and 800 Nez Perce tried to move from Oregon to Montana and then to Canada. They didn't quite make it.

The next year, in **1878**, the buffalo disappeared in Canada and about a 1000 head of cattle were brought up from Montana to the Fort Macleod area in southern Alberta. These were the first cattle brought into Alberta that were meant to stock the range. However, there were problems. The native folks were starving and were accused of killing cattle, and some cattle likely wandered off with the last few remaining buffalo herds. Wolves likely played a role in cattle loss. Also, there was no legal framework for stocking the ranges at that point. Sam Steele, officer in charge for the RCMP at Fort Macleod told the owners that they were on their own if they tried to set up ranches there. As a result of all of these issues, most of these cattle were driven back to Montana the following year.

In **1880**, in the midst of all of this, John Noriss brought 43 head from Fort Steele in BC, using native cowboys (likely Ktunaxa), through the Crow's Nest Pass and north to the Highwood range. In this same year, Joe Greaves drove 4000 head from Kamloops to Oregon and then to Cheyenne, Wyoming. These BC ranchers were bears for punishment.

In **1881**, after issues around the buffalo (gone), starving natives (being provided with food, including beef brought in) and grass leases were sorted out, cattle came to Alberta and the east slope in earnest. A rationing system for providing beef to the native bands was instituted, thus providing a local market. The first lease arrangements for large cattle ranches along the foothills were established by government. In this one year some 6,000 head were imported from the south. Almost

all of these cattle came from Montana, which at that point had many established ranches. There was one exception, A.P. Patrick, a surveyor with the Canada/US boundary survey party, went east and bought 208 head in Ontario. He took them by rail to Winnipeg, the end of the railway at that point, and then drove them west to the Ghost River area.

The 6000 cattle were bound for the newly established Cochrane Ranch west of Calgary. The ranch company suffered major losses since the cattle were moved too quickly and were not allowed to graze sufficiently to maintain good body condition. They thus went into winter pretty tough. Many died. Smaller herds existed in the High River area Emerson, Lynch, Quirk and French), and others further south .

But even then, they weren't quite done with driving cattle over the divide. In **1882**, Fred Stimson had established a ranch west of High River and wanted to stock it. He found a breed of cattle in the Lost River area in southern Idaho (east of Boise) that he preferred to the Texas longhorn herds that were coming out of Montana. They were a Durham-Shorthorn Cross. He brought 3,014 head north. They would become the basis of the Bar U herd, located on Pekisko Creek at the base of the mountains. They came over the divide via Monida Pass in southern Montana; a relatively easy low elevation pass (Highway 15) compared to passes further north, and then came down the Jefferson River valley, out onto the plains and then north into Alberta. John Ware was on that drive. Stimson also brought in some polled Black Angus bulls from the east on the railway, as far west as the rails went in that year and then trailed them west.

In that year, a total of 16,000 head were imported (based on border records). Cattle had to be counted and the drover had to pay an import tax by this point.

In 1883 there was yet another great drive over the mountains. But this time it was with horses. The Hull Brothers bought 1,200 rough stock horses in the Okanagan and drove them east. They used the same trail as the Shaw drive in 1875, going south into the US and then back up north into the Kootenay River Valley. Rather than using the Grave Creek trail and South Kootenay Pass, they went slightly further north to present day Elko, and went up the Elk River and over Crow's Nest Pass.

They did the same with a cow herd the next year in **1884**. We don't know the size of the herd, but it was likely several hundred head.

Then finally, steel comes to Alberta and the Canadian Rockies

By the end of **1883**, the railway had reached the Rocky Mountains, just eight km/five miles east of Kicking Horse Pass where the present TransCanada highway goes through the mountains. This spelled the end of the era of great cattle drives into Alberta. Cattle could now be moved from the east, or west, by rail. A year later, in **1884**, there were 47 ranches on the east slope. By **1890** there were 118,000 head of cattle in Alberta, most south of Calgary on the east slope.

The great cattle drives from Montana are well known and the trials and tribulations of these drives are well documented. The even more difficult drives from across the great divide however, have not been documented well. What a picture that must have been as they climbed the last steep pitch into the passes they used.

The drive by Shaw from the Okanogan over the mountains to Waterton and then north to Morley is another epic part of Canadian and western history that is almost entirely unknown. I would really like to talk with his ghost. I am sure he has some stories to tell.

So, there you are; a short, revised history of cattle, people and passes in southern Alberta, northern Montana and southern BC. Today, the great cattle drives from that era have been replaced by modern cattle rides, consisting of semi-trucks of fat cattle going to the Tri-Cities slaughter facilities in southern Washington State, where some of their ancestors came from. The tough, dirty and sweaty cowboys who slept on the ground for months at a time in that era have been replaced by diesel horses and steering wheel cowboys who put the peddle to the metal to get them doggies moved.

The last portion of the great plains to remain wild and untamed in the west of North America was southern Alberta and northern Montana. It was wild, windy and lonely well after most other areas were settled, including the valleys in B.C. interior. The Milk River ridge country in southern Alberta, right along the US/Canada line, is some of the last of the west. It really hasn't changed that much. You can still walk through windy grassland landscapes with the Rocky Mountains in the distance. The only locals are mule deer, sharp-tailed grouse, cattle and the occasional half ton cowboy (both the trucks and cowboys weigh half a ton now...). But if you squint at the cows and put a hump and horns on them you can get a sense of what the country was like long ago. On the US side most of the landscape is still owned by the Blackfoot nation there Blackfeet. And they have kept it pretty wild. There are a few ranches now, but most of the country is still just grass and distance. And Chief Mountain still presides over it all.

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(If you are interested in David Thompson's travels, there is an excellent documentary called Uncharted Territory: David Thompson and the Columbia Plateau. It is available on You Tube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EccSnNgQP7c>

The writer's background

Bob Jamieson is an ecologist, former outfitter and rancher, living in Ta Ta Creek, BC. He was part of the crew that worked to create the Height of the Rockies and Elk Lakes Provincial Parks, along the divide just south of Whiteman's Pass. He has done his share of long drives, but nothing like the old boys did, and has been over most the passes described here. The picture below is not of Bob, but his dad, who also did his share of long rides, including the memorial ride from Banff to Jasper, with the Trail Riders of the Canadian Rockies.



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