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Article Summary: The Sandhill lake country, originally considered unsafe for cow or cowboy, turned out to support cattle through harsh winters. When the free range became limited, however, cattlemen could not obtain the extensive spreads they needed. The immigrants who bought the land planned to farm it.

Editor's Note: Wartime paper shortages led the Society to publish this issue on paper of inferior quality that has since darkened. The scan below accurately shows the color of that paper.

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Cataloging Information:

Names: G K Warren, Levi G Sweat, John Bratt, "Buffalo Bill" Cody, North brothers, E S Newman, Hunter & Evans, W A Paxton, David Rankin, Crazy Horse, Haney Brothers, Thomas Lynch, Perry Yeast, A T Davis, "Dad" Abbott, James Forbes, J H Minor

Nebraska Place Names: Hyannis, Grant County

Ranches Discussed: Spade, U Cross, OLO, 101, UBI, B-Bar

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Development of the Sandhill Lake Country

W. D. Aeschbacher

The sandhill territory was not inhabited permanently by any Indian tribe. It was considered a valuable hunting ground, but the lack of streams to furnish a water supply made it undesirable as a permanent home. In addition the area was something of a no-man's land between the Sioux and Pawnee nations, and ownership of the territory was in dispute. The Pawnee, whose permanent villages were located along the lower Loup River, looked upon the land drained by the different branches of the Loup as their hunting territory. Some early writers credited the Pawnee with controlling nearly all of the sandhills, giving them all the territory between the Platte and Niobrara rivers from the Missouri River to the Rockies.[1]

By the time white men became interested in the sandhills, however, the powerful Sioux nation had asserted a stronger claim to the region than the Pawnee could maintain. In 1851 a treaty at Fort Laramie set, as the eastern boundary of the Sioux territory, a line drawn from the mouth of the White River in South Dakota to the fork in the Platte.[2] Another treaty of 1868 confirmed the Sioux claim to all land north of the North Platte River.[3] The territory the United States government recognized as belonging to the Sioux nation in this treaty included all but the easternmost portion of the sandhills.

As the white men pushed out along the Oregon Trail and later along the Union Pacific Railroad, They avoided

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1 George Catlin, *North Americans Indians* (London, 1876), II, 24, and map in frontispiece.

2 Charles M. Kappler, *Indian Affairs, Laws and Treaties* (Washington, 1904), II, 594.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 1002-3.

this Sioux territory, the sandhills. There is no record of any white settlement in the area, or of any white penetration of a permanent nature, before the Sioux claim was bought by the government. Finally, in 1875, the United States did buy a sizeable portion of the sandhills from the Sioux. For $25,000.00 the government bought over 11,000 square miles in a strip from the fork of the Platte to the western boundary of the state and extending north to within twenty miles of the Niobrara River. After the Indian wars in 1876 the Sioux ceded the remainder of their territory to the northern boundary of the state.[4]

Nebraska had been given a bad reputation by most of the early explorers. Even today easterners who do not know the area often refer to it as the "Great American Desert." This not wholly deserved reputation as a desert resulted in Nebraska being regarded, in the early part of its history, as a barren waste between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains rather than a place for settlement and development. The opportunities for settlement in Nebraska were ignored while thousands of people crossed the territory on their way to California, Oregon, and Utah. Within the state, the sandhills held a position comparable to that held by Nebraska in the nation.

This attitude has never completely vanished. Very recently a national magazine, in an article on Nebraska, said "As late as 1860 school geographies described Nebraska, then a six-year-old territory, as an uninhabitable portion of the Great American Desert." Later, in a surprised manner the author adds, "Now even the western sandhills, despaired of not many years ago as wholly useless, fatten thousands of purebred cattle on lush wild grasses."[5]

The first official reports on the sandhills were decidedly unfavorable. In 1855 an expedition under Lieutenant G. K. Warren traveled from Fort Pierre to Fort Kearny.

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[4] A. E. Sheldon, *Land Systems and Land Policies in Nebraska*, (Lincoln, 1936), pp. 21-3.

[5] Leo. A. Borsh, "Nebraska the Cornhusker State," *National Geographic Magazine*, LXXXVII, 513.

