



*Waiting for a Chinook*

watercolor, 1886, Montana Stockgrowers Association, Helena, courtesy Montana Historical Society

## THE HARD WINTER OF 87 / THE LAST OF THE 5,000

Painted nearby, this wordless message told the story of the hard winter of 1886-87. In the fall of '86, conditions were ripe for disaster. The number of stock on the range was at an all-time high due to stockyard strikes, low prices, new herds moving into Montana and speculative investing by absentee owners. The grass was short going into the winter. Heavy November snows continued into December, and then in January came a chinook, a thawing wind from the southwest. Late in January, a killer storm blew in with 60 mile-an-hour winds. Slush hardened into an icy shield, and livestock could not reach the grass beneath the crust. Before a chinook blew in in late March, 60% of the cattle died. Some ranchers lost 90% of their herd; sickened by the losses, some quit the business.

This winter changed the cattle business in Montana, marking the end of the open range. Much of the increase in cattle numbers was due to speculative investing by absentee owners from out of state. The die-off stemmed the speculative tide and the resulting business, while generally smaller, was more stable. No longer could the rancher count on mild winters with open range. Winter provisions in the form of hay became a necessity for many ranches. Irrigation of hay meadows increased and fences were strung across the wide open prairie.

Russell was a wrangler on a nearby ranch during this tragic winter. When Louis Kaufman of Helena asked about the condition of his cows on the OH Ranch, Russell painted this postcard-size sketch to describe the situation. Upon seeing the sketch, rancher Jesse Phelps said "Hell, he don't need a letter; this will be enough." Upon receipt of the sketch in Helena, Mr. Kaufman got drunk on the strength of the bad news.

