

Big Bend Cattlemen

The first settlers were cattlemen, mostly former gold miners or government freighters who had previously passed through the country. They settled along the Colville road along Cow creek. Johnnie Smith, now of Reardan, a participant in Col. Wright's Indian campaign of 1858 and later a packer in the Colville country, settled in 1869 on Cow creek 14 miles above the Snake and about 8 miles from Palouse falls. In the 70s old Jim Kennedy--a pioneer stockman--stayed at Smith's. George and Bill Lucas, settlers of 1869, were 2 miles further north on the creek, Tom Turner was 8 miles east. Alk Hopper was 7 miles, and his brother, Ernest, 10 miles southeast. Korst was 12 miles to the north. Old Man (J.F.) Cross settled on Cow creek about 12 miles southeast ~~mi~~ from Ritzville in 1872. William Lambie[?] settled in the vicinity about the same time. He sold out shortly to Thomas Derry. Along the Columbia Dave Coonce, returning after an absence of 8 years in 1872, settled at Ringold bar...

Among the early cattlemen may be mentioned Commodore Downs, near Sprague, Kirkman & Dooley, on the Figure 3 ranch 10 miles southeast of Sprague; Si Graves 8 miles east of Sprague. Others were Bill Dillard, S.E. of Sprague, Phil McEntee and Bebe[?] near the Grand Coulee; Barney Fitzpatrick, William Bigham (1878), 'Eed River Jim' Ferrier afterwards bought Bigham's holdsing; Virgil Brock and Jules Jarmane. Pat Clinton, H. Widdell who came in 1874, brought out Lord in 1878; Guy Fruit, H. McKenter, Jack Williams, Hugh McCool, Bob Greene, Adam McNeilley, Jack Harding...

-- Early Days in the Big Bend Country
William S. Lewis, Spokane, 1926

Columbia Basin Range

In early days a considerable part of the sagebrush country was covered with a good growth of bunchgrass--especially the bottomlands --with only a scattering bunches of sagebrush. This grass often stood 3 feet high in favored places and could be mowed, and was so luxuriant that at a distance it looked like a grain field in bloom. In the late 50s and 60s one could stake his horse in such a spot and he would have all he wanted to eat within a radius of a 25-foot lariat. One could ride along on horseback and in many places the grass would touch one's stirrups. Like most ranges the Big Bend became overstocked in the late 70s and early 80s. In the spring, when the bunchgrass came up, the cattle, horses and sheep ate it off so that within a few years all this high bunchgrass, which formerly covered good-sized patches all over this country, had largely disappeared.

--Early Days in the Big Bend Country
by William S. Lewis, Spokane, 1926

...In the early cattle days you might ride through the Big Bend for 50 or 100 miles and only encounter one or two roundup cabins in chosen spots close to wood and water. The latch string was always out. If no one was at home you went in, spent the night, ate some of the grub if you were hungry and had none, and passed ~~on~~ on...

-- Ibid

Eastern Drives
from Big Bend

Prior to 1880 the business of the Big Bend district, in fact the only business, was the cattle business. The principal buyers were Col. J.Q. Sherley, the Seewright brothers, Lang & Ryan, Sturgeons & Goodsel, and Sturgens & Lane. Prime 4 and ~~4~~ 5 year olds sold at \$20; 2-year olds at ~~\$8~~ \$9 to \$12; and yearlings from \$5 to \$7. The buyers, after traveling over the country make their purchases, assembled the cattle at Walla Walla in bunches of 4,000 to 5,000, swimming the cattle across the Snake river near Lyon's ferry, then started them across the mountains via Baker City, Boise, Shoshone and American Falls, Eagle Rock, etc., to Laramie plains, Wyoming, where they were resold for the Chicago and Omaha markets. It took 2½ to 3 months to drive the herds over in bunches 4 or 5 days apart. In 1875 D.M. Drumheller sold 5,800 head over this route. The assembling of herds of 40,000 to 50,000 Oregon cattle on the Laramie plains was not uncommon. In those days everything was Oregon-- Oregon cattle, Oregon fruit, Oregon lumber. Washington territory was comparatively unknown. They couldn't be sold under any other name.

-- Early Days in the Big Bend Country
William S. Lewis, Spokane 1926

Big Bend Riders

The ranges of the Big Bend produced a large number of excellent riders and roundup men-- some of national reputation. Among these celebrated bronco busters were Jack Skerritt and Bill Ireland-- the latter became one of Buffalo Bill's star riders. "Wheel River Jim" Ferrier and "Rattlesnake Jack" were among the most noted of these buckaroos.

-- Early Days in the Big Bend Country
William S. Lewis, Spokane, 1926

Stock Industry Declines in Big Bend

The early stockmen made no provisions for cutting hay or wintering their stock and the severe winters hit many of them every hard. In the winter of 1889-90 many men like Jodie Williams, Dave Coonce and others lost several thousand head each, and many of the smaller owners were practically put out of business; those few who had put up hay were more fortunate. In 1884, after the completion of the Northern Pacific, great numbers of cattle were shipped out of the Big Bend. About this time the horses on the range began to multiply in great numbers, and increased to such great numbers that the range for cattle began to get short. In 1890 there were probably over 25,000 wild horses ranging in what is now Grant county. Douglas county's last "roundup" was held on August 2, 1906. This marked the end of the open range.

-- Early Days in the Big Bend Country
William S. Lewis, Spokane, 1926

Wild Goose Bill

Wild Goose Bill (Samuel Wilbur Condin) who came to the country from the Cariboo mines in 1865 and who packed for the government between Walla Walla and Ft. Colville and later ran a pack train to the mines in British Columbia, Idaho and Montana, had a trading post and "Condin's " ferry on the Columbia river during the development of the Ruby maines, now in Okanogan county. About 1875 he settled at Wilbur, so named in his honor. Bill acquired his name of Wild Goose at Wild Horse, B.C., in early days by innocently shooting a flock of game geese which a priest had hatched out from eggs brought from Oregon. He paid the priest \$20 apiece for the geese, and, the story becoming known among the miners, he was ever afterwards known as "Wild Goose Bill." Bill died with his boots on in January 1896 in an encounter with a party named Parks; both were killed. Bill is reported to have dispatched a few Indians ~~xx~~ in his time.

--Early Days in the Big Bend Country
William S. Lewis, Spokane, 1926

Big Bend
Cattle-Killing Winters (2)

90 per cent of the animals dying of starvation and cold. The range was piled ~~for~~ five or six deep with dead stock. When the first ones died the others climbed on top of them to get out of the snow and died. Others did the same, so they were in heaps. They ate the hair off the dead ones, so that they were almost bare. The snow was 4 feet deep and laid on the ground 180 days...

-- Early Days in the Big Bend country

William S. Lewis, Spokane, 1926