



Thomas B. Hord: From the Open Range to “The Largest Live Stock Feeding Enterprise in the United States”

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

This article is copyrighted by History Nebraska (formerly the Nebraska State Historical Society). You may download it for your personal use.

For permission to re-use materials, or for photo ordering information, see:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/publications/re-use-nshs-materials>

Learn more about *Nebraska History* (and search articles) here:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/publications/nebraska-history-magazine>

History Nebraska members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* annually:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/get-involved/membership>

Full Citation: James E Potter, “Thomas B Hord: From the Open Range to ‘The Largest Live Stock Feeding Enterprise in the United States,’” *Nebraska History* 96 (2015): 122-135

Article Summary: A century later, a description of Hord’s cattle-feeding operation in Central City still sounds modern, both in its massive scale and its use of technology. But Hord began in the era of the open range cowboy; in his career we see the birth of the modern livestock industry.

Cataloging Information:

Names: T B Hord, Amaziah H Hord, Heber Hord, William E Guthrie, S A Guthrie, Charles F Smillie, Thomas B Adams, Robert Hill, Thomas A Kent, Mike Shonsey

Place Names: Central City, Merrick County, Nebraska; Lusk and Cheyenne, Wyoming

Keywords: T B Hord; Mike Shonsey; Guthrie, Hord, & Company; 77 Ranch; Hereford Home Ranch; Union Pacific Railroad; Lance Creek Cattle Company (LCCC); American Cattle Trust; New Hampshire Cattle Company; Converse Cattle Company; Johnson County “war” (1892); Panic of 1893; Farmers State Bank (Central City)

Photographs / Images: Hord feedlot in Merrick County; Thomas Benton Hord; card advertising the “Hereford Home” ranch near Cheyenne; Hord family in the yard of their house near Central City; 77 Ranch headquarters near Lusk, Wyoming; *Harper’s Weekly* illustration showing livestock in snow, February 27, 1886; T B Hord and Heber Hord at the Central City feeding station; Hord cowboys at dinner on the 77 Ranch; cowboys at the 77 Ranch bunkhouse; Hord employees putting up hay; Hord feedlot near Neligh, Antelope County; Hord grain elevator; Mike Shonsey

THOMAS B. HORD

From the Open Range to “The Largest Live Stock Feeding Enterprise in the United States”

BY JAMES E. POTTER

Thomas Benton Hord had reached a pinnacle of prominence by 1903 when *Nebraska Resources, Illustrated* proclaimed his livestock-feeding establishment based in Central City, Merrick County, as the largest in the nation. The accompanying article outlined “the immensity of the business carried on at this ranch.” The conglomerate comprised thirteen separate feed yards in the surrounding region, along with some eighteen thousand acres of crop land. The Hord enterprises annually finished an average of ten thousand cattle, ten thousand sheep, and seven thousand hogs, which consumed some eight thousand tons of hay and up to a million bushels of corn.¹

The description of the Hord feeding operation of the early twentieth century mentioned practices that seem modern even today. Each feedlot encompassed from ten to fifteen acres and had its own windmill to water the livestock. The cattle

were fed a specific ration, largely shelled corn, in an amount that they “will eat up clean, leaving nothing to be used for the next meal that has been slobbered over and made unpalatable.” The cattle put on feed were at least three years old. “At this age [Hord] encounters but little trouble in making satisfactory gains even with a class of cattle that are usually discriminated against by many feeders because they are not high grades of beef.” Hogs were also fattened in the feedlots “in the main to subsist on the waste from the cattle.” Each spring the lots were plowed and planted to corn.²

Hord also took advantage of available technology. Each separate feeding facility was connected by telephone to the main office at Central City so Hord could keep in touch with his foremen. His key employees participated in a company profit-sharing plan in addition to receiving a salary. Purchase of grain used in the operation, only part of which

Hord fed sheep, as well as cattle and hogs, at his various companies' feedlots at Central City and other locales.
NSHS RG4232-2-12

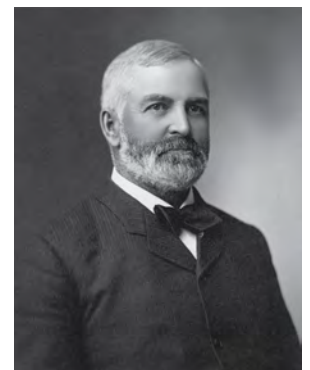


was grown on Hord land, injected an average of \$300,000 per year into the regional economy. In 1905 Hord reported shipping a thousand carloads of cattle to market by rail, most going to Chicago.³

Such success had not always been Hord's lot. He was born in Marion County, Ohio, on June 15, 1850. He grew up on a farm and in 1871 briefly attended Iron City Commercial College in Pittsburgh. He first engaged in raising sheep. On April 6, 1876, he married Sarah M. Hill. In May 1880 Hord stepped off the train in Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, to lay the groundwork for entering the range cattle business. In addition to his own capital, Hord had financial backing from his older brother Amaziah and his father-in-law Robert Hill. After spending time looking over the range country lying to the north of Cheyenne, Hord returned to Ohio and bought some fifty bull calves at a cost of nearly \$1,000 to take back to Wyoming.⁴

