



THE CATTLE BATTLE

(An excerpt)
By Laurie Winn Carlson

The “No Cow” Policy of the Hudson’s Bay Company

The first American women to arrive in Oregon were from New England. They had cultural roots in a northern European heritage, and they took their “milch” cows with them when they moved west. Dairy cows played a vital role in the settlement of the Pacific Northwest. One might even say that the growing presence of American cows tipped the balance in shifting the region from British possession to United States territory in 1846.

In the 1830s the immigrants’ reliance on the milk cow was readily understood by top executives of one of the world’s larger corporations, the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC), which controlled the fur trade in Canada as well as most of North America west of the Mississippi River. Their “no cow” policy – refusing to sell cows to settlers – was meant to discourage Americans from homesteading in the fur trade domain, and for a while it succeeded. White women coming west meant farms and settlement, and that, the HBC thought, would ruin the fur trade. Eventually, migrating Americans brought in more cattle, but for a number of years tensions in the Oregon Country often focused on who had cattle and who did not.

William H. Gray, who arrived with the Whitman-Spalding party in 1836 and accompanied a missionary reinforcement party in 1838, described the HBC cattle as “the wild, furious untamable California stock at Fort Colville, that required a Spaniard with his lasso to catch and hold, to get the milk for family use.” Artist John Kirk Townsend described the cattle when he visited Fort Vancouver as “a large-framed, long horned breed, inferior in the milch qualities to those of the United States.” As for beef, none of the cattle were to be slaughtered until the HBC had accumulated 600 animals. Preserving cattle was not easy when English ships arrived with crews starved for fresh beef.

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When William Gray saw the livestock at Fort Vancouver, he wrote, “We learned there was not a cow in the country, except [ours] that was not owned by the Hudson’s Bay Company.”

Narcissa Whitman and Eliza Spalding were, in 1836, the first two American women to cross the continent and enter the Pacific Northwest. Their missionary husbands took along a small band of cattle. These cattle were the first family-owned milk cows to cross the Rockies to Columbia. Upon reaching Fort Vancouver, near the mouth of the Columbia River, they were surprised to discover that the Hudson’s Bay Company owned so many cattle. “1,000 head in all their settlements.” Fields of turnips were “large and fine,” grown as winter fodder for the cattle.

Why Cattle?
Milk
Cheese
Butter
Fresh meat
Salted beef
Tallow for candles



This 1853 lithograph by artist Gustav Sohon shows Fort Vancouver, a Hudson’s Bay Company establishment located on the north bank of the Columbia River. Washington State Historical Society Collections

Tshimikain Mission Station

When the second group of American Board missionary families embarked for Oregon in 1838, they took 12 cattle, including 2 fresh milk cows. Mary Walker, wife of missionary Elkanah Walker, settled at the mission station called Tshimikain, near the Spokane Indians. Walker and the other mission women relied on their cows to provide the basics of survival for their families: they used deer renner (from the stomach) to make cheese from skim milk, made butter, and in time “milked six cows morning and night.”

In November 1841, three years after they arrived at Tshimikain, the missionaries there butchered their first beef, an aged work oxen. Later that winter Mary “dipped twenty-six dozen candles” made of “very white and nice” beef tallow. She wrote about preserving the meat, “salted a keg of beef by the rule four qts. Salt, four lbs. sugar and four oz. salt peter to 100 lbs.”

Puget's Sound Agricultural Company

All this interest in cattle-owning by American newcomers fueled a response from the Hudson's Bay Company. In 1837 the HBC established an agricultural arm of the company, the Puget's Sound Agricultural Company. By 1840 HBC had a contract with the Russian-American Company to supply furs and food supplies to Russian fur trade centers. The Russian contract was big. In fact, its terms were impossible to fill, particularly the requirement to send eight tons of butter to Sitka annually. That amount was never met, despite Chief Factor John McLoughlin's efforts to establish five dairies at Fort Vancouver, two at Fort Langley, and others at Nisqually and Cowlitz. The company went so far as to move all of its cows from inland posts to coastal dairies in order to increase production.



The Tshimikain (Chemakane) Mission, settled by missionaries Cushing Eells and Elkanah Walker in 1838, is located 25 miles northwest of Spokane, Washington in southeastern Stevens County near present-day Ford, Washington.

However, without a sufficient supply of workers, the contract went unfilled. By 1849 the Russians had eliminated the foodstuffs from the agreement. By then the Puget's Sound Agricultural Company was a political and economic failure.

In 1842 Henry Spalding was giving heifers to Nez Perce converts and encouraging them to travel to the Willamette Valley to trade horses for cattle. By 1845 Marcus Whitman wrote that the Indians were building better fences, a necessity because most of them owned cattle. J.B. Littlejohn, who had worked for Henry Spalding, wrote in 1844,

“The Indians are becoming civilized as fast or faster than any tribes concerning whom I am informed.”



This 1843 painting of Fort Nisqually shows cattle and sheep grazing outside the fenced areas.

Their anxiety for cattle, hogs, and sheep is very great; leading them to make the most commendable efforts to obtain them, and their, and their efforts are by no means vain. They have purchased a good number from those who are emigrating to this country, by exchanging their horses for cattle.”

The way Spalding encouraged Native American peoples to acquire and herd cattle were very controversial in his day. The American Board missionaries were divided over the question of whether the mission should supply cattle to the Indians. Reverend Asa Smith, who arrived in 1838, wrote, “A few cows are important for our comfort & support but to think of furnishing [an Indian] nation with them, it would I believe defeat our object in coming.” Certainly providing the natives with cattle of their own would allow them to become independent of the American missions.

In 1841 Lieutenant Charles Wilkes led the United States Exploring Expedition to the area. Upon arriving at Tshimikain the men “all passed me as I was milking,” Mary Walker noted with chagrin. One of the expeditionary members told her, however, that “the most pleasant sight he had seen in Oregon was a lady milking her cows.” According to the 1850 federal census there were 41,729 cattle in Oregon Territory – 9,427 of them milk cows – and the sight of a lady milking her cows was no longer a remarkable event.

Laurie Winn Carlson has written several books, including Cattle: An Informal Social History (2001). The full version of this article was previously published in the Winter 2004-05 issue of Columbia Magazine, pgs. 34-40.