



## Ranching

Agate Fossil Beds National Monument sits in the center of Sioux County in the Northwestern most corner of Nebraska. The county, composed of the Pine Ridge Escarpment in the north and rolling hills, valleys and plains in the south is approximately 30 miles wide by 70 miles long. Harrison is the only town and the county seat. Two rivers run through Sioux County on their way to the mighty Missouri River. The White River starts southeast of Harrison and the Niobrara River starts in Wyoming near Manville and runs through Agate Fossil Beds and on across Nebraska. Agriculture is the main industry in Sioux County with cattle and sheep ranching and farming. Agate Fossil Beds National Monument is comprised of land once owned and ranched by James Cook as well as neighboring ranchers.

Weather in the area can be considered semi-arid, precipitation amounts vary from 11 - 15 inches a year. Winters may be harsh with cold temperatures and wind. Summers may be hot and dry with impressive thunder storms. The stocking rate in Sioux County is 25 acres per cow/calf pair so ranches are large compared to other parts of the country.

It takes a special breed of people to overcome the difficulties of ranching and to realize that the rewards are many. The beauty of the country, the wonder and mystery of nature, and the satisfaction of living here outweigh any inconveniences.

### Spring

Spring is a time of new beginnings when the young of all species are born. Unless there is a storm, the cows are out in the pastures where they calve. If they have trouble, the rancher will bring them in and assist with the birth of a calf that is backwards or has a leg back, or is just too big for the cow to have on her own. Wind breaks, water, and hay are provided and the cows are visually checked often.

This is the time of year that the grass starts to green up and wildflowers start to appear. After the calves are branded and given their "baby" shots, the pairs (cow and calf equal one pair) are put out to summer pasture. Carefully chosen bulls are put in with the cows to breed for the next year's calf crop. Some ranchers artificially inseminate their cows to improve the genetics of the herd. With more feed grown on the ranches and better equipment to deal with snow removal, calving season is earlier than in years past.

### Summer

When the cattle are in their summer pastures, their water and supplemental salt and mineral is checked every few days. In the heat, cattle can die without sufficient water. They are moved from pasture to pasture as the grass is grazed down. Summer is haying season, the grass and/or alfalfa is cut by means of a mower or swather, windrowed, cured or dried by the sun, and stacked or baled. The bales are moved to a hay yard where they will be accessible during the winter months.

Alfalfa, if irrigated, can be cut 2-3 times during the summer. This hay will be fed as "long" hay by unrolling a bale, or the

hay will be ground and mixed with grain, corn and/or beet pulp. The tall grass that grows next to the river is also cut and baled. This meadow hay is nutritious and makes excellent hay for horses as well as cattle. After the hay bales are moved, cows are allowed to graze on the meadow, naturally fertilizing the ground for the next year.

Summer can also find the ranchers and their families doing a little celebrating. Roping events are popular as well as area rodeos. The county fair is a time when everyone gets to town to show off their cattle or to watch the kids with their fair entries.



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## Autumn

The colors of the country are changing and the air has a nip to it in the mornings. The curing grass is full of nutrients that the animals need to put weight on for the winter. Yearling cattle are sold at the end of August weighing between 900 - 1000 pounds. They will go on to feedlots until they gain enough weight to go to the packers. The calves that were born in the spring (February-March) will be weaned in October. At that time they will be kept on the ranch, fed all winter and put on grass the next year, or they will be sold.

There are several livestock auctions in small towns in ranch country. The cattle are trucked to the auction barn and are walked through a small pen with a scale under it and buyers bid on them. Another method is for a representative from the auction to take videos of the animals in the pasture. Those videos are shown on a screen in a conference room and/or on

