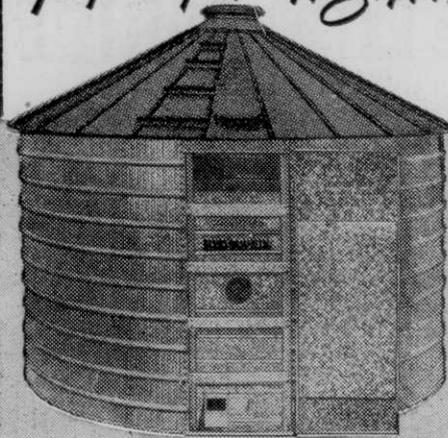


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By MONT SAUNDERSON

THIS ITEM IS the fourth of a current series, in this column, dealing with the land and water use and with the ranch and farm economics in the principal ranching and farming areas of Montana and of northern Wyoming. In this fourth item of the series, we examine the land uses and the ranch and farm operations of the Montana area long known as the "Triangle."

To most people acquainted with Montana farming and ranching, the "Triangle" means the area encompassed by lines from Great Falls northwest to Shelby, from Shelby eastward to Havre, and from Havre southwestward to Great Falls.

For the purposes of our analysis in this article, we will say that the area extends a bit more to the west, to the Northern Rocky Mountains, and northward to the Canadian line. In resources and in land uses, these additions to the usual concept of the area are quite logical.

Productive Area

This area is a big one. It also is a very productive area in Montana farming and ranching. In it we see great expanses of prairie land wheat farming, a belt of excellent foothill ranch country on the west side, and several successful irrigation farming developments in the upper drainages of the Sun, the Teton and the Marias rivers.

Though the western belt of ranching country is from 20 to 30 miles in width, by far the largest part of the area consists of prairie lands, level to undulating. This part of Montana has been strongly glaciated in comparatively recent times, geologically speaking. The resulting landform is the smooth glacial plain that we now see in most of this area.

These plains, now drained by the Marias, the Milk and the Teton river, principally, are broken only by the main stream drainages and by the Sweet Grass Hills uplift along the Canadian border.

3 Million Crop Acres

This large area contains some five million acres of land. Of this, some three million acres are now in crop agriculture. A comparatively small part of this total cropland acreage is irrigated. Though there are localized parts of the prairie country used for stock ranching, most of the ranching country of the area is in the foothills and roughlands between the prairie and the eastern border of the Lewis and Clark national forest.

Used principally for stock ranching, too, is the locality of the Sweet Grass Hills. These are not extensive. Their total area is about 125,000 acres.

Now in our look at the lands and the farms and ranches of the area we will start with the west side, the ranching country. Most of this lies to the west of the U.S. Highway 89, including roughly the western half of the Black-foot Indian reservation. In this ranching country the ranch locations nestle in the broad and flat alluvial valleys of the streams.

Now, the valleys and flood plains of the streams seem much too big for the size of the stream, but we must remember that in the glacial epochs

of the past these rivers, such as the Teton, carried enormous volumes of water. Now, these valleys afford bottomlands for the ranch hay meadows and winter shelter for the livestock.

Successful Ranching Country

In a first look at this ranching country, rather high in elevation and a "North country" in latitude, one might think of it as a rather forbidding one for year around ranching operations. That it has proven to be a very successful ranching country is due to an unusual combination of the natural resource factors.

One of these is the dependability of winter winds that sweep down from the Rockies. This may seem strange, but the winds may be depended upon to clear the snow from some of the rough terrain of the rangelands, yet there are always sheltered locations in the hills and valleys where the stock may escape the wind. Sometimes the winds are of the Chinook type that may remove much of the snow cover.

All this means that with good management of the rangelands there is good and dependable winter grazing on the hill bunchgrass. Because of this, full development of the hay meadow production of the stream bottoms hasn't been necessary. This all makes for a favorable situation of productive yet low-cost ranching.

Land of Big Farms

Eastward from the foothill country of the ranching, the prairie lands of the "Triangle" stretch endlessly to the far horizon. This is a land naturally suited for big farms, large-scale equipment and people with "know how."

From the time when the land was homesteaded and at first farmed in 160 acre units, this area has come a long way in the needed reorganization and change. These farms, with their mechanization and specialization, do not as a rule maintain much in livestock. There are of course exceptions to this.

Some of the farms near the stream breaks may combine cattle ranching with wheat farming, and otherwise the farm herds of beef cattle are not uncommon. However, with so much of the prairie land in wheat, the prairie part of the area lacks summer grazing. There is, too, the problem of natural shelter in the prairies.

Strip Farming

Alternate crop and fallow "strip" farming is now universal in this area. Soil blowing and the rather limited precipitation make these a requirement. The average annual precipitation of the plains of the Marias is about 12 inches. For the plains of the Milk river, this is around 14 inches.

Such precipitations as these would not sustain crop agriculture were it not for the fact that three-fourths of the moisture comes during the growing season months, April through September.

At times in the past, the problems of adapted land uses and of farm operations have been trying. Now, the experienced farm operators face the future with confidence. They feel that they now have the design for success and stability and that they foresee the ways to future progress.