He described the country as uninhabitable, except by nomadic hunters.[6]

Lieutenant Warren was not the only observer unfavorably impressed by the sandhills. Levi G. Sweat, who was connected with the land office in Chadron for a time and did some locating of settlers in that area, wrote a booklet advertising the opportunities in western Nebraska, espepecially on Sweat-located homesteads. He describes the sandhills as:

> A vast illimitable plain occupied by an army which has raised its tents, countless in number . . . No grasses grow among the hills, not even a weed; but sometimes the tops of the hills present openings like the craters of extinct volcanoes, and sometimes lakelets are hidden in the sandy labyrinth, but the water is alkaline, or otherwise unfit to drink.[7]

At the end of his book he warns his reader:

> So rapidly are government lands being absorbed in this state, that we predict that in another year no free lands will be left except in the "Sand Hills" and the "Bad Lands" which will remain to challenge the investigations of science.[8]

Even the Indians did not travel in the sandhills.[9] It is interesting to notice how few Indian wars and Indian battles were fought in this area.

The railroad company, when it first came into the sandhills, had little of good to say for this country. In a booklet advertising the territory being opened by its new line, the Burlington apologized for the sandhills in this manner:

> From Blaine county westward for one hundred

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6 G. K. Warren, *Explorations in the Dacota Country*, (Washington, 1856), pp. 21-22.

7 Levi G. Sweat, *Settlers Hand Book*, (Fremont, Nebr., 1885), pp. 3-4.

8 *Ibid.*, appendix.

9 A. E. Sheldon, "Settlement of the Panhandle and Sandhills in Nebraska," in A. B. Wood, *Pioneer Tales of Nebraska Panhandle*, (Gering, Nebr., 1938), p. 266.

> miles there can be very little said in favor of the country for agricultural purposes, and that little should be said very low. The railroad winds its way along the valley of the Middle Loup river, and in the midst and through the most stupendous series of sandhills to be found in the entire north-west.[10]

The sandhills appeared so uninviting, in fact, that they were shunned by the early ranchers. By 1878 one author listed Nebraska cattle districts as the Upper Republican, Upper Platte, Upper Loup, and Middle Niobrara.[11] The last three districts named do penetrate the sandhills a little, but the great sandhills area was still not recognized as a cattle raising region.

Probably the first cattlemen to use the sandhills for range purposes started at the eastern edge of the area on the South Loup River near Arnold about 1872.[12] Other Custer county ranchers advanced up the Middle Loup River further into the sandhills by 1875.[13]

At about the same time John Bratt & Co. entered the sandhills from the south. The Bratt ranch had been established and the home ranch had been built just southeast of the present city of North Platte in 1870. In 1874 a big prairie fire burned out all of Bratt's range from the Republican River to the Platte.[14] The only available range was north of North Platte in the sandhills, land that still belonged to the Sioux. Bratt decided to use this range in spite of the Indians.[15] His cattle wintered well, and he established a ranch on Birdwood Creek. After the Sioux ceded this territory in the summer of 1875, Bratt moved to get control of this sandhill range .He looked over the country surrounding the Birdwood and White Tail creeks, and crossed over to the source of the Dismal River. Bratt

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[10] *The Broken Bow Country,* (published by Burlington Route, 1886), pp. 8-9.
[11] L. D. Burch, *Nebraska As It Is,* (Chicago, 1878), pp. 72-3.
[12] Robert D. Burleigh, "Range Cattle Industry in Nebraska to 1890", (MS thesis, University of Nebraska (1937), p. 23.)
[13] *Ibid.,* p. 24.
[14] John Bratt, *Trails of Yesterday* (Chicago. 1921), p. 228.
[15] *Idem.*

established stations to control range north and west of North Platte for about twenty-five miles east and west and from sixty to seventy-five miles north.[16] During the summer of 1875 two other big outfits started sending cattle into the sandhill range from the south. These were the Keystone Cattle Company west of White Tail Creek and Bosler Brothers further west on Blue Creek.[17]

In 1877 the range north from the North Platte was connected with the range on the Middle and South Loups. In that year "Buffalo Bill" Cody and the North Brothers started a ranch on the Dismal River.[18] This ranch was about sixty-five miles northwest of North Platte. At the time there was no other ranch headquarters within fifty miles,[19] but Bratt already had a station west of the head of the Dismal where he kept men in the winter.[20] This station was less than fifteen miles from Cody's ranch house.

