

Grant-Kohrs Ranch

National Historic Site
Montana

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



The Frontier Cattle Industry

They were a rugged set of men, these pioneers, well qualified for their self-assumed task. In the pursuit of wealth a few succeeded and the majority failed, as in all other spheres of activity...the range cattle industry has seen its inception, zenith, and partial extinction all within a half-century. The changes of the past have been many; those of the future may be of even more revolutionary character.

Conrad Kohrs, 1913

Dreams of wealth lured the first cattlemen to Montana. The range was open and unfenced, and they could fatten their cattle on the lush bunchgrass and push on to new pasture when the old areas were overgrazed. The main obstacles were buffalo and the Indians, and by the 1860s both were fast being overcome.

Many of the herds were built through trade with westward-bound emigrants, who gladly swapped two or more trail-worn cows for a single well-fed one. In the late 1870s cowboys drove herds of rangy

longhorns up from Texas to the better grazing lands of Montana, adding a Spanish strain to the English shorthorn breeds already established there and greatly multiplying the herds.

Frontier military posts and mining camps bought most of the first beef produced. When the railroads opened up this region in the 1870s, the big market was back east. Beef was becoming the favorite meat of the teeming populations of eastern cities, and it could now be shipped long distances economically in refrigerator cars. By 1885, cattle raising was the

biggest industry on the High Plains, and foreign investors and eastern speculators rushed to get in on the bonanza. As ranches multiplied and the northern herds grew, there came a predictable consequence: overgrazing. This and the fierce winter of 1886-87 caused enormous losses, estimated at one-third to one-half of all the cattle on the northern plains. Many cattlemen never recovered.

If the snows of '86-87 foreshadowed the end of open range ranching, the homesteaders, with their barbed wire and fenced-in 160-acre claims, finished

The roundup was one of the grand sights of the open-range cattle industry. This photo, made in 1886 along the Powder River, shows cowboys gathering a herd for the drive to the nearest railroad.

Coffin's Old West Gallery

it off. By 1890, many cattlemen were practicing a new kind of range management: they brought the feed and water to the cattle. As feed crops replaced native grasses, river bottoms became useful for growing hay, and water—or the right to it—became a valuable asset, making the land far more productive than it otherwise might be. The quality of livestock became more important than the quantity. Improved range management and selective breeding produced cattle that yielded more beef and better withstood the rigorous winters. With these changes, the old life of the cowboy passed. He now

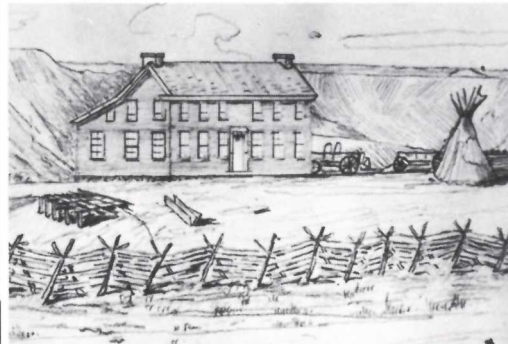
spent less time herding cattle and more time growing feed and repairing fences.

The open-range cattle industry lasted only three decades. Few of its pioneering men and women made their fortunes or are remembered today. But from their beginnings has evolved the more scientific ranching of today, with its own risks and uncertainties. That is the legacy of the Grants and the Kohrs, whose pioneer ranch, complete with original furnishings, is a reminder of an important chapter in the history of the West.



Johnny Grant was the first to make a go of ranching in this valley. In less than a decade he built a sizable herd and a fine house and induced other families to settle here with him.

Montana Historical Society



Granville Stuart, one of the first chroniclers of Montana's history, made this sketch of Grant's home in 1865. This scene probably resembles the one that Augusta Kohrs saw when she arrived a

few years later. A traditional Montana jack-legged fence encloses the front yard.



Conrad Kohrs owed his success to hard work, a vision of where the future would lead, a willingness to take risks, good judgment, and a keen interest in all about him.



Augusta Kohrs was a woman of impressive bearing. Proud, direct, well-liked by those who knew her well, she brought a touch of culture to an unpolished land.



John Bielenberg, Kohrs' half-brother, managed the ranch. His long and close relationship with Conrad Kohrs and their mutual trust and devo-

tion had much to do with the ranch's weathering bad times and prospering in good.



The ranch's grazing lands dotted the northern plains.

Conrad Warren Collection



Kohrs raised purebreds on the home ranch and used Hereford and Shorthorn bulls from that herd to improve the quality of the range herds. These cattle are registered Shorthorns. The date is

about 1900, a time of prosperity and growth for the partners.



Conrad Kohrs' living room, a place of splendid Victorian air, was the scene of many political meetings. This one occurred about 1904, its purpose unknown.

