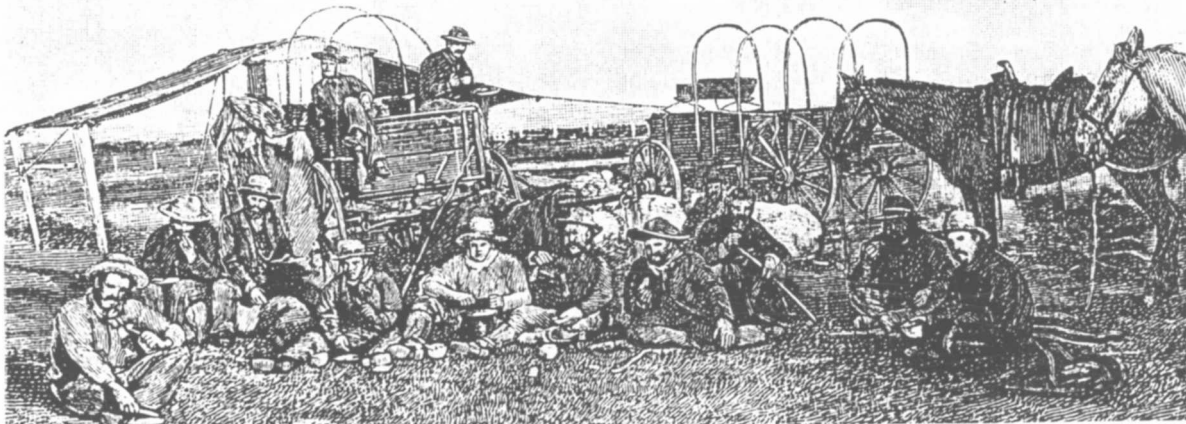


HIRED HANDS

Cowboys, Cooks and the Rest of the Crew





In the spring of 1860, pioneer cattleman Johnny Grant was living at the north end of the Deer Lodge Valley. He decided to visit the Fort Hall area in southern Idaho and convince some other families to settle near him. As he was leaving, two strangers came up looking for work. One of the men suggested that they might build a hewed log house for Grant.

"All right," Grant said, "What is your name, and where do you come from?"

The man replied, "My name is Joe Prudhomme. We deserted from Fort Benton."

Grant later wrote that, "It seemed a poor recommendation, but it was honest."

Prudhomme thus became one of the first hired hands in a long line of men - and a few women - who worked for Johnny Grant and Conrad Kohrs. The ranch which Grant founded and Kohrs made into a cattle empire is now a national historic site, and the stories of their employees have become part of the nation's history. From the nameless to the famous, these men were vital to the cattle industry and the success of the ranchers who hired them.

There were many cowboys in the ranch's history, but there were also cooks, choreboys, carpenters, irrigators, herdsman and others. They came from across the country and around the world. Some stayed for years. Some collected just one paycheck and drifted on.



Alexander Pambrun

This damaged tintype shows Pambrun in 1859, three years before Grant hired him to build the house which is the heart of Grant-Kohrs Ranch today.

Giles Olin, Grant's blacksmith, left the ranch to follow one of the gold stampedes which were disrupting the country in the early 1860's. He was caught in a storm and lost both legs as a result of frostbite. That was far from the end of his career, however. As soon as he recovered, he built his own artificial legs, then went on to build a commercial greenhouse, a racetrack, a skating rink, a machine shop, an ore concentrator and he installed the bars on the first Territorial prison.

Grant's father had been the Hudson's Bay Company agent at Fort Hall, which, like Montana's Fort Benton, was a fortified trading post, not a military fort. Johnny became a rancher by trading for footsore cattle with immigrants on the Oregon/California Trail, which passed Fort Hall. After a few years, hundreds of Grant's cattle grazed in the valley, and he employed some of the first cowboys in the area. In 1865, a newspaper reporter wrote of his visit to Grant's ranch. *"Mounted on the top rail of a long corral, I also witnessed the skillful use of the lasso, by the vaqueros, who were branding a lot of wild Spanish cattle. Over the horns and the hind-legs flew the nooses, and the bellowing beeve was thrown and branded 'G' by Johnny himself."*

It is no surprise that the reporter used the Spanish word for cowboy. Distant though Montana was from Mexico, it was greatly influenced by the Spanish way of dealing with cattle on the open range. The word *vaquero* eventually evolved into *buckaroo*.

By 1865, the gold camps were booming, and German immigrant Conrad Kohrs had come to the territory seeking gold. He found work as a butcher's assistant, eventually owning his own butcher shops in several of the biggest gold camps. It was natural that he should meet Grant, who provided much of the beef for Kohrs' shops.

