

Settin' Up A "Brand" New Ranch

Understanding the Early Alberta Ranching Life through the Creation of a Simulated Ranch

Introduction

Students need to understand how in the 1880s ranching began to populate the land that is now Alberta. They will explore how the geographic, cultural, economic and historical characteristics of the times are reflected in our interaction with the land now. What factors led to the "Era of the Big Ranches"? What geographic factors were important to their setup? What costs were involved? Where did the men and cattle come from? What problems would a ranch manager have to overcome in order to make the ranch successful?

Project Explanation

In this project, students will develop an appreciation of the lifestyle, history and development of the early Alberta ranching sector. Students will learn geographic and mapping skills, use historical thinking, apply mathematical problem solving using concepts of area and perimeter, and determine how the Era of the Big Ranches shaped the evolution of Alberta. Students will create their own simulated ranch using historical details by mapping and determining the area they will lease from the government, plan the buildings that would be needed, examine the amount of natural resources, cattle, and men needed to run the operation, brainstorm possible problems that might arise and create a plan to deal with them, and research the factors that led to changes the way ranching took place in Alberta.

Alberta Social Studies Curriculum Unit Connections

Grade Four - Alberta: The Land, Histories and Stories

- 4.1 Alberta: A Sense of the Land
- 4.2 The Stories, Histories and People of Alberta

Grade Five - Canada: The Land, Histories and Stories

- 5.1 Physical Geography of Canada
- 5.2 Histories and Stories of Ways of Life in Canada

Materials and Resources Needed

- *Mavericks: An Incorrigeble History of Alberta* - Character Biographies and Online Artifacts

- <http://www.glenbow.org/mavericks>
- Jameson, Sheilagh. (1987). *Ranches, cowboys and characters: Birth of Alberta's western heritage*. Calgary, AB: Glenbow Museum. 36-page booklet examining the history of western ranching.
- Writing books for group or individual journals
- Large paper for mapping assignment
- History of Applying Brands
http://www.lis-alberta.com/applying_brands/history.html
- Cowboy Showcase - Branding
<http://www.cowboyshowcase.com/brands.htm>
- Alberta Rural Life – Brands & Branding
http://collections.ic.gc.ca/pasttopresent/rural_life/brands_branding.html
- History of Cattle Brands
<http://www.barbwiremuseum.com/cattlebrandhistory.htm>
- Typical Brand Designs
<http://www.barbwiremuseum.com/Typical%20Brand%20Designs.htm>
- *Alberta Rural Life* – Early Alberta Ranching Information
http://collections.ic.gc.ca/pasttopresent/rural_life/ranching.html
- Images Canada – Search historical and archived photographs
<http://www.imagescanada.ca/>
- Canada's Beef Cattle Industry Fact Sheet
<http://www.cattle.ca/INDUSTRY/FactSheets/beefindustrymay04.pdf>

Procedures

Students will create their own simulated ranch using historical details from the 1880's era ranches. It would be recommended that they work in small groups in order to allow for brainstorming, consensus building, and more people to do the work.

Introduce the project to the students by telling them that they will be acting as the ranch manager for a group of wealthy investors back in Eastern Canada. In 1881, Sir John A. Macdonald's government passed an Order-in-Council permitting land leases all the way up to 10 000 acres at the rate of one cent (\$0.01) per acre per year. The rush was on for investors and land promoters!

Create student groups and have students begin by deciding upon a name for the ranch and designing a brand that represents the group members in some manner. They can research about the history of applying brands and examine how ranchers came up with brand designs. After creating the brand and naming their ranches, the brands can be shared with the other groups, challenging them to try to "read" the ranch name from the brand.

The students will then begin researching what ranching was like in the 1880's using the ranching content area in *Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta*. This will provide a general understanding of what might be needed as they work through setting up their ranch. As a whole class, students will brainstorm

questions they will have to answer in order complete the project. For example, how big is an acre, what did cattle cost then, how much were cowboys paid, what problems must we overcome, and so on. They can search "ranch" on the *Images Canada* web site for ranch pictures so that they may get an idea of what a ranch might have looked like and what buildings and structures will be needed.

The groups will then work together, using either printed maps of Alberta or online maps from *Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta* to decide where a good place to settle would be and how many acres will they lease from the Federal Government. The geography of the area is a major factor in the settlement of any region. The investors back east will need a report for the group with a geographic and climatic description of the area including information about the general climate, weather, landforms, flora and fauna, soil conditions, and water sources. Students should also think about the chosen area's effect on transportation, communication, and the raising of the animals themselves.

The investors also will need the ranch managers to create a map of the ranch itself. It will need a title, legend, scale, cardinal directions, water sources, geographic landmarks such as sloughs, cliffs, trails, etc. Students may also choose to add contour lines denoting elevation of hills and valleys. The area they have chosen should be clearly labeled, as well as any buildings or fences that will have to be built. They may then calculate the area of the land and determine the perimeter of any fencing they use for the ranch.

The ranch managers will then have to prepare a budget for the coming year to present to the investors. The ranch managers will examine the amount of cattle and men needed for a successful operation. Below are some of the stipulations they will need to follow:

- During the late 1800s cowboys worked from dawn until dusk for \$10 to \$30 a month (depending on experience) with food and a bunkhouse supplied
- Dominion Lands Policy – there must be one cow for every 10 acres under lease
- The cost of cattle is 7 cents (\$0.07) per pound
- The size of the cattle bought averages to about 900 pounds per head

Students may also determine any other costs that might be likely, such as the cost of food, a cook, horses, saddles, wood and building costs, etc.

The team, having done some research on cattle operations at the time, will then brainstorm possible problems that might arise. These could include moving the cattle across geographic barriers such as rivers and mountains, falling cattle prices, end of the lease agreement, a terrible drought, heavy winter snowstorms, disease killing cattle, rounding up cattle in the spring, etc.

For each major problem, they should create a plan for what they will do in case that difficulty arises.

Using the *Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta* site, students will research the factors that led to ranches having to modify and adapt how they did business. Some of the main reasons were the end of land lease agreements, the end of the open range due to settlers coming west, falling cattle prices, and the terrible winter of 1906-07.

The groups of ranch managers may share their projects with the rest of the class in a presentation format, or specific parts may be examined as a large group in order to share and compare what each different group came up with. Another option would be to invite some local ranchers to attend and allow students to share their projects with these experts.

Assessment and Evaluation

- Students and their teacher should develop their own rubric by identifying evaluation criteria for the project that will match their own learner outcomes. This allows students to understand the expectations for their work and to have input into the ongoing evaluation process.
- Students may use their rubric as a guide for writing a self-assessment of their project work. They will determine their level for each of the categories and use the criteria specified in their rubric to justify them.
- A project journal may be used for information gathering as well as for reflective writing as the process is taking place. Students can pose questions, vent frustrations, synthesize their work, examine their process, and even wonder about what they are missing or what is still needed for their project. This may be completed as a group or individually.

Ideas to Enrich this Project

- Students could research and compare an 1880's ranch to a modern ranch. Factors such as size of the land, number of head of cattle, the methods they use for raising healthy animals, costs of animals and beef prices, tools and machinery used, etc.
- The class could end the project by investigating the Beef Cattle Industry in Alberta and Canada today. Using the *Canada's Beef Cattle Industry Fact Sheet* PDF, they can gain a simple understanding of how the industry has developed over the past 100 years.