Ranches were established around the southern and eastern fringe of the sandhills by 1877. These areas were separated from the Sioux by considerable distances and were relatively safe from attack by them, but the Indians did not let the settlers completely alone. In 1877 some Sioux visited the Cody-North ranch, and in September of 1878 they made a raid there, stealing twenty-two head of horses. These horses were never recovered, but they were positively identified on the Rosebud reservation.[21] Other raids took place that fall. One of these was the last raid to reach the Platte Valley. The North Platte militia, or North Platte Guards, under John Bratt, caught these Indians as they reached the Middle Loup River. Bratt's

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16 *Ibid.*, pp. 232-3.

17 *Ibid.* p. 234.

18 Burleigh, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

19 Frank North, "The Adventures of Frank North," MS., Nebraska State Historical Society, p. 202. (Hereinafter referred to as Frank North MS.)

20 Luther North to A. E. Sheldon, undated letter, Nebraska State Historical Society.

21 Frank North, MS, p. 203.

men took their horses away from them and made them walk back to the Rosebud.[22]

As soon as Crazy Horse surrendered in 1877, ranchers could move cattle into the former Sioux area north of the sandhills. E. S. Newman had the first ranch on the Niobrara river in that year.[23] This ranch and the Hunter & Evans ranch sold the beef they raised to the government for the Indians on the reservations.[24]

Even before the Sioux were finally defeated, the government bought beef in cattle towns, like Ogallala, to be delivered in South Dakota for Indian consumption. The trail followed in driving cattle from Ogallala to South Dakota led up Birdwood Creek, across to the heads of the Dismal, the Middle Loup, and the North Loup rivers, and then on north through the sandhills.[25] This same trail was used a little later by the mail route. This mail route was the first traveled trail leading northeast of the Sidney-Black Hills stage line. It started at North Platte, went up Birdwood Creek, crossed the Dismal, then crossed the Middle Loup near the present site of Seneca, and went on up to the Niobrara.[26]

In spite of the attempts to penetrate the sandhills so far mentioned, the region was little known and greatly feared through 1878. This was especially true of the lake country, the area to the west of the Loups and the Dismal. In the fall of that year when the Cheyennes, led by Dull Knife and Little Wolf, crossed the Platte and disappeared into the sandhills above Ogallala no one pursued them. Hard-bitten soldiers and cowboys said that there was no water in the sandhills; that people could go in but never got out; that Indians might get through, but the sandhills were no place for white men.

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[22] Bratt, *op. cit.*, p. 269.
[23] Frank North, MS., p. 11.
[24] A. E. Sheldon, "The Sheridan Region, Origin and Early History," *Nebraska History Magazine*, XVI, 245.
[25] James H. Cook, "Trailing Texas 'Long Horn' Cattle Through Nebraska," *Nebraska History Magazine*, X, 339-40.
[26] Luther North, letters to A. E. Sheldon, August 18 and August 27, 1931, Nebraska State Historical Society.

Not until 1879 was the lake country penetrated for the first time and the worth of the region as a cattle country recognized. Each spring since 1877 the North Brothers had followed the roundup to the headwaters of Blue Creek about seventy miles from the home ranch on the Dismal. Returning they had gone down the Blue, followed the Platte to the Birdwood and worked up the Birdwood a distance more than twice that of the seventy mile direct route. For the spring drive in 1879 Frank North decided they should attempt the seventy miles of lake country, then thought to be dry country. They found a lake after driving about thirty-five miles, and around the lake were about 700 head of cattle. Some of them were three years old and had never seen a man. These animals were in good shape, and fat enough to ship, while the cattle they had gathered on the roundup were still thin from the winter.[27]

On the northern side of the lake country the sandhills were considered a graveyard for cattle, and the ranchers had their line riders keep the animals from drifting into this waste land. A blizzard drove many cattle past the line riders in March of 1879. The Newman ranch had over 6,000 head drift into the hills, so the manager decided to make a desperate attempt to save some of them. When the snow melted in April, he sent a roundup into the hills to see if any of the cattle were still to be found alive. The roundup worked for five weeks, bringing out 8,000 head of Newman cattle that had drifted into the hills. They found an additional 1,000 head of native, or unbranded, cattle, descendants of animals that had drifted into the sandhill region in previous years.[28]

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[28] Fred Carey, *Major Jim* (Omaha, 1930), pp. 31-35. In "Recollections of Cowboy Life in Western Nebraska," *Nebraska History Magazine*, X (October-December, 1927), 335-343, James C. Dahlman, the "Mayor Jim" referred to, placed this event in 1878. This date is evidently a year early, as the winter of 1877-78 was the first winter that cattle could be wintered on the former Sioux hunting grounds along the Niobrara.