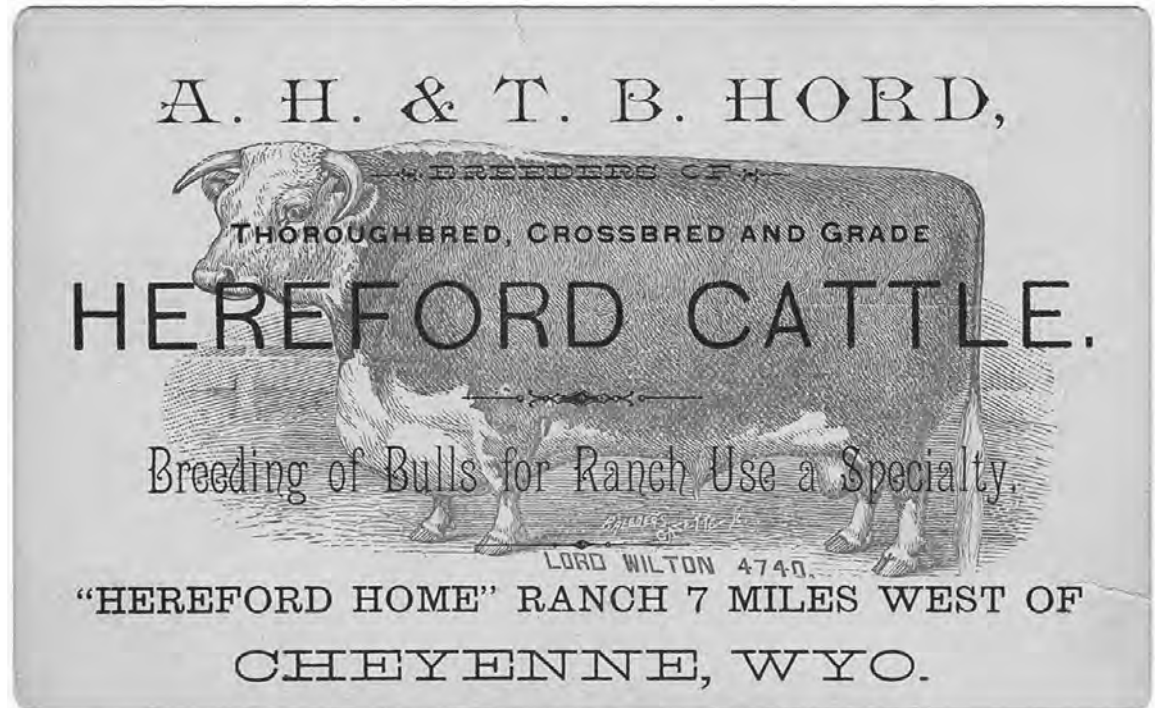
He soon formed a partnership with fellow Marion County natives William E. and S.A. Guthrie under the name of Guthrie, Hord, & Co., which ranged cattle on LaBonte and Wagonhound creeks south of Douglas.⁵ Hord's path from this beginning to his being recognized as the Nebraska livestock industry's most successful entrepreneur at his death on December 24, 1910, was not always smooth. In 1908 he recalled that his success resulted from "twenty-five years of fighting fire."⁶

The Guthrie-Hord partnership was dissolved on January 1, 1884, although Hord had already begun to assemble what would become the centerpiece of his endeavors in the range cattle industry extending over a period of nearly fifteen years, the 77 Ranch located on a tributary of Lance Creek northwest of modern-day Lusk, Wyoming. The 77 brand had been registered to W.C. Lykins in 1873 and transferred to D.B. Wyatt in 1880, who sold the



**Thomas Benton Hord
(1850-1910)**
NSHS RG4232-5-3

Hord and his brother, Amaziah, established the "Hereford Home" ranch near Cheyenne in the mid-1880s.



brand and a few deeded acres to Hord in 1883. Most of the land where the cattle grazed was open range, but Hord continued to buy land previously patented by other parties. John B. Kendrick, later Wyoming governor and U.S. Senator, also took an interest in the 77 herd.⁷

While Hord was getting the 77 Ranch up and running, he and his brother also bought a large tract from the Union Pacific Railroad a few miles west of Cheyenne on Happy Jack Road. This was the "Hereford Home Ranch" as advertised on an undated business card identifying A. H. and T. B. Hord as the proprietors and noting, "Breeding of Bulls for Ranch Use a Specialty." In August 1884 the *Cheyenne Democratic Leader* mentioned that several "fine" bulls had arrived at the ranch. The next year A. H. Hord helped incorporate the Hereford Home Ditch Co., signaling that irrigated crops were to be raised on the ranch and adjacent lands. By 1890 Amaziah alone was listed as the proprietor of the Hereford Home Ranch in an ad appearing in the Cheyenne newspaper. In the meantime T. B. Hord continued to oversee and expand the family's other livestock interests.⁸

The genesis of T. B. Hord's future Nebraska livestock feeding empire came in 1884 when some of the 77 Ranch cattle were sent to Merrick County, Nebraska, for fattening. This development apparently stemmed from Hord's previous affiliation with William E. Guthrie who, with his brother and other partners, had recently purchased forty acres near

Clarks for a cattle feeding station. Merrick County's appeal as a livestock-feeding locale was due both to its excellent Platte Valley farm land that produced abundant crops and to its transit by the Union Pacific main line on which finished cattle could readily be shipped to market.⁹

These were boom years for the open-range cattle industry, an era characterized as "The Beef Bonanza" in the title of a popular 1881 book by James S. Brisbin. Flush times and the prospect of easy profits attracted eastern and foreign money to the western ranges. On March 1, 1886, investors headed by Wall Street importer Charles F. Smillie joined Hord, his brother Amaziah, and Thomas B. Adams of Cheyenne to incorporate the Lance Creek Cattle Company (LCCC) of Wyoming Territory with \$1 million of capital stock and Smillie as president. It is unclear how the connection between Smillie and the Wyoming cattlemen was forged, but undoubtedly Smillie was the link between the company and its eastern investors.¹⁰

To raise operating capital, the LCCC sold debenture bonds which by July 1887 had netted \$224,000. Hord was paid \$196,000 in cash and company securities and John Kendrick \$10,000 for their interests in the 77 lands and herd. Hord was appointed the company's vice-president and general manager, while Kendrick ran the ranch. Hord and several members of his wife's family headed by Robert Hill were also investors in the company's bonds and stock.¹¹



The Hord family in the yard at their house near Central City, which had been built with Lance Creek Cattle Company funds. NSHS RG4232-2-10

Little did the eastern investors (and the cattlemen themselves) expect what was about to happen. Severe storms during the winter of 1886-87 decimated the range cattle herds, and the industry's slow recovery sustained additional blows during the next decade from low beef prices and economic disruptions such as the financial Panic of 1893. That Hord weathered these turbulent decades to reap a fortune in the livestock industry by the early twentieth century is testament to his business acumen, hard work, and good luck.