In 1866, Grant sold the ranch to Kohrs, and the next year moved to Manitoba.



Kohrs, in partnership with his half-brother, Johny Bielenberg, grazed cattle in four states and two Canadian provinces.

HOW MANY COWBOYS?

One of the most difficult questions to answer at Grant-Kohrs Ranch is "How many cowboys worked here?" The answer is complicated:

Montana's cattle industry started in its sheltered western valleys. As bison were hunted to near extinction on the plains to the east, cattlemen like Kohrs were quick to move their cattle there.

Natural barriers such as rivers, mountains and dry plains tended to keep cattle within a few hundred thousand acres. These areas came to be designated "roundup districts."

At the peak of the open range business in the 1880's, Kohrs might send only a dozen cowboys to round up the cattle in one of these districts. However, every other rancher who had cattle on the same free, public land sent a dozen hands at the same time. Sixty or more men would gather to work the range together. Further, Kohrs had cattle in several districts. So, the answer to the question of "how many cowboys?" might range from a few dozen to hundreds.

WHO WERE THE COWBOYS?

One of Kohrs' cowboys achieved fame as great as that of his cattle baron boss. E. C. 'Teddy Blue' Abbott's autobiography, *We Pointed them North* has sold over 40,000 copies, and has served as the basis for many novels and movies of the old west. Most of the cowboys who rode for Kohrs are just names in his ledger book so far, though future research will change this.

Surprisingly, though, another of Kohrs cowboys became even more famous than the boss. By his own admission, C. M. (Charlie) Russell was never a top hand, but his paintings of his fellow cowboys immortalized their work. As a wrangler, Russell earned \$40 a month. His paintings now sell for millions.



C. M. (Charlie) Russell

Charlie Russell never claimed to be an all-around cowboy, but he was a top hand at portraying the men of the open range, as this pen and ink sketch shows.



E.C. (Teddy Blue) Abbott

Wild as a boy, philosophical as an old man, Teddy Blue was a cowboy through and through.

Charlie Russell grew up near St. Louis, MO. Teddy Blue Abbott was born in England. Of eighteen employees working at the Kohrs headquarters in Deer Lodge in 1880, only half were born in America. The rest were from Germany, Bavaria, Ireland, Austria and Canada.

WHAT DID COWBOYS DO?

Wherever they came from, the open range cowboys' work consisted of two main jobs: trail drives and roundups. Trail drives moved cattle from one place to another, often many hundreds of miles at an average pace of ten miles a day. Roundups gathered cattle in a particular area.

Kohrs bought two-year-old Texas cattle and had them trailed to Montana. The cowboys on such drives were generally not Kohrs' own hands, and they often turned around and headed right back home to Texas as soon as the cattle were delivered to the Montana range.

The cowboys who worked the roundups were more likely to be regular Kohrs employees. Some would have been employed through the preceding winter to keep an eye on the cattle and see that they didn't drift too far from their customary ranges. In the spring, more cowboys would be hired, and together with roundup crews from other ranches in the area, they would gather everyone's cattle, brand and doctor any calves and turn the cattle loose to graze through the summer. Some effort would be made to keep the different ranchers' cattle separated and grazing in different areas. It was public land, but the various outfits had unofficial claims to "customary ranges."

In the fall, a second roundup was held to gather cattle to ship to the eastern markets, especially Chicago. Until the railroad reached Montana in 1881, the fall roundup was followed by a drive to the nearest railhead. At first this was Oglallah, Nebraska, then Cheyenne, Wyoming. The cowboys who trailed cattle to



the railheads were likely to be Kohrs' own hands. Once he could ship his cattle from Miles City, the cattle were trailed there by the roundup crew.

Some of these cowboys would ride the cattle cars back East, spending the winter with their families, working the fishing boats on the Great Lakes or finding a career with higher pay and fewer risks than riding the range. Some would return West in the spring, hiring on with a big outfit for the spring roundup. At \$30 to \$40 a month, it wasn't the pay that drew them.

Those who were born to be cowboys found a way to stay in ranching country. It wasn't an easy life. During the Hard Winter of 1886-87, Teddy Blue Abbot and Pike Landusky found themselves camped out in a snowstorm on Christmas Eve.

Storms and stampedes, occasional rustlers and - deadliest of all - river crossings took their toll, but the open range cattle business created a kind of man who wouldn't live any other way.

MORE THAN COWBOYS

Cowboys valued their independence, but they weren't their own bosses. There was a foreman or trail boss to report to.

