



*Paying the Fiddler*

oil on canvas, 1916, courtesy C.M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, Montana

## THE CATTLE RUSTLERS

To the north, the gentle grasslands and benches of the Judith Basin drop off into the rugged breaks of the Missouri River. The breaks provided a natural fortress for an organized, tough and efficient group of cattle rustlers and horse thieves. Swift night raids and a quick withdrawal to the badlands provided safety from the lawman and the ranch foreman. After the brands were fixed and herds shuffled, the horses were driven to surrounding states or Canada and sold.

By 1883, the situation had become intolerable. In addition to the mounting horse thefts, cattle losses to rustlers approached 5% annually.

In 1884, Granville Stuart and other stockmen decided to take the law into their hands. A "Vigilance Committee," otherwise known as Stuart's Stranglers, was formed.

The vigilantes successfully cleaned out the outlaws' dens as reported in the *Mineral (Lewistown) Argus*:

"Infrequent report of (stock) losses of late is tangible evidence of the horse thieves exodus to healthier climes. Suspicious looking parties have been seen descending the Missouri in small boats and adopting other means of flight."\*

\*(Joseph Howard Kinsey, *Montana, High, Wide And Handsome*, Yale University Press, 1943, p. 134.)

