A HISTORY OF THE CATTLE BUSINESS IN SIERRA VALLEY!

1945

(THE FOLLOWING ARTICLE WAS FIRST PRESENTED TO THE ROTARY CLUB AS AN ADDRESS BY MR. A. STRANG OF SIERRAVILLE.)

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I have been asked to give a short history of the cattle business in Sierra Valley. I'd suggest some one to hold a stop watch on me as when I get to talking cows I forget I'm a human being. You might be like the little boy who sat through a long-winded talk. At the close the speaker said, "I hope I've not talked too long but I haven't a watch and there isn't a clock in the room." Whereupon the little fellow piped up, "Yes, but you might have looked at the calendar." I'll try to do better than that at least.

In 1858 my grandfather, Jered Strang, came into Sierra Valley from Downieville with a pack train and a crew of men with scythes to cut and bale hay from the meadows around Sierraville and Sattley. They packed it muleback into the mining camps around Downieville. The old pack trail started in at Calpine and went up under Haskell's Peak and past the Buttes into Downieville.

As I recall hearing him relate, it must have been about 1860 when they ran out of hay in the early spring. The pack trail was still closed with snow and a man by the name of Bailey, who had a herd of dairy cows, decided to bring them into Sierra Valley to feed. They had to find a new and lower trail. My grandfather helped him bring them in. They left Downieville, came in past what is now Sierra City and up the Yuba River to the summit and into the valley over the approximate route of the present Yuba Highway. This trail was later made into a freighting road by the County and eventually improved and rebuilt as the Yuba Highway.

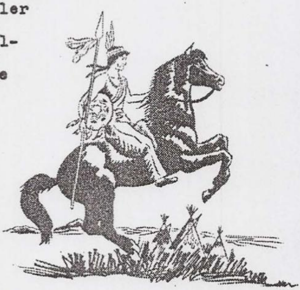
These were the first cattle to ever be brought into Sierra Valley. And there started a series of changes in the methods of handling cattle through the years. It is these changes I shall endeavor to record in as nearly a chronological order as I can gather my thoughts.

My grandfather took up a homestead and a preemption claim at the upper end of the valley--the same Strang Ranch of today.

Now, especially in the lower end of the valley, production has been cut greatly by the encroachment of the sagebrush. When the Indians had sole use of the valley, they used to round up the antelope every fall and kill their winter's meat supply. As an aid in the round-up they burned off all the tall dry feed. This kept the sage down. Even today on fields where sage has been removed, good crops can be grown; either grain or some of the more draught resistant forage crops which have been perfected to such a large extent within the last few years.

During the years of the big rodeos, more homesteaders arrived and settled in the valley--it was broken up into smaller ranches and fences began to put in their appearance. This automatically put a stop to the old method of handling cattle, and the next change appeared.

Each man commenced cutting hay and feeding his own stock through the winters at home. This limited the size ofthe herds that could be handled and gradually the dairy cow replaced the beef. The dairy cow will require more work on the part of the rancher, but brings in a higher return per cow-financially. You notice whenever a cattle man goes broke he goes back to his dairy and starts over.



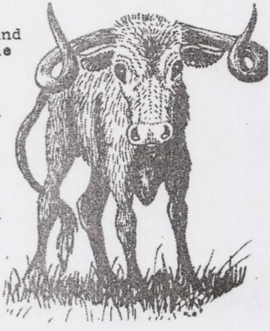
The south end of the valley was settled largely by a group from the state of Maine, and from some other New England communities. These included the Strangs, Hamlins and Millers. The central valley was taken up by a colony of old country Irish-the Sarkeys, the O'Haras, the Biblins, the Marbles (of the Hot Springs and tennis fame), the Caseys and the McCauleys-all names which are still familiar to residents of our surrounding communities even today. These brought their dairying practices with them.

Each ranch had its own creamery and made its own butter. This was sold largely to the mining camps around Virginia City, Downieville and Johnstown. The butter was not in the neatly packaged one pound cartons with which our housewives are so familiar today (or are they?) but in fifty pound tubs or firkins kits, as the buttermen used to call them.

These kits were made in Sierraville by an old gentleman by the name of Leichtery and by his son, George, who still owns the old home (Note: this home is now owned by Curley Wright). They were made in a little copper shop on the creek. They selected white fir from the nearby woods and completed the kits there. The dairymen stacked these kits of butter in sawdust cellars and every week or so a brine (strong enough to float an egg) would be poured in through a hole in the lid left there for that purpose.

