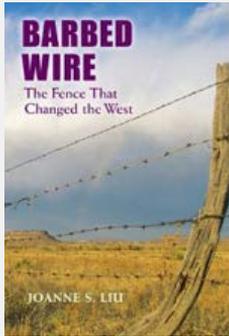


Barbed Wire: The Fence that Changed the West

Submitted by jainlayconley on 2-24-2010 04:48 PM



Author: Joanne S. Liu

Publishing: Missoula, MT: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 2009. viii + 141 pages. Black and white photos, drawings, maps, appendices, bibliography, index. 6" x 9". \$14.00 paperback.

Reviewer: Carl Sandberg

If this were just a book on barbed wire, it would probably be a rather dull read. However, that is not the case. In just over one hundred pages the author manages to bring together not only a history of barbed wire, but the story of the American cattle industry and the settlement of the Great Plains.

By the mid-sixteenth century, longhorn cattle had probably drifted north from Mexico into what would become Texas and California. However, it was not until the 1800s that something resembling cattle management began. Many of the tricks of the trade employed by the American cowboy were taught to them by the Mexican vaqueros. These early Mexican longhorns were tough and aggressive and able to survive the rigors of the prairie. Unfortunately, their meat was also tough, at least tougher than Americans and Europeans were used to, making it hard to market to Euro-American tastes. In order to capitalize on the hardiness of Mexican longhorns, they were interbred with American cattle from the East which were descended from European stock, resulting in a new hybrid breed known as the Texas longhorn.

Early western cattle management was governed by the Law of the Open Range. Both cow and cowboy roamed freely across the vast prairie in pursuit of grass and water. Little did the cattlemen suspect the changes in their way of life that would soon be taking place.

In the 1840s, Manifest Destiny was the buzzword. The push to settle the West was on. While the early pioneers were bound for Oregon or the gold strikes in California, along the way they were finding that the "Great American Desert" was anything but a desert. True, water and trees were scarce commodities, but the seemingly endless expanses of grasslands provided ample food for their livestock. The term "Great American Desert" was soon being replaced by "Great Plains" on the maps.

The westward movement was given further impetus by the government in the form of programs providing land at little or no cost to those willing to settle the land. The Preemption Act of 1841 and the Donation Land Law of 1850 (which applied mainly to Oregon-bound settlers) were two such programs. The program having the greatest effect, however, was probably the Homestead Act of 1862. All of these various programs offered free or cheap land to settlers in exchange for them farming the land for a set period and making certain improvements. Initial response to the Homestead Act was slowed by the Civil War, but at the conclusion of the war, the westward movement began in earnest. This was the start of big changes to come for the cattlemen and the Open Range Law.

The new settlers were used to being governed by Herd Law, which required them to keep their livestock fenced and out of other peoples' property. Conflict was inevitable. At first there wasn't much of an impact due to the lack of trees for building fences and the expense of shipping wood from the East. Early fences consisted of mud bricks or stones, and even deep trenches around a settler's property. Then hedges made of osage orange became all the rage. These hedges were impervious to even the most determined longhorn. In fact, about the only thing that could dislodge a properly planted osage orange hedge, other than heavy artillery, was prairie fires. And there were plenty of them. Another solution was needed.

An early unsuccessful solution was smooth wire. This worked fine for the gentler eastern cattle, but proved to be problematic in the West. The aggressive longhorns would have no trouble getting through or over it. Plus it tended to get brittle in the winter and would sag in the hot summers.

In 1873, the unlikely town of Dekalb, Illinois, provided the solution to the West's fencing woes. It is noteworthy that out of the four-hundred-some patents for fencing and fencing tools issued by the turn of the twentieth century, almost half came from Illinois inventors, and a large portion of those came out of Dekalb (36). However, it was one man, a farmer by the name of Joseph F. Glidden, who, inspired by an exhibit at the county fair, came up with a design for a barbed wire. He was not the first to do so, nor would he be the last. He simply had the best design out of the probably fifty-plus designs that would eventually hit the market, and it was his model that would set the standard.