Kohrs sits at right, John Bielenberg leans against the door frame at center.

A Kingdom of Cattle

Cattle ranching began in the Deer Lodge Valley in the late 1850s. Johnny Grant—a Canadian trader—settled there and became one of the first ranchers in Montana. In less than a decade he built a herd of 2,000 cattle, mostly by trading along the Oregon Trail. In 1862 he moved his ranching operation close to the present town of Deer Lodge. Here he built a two-story log house for his wife Quarra—a Bannock Indian—and their large family. It was the finest house in Montana, said a newspaper. It looked as if "it had been lifted by the chimneys from the banks of the St. Lawrence and dropped down in Deer Lodge Valley. It has twenty-eight windows, with green painted shutters, and looks very pretty."

Grant worked this ranch for only a few years. He sold out in 1866 for \$19,200—"farmhouses with household furniture, stables, corrals, ricks of hay, all my farming implements, wagons...cattle, sheep, goats and grain"—and

returned to Canada. The new owner was Conrad Kohrs, a German immigrant and by trade a butcher. He had already shown his skill in the frontier cattle business by shrewd trading and by selling beef to mining camps. He owned a sizable herd, and the Grant ranch gave him a base for his operations.

The ranch at this time was a fairly primitive place. On a trip back east in 1868, Kohrs found a wife. She was Augusta Kruse, a 19-year-old of German background. After a whirlwind courtship and marriage, they set out for Montana. The trip took 7 weeks by riverboat and 6 days in a wagon in the rain. After this daunting start Augusta settled in and brought a much needed order to the ranch. She cooked, cleaned, milked cows, made soap and candles, roasted coffee, ran the house, and began to raise a family.

Shortly after Kohrs took over the ranch, he brought in his half-brother John Bielenberg as partner. Kohrs handled the business end and Bielenberg supervised day-to-day work. Under them, the ranch became one of the best known in the region. They grazed their cattle far beyond the Deer Lodge Valley. At one point they ran their herds on ten million acres of land in four states and Canada. They also greatly improved the quality of their cattle. In the 1870s and '80s, they brought in as breeding stock registered Shorthorns and Herefords.

Part of Kohrs' success lay in diversifying. He went into partnership with other ranchers, and he invested in mining, real estate, and water rights. This enabled him to ride out market fluctuations, epidemics, and bad weather. Kohrs not only survived the killing winter of 1886-87, but he fairly prospered. His registered herds came through virtually intact, in part because of their sheltered

location in the valley. There were less cattle all around competing for range, and he was in a good position to rebuild.

The hard winter marked a divide for the cattle business. The old freewheeling days of nomadic grazing gave way to more settled ranching based on good range management, supplemental feeding, and upgraded bloodlines. Kohrs and Bielenberg were equally successful in the transformed industry. Their home ranch holdings increased to 30,000 acres and became a center for stock breeding. For a quarter of a century after '86-87, they shipped to market each year between 8,000 and 10,000 cattle. During the 1890s, Kohrs left the management of the ranch to his son-in-law John Boardman and Bielenberg and turned his attention to his other business interests.

On the eve of World War I, Kohrs and Bielenberg saw still another fundamental shift coming. Homesteaders had pretty well fenced in the range, and it was no longer possible to swing big herds across the plains in search of grass and water. Had they been younger men they might have acted differently. But Kohrs was 75 and Bielenberg 65. Moreover, their heir apparent William, Kohrs' only son, had died in 1901, and there was no one to operate the ranch on the scale required. Reducing their holdings seemed the best move. By the time of their deaths in the early 1920s, they had sold all but 1,000 acres around the home ranch. It was this remnant that Conrad Kohrs Warren, a grandson, began to manage in the 1930s. In 1940 he bought the ranch from the Kohrs Trust and began breeding the registered Hereford cattle and Belgian horses for which he became widely known.

Augusta Kohrs still loved the old ranch. Until she died in 1945 at age 96, she spent part of every summer there, cherishing the pictures, furnishings, and household items of her younger years. Conrad Warren and his wife Nell carried this work further. They carefully preserved the old buildings and their furnishings and gathered together the ranch's working documents, so essential to reconstructing its history. Others became interested in saving the ranch, and in response Congress in 1972 set the ranch aside as a National Historic Site for the purpose of providing "an understanding of the frontier cattle era of the nation's history."

Grant-Kohrs Ranch

About Your Visit
Grant-Kohrs Ranch is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Box 790, Deer Lodge, Montana 59722, is in charge.

You are invited to walk around the range and look in on its activities. The map below identifies the main buildings. The ranch is open daily except Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Days.

There are no picnic or overnight facilities on the range. For accommodations nearby, inquire at the visitor center.