After the haying season in the fall when the horses were not busy, these tubs of brined butter were freighted into the mining camp markets where each miner bought up his year's supply and stored it in the mine tunnels.

With the dairying industry came a change in the type of cattle in the valley. The first cattle were largely Texas longhorn and were crossed with Shorthorn or Durham. But when you are milking a cow the first requisite is that she give some milk--at least enough to make it pay to milk her--and it became almost obligatory to improve the breed.



A man by the name of Stiner (living on the ranch now occupied by Charley Laffranchini) pioneered the improvement of the breed in his work. He went back to Kentucky and brought in five cows and a bull. These were from registered Durham herds. One of these cows averaged 85 pounds (or approximately 10 gal.) of milk every day for a week--a good cow at any time, but almost unheard of in these parts at that time. This strain spread through the whole valley and really produced some good herds of milking Shorthorns. By selecting a bull and maintaining a good strain, the herds remained as very good herds. But soon a demand for a dual purpose animal came along, and the beef type Durham or Shorthorn was imported and crossed with the milkies. This ruined the dairy herds of that breed, and to this day there is not a decent herd of milking Shorthorns in Sierra Valley.

With the deterioration of the Shorthorn herds, the advent of the Holstein was inevitable. In the early 1890s Albert S. Nichols of Sierraville (on the present Bony ranch), and Bill Arm of Beckworth (on the present Weltch place) brought in Holsteins. Nichols

brought in three cows and a bull from New York as a foundation herd, and the late Bert Miller gave the Holsteins a big boost when he brought in a carload lot from Wisconsin. One of the Nichol's bulls was sold into Texas. From there it went to the Chicago World's fair as the largest bull in the world, weighing in excess of 3300 pounds--close to a ton of dressed beef, and that's a lot of bull!

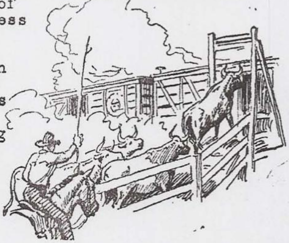
About the same time Ed Hamlin (living on the present Henry Dotta ranch) raised a Durham steer which was sold into the corn belt and exhibited at the same fair in Chicago. It weighed more than 1½ tons-and this was not baloney! What wouldn't some of our little meat markets do for a couple of animals like them today!

At about the same time Line Dolley tried importing Jerseys (on the present Torri ranch), but Jerseys never proved very successful in this climate. Around 1900, the Hereford appeared to replace the Shorthorn as a beef animal. A.S. Nichols brought in the first purebred herd. They gained rapidly in favor here, as they did elsewhere in the range countries.

For years the closest railroad connection available to the valley was Nevada City. Later a connection was available at Truckee. The beef were driven to these points for shipment to the packing centers. The construction of the Western Pacific Railroad was a great boon to the ranchers of Sierra Valley. The loading yards at Hawley were right in our front doorway.

The soil of Sierra Valley is shallow and not too good a quality. With no better care that it received, crops became smaller, and a man could no longer make a living on the little ranches of former times. This resulted in considerable selling out, and the Swiss started coming in and replacing the Irish families who had originally homesteaded the country. The first Swiss were brought into the valley as milkers when dairying began on a large scale--late in the 80's and throughout the 90's--the Delleras, Guidicis, Dottas, and a number of others still prominent in Valley business coming here in that manner.

The Brown Swiss cow was brought in to the country and tried out, but it never proved too successful, being tops neither as a dairy nor a beef animal. A few of this breed still persist among the Swiss-Italian ranchers, but they are so largely corss-bred as to be indistinguishable as a breed.



A couple of herds of Aberdeen-Angus were prominent, the McNeir brothers having one of the largest herds of registered Angus in the U.S. Somehow, however, they cannot compete with the Hereford. However, in the last year or two, a crossing of the Aberdeen with the Hereford is beginning to creep into the valley-the idea being to increase the size of the Hereford.