[27] Luther North, "The Cody-North Ranch on the Dismal River" MS., Nebraska State Historical Society. (Hereinafter referred to as Luther North MS.)

These two discoveries the same spring made people realize that the lake country would support cattle. It took one more event, however, to popularize the sandhills as cattle country. The winter of 1880-81 was one of the bad winters in the history of the Nebraska cattle country. Snow came in October and did not disappear until the following March. The snow was deep and formed a hard crust over the grass. Cattle along the Platte could find nothing to eat and died by the thousands. Attempts were made to move these cattle north into the sandhills where there was feed, but the animals would not leave their familiar feeding grounds. They could not be driven because their hooves broke through the snow crust, and the jagged edges of the crust would cut their legs whenever they walked. The Cody-North ranch lost relatively few cattle as their range was back in the sandhills away from the Platte valley.[29] After this winter the ranchers realized the sandhills not only were a possible range, but that they were superior as a cattle country to much of the territory then in use.

Grant Shumway, in his history of western Nebraska, says that there were no cattle barons in the early sandhills.[30] On the surface this seems to be a blatant mis-statement, but actually the era during which cattle barons dominated the sandhills came years later.

It is true that the first cattle to be driven into the sandhill lake country, the country that until 1879 was considered unsafe for cow or cowboy, belonged to big ranches, to cattle barons. E. S. Newman started using the lake country in the spring of 1879. His ranch on the Niobrara stretched from Valentine to the Wyoming border. Except for the Hunter & Evans ranch, it was the only ranch in the northern sandhills before 1880.[31] To the south of the sandhills, John Bratt was probably more instrumental in starting general use of the sandhill range than Cody

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[29] Luther North MS., p. 39.
[30] Grant L. Shumway, *History of Western Nebraska and Its People* (Lincoln, 1919), p. 160.
[31] *Ibid.*, p. 123.

and the North Brothers. The John Bratt and Co. ranch was the big ranch in the North Platte area. West of Bratt W. A. Paxton invaded the sandhills from the south. West of these two ranches, and ranging up the west side of the lake country was the Bosler Brothers' B-Bar ranch. At the same time David Rankin moved further north and west up the Middle Loup into the vacant lands near the lake country. All of these ranches were big organizations with from 15,000 to 40,000 head of cattle.[32] Even the Cody-North ranch, admittedly a smaller venture, claimed a range twenty by thirty miles, and started operations with 1,500 head of cattle.[33]

Nevertheless, the effect of these large ranches on the early development of the sandhills was probably beneficial on the whole. The big ranchers never seriously invaded the area: none of them moved their headquarters into the lake country. They stayed near their markets, the shipping points on the Union Pacific to the south; the Sioux reservation and later the Chicago Northwestern railroad to the north. Rankin, it is true, was not established near a market, but he did not move his headquarters into the lake country away from the Middle Loup River. The large ranches had their big roundups twice each year. Aside from these expeditions the country was left to the cattle and the antelope. The large ranches did bring men into the sandhills as cowboys. Some of them, such as Charles Hoyt, Jay Taylor, and the Thurston Brothers, remained to settle there. Besides bringing in a sizeable portion of the early population in this way, the large ranches provided a ready food supply to the early settlers, most of whom came in with little or no capital and very few cattle of their own. One of the early settlers said, "We never thought of killing one of our own cattle for beef. We always killed a 'Circle'[34] cow. They were running everywhere."[35]

Because the large ranches did not aggressively exploit

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[32] Luther North MS., p. 11.
[33] Frank North MS., p. 201.
[34] The Circle was the John Bratt and Company brand.
[35] George Manning, interview, August 6, 1945.

the sandhills, settlers started moving into the hills in the early 1880's. Thomas Lynch was one of the first men into the region south of Hyannis in 1884 or 1885,[36] and Dan Egan came in at about the same time. Jay Taylor began working for the Bar 7 ranch on the Middle Loup in 1883. He moved west to settle on his own place near Whitman in 1888.