The foreman provided middle-management on a big ranch. He had responsibility for hiring the cowboys, cook and horse wrangler. He selected the route and chose the bed grounds where the cattle would stop each day. He made two or three times as much money as the cowboys, and had to be able to make decisions without direct guidance from the boss. There were no cellular phones on the trail. To the average cowboy, the finest praise they could give of their foreman was that, "He'd never ask you to do anything he wouldn't do himself." To the rancher, the best foreman was the one who brought in the best profits at sale time. Kohrs valued and trusted his foremen, paying them \$100 a month - as much as the cook.



Mitch Oxarart

Oxarart quit working for the Kohrs outfit to become a horse trader. His later adventures in Canada left folks wondering just where some of his horses came from.



Tom Hooban

More than a foreman, Hooban was also a friend. He accompanied the Kohrs family to Philadelphia for the country's Centennial Celebration.

SOWBELLY AND BEANS

Though he is often portrayed in movies as a broken-down cowboy too old to ride herd, the trail cook was no weakling. Starting in the pre-dawn dark, the cook had to rustle up a hot meal and plenty of coffee for the trail crew, while simultaneously packing up the camp. As soon as breakfast was done, he hitched up his team and hurried to the next bed ground to set up for supper. Along the way, he had to snag whatever wood or other fuel was to be had, and his problems were compounded if there was a river to cross or rain, hail, sleet or snow to contend with. No wonder the trail cook generally made \$100 a month.

If they caught up with the wagon, cowboys might get a midday meal from the cook. Kohrs' cowboys often carried small canvas sacks full of pemmican - jerked beef coated with crushed huckleberries and salt. It gave them something to eat when they were away from the wagon, but as one cowboy noted, "You chewed it a good, long while."

WHEN DID IT ALL END?

Though some people claim the open range days ended with that Hard Winter of 1886-87, trail drives and roundups didn't stop overnight. They continued on a smaller and smaller scale into the early years of the 1900's. Even today, some Montana cattle graze on ranges sufficiently large to require a roundup, though now it only lasts days where it once lasted months.

By the turn of the century, homesteaders were fencing up the grasslands. The "Open Range" was no longer open. Kohrs' fortune was already made, and he had mining, real estate and other investments to provide income. By World War I, the Kohrs cattle empire was gone, with only 1,000 acres around the home ranch to recall its past.

On the Eastern ranges, some of the Kohrs cowboys drifted on to other ranches. Others "graduated" and became ranchers themselves, Teddy Blue Abbott among them. Still others left the cowboy life behind completely.



Ham Sam

Little is known of Ham Sam, one of several Chinese cooks who worked in the Kohrs bunkhouse. In this rare photo, he wears typical western garb of striped shirt, vest and bandanna, and is smoking a cigar while wielding a Chinese fan.