LCCC correspondence and reports in the Thomas B. Hord Family Papers at the Nebraska State Historical Society in Lincoln paint a vivid picture of the company's ups and downs during its ten-year existence and suggest how Hord survived its demise.¹² At its inception, the company planned to market most of its cattle directly from the Wyoming range each fall, with a portion being sent for winter fattening at Nebraska feed yards. In 1887 the LCCC began buying property at Central City, where it annually expected to fatten 1,500 to 2,000 head of cattle. In July of that year company secretary Thomas B. Adams of Cheyenne inventoried its assets: 6,947 head of cattle; 134 head of horses and mules; Wyoming range land (some of which the company owned) with fences and improvements; and five hundred acres of land and improvements near Central City, much of it mortgaged. Adams valued the assets at \$209,281. That fall Hord and his family took residence at Central City in a house built

with company funds. A year later LCCC prospects got a boost when the Union Pacific built stockyards at Central City on land the company provided.¹³

Throughout its history the LCCC's main problem was that it began operations in a financial hole from which it was never able to climb. The company continually had to borrow money to operate, yet aside from eventually realizing modest profits from feeding cattle and hogs at Central City, it rarely earned enough to pay down the principal on its loans, or the interest due its bondholders. The financial report for 1886-87 already reflected liabilities of \$268,452 including the bonds. The feeding operation had lost \$2,000 during the last twelve months; on January 1, 1888, interest of \$13,400 would be due on the bonds. Cattle prices remained low and, while the company began patenting additional Wyoming land it had previously used for free, the available range was becoming both overgrazed and scarce as more and more settlers moved in. Adams, who was also the secretary of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association, summed up the situation in a letter to President Smillie on August 13, 1888: "The whole history of the cattle business for the last two years has been one long string of disappointments."¹⁴

One of those disappointments, more appropriately termed a disaster, had been the winter of 1886-87. In the spring of 1887 John Kendrick at the Wyoming ranch reported that cattle losses appeared to be small, but by July they were being estimated at



The 77 Ranch headquarters near Lusk, Wyoming, probably during the 1890s. The woman in the doorway is Sarah (Mrs. T. B.) Hord. The boy is her son, Heber Hord.
NSHS RG4232-1-8

from 20 to 30 percent. Eventually, the LCCC determined that more than half its herd had perished during the winter of 1886-87, but it took some comfort that other cattlemen had fared even worse: "[M]ost of our neighbors were forced into liquidation, and some of them actually wiped out of existence," Adams noted in May 1887. In its 1886-87 financial report the company wrote off \$73,000 in losses and depreciation on the value of cattle and horses.¹⁵

At this time the range cattle industry was also experiencing ruinously low market prices, and the formation of The American Cattle Trust loomed up as a possible solution. The trust was to be a giant, million dollar corporation organized and controlled by the cattlemen themselves to counter the monopoly they saw embodied in the eastern meat packing industry. It would be financed by absorbing the assets of its member companies, who would then become shareholders. The Trust hoped to control the fate of every animal from the time it was a calf until it reached the consumer's grocery basket.¹⁶

The LCCC considered joining the Trust and on July 27, 1887, Secretary Adams sent a circular to the stock- and bondholders asking them to surrender their company securities for that purpose. While Smillie, Hord, and Adams thought entering the Trust could help the company recover from its indebtedness, they never had the chance to find out. By April 1888 Adams was forced to report that the plan had been abandoned because "We have been unable to obtain the consent of a sufficiently large percentage of the owners of the company's

securities." Similar circumstances no doubt prevailed in the ranks of other western cattlemen and the American Cattle Trust never achieved its hoped-for monopoly, folding in 1890.¹⁷

The LCCC took several other steps to bolster its flagging business. In 1888 it formed a "combination" with the New Hampshire Cattle Company of Wyoming Territory to share the labor and expense of managing the two companies' herds on the range near Lusk. This plan would save money "as the two companies can be easily handled under one foreman, with an ordinary force of men." Hord was in overall charge of the "range work," while J. H. Barron of the New Hampshire company served as treasurer for the combination. When the final accounting was finished in early December, Adams was "very much gratified at the result of the year's experience as far as expenses are concerned." In 1889 the LCCC entered into a similar arrangement with the Converse Cattle Company and other companies, which it would continue for several years.¹⁸

Despite these momentary financial successes, the overall arc of the company's business continued downward. It was often difficult to borrow the money for each season's operations. Accordingly, in August 1889 President Smillie decided that the company should not feed livestock at its Central City yards during the coming fall and winter. It would be impossible to get more funds from the bond holders, "who are already our creditors and who are in a violent frame of mind, and would not advance us a dollar for any purpose." Any attempt by the company to borrow operating funds from western banks would also be resisted by the bondholders. Moreover, "With the present beef market, I do not believe that it would be justifiable to feed any way."¹⁹

Harper's Weekly,
February 27, 1886



Another problem plaguing the LCCC was that the corporate marriage of eastern capitalists and western cattlemen was not always harmonious. Smillie and the investors focused primarily on the company's profitability or lack thereof, and Smillie tended to criticize Hord or Adams when the costs on the range or feeding station exceeded projections or when market variability reduced the expected revenue from the sale of livestock. For example, Smillie initially refused to sign the deed to the company land Hord had agreed to give the Union Pacific to construct a side track and loading pens at Central City until Adams and Hord explained how the arrangement would benefit the company. Adams, as the LCCC financial officer, often found himself in the middle of disagreements between Hord and Smillie, noting in one letter, "I am disgusted at the way in which things are going at sixes and sevens in the management of our business, as no one seems to know exactly what he has authority and what he has not authority to do."²⁰

At their December 1889 board meeting in New York City (which Hord did not attend), the trustees centralized all financial transactions in Secretary Adams's hands in Cheyenne. All proceeds of livestock sales made from Central City were to be remitted to the Cheyenne office. Henceforth Adams would also be responsible for the paperwork on all loans taken out by the company. Every proposed contract or agreement was to be submitted to Smillie in New York before it was finalized.²¹

Predictably Hord, as general manager, was not happy about the change. He promised to comply with the trustees' request, "although it will not be nearly as convenient, and it is simply taking the management out of my hands, but if that is the desire, I have nothing to say . . . We have always done the best we could, and worked with as little help as possible, and used all the economy it has been business to, but no one interested sees it and of course it is not appreciated." Adams tried to smooth Hord's ruffled feathers by assuring him that the change was not meant to hamper his operations or signal that the board lacked confidence in him.²²

Although the LCCC had continued to purchase land in Wyoming during this time, in 1889 the company began to restructure its business, first by moving the range herd from Wyoming to Montana in late summer "[t]o keep our cattle alive and in good condition" now that the Wyoming ranges were becoming seriously overgrazed. Another motive that prompted the company to consider