About 1886 several settlers, who later became prominent in the early history of the lake country, arrived. George and Ruf Haney came that summer. They were followed the next year by their brothers, Ben and Jim, and the fifth brother, Ike, joined them in 1888.[37] These men settled in the southern part of Grant county, where they and their descendents were prominent ranchers for many years. "Dad" Abbott and his son, Arthur J., also came in 1886. The Abbotts ranch was about nine miles northeast of the present town of Hyannis.[38] J. M. Gentry came in 1887, driving up the rest of Abbott's cattle as well as the few head he owned at that time. He settled south of Whitman temporarily in 1887 before moving to the present Gentry ranch northwest of Whitman. In the spring of 1888 James Forbes and J. H. Minor arrived. These men settled southwest of Hyannis on the present Minor ranch.[39] The Haneys, the Abbotts, Gentry, Forbes, and Minor, who had been cattlemen in the Republican valley, greatly influenced the development of ranching in the lake country.

The year 1886 brought other settlers. C. Hazelbaker, who was to be a prominent rancher for a time, settled twenty-five miles southeast of Hyannis in that year,[40] and August Buchfinck homesteaded north of Hazelbaker.[41] As Sidney Manning was driving a herd of cattle to his Colorado ranch in 1886, he met a man in North Platte who convinced him that he should come to the sandhills instead.

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[36] *Grant County Tribune*, December 28, 1899.
[37] *Ibid.*, September 5, 1889.
[38] *Ibid.*, December 28, 1899.
[39] Raymond Gentry, "The Story of J. M. Gentry," Mrs. George Wheelock's scrapbook.
[40] *Grant County Tribune*, December 28, 1899.
[41] John Buchfinck, letter to author, November 18, 1945.

The great advantage he saw in the sandhill area over Colorado lay in its hay and winter feed. Mr. Manning paid $100.00 for a homestead claim southeast of the present town of Whitman,[42] an indication that by 1886 some of the choicest locations were already homesteaded. The town of Hyannis was founded with the advent of J. R. Dellinger, P. M. Alwood, and J. R. White in the spring of 1887.[43]

Grant County was organized as a county in 1887. The organization at that time was not necessitated so much by the crush of population needing a government as by the demands of cattle owners for local law enforcement in this uninhabited waste. A government was needed to help keep down cattle rustling. Thomas Lynch, August Buchfinck, and Perry Yeast were appointed county commissioners. R. M. ("Bud") Moran was appointed sheriff.[44] All of these men were elected to office in the first election in 1888.

By 1890 there were quite a few people in the country. F. L. Perrett came to the sandhills that year and settled near Mother Lake, about 15 miles north of Hyannis, in southern Cherry County. When he arrived he had neighbors to the southwest and west in Woodruff, Mason, Stansbie, and Gage; Davis, who already had a large ranch at the OLO, and Plummer were to the north and east; and Shaw and Westover were neighbors to the south. The next two or three years brought additional neighbors to the west in Lawson and Becker.[45]

On May 2, 1889, the first issue of the *Grant County Tribune* appeared. This issue quoted, with approval, an article from a Blaine county paper, which said the Nebraska sandhills were a paradise compared with sandhill areas in New Jersey and New England.[46] In November it

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[42] John E. Aeschbacher, "From Missouri Farm Boy to Prominent Rancher," MS., Nebraska State Historical Society.
[43] *Grant County Tribune*, December 28, 1899.
[44] Mrs. Helen Hagar, interview, August 7, 1946.
[45] F. L. Perrett, interview, August 10, 1945. Neighbors in that area included all settlers within about a ten mile radius.
[46] *Grant County Tribune*, May 2, 1889.

reprinted a letter describing Hyannis. Part of the letter follows:

> "I went as far as Hyannis, Grant County, Nebr.. a new town on the line of the road from Lincoln to Alliance, Nebraska. The town is rather primitive. There are three stores, a printing office, a post office and about ten dwellings. One house close by is painted and all in good shape a story and a half. A boarding house is weather boarded, but unpainted. The stores and other houses are frames, with perhaps the exception of one sod house; they are enclosed with ordinary matched siding, and yet unplastered. How they expect to winter in them I do not know."[47]

Although danger of serious Indian wars disappeared with the surrender of Crazy Horse in 1877, and the last raiding party of the Sioux was driven out in 1878, Indians still hunted in the sandhills. In the summer of 1889 Chief Whirling Hawk and about twenty Sioux went on a hunting expedition through the southern part of Grant County. The Indians camped for a week in Thomas Lynch's valley. One of the Indians deserted the hunt and remained to help Mr. Lynch put up his hay.[48]

