

THE BUILDING OF A CATTLE EMPIRE

The Saga of Conrad Kohrs

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In all of Montana's century-old, turbulent history many colorful figures have trod the Treasure State's broad expanse, but—cattle-wise at least—no figure in all that time ever attained the stature of Conrad Kohrs, a citizen of the state generally and, more particularly, of the Deer Lodge and Helena areas. He was "Mr. Cattleman" in all that era when the sprawling state suffered grievously with growing pains—when it fought and bled and battled its way to statehood. Few will challenge you if you make the statement that Conrad Kohrs was Montana's—probably the West's—greatest cattleman.

Conrad Kohrs was a tall, spare man. In group pictures he towered above the crowd in quite the same way his cattle operations stood above those of his contemporaries. Joe Rosenbaum, one of Chicago's biggest cattle commission merchants, said of him, "No one before him or since has ever shipped so many trainloads of cattle to the Chicago market!"

A confidant of Theodore Roosevelt, Kohrs sat with this vigorous American on executive committee meetings of the then-organizing Montana Stock-growers Association. He was elected a member of the Territorial Legislature in 1885, referred to since as the "Cow Boy Legislature" because nearly all the laws relating to the cattle industry were passed during that session.

Kohrs pointed the way for the beef industry of our fourth largest state. His experiences and successes were patterns for others to follow. His failures—and like all men of accomplishment he had failures—were signs and pitfalls of which others might well stay clear.

There was an ebb and flow to his fortunes and once when a hard winter had brought disaster to his herds and his usual sources of credit dried up, he was given a helping hand by a fellow Montanan, A. J. Davis, who was in control of the First National Bank of Butte. And another time when he needed funds (Davis was then dead) Joe Rosenbaum of Chicago came to his rescue. Like all his other creditors, they were repaid; but more than that, Kohrs later saved Butte's First National for A. J. Davis' son and he came to the rescue of the Rosenbaum boys when grain market trading losses during World War I threatened disaster to their firm.

Kohrs' rise to fame and fortune is an American success story. He was an immigrant, possessed of but scant formal schooling, and his success was attained without benefit of subsidy or any of today's aids from a paternalistic government. He was born in the peaceful fishing village of Wewelsfleth, in the province of Holstein, then a possession of Denmark. In what was probably an attack of appendi-

citis, his father died when Kohrs was seven years old. Con Kohrs acquired a taskmaster of a stepfather, and at 15 he turned his back on the stepfather's farm and shipped to sea. His ship landed at Rio de Janeiro where a yellow fever epidemic was raging. He came to Buenos Aires during the rebellion of 1851 and back at Rio he contracted yellow fever and almost died.

Later his ship docked at New York and he stayed with a cousin who was a packing house foreman. He got a job at \$1 a day carrying dressed hogs to the cooler. Meanwhile his family had migrated to Davenport, Ia., and he went there and contracted a bad case of typhoid fever. Later he "ran" logs down the Mississippi; then he did a winter's turn in his brother-in-law's Davenport store, found that confining and, having caught the "California" fever, he went east, sailed down the Atlantic, crossed the Isthmus of Panama and ended up in the hell-roaring city of San Francisco. His mining experiences were none too successful and soon he returned to Davenport, intending to help his sister by running her grocery store. But by the time he got there the store had been sold.

Now, however, the call of the West was high in him. He set out again, driving a wagon, and on this trip he got his first glimpse of Montana, a state that was to claim his attention for the better part of his remaining years. His caravan found a difficult crossing at the Big Hole River, and he worked in the water a great deal, with the result that he got a bad case of rheumatism that held him bedfast.

William Hickman, one of the leaders of the Mountain Massacre, learning of young Kohrs' helpless condition, set the entire party to hunting rattlesnakes. Hickman fried the oil out of the reptiles, took Kohrs to the river, gave him a bath and rubbed

him with gunny sacks until his skin was red. He then applied the rattle-snake oil. Two days later Kohrs didn't know he'd ever had rheumatism.

On a bright, clear Indian Summer day he saw Cottonwood, or Deer Lodge, for the first time, made camp and prepared to prospect the surrounding mountains. Kohrs might have gone on and become a miner at that point but Hank Crawford, who had quite a butcher business in the area, needed someone to run his shop at Bannock where there had been a big gold strike. Con hired out to him at \$25 a month.

Crawford set out to buy cattle and left Con in charge, but the supply of beef was exhausted long before Hank returned. Young Kohrs bought up some of the work cattle from emigrants and a few moose from market-hunters and kept the business going. On his return Crawford was so delighted to find he still possessed a "going" business he raised Con's salary to \$100 a month. In those days beef sold at 15 cents for the boiling cuts, 20 cents for chuck and round and 25 cents for the loin.

The business grew rapidly. Kohrs was given an assistant. He went over to Cottonwood to buy cattle. There he paid \$75 for big, fat cows with the calves thrown in. Returning, he made camp at Little Spring, where he was intruded upon by a hard-bitten trio, Whiskey Bill, George Cleveland, and Henry Plummer, highwaymen all.

Across the campfire Plummer warned Kohrs, "The next time you come by here, come with money instead of cattle or we'll make you look down the barrel of a gun that you'll think is as big as a haystack!"