T. B. Hord and Heber Hord at the Central City feeding station. NSHS RG4232-1-1

liquidating its Wyoming land holdings was to avoid paying taxes. Open range, which could be used for free, was still available in Montana.²³

These steps, along with the January 1, 1890, suspension of interest payments to the bondholders, did little to solve the company's money problems. Some creditors apparently urged liquidating the company, but Adams cautioned that "It would be simply recessious to attempt anything like liquidation now." Adams hoped there might soon be an opportunity to sell both the Central City feeding plant and the Wyoming ranchland at "fair prices." Though Smillie opposed selling the feeding station, Adams thought the profits it earned did not offset the "constant anxiety & friction" involved in its operation.²⁴

In lieu of a complete liquidation, the Board of Trustees voted unanimously in February 1891 that the company would dispose of its Wyoming properties and cease doing business there. It would close its Cheyenne office, sell the ranchland it actually owned, and focus on ranging cattle in Montana and feeding livestock at Central City. In preparation for the sale, the company placed a book value of \$28,800 on its Wyoming real estate and equipment.²⁵

Both Gene Gressley in *Bankers and Cattlemen* (1966) and Nellie Snyder Yost in *Call of the Range: The Story of the Nebraska Stock Growers Association* (1966) reported that the 1891 decision to suspend business in Wyoming marked the



(Top) Hord cowboys at dinner on the 77 Ranch.
NSHS RG4232-1-10



(Right) Cowboys at the 77 Ranch bunkhouse.
NSHS RG4232-1-11

end of the LCCC. They reached that conclusion because the company's letter books formerly in the Hord papers at the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming in Laramie end on that note. Neither scholar, however, had the benefit of the Hord Family papers donated to the NSHS in 1986 by Hord's grandson, Thomas Barge Hord. Additional LCCC correspondence therein reveals that the company struggled on until 1896, although its business now centered on its Nebraska feeding station and its Montana cattle herd. The correspondence at the NSHS also documents Hord's repurchase of the 77 Ranch properties in Wyoming from the LCCC in 1891.

As the manager, Hord was clearly aware of the company's financial problems and as a cattleman himself, he had the insight to assess the range cattle industry's future. The days when investors could profit from simply grazing cattle on the open ranges of the public domain were drawing to a close. Future success would come from owning the land, stocking it with higher grade cattle, and controlling their movements with fences. Hord likely concluded that purchasing the LCCC's Wyoming lands offered a better prospect for a return on his investment than did the company securities he and his family had held since 1886.

Accordingly, Hord and his father-in-law Robert Hill surrendered LCCC bonds and stock with a book value of \$26,000 to repurchase the 77 Ranch properties now comprising some 2,400 deeded acres. By October 1891 President Smillie wrote Hord that he had "fixed up" the bonds and stock in payment of the ranch. The LCCC's December 15, 1891, financial statement showed that the securities Hord and Hill surrendered had reduced

the company's indebtedness to its bondholders from \$224,000 to \$198,000. After Hord repurchased the 77 Ranch he began to restock it with his own cattle and let a contract for twenty-five miles of fencing. William Hill (probably another member of Hord's wife's family) was installed as ranch manager. Hord continued to spend most of his time at Central City in his role as vice president and general manager of the LCCC.²⁶

By the end of 1891 the LCCC had ceased doing business in Wyoming. Smillie saw this as the first step in divorcing the company entirely from the vagaries of raising cattle on the open range, an activity "which must within a very few years be entirely given up" due to an influx of settlers. The new business plan was to sell off the range herd as rapidly as possible and use the proceeds to buy feeders to put in the lots at Central City. Smillie predicted that "within the next eighteen months we shall be able to pay off all of our bills payable." Once that goal was realized, "we shall turn our attention to paying back-interest on our bonds, and I see no reason why, within the next two or three years, our company should not be in a perfectly sound and flourishing condition, with its bonds at par." Unfortunately Smillie's optimism would prove unfounded.²⁷

The exit of the LCCC from Wyoming meant that it avoided any direct entanglement in the infamous Johnson County "war" of 1892. The episode resulted from an effort by cattle "barons" affiliated in the Wyoming Stock Growers Association to kill or drive out small ranch operators who were increasingly moving into the ranges where the big companies ran their herds. The cattlemen's justification for this brutal approach was that

these competitors for the range were nothing more than “rustlers” who were not being reigned-in by local law enforcement.

In early April 1892 twenty-four cattlemen (among them Hord’s former partner William E. Guthrie and other men he knew well), accompanied by a contingent of twenty-five hired Texas gunmen, invaded Johnson County to carry out their plan. Mike Shonsey, who had formerly worked for Hord on the 77 Ranch and would do so again, was with the invaders when they gunned down two alleged “rustlers” named Nick Ray and Nate Champion at the KC Ranch near the present town of Kaycee north of Casper (see article on p. 134). As the cattlemen moved on toward Buffalo, they soon found themselves surrounded and besieged by a posse organized by the small ranchmen and local lawmen. U.S. Army troops were called out to rescue the cattle barons, who were arrested and taken back to Cheyenne. Before they were put on trial in January 1893, they managed to have two trappers who had witnessed the killing of Ray and Champion at the KC Ranch spirited out of Wyoming. After the prosecuting attorney was unable to seat twelve jurors out of more than a thousand men he interviewed and the potential jury pool had been exhausted, the case against the cattlemen was dropped.²⁸

As the LCCC sought profitability in the early 1890s, Hord decided to see whether shipping cattle to England might pay off. It was a complex operation involving rail shipment of the cattle to New York City, followed by a two-week ocean voyage to Liverpool. The steamships could carry from 450 to 650 head, along with four men to care for each one hundred cattle and the fodder to feed them. The cost per head to ship a fourteen hundred-pound steer from New York to Liverpool ranged from ten to fifteen dollars, plus insurance and sales commissions. Adding risk was that the overseas market could fluctuate wildly while the cattle were en route. Once they arrived, English law required their slaughter within ten days. Based on information Smillie received from a New York steamship broker, he figured the voyage would add \$25.63 to the price the company would need to receive, per head, compared with the price the animal would bring if marketed in Chicago.²⁹