Many of the early settlers had no stock and little or no capital. They would homestead a choice piece of hay land and then attempt by some means to get money or cattle to stock a ranch. While the railroad was building west from Whitman in the spring and summer of 1888, the fortunate ranchers who owned cattle sold butter and meat to the construction crews. However, at least one of the new ranchers who supplemented his income in this way did not sell a great deal of produce, and what he sold he sold cheap. He tells us that his total cash income for that year was seventy-five dollars.[49]

Others, less fortunate, earned what cash they could. The railroad was a godsend to many settlers as it offered cash pay for construction work. To get a few weeks work

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[47] *Ibid.*, November 7, 1889.
[48] Mrs. Helen Hagar, interview, August 7, 1945.
[49] Gentry, *op. cit.*

on the section gang a settler would have to apply months in advance.[50] The other opportunity to earn cash lay in getting a job on one of the larger ranches. In the north these ranches included the Spade and the U Cross. By 1890 A. T. Davis, on the OLO, Plummer Brothers on the Dumbell Bar, and "Dad" Abbott had ranches north of the railroad that were large enough to need hired help. South of the railroad the big ranches still included the Bratt ranch and the Ogallala Cattle Company. The settlers in that area whose ranches had become too large for one man to handle included Perry Yeast, Thomas Lynch, "Stof" Hazelbaker, and the Haney brothers. Mr. Perrett tells us that the hardest manual labor he ever did was for A. T. Davis on the OLO ranch in 1890 or 1891. For over a month he worked at cutting sod and lifting the sod into place building sod corrals.[51]

Hard times and lack of money are reflected in the *Grant County Tribune*. During the Eighteen Nineties merchants quit advertising goods for sale from shipping time, October, until January or February. For these months their advertisements in the paper consisted of appeals to their customers to pay their bills, because the storekeepers needed the money to pay their creditors. The editor of the paper also ran weekly requests for subscribers to keep their subscriptions paid up and threatened dire consequences if they fell in arrears. In spite of his threats he continually offered to accept any sort of produce in lieu of cash for the subscription.

By 1896, however, the editor could look around him and find his community prospering. The depression of the 1890's had affected the sandhills much less than other areas in the state. The country around Hyannis had been settled by ranchers with from twenty-five to 800 head of cattle, the average ranch having about 300. The only big ranch still operating was the Spade with 18,000 head. The editor said that the sandhills offered a splendid opportunity to

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[50] F. L. Perrett, interview, August 10, 1945.
[51] *Idem.*

settlers as long as there were hay claims to be filed upon, and the hills remained free for grazing.[52]

By 1900 the lake country was in the midst of change. The big ranches, which were situated on the outskirts of the hills and used the sandhill area only as part of their range, had abandoned the country to the people who had settled in the hills. Some of the ranches established by the settlers who arrived in the 1880's as small, one-man or one-family units bad grown into large ranches. Several large ranches operated on foreign capital[53] had also entered the region. The Spade ranch with headquarters at Ellsworth was probably the largest. The 101 ranch from Oklahoma, parent of the famous 101 traveling rodeo, had started a ranch with headquarters east of Whitman. Southeast of Whitman, located,for the most part, in the rough country or choppies near the Dismal River, lay the British owned UBI ranch.

Most of the early arrivals in the territory had not owned cattle, and only a few of the inhabitants had stocked their ranches before 1890. The early settlers who did have cattle had prospered, and by 1900 the ranches of the Haney Brothers, Abbott, Forbes, Lynch, and Yeast had expanded so that the lake country was becoming a region of large scale ranchers.

The trend toward larger holdings was not the only change affecting the lake country people about 1900. The people who came into the country from the east were farmers, and they put land into cultivation. This idea of breaking up the land did not reach the height of its popularity until the era of "Kinkaiders" and the opening of the forest reserve land. However, the settlers after 1890 did more and more farming. The earliest sandhill pioneers had been either cowboys, who worked for the big outfits,

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[52] *Grant County Tribune*, February 20, 1896.