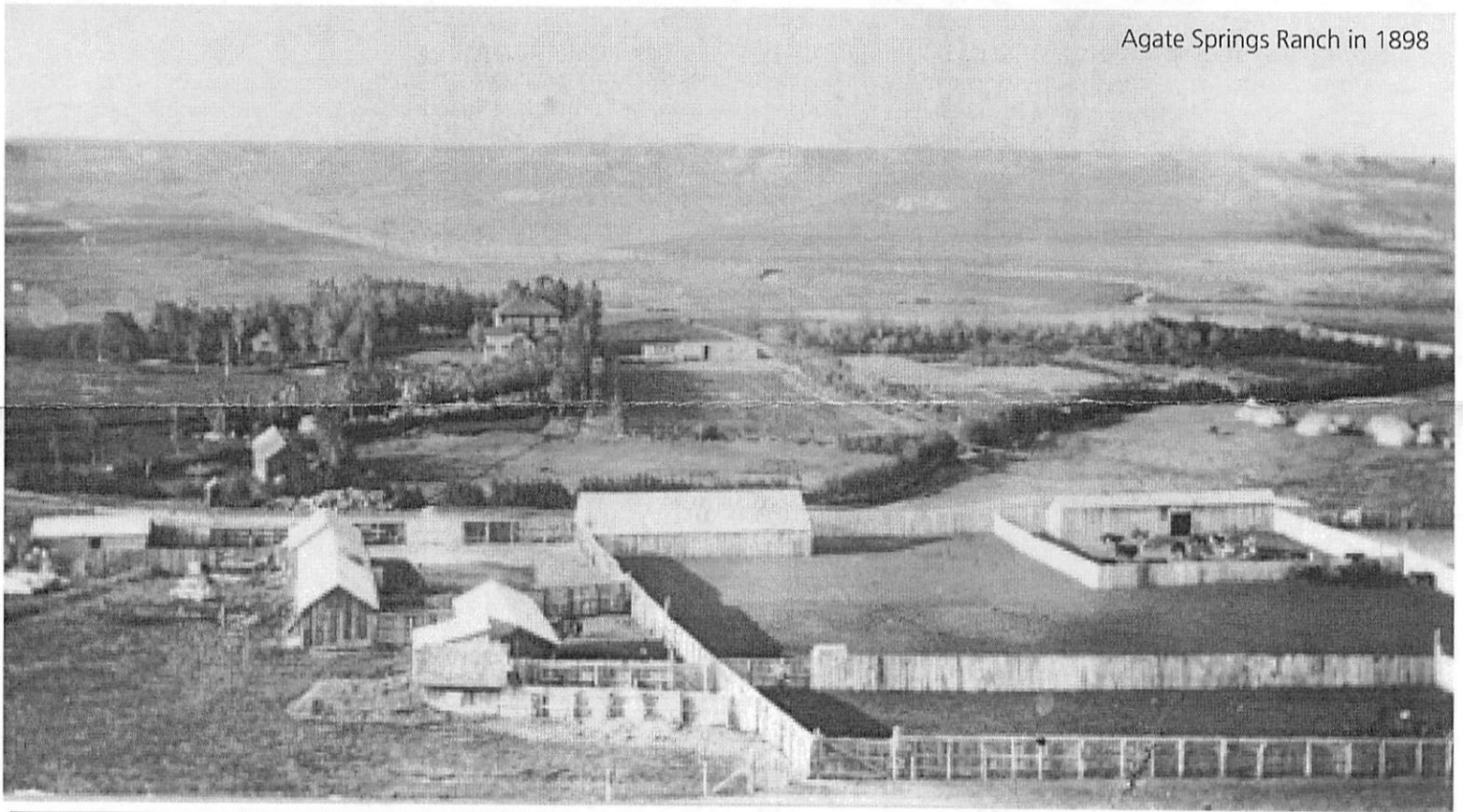
the internet, and buyers will bid on them there.

The cows are checked to see if they are pregnant, given shots of wormer, poured for lice, and put back out in the pastures. The cows that are not pregnant are sold. A rancher cannot afford to feed a cow all year if she is not going to have a calf. They take good care of the cattle that they own and this decision is hard, as many times the rancher will remember that cow as a calf.

Ranching is a business and with the price of land, fuel, equipment and labor going up, every decision has to be considered very carefully. This does not take into account the weather; the amount and timing of rainfall, as well as storms in the winter, all contribute to the uncertainty that ranchers live with.

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Agate Springs Ranch in 1898



## Winter

As the days get colder and shorter with snow on the way, the cows can still be on winter pasture eating the dry, dead grass. They are supplemented with corn or cake. Cattle cake is a high-protein feed that is formed in small blocks about the size of a medium sized pill bottle. The cows love it and will come running to the pickup when the horn is honked. Water and salt is still very important to their welfare so the ice has to be chopped and thrown out of the water tanks. Hay is fed when the cows can't get to the grass for the snow. Then the cows will be moved closer to ranch buildings and more protection as the time to calve draws near.

It would seem that winter would be a quiet time of year, but even with modern equipment it takes time to feed every day. There are always projects in the shop to work on, and bookwork to be done.

Ranching has evolved since the time of James Cook. The modern rancher uses every type of technology to help make the operation more efficient. They are also stewards of the land, and know that if they don't take care of the land, their way of life is gone. Many are involved with environmental groups and work to restore natural habitat for wildlife.

Women have always been involved in the ranch operation. She may be a working partner doing whatever the job of the day is, working an outside job to help with the expenses, or running a ranch of her own. In any case they know their operation and help keep things running smoothly.