Preservation is a continuing job here. Smoking and pets are allowed only in the parking lot. Please stay in designated visiting areas and do not touch historical objects.

For Your Safety
Watch your step in walking around the ranch—do not enter corrals or pastures or approach livestock. Report accidents or hazards to a ranger.



A range rider about 1910.



Branding calves.



The mess wagon, 1904.



Moving a herd across the range.



Roping a maverick.



A night rider resting.



An "overshot" hay stacker.

Ranch Life

The ranch house and the bunkhouse, though only 50 feet apart, were two different worlds. The cowboy's day was spent tending cattle, mending fences, and taking care of horses and equipment. It was a strenuous, often monotonous life, relieved by spring or fall round-ups or a few days in a railroad town after a cattle drive. On the occasional trip to town he had a chance to replace worn-out boots or buy a pair of

pants. Since a cowboy made only \$20 to \$30 a month, and a new hat might cost \$20, he had to shop carefully and buy clothes and gear that were functional and durable.

The bunkhouse—home for the cowboys and ranch hands—lacked the amenities of the ranch house. Its pleasures were few and simple but appreciated. The food was plain. Yet the meals at the long table were

banquets compared with the rough fare on the trail or during round-ups. A Chinese cook served beef, beans, and sourdough bread, a menu sometimes varied by bacon and eggs, vegetables, pies, cakes, and sweet biscuits called "bannocks." In the evening the cowboys gathered around the stove to chew tobacco or smoke, swap stories, or listen to news brought in by cowboys from other parts of Kohrs' far-flung empire.

While the rancher and his family may have been better fed and clothed, they hardly had an easy existence, at least in the early years. A rancher worked as hard as the hands, and his wife had to endure isolation and loneliness, not to speak of her labor on countless everyday chores. When they did achieve some success, their prosperity showed in the furnishings of the ranch house. The rancher's wife tried to make her home as comfortable and gracious as

possible and a good place for raising children and entertaining friends. The Kohrs, better off than most, lavished improvements on their house—the latest furniture, a brick addition, indoor plumbing, lighting, and central heat—and traveled widely.

For all the tangencies of their lives, the rancher and the cowboy were partners in an intricate, often risky business: a rancher depended on good cowboys; a

cowboy appreciated a rancher who could make the ranch pay and was sensible and fair. They shared the common bonds of open grasslands, cattle, horses, and hard work.

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Grant-Kohrs Ranch illustrates the development of the Northern Plains cattle industry from the 1850's to recent times. Though the ranch now covers only 1,500 acres, cattle still graze and draft horses still work the land. As you walk around the ranch, you'll see activi-

ties that recall the days of oldtime cowboys as well as modern ranchers. These demonstrations are part of the work of the ranch, and you are invited to observe and ask questions.

1 Ranch house/ A few years after Grant built the original house in 1862, the *Montana Post* described it as the finest in the Territory. Conrad Kohrs added the brick wing in 1890. His wife acquired the furnishings, the finest available, over several decades.

2 Bunkhouse row/ This group of buildings was central to the life of the ranch. The cowboys and ranch hands ate and slept here, and whiled away the evening hours swapping yarns, mending their gear, and playing a friendly game of cards.

3 Ice house 1880s and tack room 1930s/ Before the 1930s, ice cut from ponds in the winter was stored here for summer use. When refrigeration made the ice house obsolete in 1935, it became a tack room for horse gear. The added room was the summer home of the Chinese bunkhouse cook.

4 Garage-blacksmith shop 1935/ Conrad Warren stored his gas-powered vehicles in this building. He also had space here to repair machinery and shoe horses.

5 Thoroughbred barn 1880s/ Built as a stable for thoroughbreds, this barn was later used as a cattle show barn by Con Warren. It now houses horse-drawn vehicles and farm machinery.

6 Leeds Lion Barn 1885/ There are several stallion barns on the ranch, each with its own hay loft, corral, and stream. To prevent fighting, each barn stabled only one stallion. The barn was named for a famous English Shire stallion owned by Kohrs.

7 Feed lot and sheds 1930s/ Con Warren built this part of the ranch when he began raising Herefords.

8 Chicken coop 1935/ Chickens and eggs helped make the ranch self-sufficient.

9 Buggy shed 1875/ This shed originally adjoined the east end of bunkhouse row. It was re-located in 1907 to make way for the railroad tracks.

10 Granary 1935/ Grain was stored, ground, and mixed for cattle feed in this building according to carefully worked out formulas.

11 Draft horse barn 1870/ After draft horses replaced oxen, this barn sheltered other livestock, but it kept the original name.

12 Oxen barn 1870/ After draft horses replaced oxen, this barn sheltered other livestock, but it kept the original name.

13 Dairy 1932/

14 Bielenberg barn 1880/ Illustration by Richard Schlecht.