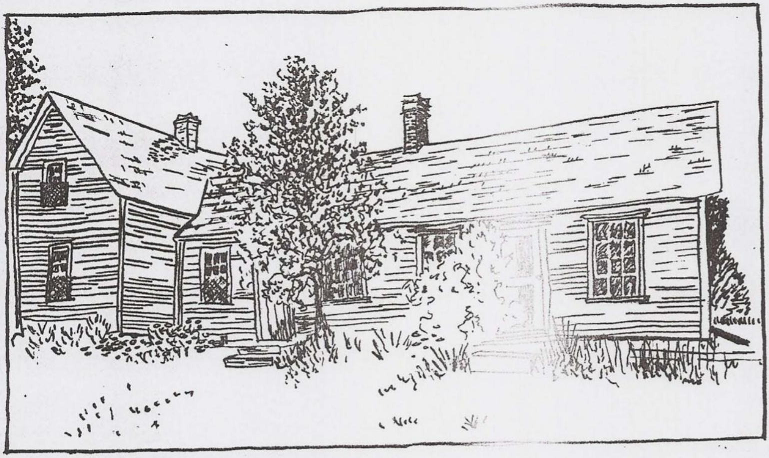
You know styles in animals change with changing ways of living. With small families and apartment living, a demand for smaller cuts of meat was made, and any butcher knows the lady of the house likes her meat with "no bone". Ever anxious to please the ladies, a smaller, more compact animal was bred. But when raising an animal on pasturage and hay, a large ranch is essential to give it capacity for enough of this rougher feed. No silage and little grain (as conpared to feeding in the grain belts) is fed in Sierra Valley and the larger animal is much more economical to raise. This was recognized during the war years, and the packer was encouraged to use the larger animal again as a conservation measure. It was found that these animals gave a higher amount of dressed meat--resulting in more profit to them, and it is the concensus of opinion that these larger animals are here to stay. So styles change again.

Starting about the time of World War I, a few of the ranchers began finishing beef steers. It became quite a wide-spread practice to grain feed steers. With the advent of prohibition, a surplus of grain was available and was profitably used in this way, barley being the common grain fed. Then they began using cottonseed meal. This proved an excellent source of concentrates for the dairy cow, too, and is still in favor for that purpose, but at present the cost prohibits the use of it for fattening beef. Of late years, soy bean has been introduced in the wake of a dwindling supply of cottonseed. It has proved very effective.

The practice of finishing beef has fallen off lately due to the increase in cost of both the feeder animal and the grain and the distance from the centers of supply of the concentrates. It leaves too small a margin of profit from the producer to the packer.

With the continued decrease in land production, consolidation of ranches began--it being cheaper to buy more land than to improve the quality of what was had. The Humphrey ranch finally reached a size of 12,000 acres. With these larger ranges again, and the new easy transportation methods, cattle are being wintered out of the valley again, as they were in olden days, but this time, instead of going to the desert they are being sent into the foothills and valleys west of the divide, and large numbers of lower country cattle are being brought into Sierra Valley and the surrounding country for summer pasture. The labor situation was re-

sponsible in a large measure for this. Milkers became so scarce and help so hard to get that many dairies were sold, and the beef herds were shipped below for wintering to get away from having tp put up hay. A larger volume of business was also possible in this way-to say nothing of the ease to the rancher in not having to fight the heavy snows in caring for his herds. It is not uncommon now for an entire trainload of cattle to be unloaded here for a single feeder. A trainload would run from 1,000 to 1,5000 head.



THE STRANG HOME IN 1862

The home shown here was originally built by a creek below the present Strang residence. In 1880 it was moved to its present location. The middle third of the house was made from lumber brought around the Horn and packed up to Sierra Valley on muleback via Marysville and Sierra City. Part of the home is still standing today as part of the Strang home, some three miles north west of Sierraville.

Of course there still are a few dairies in the valley, but it is a dairy herd or a beef herd-the dual purpose herd has about passed out of the picture, being really profitable as neither.

This is about as far as the history of the cattle business in Sierra Valley goes-it bringing it up to the present day. Anymore would be prophecy, and I don't claim to be a prophet. Of course, the lumberman and the logger will claim their share in the development and progress of Sierra Valley. We grant them their phase in the spotlight, but at the same time, we contend that Sierra Valley was, from the first, and will be to the last, a cattleman's stamping grounds.

Thank you gentlemen.

Notes on the author-
The Strang family is one of the oldest in the Sierra Valley area-Nathaniel Strang having come to the Sierra Valley in 1856. He was followed in 1858 by his son, Jared, who bought out his father. Arthur Mays Strang, Jared's grandson, was born in the same house as was his father (see illustration) on June 3, 1903. He lived on the family ranch until going to Sacramento where he attended Heald's Business College, and worked for a short time as a bookkeeper. In 1930 he returned to Sierra Valley, working as a ranch hand and a butcher until 1930, when he took over running the family ranch. At present he has 150 head of cattle. The article on the history of the Sierra Valley cattle business was first a talk delivered to the Portola Rotary in 1945. The same address was later given to the Truckee Rotary in the 1950s.