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Ranching in Indian Territory: A Dream Not Realized

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RANCHING IN INDIAN TERRITORY: A DREAM NOT REALIZED

Cattle ranching among tribes in Indian Territory, which later became Oklahoma, began during the 1840s, reached its zenith in the 1850s, nearly died during the Civil War, and ended with the land runs of the 1890s. The Five Civilized Tribes—the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Muscogee (Creek), and Seminole—brought ranching operations with them when they were forced to emigrate from the southeastern part of the United States to the newly established Indian Territory. The Plains tribes who were settled in the western portions of Indian Territory had ranching experiments thrust upon them. Although many success stories dot the history of Indian ranching in Oklahoma, with few exceptions the experiment in ranching was an abject failure.

Many federal policy makers argued that encouraging ranching among the Indians was the answer to protecting tribal sovereignty, keeping whites out of Indian Territory, and providing an easy transition from nomadic hunting to agricultural production. Among the Five Tribes, successful ranching was expected to lead to the development of Indian-owned railroads and supply enough income to enable the tribes to be self-sufficient. It never did. However, cattle operations among the Seminole were so successful that it was common for

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SEASONAL SHIFTS-EAGLE'S NEST
Chris Edmonds

one individual to run herds of more than 20,000 head of cattle. Among the Cherokee there was considerable expectation for the development of a native cattle industry. The tribe hoped to establish a Cherokee-owned-and-operated outfit on the vast plain of the Cherokee Outlet.

The Civil War, coming in the very middle of the development of Indian

ranching operations, destroyed the hopes of the Five Tribes for establishing Indian-owned cattle ranches. The war wrecked the economies of all Five Tribes. The loss of material wealth among tribe members naturally hastened a decline in investment capital. Thus, as the range cattle industry blossomed across the American West, Indians were without

the financial capability to actively participate in the economic expansion that characterized western land development after the Civil War.

Although tribal cattle operations proved nonexistent during the war, individual tribe members were able to establish independently owned ranching enterprises. Wilson Jones, a Mississippi-born Choctaw, used ranching to gain investment capital, and by 1890, he was one of the richest men in Indian Territory. By 1885 Clarence W. Turner, whose ranch flourished in the Muskogee area, ran a herd numbering 5,000 head. Turner's holdings made his one of the largest cattle operations in Indian Territory.

While eastern tribes adapted to ranching with relative confidence, the situation was very different among the previously nomadic tribes occupying lands in the western portion of Indian Territory. Washington officials hoped that cattle ranching would ease the transition to "civilized" ways. Policy

makers believed that in order to induce these peoples to settle on the reservation, they could not force them to take up agriculture. Thus, ranching was designed as a step toward the development of self-sufficient agriculture among the various tribes of western Indian Territory. Lacking the knowledge of ranching that the Five Tribes brought with them from their homelands, the nomadic tribes faced greater obstacles to the construction of an Indian-owned cattle operation.

Among the Comanche, one of the area's most successful ranching tribes, Agent James Haworth attempted to launch a ranching experiment in the first three years of reservation living. The Comanche remained reluctant to take up ranching as agents pushed agriculture as the more promising future. In 1885 the Comanches' crops were destroyed by drought. Agent P. B. Hunt decided that the only way to make the Indians self-sufficient was to pursue cattle ranching. To ensure the success of the operation,

Hunt purchased numerous bulls and heifers and believed that in five years the tribe would possess a sizeable herd. Hunt's plan never materialized. Faced with near starvation, the Comanche either killed the cattle or sold them to white ranchers to buy food. Although tribal ranching eventually failed, like their eastern counterparts, individual Comanches amassed large cattle herds. One such rancher was Quanah Parker. Parker was placed on the payroll of a Texas cattle operation and paid the hefty sum of fifty dollars per month and was promised a herd of 500 cattle. With Parker's aid, Texas cattlemen secured lease to 1.5 million acres at the price of six cents per acre. This area became known as "Big Pasture" and comprised much of present Cotton, Tillman, and Comanche counties in far southwestern Oklahoma.

Among the Cheyenne and Arapaho, agents sought the elusive goal of Indian self-sufficiency through cattle ranching. Agriculture proved ineffective as

drought, lack of tools, resistance, and poor agricultural instruction caused crop failures. The Arapaho, living in the bottomlands of the North and South Canadian rivers, quickly adapted to stock raising. By the mid-1880s Arapaho elders held substantial herds, and their example was being followed by younger tribesmen. Despite the Arapahos' success, reservation agents sought to bring white cattle ranchers onto the reservation. By the end of the 1880s, the people of the Cheyenne-Arapaho Reservation were embroiled in one leasing controversy after another, and tribal and intertribal factionalism led once again to the failure of Indian-owned cattle operations.

By the time of the famous Oklahoma land runs of the 1890s, the dream of protecting Indian sovereignty and ensuring self-sufficiency through Indian-operated cattle ranches clearly would never be realized.

Many reasons contributed to the failure of American Indian cattle



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Amanda Maciuba

ranching in Oklahoma. First, for Indian cattle ranching, to operate the way the government ordered, all whites should have been excluded from the territory. The exclusion of all whites from Indian Territory was as much a pipe dream as were Indian ranches. Second, tribes lacked the political power to collect taxes from whites or other tribes who grazed cattle on their lands. Third, white ranchers manipulated tribal laws to their benefit and often did so by pitting tribes against each other.

Finally, Indian-operated ranches failed because of tribal factionalism. Some tribe members sought to capitalize on revenues generated by encouraging whites to enter the territory. Many others were more interested in leasing.

The operation of a cattle ranch requires a large amount of investment capital. Indians did not have the money to invest in tribally-owned ranches and therefore sought out lease agreements to ensure the flow of capital into tribal coffers.

For all these reasons, the dream of successful tribal cattle ranching in the territory remained just that: a dream.

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