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COMPS Proposal

Working Title:

Water on the Range: Wyoming Water Politics and the Hegemony of the WSGA

Introduction:

The Wyoming Stocker Growers Association (WSGA) was a collection of cattle ranchers with the goal of managing ranchers' use of lands throughout Wyoming and bringing the industry under one framework. Throughout the nineteenth century the WSGA would grow to become one of the most powerful stockmen's associations in the American West.¹ A crucial part of ranching in the West revolved around access to water, with the arid climate dictating every aspect of farming and rangeland success. Between 1876 and 1888, Wyoming, like many other western states, implemented the practice of prior appropriation of water resources, allowing anyone to claim any amount of water. After the "Big Die-Off" during the winter of 1886-1887, the WSGA encouraged some of its members to convert their land for agricultural use in order to grow hay, and in doing so attempted to avoid another round of cattle starvation on the range. This brought the WSGA into the legal conversation around water policy in Wyoming.² Beginning in 1890 however, Wyoming, now a state, adopted state oversight and permitting requirements to water appropriation, ending the unrestricted diversion access of the 1870s and 1880s.³ This Comps will seek to investigate the connection between the impacts of the pre-1890 water diversion policy and the WSGA's increasing control of cattle ranching in Wyoming throughout the 1880s. The

¹ Louis Pelzer, "A Cattlemen's Commonwealth on the Western Range," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 13, no. 1 (1926): 30-49, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1892560>. 30-31

² Anne MacKinnon. "Historic and Future Challenges in Western Water Law: The Case of Wyoming," *Wyoming Law Review* 6, no. 2 (2006). 296-297

³ MacKinnon, *Historic and Future*, 301

period between 1880 and 1892, at the height of the industry and before the Johnson County War, provides a framework for this paper, a period when ranching in Wyoming was at its strongest and demand for water was rapidly increasing.

Review of related literature:

Christopher Knowlton's *Cattle Kingdom: The Hidden History of the Cowboy West* will provide the basis for understanding cattle ranching as an industry. One advantage of this text is its expansion on the foundations of new western history, re-analyzing the cattle industry and the figure of the cowboy while building a more nuanced understanding of the cowboy myth. Additionally, Patricia Limerick's *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* provides a similar kind of analysis to Knowlton's work but is encompassing of more western industries than just ranching. However, Limerick's in-depth treatment of the West's culture of dominance will provide essential framing for the policy decisions being made around water. Donald Worster's *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* assesses the West's managerial relationship with natural resources. Worster's analysis of the United States as an empire is done through his research on water. Implementing this same emphasis on the importance of water in my own research, I will adapt Worster's analysis of water specifically to the industry of cattle ranching. Additionally, Anne MacKinnon's work *Public Waters: Lessons from Wyoming for the American West* provides a detailed investigation of water management decisions specific to Wyoming throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Finally, Donald Pisani's *Water, Land, and Law in the West: The Limits of Public Policy, 1850-1920*, a collection of his own essays from previous decades, includes an analysis of western water law policy and its impacts both surrounding prior appropriation as well as the role

of the Bureau of Reclamation in shaping western water management. This work will help to support my interpretation of the unique elements of Wyoming's move away from prior appropriation and contextualize Wyoming in contrast with other states.

Additionally, Daniel Belgrad implements a method of using environmental context to analyze political history in his article "'Power's Larger Meaning': The Johnson County War as Political Violence in an Environmental Context". Adopting aspects of Belgrad's analytical framework, I will use the environmental history of Wyoming water and cattle regulation to investigate the relationship between water policy and ranching, seeking to understand the ways both of these regulations affected one another. Another critical essay that will inform my analysis of cattle ranching in the 1880s is Randy McFerrin and Douglas Wills's "Searching for the Big Die-Off: An Event Study of 19th Century Cattle Market", which seeks to refute the narratives of overcrowding and overstocking as the primary causes of the "Big Die-Off" of 1886-1887 and the relative end of the cattle-boom. They argue instead that the market was on the rise through 1895 and that an analysis of the industry should not necessarily operate within the framework of the post 1887 slump. I will consider this argument within the context of the profitability and decision making of the ranches I am researching as well as the water policy decisions being made in 1887.