Although Smillie was skeptical that exporting cattle to England would pay, he grudgingly left the decision up to Hord: “After you have read my letter dated twenty-eighth, you may do what you think best about shipping one hundred head Company’s cattle.” Hord’s brother, Amaziah, and his son, Heber, accompanied the first boatload in

the spring of 1892. No records indicate the price the cattle brought, but President Smillie’s June 6 letter to Hord reveals the outcome: “I was very sorry to hear from your brother [on his return to New York] of the poor result of the sale of our beeves in Liverpool, but everything seems to be against us at the moment.” The outcome of this shipment did not deter Hord. Son Heber recalled that eleven boatloads of cattle, some eight thousand head, evidently most of them Hord’s private cattle, were exported that year, presumably receiving higher prices than had the initial shipment. Additional shipments of T. B. Hord and Co. cattle went from Baltimore to Liverpool in the spring of 1894.³⁰

After the restructuring of the LCCC in 1891, Secretary Thomas Adams moved from Cheyenne to New York City and took a job as treasurer of a newspaper. Because both the secretary and president of the LCCC now had their offices on Wall Street, Smillie became Hord’s most frequent correspondent on company business. He badgered Hord about the feeding station’s record-keeping, which often failed to meet his exacting Wall Street standards. At the same time Smillie could not resist criticizing or second-guessing the general manager’s decisions involving grazing, feeding, or marketing the company’s livestock.

Hord’s frustration no doubt increased when Smillie was often distracted by business unrelated to the LCCC. In 1892 Hord wanted to meet with Smillie in New York, but Smillie warned him not to come unannounced. Smillie had just returned from a lengthy vacation, other work had piled up, and “I could not give you a moment’s time, excepting at night, and after a hard day’s work in Wall Street I am not in condition either physically or mentally to attend to night work.”³¹

Hord employees putting up hay.
NSHS RG4232-2-15



While the Central City feeding plant continued to be modestly profitable, the LCCC had not made much progress toward eliminating its debt and resuming interest payments to its bondholders. One bright spot was that the company had paid off the mortgages on its property in Central City by December 1892. By the next spring, Smillie predicted that “we are going to be able to make a good, big payment against our Eastern indebtedness by the time it matures this summer.”³²

Once again, his hopes were dashed with the onset of the financial Panic of 1893. On May 18 Smillie wrote Hord, “We are having terrible times here now in the way of panics, etc. etc. and I see from the papers that your Western institutions are closing their doors right and left.” He urged Hord to send him as much cash as could be spared from the company funds on deposit in the Central City banks, “especially as the bank that you used to employ once came to grief.” When Hord failed to comply promptly, Smillie took him to task in a June 7 letter, particularly once he learned that the local bank had lent out the company’s money: “We have outstanding notes here in New York on which we are paying 8% per annum, which interest, of course, would be immediately stopped if you would send me our idle money and let me pay off the notes . . . I have no doubt but that you are perfectly correct in your statement that the bank in Central City is all right now but in the rotten condition of Western finances and silver, there is no knowing what may happen tomorrow.” Smillie had already promised some of the company’s creditors that the income from cattle sales would allow a payment against their notes. “I cannot tell them that the bank in Central City has loaned our money out and I will pay the notes later, because if I did, they would probably attach the whole business, and would be justified in doing so.” He could not resist reminding Hord that “No one knows as much about the present finances of the country than we Wall Street men.”³³

In addition to the financial turmoil plaguing the country during the mid-1890s, drought added to the problems facing those engaged in the livestock industry. A late frost damaged the 1894 Nebraska corn crop, which was virtually destroyed by hot, dry winds in July. That summer’s yield of hay in Nebraska’s central Platte Valley was said to have been even less than the lowest estimates. A shortage of feed was probably why Hord fed no cattle at Central City during the winter of 1894-95, another blow to the LCCC, to Hord himself, and to other stockmen. The local

newspaper mentioned that the suspension of feeding at the LCCC yards depressed the value of property in Central City Township by more than one-third. Conditions did not improve in 1895, when the paper reported that the Platte River had gone totally dry by fall.³⁴

The hard times of the 1890s threatened not only the LCCC’s prospects, but those of Hord and his family’s personal enterprises. Fortunately, in early June 1893 before the worst of the financial crisis hit, Thomas B. and Amaziah sold their ranch properties west of Cheyenne to Chicago capitalist Lewis E. Ingalls and Cheyenne banker Thomas A. Kent. The transaction involved more than 14,000 acres for \$140,000 with most of the land going to Ingalls, who planned to stock it with even more cattle. Soon afterwards, on July 20, Kent’s Cheyenne Savings Bank failed. Although it is not clear whether Kent had settled with the Hords before his bank went under, Kent transferred LCCC bonds of undetermined value to Thomas B. Hord in December 1893.³⁵

As land prices fell during the depression of the 1890s, the Hords were able to add to their real estate holdings at the ranch near Lusk and also in Merrick County, likely using the proceeds from the sale of the Cheyenne ranch. Some of the tracts were purchased by Robert Hill, indicating that he was continuing to invest with his son-in-law and help him ride out the economic downturn. Aside from Hord’s LCCC management role, for which he was paid an annual salary of \$4,000 by 1893, he was feeding some of his own cattle at the company feed yards in 1893 under the firm name of Hord & Baxter. Baxter was Wyoming cattleman George W. Baxter, who had served briefly as governor of that territory in 1886. Documents also record short term loans in 1894-95 from the Farmers State Bank of Central City to “Hord & Bissell,” “Hord & Wilder,” and “Hord & Irvine,” the latter probably W. C. Irvine, a prominent cattleman who became president of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association in 1896. Bissell of Central City became a frequent partner in Hord enterprises after 1900.³⁶

Hord was also president of the Farmers State Bank of Central City until 1895, whose principle stockholder was the Chicago livestock commission firm of Clay, Robinson, and Co. The Central City paper characterized the firm as having “a practically unlimited supply of funds at their beck.” Clay was John Clay, a noted Wyoming cattleman, who assumed the bank’s presidency from Hord. While the exact nature of Hord’s arrangements with his various presumed partners is unknown,

it appears that he was diversifying his business interests with the help of well-placed friends and former cattle industry associates as the fortunes of the LCCC continued to decline.³⁷

