

Reforming Beef

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Public Land: Whose Land is It?

In the latter years of the nineteenth century, the number of homesteaders, who mostly were farmers (also called "grangers") grew. This put pressure on the ranchers who were using large tracts of public lands to graze their cattle. Not only were homesteaders taking the land, but they were taking the land with access to water, which the ranchers' cattle needed.



Tobias Family, Dry Valley, Custer County, Nebraska, 1886.
Courtesy [Nebraska State Historical Society](#), RG2608-1160



Cowboy on Nebraska ranch, late 1800s.
Courtesy [Nebraska State Historical Society](#), RG1227-21-2

This conflict between homesteader and cattle baron was rooted deeply in two very different traditions of land use. The ranchers were mostly from the southwest, and when they came north to Nebraska, they brought with them the **Spanish idea of land use** where the range was open to grazing. The farmers came to Nebraska from the east, where the model for land use was the **Jeffersonian notion of the yeoman on a small farm.**

Both farmers and ranchers wanted to use public land for their own purposes. In Wyoming, these groups shot at each other, but in Nebraska, "backstabbing" was the preferred method. Farmers shot cattle or cut ranch fences to let cows loose. Ranchers ran cattle through farmers' crops. It was time to bring in the law.



Select the magnifying glass for an extreme close-up.

In other western states, the problem of grazing cattle on public lands was resolved with leases. In Nebraska, the problem was solved by forcing the public lands into private ownership. If you wanted to ranch in Nebraska, you were supposed to own the land. The federal government accomplished this transfer of lands by cracking down on those who were illegally using public lands for grazing, and by increasing the number of acres that an individual homesteader could take.



Photo faked for newspaper article of the time:
"Settlers taking the law in their own hands, cutting 15 miles of the Brighton Ranch fence in 1885. Copyright S. D. Butcher, Kearney, Neb."

Courtesy [Nebraska State Historical Society](#), 12299v