Not long after that Plummer got embroiled in a drinking argument with Hank Crawford, Kohrs' employer. The two gunned for each other for several days. One noon

Crawford came around the corner of the Gold Front Saloon and met Plummer head on. Plummer was slow on the draw and Crawford's bullet, crashing into his shoulder, left his shooting hand helpless.

"I'll get my boys to fix you up good for this!" Plummer snarled.

Crawford well knew his time in the area was over. Plummer had too much shooting-iron strength to go against. Crawford ran back to the butcher shop, scooped the money out of the till. "How much money have you got on you, Con?" he demanded.

He grabbed the money out of Con's hand. "You just bought yourself a business," Crawford called to Con as he bolted out the door and made for his horse.

Thus Con got into business for himself—but he had no money. On credit he obtained eight yoke of oxen that had trudged across the plains from Minnesota. These he took to Deer Lodge and traded for fat steers—straight across. He started up shop.

One day a Mr. L. R. Maillett came up the Deer Lodge valley with 20 head of fat steers which young Conrad bought at \$100 a head to keep Maillett from opening a competing butcher shop in Bannock. He ranged them with a man by the name of McDonald, on the Grasshopper, and a matter of only days later the Sheepstealer Indians descended on the McDonald range and ran off all the cattle and horses. The loss put Kohrs in a bad position. He had no cattle to kill and was heavily in debt. Then came news of the strike at Alder Gulch, the beginnings of Virginia City, Montana's greatest gold camp of the early days. Bannock's population vanished overnight, and so did most of the receivable accounts Kohrs had on his books. He, like the rest, went to Alder.

Failing to locate a profitable claim, he returned to the butchering business at nearby Virginia City. His

shop was a brush shanty in which, in early morning and late at night, he converted tallow into candles for the miners. The price was \$1.50 a pound. Virginia City was in her glory in those days and business was good.

That fall Kohrs returned to Bannock, hoping to collect some old accounts and to buy cattle at Deer Lodge beyond. At the Bannock hotel he sat in on a game of whist with Colonel McLain who owned adjoining mining property. He was startled to learn that the Colonel had become a fast friend of Henry Plummer, the highwayman. Later Plummer came in and took a hand in the game. It was Plummer and Whiskey Bill who had warned Con not to be caught on the trail without money. Also they held a grudge against Con because Con's employer had shot Plummer through the shoulder.

The Colonel, unsuspecting Plummer's double life, blurted out that Kohrs was on a buying trip and had money on him. Plummer had come into new power and, incongruous though it was, had become sheriff of the entire Montana territory. All the rest of the game Con felt Plummer's eyes preying on him.

Whether it was good or bad fortune, Con had collected several accounts at Bannock. When he prepared to leave town in the next morning's pre-dawn darkness he had quite a sum on him. He led his horse out of the darkened livery stable door, peered down the street. He saw nothing. The place was startlingly quiet. As he was about to put boot to stirrup he heard the scrape of a foot at a nearby corner. A figure loomed in the darkness. Out of the silence a voice boomed at him.

"Where you going so early, Con?" It was Plummer.

For answer Kohrs swung into the saddle, put spurs to his horse and thundered down the main street. His

pursuers would still have to saddle up and he'd have a several minute start on them.

A quarter of a mile out of town he stopped, listened. The crisp cold air held nothing but silence. Then a dog barked.

An answering reply came from the throat of a coyote far up the valley.

Relieved, Con was about to turn and go on. He heard a door slam. The noise came from the direction of the livery stable. Presently he caught the sound of horses pounding the dust of Bannock's main street.

Kohrs swung his horse abruptly off the road, walked it into the trees. Then he lit out down a little-used trail, hoping thus to elude his pursuers. The protecting darkness was soon dissipated by the dawn. As he topped a rise his eyes raked his back-trail. Two horsemen were following him.

He hurried on. As his horse struggled to Moose Creek Divide he saw that the horsemen were rapidly gaining on him. Kohrs was a large man, a burden to his horse.

He knew his only chance was to lighten his mount's burden. He jerked off his blankets, threw away his overcoat. It was hell for leather then—up hill—down dale—splashing

across creek beds—twisting through timber. His chance for life lay in the fleetness of his horse.

Each mile seemed like five. He knew the breaking of the surcingle, the stumble of his horse, would bring him to certain death. And his pursuers gained!

He made the 60 miles from Camp Creek to Deer Lodge in six hours. He headed for Johnnie Grant's ranch. His lathered horse was heaving badly as he flushed out of the timber across the meadows that separated him from the Grant place.

His pursuers were close enough to fire. Bullets whined about him but the horsemen elected to remain in cover of the timber.

Johnnie Grant had been one of Kohrs' first creditors and had given the young man an opportunity to start in business. A rugged individualist who disliked "book work," Grant thought Kohrs had balanced his account but was pleasantly surprised when Con offered him \$1,150 as the final payment on his debt. Grant was so pleased to find an honest man he forced Con to buy another hundred head of cattle, giving him the pick of the herd. His prices were more reasonable than ever before.

(To be continued)