Although no LCCC correspondence survives beyond December 1893, the company struggled on until the end finally came in February 1896 when the bonds issued at its inception in 1886 came due. In his report to the bondholders, President Smillie presented detailed financial statements showing that the deficiency between the company's net assets as compared to the \$198,000 of unredeemed bonds had fallen from \$95,252 on July 1, 1891, to \$37,913 on July 1, 1895. He argued that if the bondholders would agree to a ten-year extension, the accrued interest on the bonds could be paid within a few years and before the ten years had elapsed, "the company's property will show assets in excess of the bond issue." If the company were compelled to redeem the bonds now, he warned, "it will necessitate the selling of all of our assets at a time of extreme

depression . . . and will stop the development of the paying branch of our business (the handling of young cattle) and result in a heavy loss to you."³⁸

Notwithstanding Smillie's plea and his statement that the company's seven-member board of trustees, who held \$126,000 of the \$198,000 in bonds, favored the extension, other bondholders had had enough and sent in their bonds for redemption. Before the bonds actually came due on February 29, Hord and the other officers arranged to have a court appoint John B. Kendrick as receiver. This step avoided having the disgruntled bondholders attach the company's assets and property in an effort to collect the full value of their bonds, which were then worth less than forty cents on the dollar. Under receivership, the company's assets could be protected and distributed or sold for equal benefit to all the creditors.³⁹

On December 19, 1897, President Smillie called a stockholders meeting in Cheyenne to wind up the company's affairs. At the same time, Hord and his wife Sarah sold their Wyoming ranch near

**Hord feedlot near Neligh,
Antelope County.**
NSHS RG4232-2-20




James E. Potter is Senior Research Historian at the Nebraska State Historical Society, and author of *Standing Firmly by the Flag: Nebraska Territory and the Civil War, 1861-1867* (University of Nebraska Press). His article "A Peculiar Set of Men: Nebraska Cowboys of the Open Range" appeared in the Fall 2013 issue of *Nebraska History*.

Lusk, some 3,129 acres and 1,000 head of steers, to Addison A. Spough, another area cattleman, for \$16,000. It was likely proceeds from this sale, along with Hord's share of the LCCC assets as a stock and bondholder and assets he had accumulated independently or from his wife's family that enabled him to acquire title to the company's Merrick County property for "\$1.00 and other good and valuable consideration to it in hand paid." No longer in the ranching business, Hord was now free to purchase livestock for feeding at Central City wherever he could find it and at the best prices he could arrange. From then on, his journey to become the nation's largest livestock feeder seemed to suffer no major setbacks.⁴⁰

Hord had continued to invest in various enterprises, helping organize and becoming president of the Central City Bank in 1896. In 1899 Hord began building a new residence in town and witnessed the marriage of his son, Heber, who had become increasingly involved in managing the family's growing empire. By then, Hord's younger brother Bailey had moved to Central City. Also joining in the Hord businesses were associates from the open range days including Mike Shonsey, who managed the feeding operation at Clarks and later became a partner in several Hord companies. For the "season" of 1901-2, the earnings of the various Hord businesses totaled \$193,900.⁴¹

The years from 1900 until Hord's death in 1910 saw the Hord conglomerate grow dramatically via the creation of multiple companies including the Hord and Black Cattle Co. (1900) with ranchland near Thedford; the Valley Stockyards Co. near Valley (1901); the T. B. Hord Grain Co. (1904) with some fifty elevators along Nebraska and Iowa railroad lines; the T. B. Hord Alfalfa Meal Co. (1908), and the Lakeside Ranch Co., among others. In 1905 he was an investor in and became president of the Citizens National Bank of Cheyenne. In 1908 Hord suffered what is presumed to have been a stroke from which he never fully recovered. When he died on the day before Christmas in 1910 at the age of sixty, Hord's estate exceeded \$1.2 million, some \$29.7 million in today's dollars. By then he personally owned more than four thousand acres of farm land, town lots, and business blocks worth \$310,000. Most of this real estate was in Merrick County, but it also included property near Schuyler, Neligh, and Oakdale. Hord's son Heber, and grandson Thomas Barge Hord, continued to manage the Hord businesses until the last family enterprise was liquidated in the 1970s.⁴²

Although the details of T. B. Hord's personal business activities and investments from the early 1880s through his death in 1910 are not nearly as well documented as are the affairs of the Lance Creek Cattle Company, it seems clear that his willingness to take risks, his practical experience in raising and feeding cattle, his personal connections to livestock industry leaders of his era, and financial support from his extended family helped him ride out the travails that doomed the LCCC. Although he is little known today, barely a century ago Thomas Benton Hord was readily recognized for his role in the formative years of the Great Plains livestock industry, his perseverance during its rise, fall, and reinvention, and his emergence as one of Nebraska's most successful entrepreneurs.⁴³ 

NOTES

¹ George W. Hervey, ed., *Nebraska's Resources, Illustrated* (Omaha: Nebraska Farmer Co., 1903), 86-90.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.; Hord testimony, "Regulation of Railroad Rates," hearings before the Interstate Commerce Commission pursuant to Senate Resolution No. 288, 58th Cong. 3d sess., May 5, 1905-May 17, 1905, *Senate Doc. No. 243*, 58th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D. C.: GPO, 1906).

⁴ Hord diary and memorandum book, 1880, RG4232, Hord Family Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln (hereafter Hord papers).

⁵ Brand "cut" for Guthrie, Hord & Co., *Cheyenne Daily Sun*, Nov. 2, 1881; listing in *Gazetteer and Business Directory for Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, Wyoming, and Arizona* (Chicago: R. L. Polk Co., 1884). The Wyoming newspapers consulted for this article were accessed via the Wyoming Newspaper Project website, www.wynewspapers.org.

⁶ Quoted by Albert Watkins in "Nebraska Resources" feature article, *Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln), Dec. 10, 1908.

⁷ Partnership dissolution notice, *Cheyenne Daily Sun*, Jan. 13, 1884; deed, D. B. Wyatt to Hord, July 1, 1883, Deed Book, 2, pp. 309-10, Niobrara County Clerk, Lusk, Wyoming; Addison A. Spough, "The Famous OW Roundup of 1884," letter in Lusk (Wyo.) *Free Lance*, May 17, 1934; Russell Thorpe, secretary, Wyoming Stockgrowers Association to James B. Griffith, publisher, *Lusk Herald*, Aug. 24, 1949, published in *Lusk Herald*, Sept. 22, 1949.

