

BEAVERSLIDES

The fields of western Montana are dotted with tall wooden frameworks called Beaverslides. These hay stackers have been part of the scenery for nearly a century. Invented in 1908, and patented in 1910 by D. J. Stephens and Herb Armatage of Montana's Big Hole Valley, their use spread throughout the northwestern United States and Canada.

Beaverslides are an excellent way to stack hay, and they are also one of the best question generating devices in ranching history. Walk to the Beaverslide here at Grant-Kohrs Ranch and take a close look.

WHY ARE THEY CALLED BEAVERSLIDES?

The inventors originally called their unique machine the Sunny Slope Sliding Stacker. If you say that fast, ten times, you may have the answer to why the name has changed. Actually, the first ones were built in Beaverhead County, Montana, and locals were soon calling them Sunnyside Stackers, Beaverhead Sliding Stackers, and other names. Eventually the name was shortened to Beaverslide.

HOW DO THEY WORK?

Dried grass (hay) is brought to the stacker on the flat, wide tines of a buckrake and deposited on the Beaverslide's "basket", which is a larger set of tines at the base of the stacker. Cables run from each side of the basket up through pulleys at the top corners of the tall frame. Horses pull the cables, the basket slides up the slope, and the hay falls through the opening at the top of the frame. A "stackman" atop the growing pile arranges the hay into a well-formed stack.

WHY ARE THEY USED INSTEAD OF BALING THE HAY?

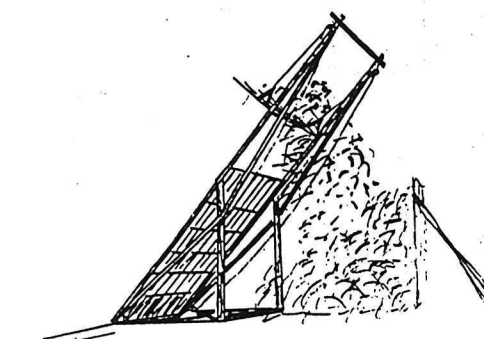
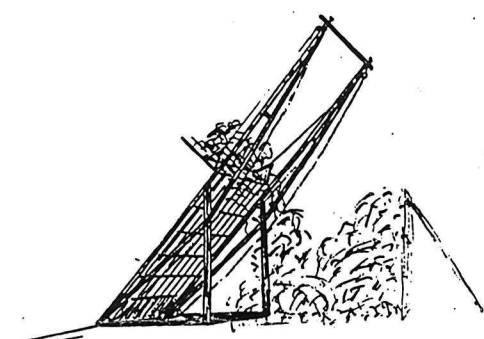
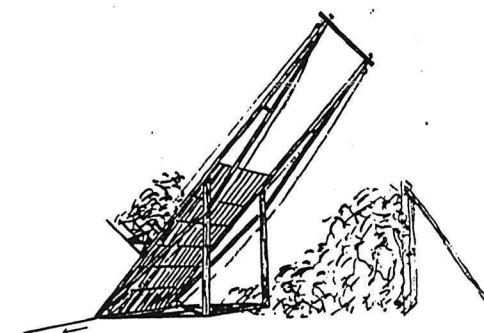
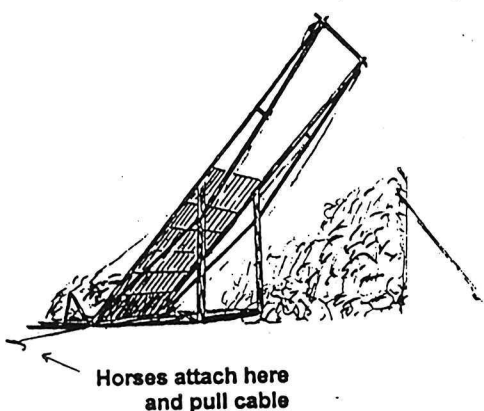
Baling hay has always been expensive, and ranchers have always looked to cut costs. A Beaverslide built with local materials is cheaper than buying a baler and can be fixed on the spot. They stack hay faster and cheaper than a baler and cause less damage to the hay. Beaverslides work well in the rough and often wet, wild hay fields where as much as 2 tons of hay must be stockpiled per cow for the winter feed. Tractors and balers frequently broke down, or simply couldn't work in many of these fields. Beaverslides require more workers, but in historic times labor was cheap and plentiful. And many ranchers will tell you, properly stacked loose hay stays fresh longer and has less mold than baled hay.

HOW IS LOOSE STACKED HAY FED TO ANIMALS?

Getting the hay from the big stacks to the animals takes more work and time than feeding modern hay bales. In the past someone had to pitch the hay onto a wagon or truck using a pitchfork. Since stacked hay is thatched together like woven threads and hard to separate, ingenious ranch hands invented hay knives, long handled rakes, and even homemade wire saws to help cut into the stacks. Modern machines have enough power to pull the thatched hay from the stack, but once on the truck or wagon, the loose hay is usually fed with a pitchfork, just like in days gone by.

WHY ARE THERE SO MANY STACKERS?

One drawback to Beaverslides is their size. Although built to be pulled from one field to another, they are too big to take across a bridge or ditch and won't easily fit under most telephone or electric lines. So the rancher built one in each area of his fields. Once again, the cheap labor and low cost materials of the past helped make this possible.



TODAY

The Beaverslide hasn't changed much since it was invented. Attached, gate-like wings and a movable backstop were added in the 1950's to make forming the stack easier. Gasoline power has replaced horses, and the stackers have gotten larger. Labor costs, the convenience of modern machines, and the need to sell and ship hay has left many Beaverslides idle and rotting in the fields. Still, their high speed, low cost, and ability to work the roughest wet fields keeps many of them from disappearing entirely.

It's easy to admire a machine whose design, nearly unchanged, is still useful after almost 100 years - and even easier to appreciate the scene created by well formed stacks, or a Beaverslide's striking silhouette outlined against the mountains and sky. But these stackers also provide a tangible link to the past, and remind us of value of traditional techniques even in our highly technical world.

OTHER TYPES OF HAYING EQUIPMENT FROM THE EARLY 1900'S