Approach and Sources:

The guiding aim of this project is to understand the extent to which Wyoming's water management policy contributed to how the WSGA managed communal grazing and developed control over ranching practices in Wyoming. The uncommon nature of Wyoming's shift away from prior appropriation policy and its impact on ranchers and homesteaders provides an opening for research. While work has been done both on the history of water rights in Wyoming

and on cattle-ranching, as previously discussed, putting the two in conversation with each other through an analysis of specific ranches in Laramie will allow me to develop a tightly focused argument on the impacts of environmental legislation on the lived experience of ranchers, many of whom were members of the WSGA.

The primary source material of this project comes from the WSGA's correspondence, administrative records, and roundup records. An analysis of this material will allow me to develop an understanding of what the internal decision making processes of the organization were and to determine to what extent concerns about water access were part of meetings and other internal conversations.⁴ The WSGA was started originally in Cheyenne in 1872 with the purpose of combatting cattle rustlers. Growing from this initial goal the organization would come to run branding inspections, managing round-ups, as well as fencing and public domain disputes. Beginning in 1875, the WSGA paid stock detectives to discourage cattle rustling, with members paying a fee to ensure protection. The WSGA was also involved in the hiring of a state veterinarian whose primary goal was to keep disease off of the range. Coupled with newly introduced range laws, the WSGA invested in the protection of cattle for its members.⁵ This general oversight by the organization indicates a concern for the quality of the rangeland.

Additionally, primary source material will come from the Double X and Flag ranches outside of Laramie, whose materials encompass operations of the ranches, personal correspondence, and, for Double X, a historical account written by someone within the family. Double X was one of the earliest homestead ranches in Wyoming and would become a premier

⁴ This section does not include specific footnotes due to the lack of digitized materials. However, general information on the primary source material comes from the content descriptions and historical notes available through the Archives West descriptions. The "Wyoming Stock Growers Association records, 1857-2022", "Double X records, 1800-1986", and "Robert H. Homer Papers, 1873-1925" are the collections that the primary source papers will come from.

⁵ Pelzer, *A Cattlemen's Commonwealth*, 34-36

breeding operation of Black Angus cattle. The Flag Ranch materials are stored within the papers of Robert H. Homer, the owner of the operation, who moved to Wyoming from Boston in 1871. In 1912, he was involved in a water rights lawsuit with two ranches south of the Flag Ranch. While initially a sheep outfit, Flag Ranch moved to exclusively cattle in the 1890s. While the ranches are geographically near each other, they approached the industry differently. Comparing them will allow me to analyze the different ways ranchers adapted to the arid landscape and attempted to make their businesses profitable. These materials will help me to determine how the ranches were operated and what kinds of decisions they made around water access.

The research questions driving this project are: What role did the WSGA play in managing the environmental concerns of ranchers, primarily their access to water? In what ways are ranchers expressing concerns, or not, around water and their access to it?

Concerns

My main concern at this point is about how I will include Indigenous history in this project. I'm hoping the answer to this will come with more research and a better understanding of the landscape of southeastern Wyoming in this period. Claudio Saunt's *Unworthy Republic: The Dispossession of Native Americans and the Road to Indian Territory* will provide a general outline for understanding Indigenous displacement in the West, but I don't want to miss any relevant history in Wyoming due to the scope of this project. I do think that an analysis of water rights and access will provide an opening to discuss who else had claims to various water sources other than ranchers and homesteaders.

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“Volume 8”, Box 2, Folder 3, Wyoming Stock Growers Association records, correspondence 1887, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

List of relevant coursework

HIST 308: American Cities in Nature

HIST 213: Politics and Protest in the New Nation

Expected: HIST 203: American Indian Education

Proposed class schedule for Winter term

HIST 203: American Indian Education

PE 172: Swimming, Fitness