⁸ *Laramie Weekly Boomerang*, May 15, 1884; business card, Hord papers; *Cheyenne Democratic Leader*, Aug. 3, 1884; notice of incorporation, *Democratic Leader*, Oct. 8, 1885; business card, *Cheyenne Daily Leader*, July 1, 1890.

⁹ Deed to Guthrie Bros. and Oskamp, May 30, 1884, Deed Book G, p. 351, Merrick County Clerk, Central City, Nebraska. The *Central City Courier*, Oct. 9, 1884, mentioned that "Guthrie Bros. & Co" received twenty carloads of cattle to put on their feeding "ranch." It is not known whether Hord had an interest in these particular cattle.



One of Hord's many grain elevators in Nebraska and Iowa. NSHS RG4232-3-11

¹⁰ Smillie (1848-1914), the son of artist and engraver James Smillie and the brother of James D. Smillie, also an artist, engaged in the spice and East India import business until his death on Nov. 22, 1914. He never married. *Simmons' Spice Mill* 37 (Dec. 1914): 1350.

¹¹ *Certificate of Incorporation and By-Laws of the Lance Creek Cattle Company of Wyoming Territory* (New York: American Bank Note Co., 1886); LCCC report to the stockholders, Dec. 31, 1886; Thomas B. Adams to Smillie, Apr. 13, Apr. 30, Aug. 1, 1887, all above in Hord papers. Hord and Co. and Kendrick were paid a total of slightly more than \$206,000 in cash and company securities.

¹² Until July 2014, the records of the Lance Creek Cattle Company were divided between the American Heritage Research Center at the University of Wyoming in Laramie and the Nebraska State Historical Society in Lincoln. The LCCC records in Laramie had been donated by the Hord family in 1960, while a more extensive portion of the Hord papers, including additional LCCC records, was donated by the family to the NSHS in 1986. In 2014 the American Heritage Research Center graciously decided to transfer the Hord/LCCC papers it held to the NSHS.

¹³ LCCC report to the bondholders and stockholders, Dec. 31, 1891; Adams to Smillie, Apr. 16, Sept. 28, 1887, Aug. 29, 1888; Adams to Thomas Sturgis, July 22, 1887; Adams to John R. Manchester, UPRR, Sept. 12, 1888, Hord papers; *Central City (Nebr.) Nonpareil*, Apr. 14, 1887.

¹⁴ Adams to Smillie, Apr. 13, Dec. 3, 1887, Aug. 13, 1888, and LCCC Financial Statement, Nov. 15, 1887, Hord papers.

¹⁵ Adams to Smillie, May 24, July 17, 1887; "Statement to the Bondholders," Feb. 1, 1896, 6; LCCC Financial Statement, Nov. 15, 1887, Hord papers.

¹⁶ Gene M. Gressley, "The American Cattle Trust: A Study in Protest," *Pacific Historical Review* 30 (Feb. 1961): 61-62.

¹⁷ Adams to Smillie, July 21, 1887; Adams to Thomas Sturgis, New York City, July 22, 1887; Adams to Walter Cook, New York City, Aug. 11, 1887; Adams to Charles Schroder, Cedarville, Pa., Apr. 18, 1888, Hord papers.

¹⁸ Adams to J. H. Barron, Lusk, Wyo., Mar. 26, 1888, Adams to A. S. Mercer, *North American Livestock Journal*, July 18, 1888; Adams to Smillie, Dec. 5, 1888, Hord papers.

¹⁹ Adams to Hord, Aug. 29, 1890, quoting Smillie to Adams, Hord papers.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Adams to Hord, Jan. 3, 1890, Hord papers.

²² Hord's comments quoted in Adams to Smillie, Jan. 8, 1890, Hord papers.

²³ Adams to A. H. Low, New York City, Aug. 16, 1890; Adams to Hord, Apr. 11, 1889, Hord papers.

²⁴ Adams to William T. Ryle, NYC, Aug. 28, 1890; Adams to S. E. Huntington, Newport, R.I., Aug. 30, 1890, Hord papers.

²⁵ Smillie to Hord, Feb. 18, 1891; Adams to M. M. Mason, Cheyenne, Feb. 27, 1891; Adams to Smillie, Mar. 6, 1891, Hord papers.

²⁶ Adams to Hord, Apr. 6, May 4, 1891; Smillie to Hord, July 31, Oct. 27, 1891; Smillie to Robert Hill, Nov. 9, 1891; LCCC Financial Statement, Dec. 15, 1891, Hord papers; *Lusk Herald*, May 19, 1891.

²⁷ Smillie to Robert Hill, Nov. 23, 1891, Hord papers.

²⁸ T. A. Larson, *History of Wyoming*, 2d ed., revised (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), 268-84, gives a summary. John R. Davis, *Range War: The Infamous Invasion of Johnson*

County (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010) provides a more detailed analysis. Addison E. Sheldon, later superintendent of the Nebraska State Historical Society, lived in Chadron in 1892 and observed some of the legal proceedings by which the witnesses to the Ray and Champion killings were removed from Wyoming before they could testify against the cattlemen. Sheldon, "A Nebraska Episode of the Wyoming Cattle War," *Nebraska State Historical Society Publications* 10 (1902): 138-49.

²⁹ Smillie to Hord, Mar. 28, 1892, enclosing R. S. Barrie & Co., New York, to Smillie, Mar. 25, 1892, Hord papers; Ruth Morse, "Hello There," *Nebraska Cattleman* (January 1948): 16.

³⁰ Smillie to Hord, Apr. 2, June 6, 1892, Hord papers; Ruth Morse, "Hello There," *Callaway (Nebr.) Courier*, Apr. 6, 1894.

³¹ Smillie to Hord, Aug. 2, 1892, Hord papers.

³² Smillie to Hord, Dec. 1, 1892, Apr. 17, 1893, Hord papers.

³³ Smillie to Hord, May 18, June 7, 1893, Hord papers.

³⁴ Addison E. Sheldon, *Nebraska: The Land and the People* (Chicago: Lewis Pub. Co., 1931), 1:739; *Central City Republican*, Nov. 14, 1894, June 15, Oct. 19, 1895.

