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Winter 1998

Review of *The Ranch: A Modern History of the North American Cattle Industry* By Sherm Ewing

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The Ranch: A Modern History of the North American Cattle Industry. By Sherm Ewing. Missoula: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1995. Photographs, register of characters, glossary, notes, bibliography, index. xiii + 373 pp. \$14.00 paper.

Although the title of this book might be somewhat misleading—it has little to do with daily ranch life and is certainly not a systematic historical study—nevertheless its idiosyncracies convey a wealth of fascinating information in an extremely readable format. The author, a former Canadian rancher who has since retired to the sunny south of Montana, spent three years traveling, discussing ranching with old friends and new acquaintances, taping interviews, and collecting his research into two thousand pages of single spaced typing.

From this mass of information he has crafted an overview of twentieth-century ranching, most of it in the words of nearly eighty informants, whom he terms “characters.” These characters include ranchers from Canada to Mexico, as well as scientists from all over the continent and England as well. Ewing has chosen four major areas—The Way Things Were, The Age of Growth, The Invasion, and The Importation. The first deals with the tendency back in the 1930s to downsize cattle, an era when top prizes at livestock shows were

awarded strictly on the subjective basis of “looks,” not on performance. The second section covers the post-war period when scientific innovations such as performance testing and artificial insemination were becoming a part of the beef industry. The third examines the Mexican influence on Canada and the United States, both with the importation of Charolais and the problems of foot and mouth disease. The final section discusses the many exotic breeds that have come into North America and looks forward to a future where advances in embryo transplant and genetic manipulation technology suggest unpredictable changes to the cattle industry.

Although these topics sound dry in a mere listing, they come alive in the words of Ewing’s characters and in his own introductory comments. Here, in the real language of the real men and women of the range, one learns at the grassroots level how innovation and change occur in ranching, how interest in new breeds and new techniques can overcome the scepticism of neighbors or the scientific community. Jim Gray, for instance, one of Ewing’s neighbors in the Porcupine Hills of Alberta, found out about a good line of performance tested bulls while “rubbering” (i.e., listening in) on the party line while Ewing talked to a Montana rancher. Then he went to Montana and bought several of the bulls, paying cash for them with twelve hundred American silver dollars.

Ewing says he likes all breeds of cattle, although Charolais and other exotics seem to be favorites. But his mind is open and inquisitive, and he has shaped his material, though in the words of others, into a coherent whole. His next project, hinted at in an epilogue, is to visit those who buy the ranchers’ product—“the butchers, the tanners, the pharmacists, the chemists, the artists and artisans of every trade.” I look forward to reading the book that will result, as well as his first book, *The Range*.

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