[53] The term "foreign capital" is here used in the colloquial sense of absentee capital. Among the lake country ranches of the era only the UBI seems to have been actually foreign owned. The others were foreign only in the sense that Chicago and the eastern United States were "foreign" to the sandhills.

or ranchers who had left ranches in other cattle raising districts to get away from the press of homesteaders. About 1890, however, settlers began to come in from the east. To them, the quick way to economic independence was to be found by using a plow rather than by accumulating the capital to buy a herd of cows. At the turn of the century items of this type were common in the sandhills papers: "It is evident from the number of farming implements being bought that the ranchmen are doing more farming than ever before."[54]

By 1900 the problem of land ownership had come to haunt sandhill cattlemen as it had haunted cattlemen in every grazing area as the range industry was forced back toward the Rocky Mountains. The first ranchers in the early 1880's did not trouble to file on the land they appropriated. They picked out the best piece of land they could find and located as squatters.[55] By the middle of the 1880's this practice had been abandoned. Settlers homesteaded their claims in hay valleys, sometimes using their pre-emption and tree claim rights to get control of more hay land. However, they were making no attempt to get legal title to the range. Even as late as 1899 the Whitman editor thought there was range for all when he said that all you needed to become a successful rancher was about a half section of hay land. Ranchers themselves, however, were beginning to think that there was a limit to the free range. There was continuous agitation in the east to do something about the public lands. The public felt that these lands should not remain an expense for the government to administer. Instead they should bring income to the government as privately owned, taxable property.

People in the sandhills were content to have this happen but on their own terms. Large ranch operators inclined toward plans for the sale of public lands or the leasing of public lands. These schemes embodied the idea that the present user would have first chance to buy or lease the

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[54] *Grant County Tribune*, May 14, 1903.
[55] Sheldon, *op. cit.;* P. 178

land that he was currently using for range. The later arrivals in the sandhills — men who had only a 160 acre homestead and could claim little range since they ran few cattle — were more in favor of a law allowing the homesteader to lay claim on a larger piece of land for a homestead.

By the early 1900's the larger ranchers, the cattle barons, had a second reason for wanting either a purchase or a long term lease law. Such a law would preserve the range they were using, and also protect the investment they had made in fencing the public land.

Their hopes for a purchase or lease law were rudely shattered. The Kinkaid Act, passed in 1904, increased the size of the homestead in the sandhills to 640 acres. At the same time President Roosevelt's administration started action against the illegal fencing of public lands. These two blows were too much for many of the biggest ranchers, operating on foreign capital. The 101 ranch sold out its sandhill holdings in 1905. The UBI sold much of its stock to the Spade and disappeared. Of the big ranches only the Spade stayed in business, and it had suffered a blow from which it never fully recovered.

When the lake country was opened to the Kinkaiders, the population in the region boomed. The new settlers usually put up a frame house covered with tar paper. Some sod houses were used, however. Almost all the houses, sod or frame, were one-room affairs, twelve feet by twelve feet.[56]

The Kinkaiders tried to farm. They often put as much as one hundred acres of their land under cultivation. But the farming slowly died out. There is less than one tenth of the land in cultivation now that there was thirty or thirty-five years ago.[57]

While the Kinkaiders came into the eastern part of the lake country after 1904, the western portion was not settled for another ten years. Originally this western part

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[56] J. W. Shackelford, letter to author, November 10, 1945.
[57] *Idem.*

consisted of a tract set aside and designated as the North Platte forest reserve. Not until 1913 was this area opened to settlement, at which time the land was taken up by the land hungry immigrants. After 1913 this western area went through a period of from five to twenty years of farming. The depression in the early 1920's drove most of the remaining "Kinkaiders" from their holdings, but the forest reserve settlers stayed in fairly large numbers until the combined depression and drouth of the early 1930's drove them out. By 1940 very few of the Kinkaid or forest reserve settlers remained, holding stubbornly to a farmer-stockman type of existence on their one section farm. The other "Kinkaiders" had disappeared. Most of them had sold out to ranchers who were already established. In a few instances the settler, having more foresight or more capital than his neighbors, acquired more land, abandoned his attempt at farming, and became a successful rancher.

By 1920 the pattern of present day ranching was fairly well established. Any illusions that farming would displace cattle raising in the area had been dispelled. The land had passed into the hands of private owners, and only a few isolated tracts of public domain remained in ranchers' summer ranges. All of the country had been fenced. The ranchers fed hay to their cattle in winter, and were beginning to feed supplementary protein feeds.