³⁵ *Cheyenne Daily Leader*, June 6, June 13, July 21, 1893; *Cheyenne Daily Sun*, June 13, 1893; *Carbon County Journal*, Rawlins, Wyo., June 17, 1893; Smillie to Hord, Dec. 5, 1893, Hord papers.

³⁶ Deed records in Niobrara County, Wyoming, and Merrick County, Nebraska, document acquisitions by Hord, his wife Sarah, and father-in-law Robert Hill during the years 1892-95; Smillie to Hord, June 14, July 7, 1893; "Notes in favor of the Farmers State Bank," Hord papers.

³⁷ *Central City Republican*, July 13, 1895.

³⁸ "Statement to the Bondholders of the Lance Creek Cattle Co., Feb. 1, 1896," Hord papers.

³⁹ Kendrick had formerly been affiliated with Hord in the 77 Ranch, prior to the creation of the LCCC. The officers likely believed Kendrick would be mindful of his old friends as he wound down the affairs of the company. Writing his wife about his appointment as receiver, Kendrick noted that the bonds "are not worth, on an equitable distribution, more than 40 cents at the utmost." Kendrick, St. Louis, to wife, Feb. 26, 1896, Manville Kendrick Papers, Trail End State Historic Site, Sheridan, Wyoming, www.trailend.org, accessed Nov. 9, 2011.

⁴⁰ Warranty Deed, Thomas B. and Sarah M. Hord to Addison A. Spough, Dec. 17, 1897, Deed Book 2, pp. 381-82, Niobrara County Clerk, Lusk, Wyoming; LCCC dissolution notice, *Cheyenne Daily Leader*, Nov. 23, 1897; deed, LCCC to Hord, Dec. 28, 1897, Deed Book U, Merrick County Clerk, Central City, Nebraska.

⁴¹ Merrick County History Book Committee, *History of Merrick County, Nebraska* (1987), 1:238-39, 363; Earnings statement, Hord papers.

⁴² Miscellaneous Corporations, Vol. T, V, Z, 8, 11, and 13, RG2, Records of the Nebraska Secretary of State, NSHS; *Omaha Daily Bee*, Dec. 25, 1910. A copy of the inventories and "Decree Assessing the Amount of Inheritance Tax" on T. B. Hord's estate is among unprocessed material in the Hord papers.

⁴³ The Hord family enterprises in the years after T. B. Hord's death are reviewed in Dennis Madden's article, "The Hord Family: Merrick County Entrepreneurs," *Nebraska History* 70 (Summer 1989): 164-71.

Mike Shonsey


BY JAMES E. POTTER

When he died on August 5, 1954, Mike Shonsey of Clarks, Nebraska, was said to have been the last surviving participant in Wyoming's 1892 Johnson County "cattle war." Born in Montreal, Canada, in 1866, Shonsey soon moved with his parents to Caledonia, Ohio, not far from where Thomas B. Hord grew up. When he was still a youth, Shonsey went to work for Hord and followed him to Wyoming in the early 1880s. There, he was ranch foreman for Hord and other open range cattlemen, several of whom played significant roles in the Johnson County war.

During the cattlemen's invasion of Johnson County in April 1892, it was Shonsey who brought word that two of the alleged "rustlers" the cattlemen sought to kill or capture, Nick Ray and Nate Champion, were holed up at the KC ranch near the present town of Kaycee. After killing Ray and Champion (some accounts say Shonsey fired the fatal shots) the cattlemen were themselves besieged at another ranch, rescued by U.S. troops, and taken to Cheyenne for trial. A group photograph of the invaders taken at Fort D. A. Russell on May 4, 1892, includes Shonsey and Hord's former partner William E. Guthrie. Although Shonsey and the other cattlemen were released after a jury to try them could not be seated, the fallout from his involvement in the war was far from over.

Soon afterwards Shonsey was again employed on Hord's 77 Ranch near Lusk. In May 1893 he had a deadly encounter with Nate Champion's brother, Dudley. The latter had vowed to "get" the men involved in killing his brother and Shonsey was one of his targets. On May 24 Champion rode up to where Shonsey was working and greeted him. Word had already gone out that that Champion was after him so Shonsey had his revolver at the ready. When Champion reached for his gun, Shonsey fired first and Dudley fell from his horse. Champion tried to raise himself up to return fire, but his gun would not go off and Shonsey shot him again. A witness reported that the dying man kept gasping that he could not cock his gun. When a coroner's jury examined the dead man's revolver, it found dried

mud packed between the cylinder and hammer, evidently caused when Champion had earlier crawled through a creek bottom trying to get a shot at another man said to have been involved in the death of his brother. Although some accounts claim that Champion had not pulled his gun, the jury acquitted Shonsey on the grounds of self defense.

Naturally Hord and his business associates were aware of the episode. In a June 7, 1893, letter to Hord, Lance Creek President Charles Smillie noted, "I am glad to see that the coroner's jury acquitted him and hope he will not get in any further trouble, though I fear that those Johnson County men have spotted him, and I think if I were in his place I should give northeastern Wyoming a wide berth." Whether or not Shonsey knew of Smillie's advice, he soon moved to Central City, Nebraska, where he became foreman at the feeding station. In 1898 he moved to Clarks to manage the Hord feeding station there. In 1906 Shonsey became a partner in several of the Hord enterprises including the T. B. Hord Grain Company, the Hord and Shonsey Cattle Company, and the T. B. Hord Alfalfa Meal Company. He lies buried in the Central City cemetery. 

SOURCES

Central City Republican Nonpareil, August 12, 1954.

Compendium of History, Reminiscence and Biography of Nebraska, (Chicago: Alden Pub. Co., 1912), 1086.

John Rolfe Burroughs, *Guardian of the Grasslands: The First Hundred Years of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association* (Cheyenne: Pioneer Printing & Stationery Co., 1971), 169.

John R. Davis, *Wyoming Range War: The Infamous Invasion of Johnson County* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010).

Lance Creek Cattle Company correspondence, MS4232, Hord Family Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society.

Miscellaneous Corporation Records, 8:77; 8:631; 13:139, RG2, Records of the Nebraska Secretary of State, NSHS.

Right: Mike Shonsey at Central City, probably soon after the Johnson County "war." NSHS RG4232-5-11