Modest sales of ten thousand pounds of Glidden's wire in the first year mushroomed to over eighty million pounds by 1880. This success was not without its troubles, however. Dozens of other factories sprang up all over that were manufacturing what was called "moonshine wire." This was wire manufactured without regard to existing patents and without paying royalty fees to the legitimate patent holders. This problem was eventually overcome, but not without many long court battles.

As one can imagine, the cattlemen considered all of this new fencing a serious threat to their way of life. No longer could their cattle roam unimpeded. It even affected the famous trail drives. The cattlemen fought it in many ways, some legal and some illegal. They were helped somewhat by the coming of the railroads. This meant that they had a greater choice of shipping points to get their product to the markets. But it still wasn't enough. One of the most blatant ways the cattlemen fought the fence was simply cutting it. The fence cutting wars of 1881–1885 resulted in blood being shed on both sides. Finally the government stepped in and made fence cutting a felony, which put an end to the problem.

It was not only the cattlemen who suffered from the fencing. The nomadic lifestyle of the Native Americans was also seriously affected. They were used to freely roaming the vast prairies in pursuit of the bison or American buffalo—their primary source of food, clothing, and other essentials. The buffalo were, by nature, constantly on the move. When they had depleted the grass in one area, they would move on to the next, and not return to the first until the grass had grown back. The fences disrupted this pattern and resulted in overgrazing, which in turn led to the buffalo dying of starvation. This, and the wanton killing of the buffalo by the white man, was one of the chief factors in forcing the Indians onto reservations.

By the end of the 1880s the Open Range law was pretty much a thing of the past. The cowboys' job changed from herding cattle to digging post holes and mending fences. Cattlemen, for the most part, accepted the fact that fencing of the West was the future and began to use the wire to fence their own herds. They even began raising crops to feed the cattle. This turned out to be a much more efficient way of doing business.

Barbed wire was truly the fence that changed the West.

If there is a shortcoming in the book, it would be the constant skipping around of dates. Each chapter seems to have its own set of dates for various events which sometimes makes for confusing reading. However, things are finally put into perspective by a comprehensive chronology at the end of the book. There is also an excellent bibliography and listing of museums and other resources for the reader interested in further investigations into this facet of western history.

There is also a bit of confusion in regards to the dates of the Homestead Act. The book has it as 1862–1976 (1986 in Alaska) (21), but the commemorative stamp (20) shows the dates as 1862–1962. Perhaps the stamp was issued to commemorate the centennial of the act.

Reviewer Info:

Carl Sandberg is a photographer and historian interested in the history of the American West. He leads tours and gives lectures and slide shows on Colorado history.

Barbed Wire book. Read 5 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. Before the mid-1800s, much of the American West was a vast expanse of open plains. Native tribes followed buffalo herds unimpeded for hundreds of miles, cowboys ran cattle wherever water and grass led them, and the cattleman's Law of the Open Range ruled. All this changed when settlers pouring into the West under the Homestead Act of 1862 brought with them the Eastern farmer's concept of fencing in farms. I was honored to be a guest on 99% Invisible's podcast episode about barbed wire. Listen to it here: <http://99percentinvisible.org/episode/devils-rope/>. In the mid 1800s, not many (non-native) Americans had ever been west of the Mississippi. When Frederick Law Olmstead visited the west in the 1850s, he remarked that the plains looked like a sea of . All this changed when settlers pouring into the West under the Homestead Act of 1862 brought with them the Eastern farmer's concept of fencing in farms. With the invention and mass production of barbed wire in the 1870s, it soon became possible for homesteaders to fence off millions of acres of what was once open range. But barbed wire threatened the livelihood of the cattlemen who depended on unfenced grasslands, and a clash of cultures was inevitable. From the legal battles over barbed wire patents to the brutal fencing wars that erupted on the frontier and the ultimate end of the open range, author Joanne Liu tells the fascinating story of how a simple twist of wire transformed a country's landscape and ushered in a new way of life. Read more. About the Author.