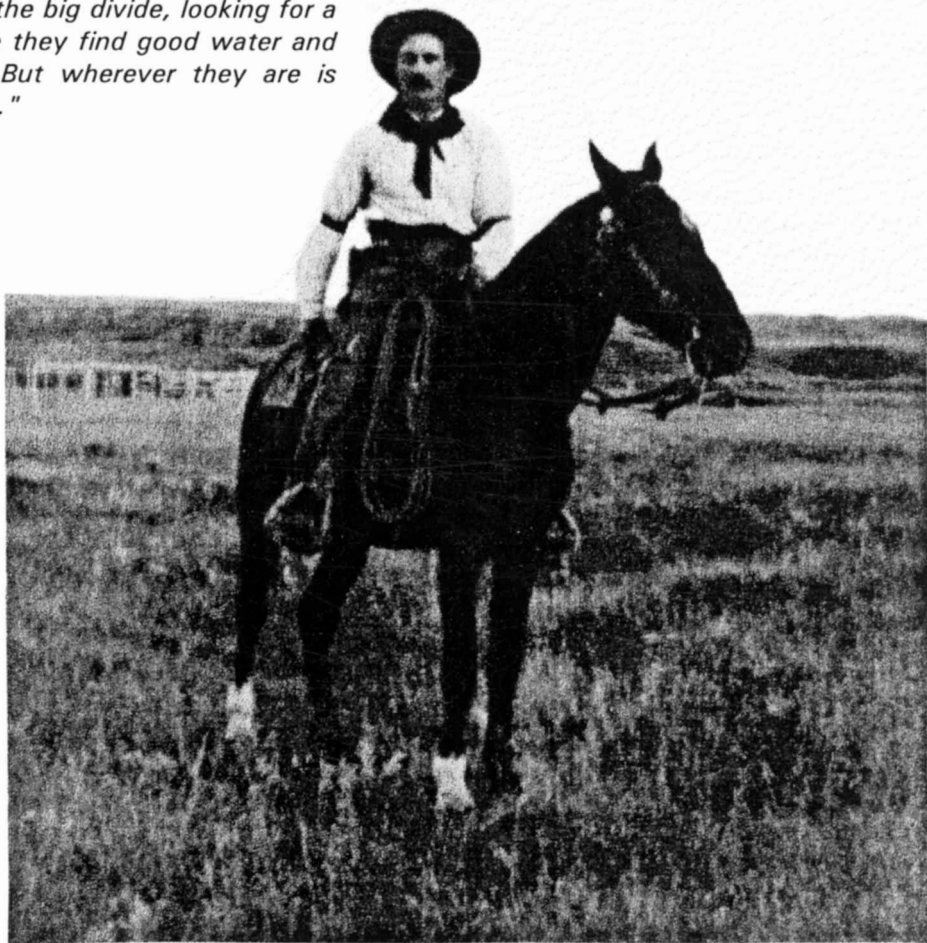


Wilhelmine Schuchhardt

One of very few women to work at the ranch, Wilhelmine cooked for the family in the big ranch house.

At the Deer Lodge headquarters, the job of cowboy evolved. There was still work to be done on horseback, but there was also fence building, haying and other work more related to farming.

Reflecting on this change in 1939, Teddy Blue Abbott (then 78) wrote: *There are lots of young fellows punching cows today but they never can take our place, because cowpunching as we knew it is a thing of the past. Riding fence and rounding up pastures ain't anything like the way we used to work cattle in the days of the open range...They are good fellows, but they will never get a show to learn like we did....Only a few of us are left now, and they are scattered from Texas to Canada. The rest have left the wagon and gone ahead across the big divide, looking for a new range. I hope they find good water and plenty of grass. But wherever they are is where I want to go."*



Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site

Grant-Kohrs Ranch commemorates the open range cattle era: the days of trail drives and roundups. Since 1972, the ranch has been preserved by the National Park Service. It includes 1,500 acres and over 25,000 artifacts original to what was once the largest cattle ranch in Montana. In its heyday, the ranch had cattle on over 10,000,000 acres in four states and Canada. Much of this was public land - hence the name "open range".

The ranch is open year-round. Visitors may take a self-guided tour of many original buildings, including the bunkhouse, blacksmith shop, thoroughbred barn, draft horse barn, dairy and buggy shed. Particularly in the summer, visitors are likely to see living history demonstrations, such as chuckwagon cooking, blacksmithing. Some activities, such as haying, calving or winter feeding are clearly seasonal in nature. Special programs can be arranged for groups.

For information about visiting the ranch, check out the website listed below, or write:

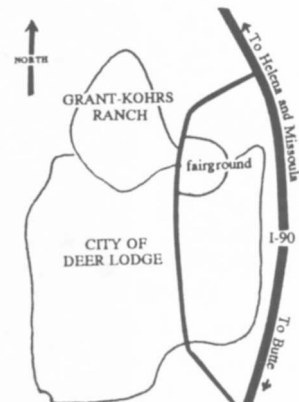
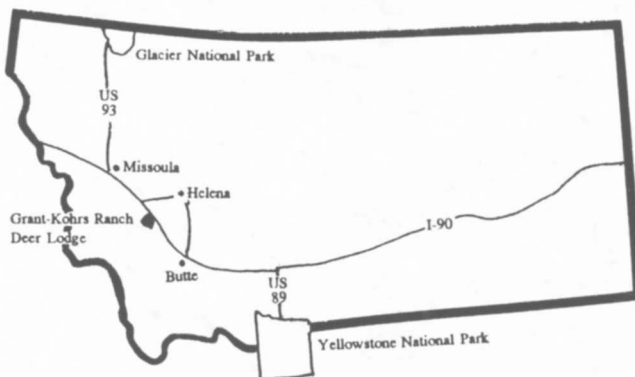
Superintendent
Grant-Kohrs Ranch NHS
P. O. Box 790
Deer Lodge, MT 59722

Suggested Reading

"Conrad Kohrs: An Autobiography", Conrad Kohrs
"The Cowboys" and "The Ranchers", ed. Time-Life
"The Log of a Cowboy", Andy Adams
"Trails Plowed Under", C. M. (Charlie) Russell
"Very Close to Trouble, the Memoirs of Johnny Grant", ed. L. Meikle
"We Pointed Them North", E. C. (Teddy Blue) Abbott

Website

www.nps.gov/grko





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