EARLY settlers who came to the Pacific Coast bunchgrass regions saw the finest grassland west of the Rocky Mountains. This grass, covering approximately 61,000,000 acres of land in western Montana, southeastern Idaho, eastern Washington, and central Oregon, provided forage for immense herds of deer, elk, buffalo, and antelope, and was to become a valuable range for domestic livestock. During the first years of settlement, abundance of forage and a succession of mild winters provided excellent conditions for new ranchers, and it was not deemed necessary to provide hay or other supplemental feed.

Prior to 1861, stockmen suffered heavy losses. Indian wars of the late fifties were a contributing factor. Immediately following the Indian wars, when the stock industry was being re-established, the big snow and freeze of 1861–62 is reported to have killed 90% of the domestic stock in the Washington Territory. Undaunted by these reverses, stockmen brought new herds from Oregon, California, and the East, and did a lucrative business until 1880 when another severe winter is said to have taken a toll of 50 percent of all livestock. This loss, coupled with still another severe winter just 10 years later, broke up most of the large outfits.

EARLY METHODS OF MANAGEMENT

Although the available range was being diminished both in area and in quality, the number of cattle and sheep increased, not only in the Northwest but over most of the western range. Supply overstepped demand with the usual result—prices slipped, then dived downward. Choice beef on the Chicago market in 1885 brought $3.50 a hundred weight. Because it was not profitable to ship $2.50 beef, stockmen held their cattle on the range. Herd increases were such that the range could not support these large numbers under continuous use. The era of overuse was in full swing, and from then to the present most of the range has been given no chance to recover from this early “beating”.

As the better ranges were broken for cultivation, the poorer areas were more and more heavily used, and it was not long before many of the ranges were seriously injured. As a result, forage production has been reduced by more than 50% and, on many areas, to only a fraction of the virgin forage yield.

PRESENT CONDITION OF RANGE

As a result of lowered vitality of the more desirable forage plant, not only has production been reduced, but the weakened plants

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1 Contribution from the Soil Conservation Service, U. S. Dept. of Agriculture. Received for publication May 4, 1940.
2 Assistant Range Examiner.
3 Figures in parenthesis refer to “Literature Cited”, p. 606.