

# Winter Feeding in Western Wyoming

By Sandy Powell /Photos courtesy of Sandy Powell



**W**estern Wyoming is incredibly rich in western history: from the days of the mountain men who explored the western mountains and held their annual Rendezvous in the area, followed by the thousands of wagons who passed through on their way to Oregon or California. However, this part of the country was one of the last locations in the West to be settled, in the late 1800s, due to its harsh climate. The winters were brutally cold, long, and presented daunting challenges for the homesteaders.

Because of the cold climate, the region was not suitable for farming but early settlers recognized that the area

had potential for cattle grazing. At first, the sparse prairie grass provided year-round grazing on the open range. Cattle barons recognized the potential of the open range and overstocked the ranges in the late 1800s. But the brutal winters of 1886-1887 and 1888-1889 wiped out much of their livestock. So the ranchers learned to adapt, by decreasing the size of their herds and implementing irrigation so they could grow hay for their winter-feed.

With the area dependent on livestock and hay production, the demand for draft horses soared. Cattle, was king while the draft horses were the unsung heroes, working year-round to provide horsepower for putting up hay

and feeding cattle in the demanding winter months.

Today ranching operations are not as ambitious as the early cattle barons. But the cold winters are still daunting for the present-day ranchers. On a recent road trip to western Wyoming to photograph ranchers who still use draft animals to feed their cattle in the winter months, I met up with Wes Lupher who works with Shire horses and mules to get the feeding chores done.

Lupher lives in southwestern Wyoming at 7000 feet elevation and feeds his cattle in two different locations in the winter months. Lupher has been feeding cattle with draft horses

since he was a child; his family has raised cattle on this land since the late 1800s. In this part of the country, the winters can be bitter cold with sub-zero temperatures and harsh winds.

There are many advantages to using teams of animals to feed compared to a tractor. The teams do much better in snowdrifts and whiteout storms. “And when the temperatures hit forty below zero, many of the tractors on the adjacent ranches won’t start and/or the diesel starts to gel up. You don’t have to plug in a team overnight, they always start up in the morning,” Lupher says.

Lupher acquired a few mules over the years for free, in turn, saving them from the slaughterhouse. He trained the mules by driving them for sixty days consistently. He finds that the mules really like a daily job, a steady routine. “And compared to his Shires, the mules do a lot of work for very little feed,” he says.

Additionally Lupher has trained his mules and horses to skid large bales and round bales onto a sled and bobsled. His mules are used to skid the round bales onto a four-by-six-foot sled/slip. The snow was not deep (and pretty wind-blown) when I visited so he used a cart attached to the sled. At the other location he has another mule, Silas, who works with the Shire horses to skid large bales of hay onto the bobsled. Even though Silas and the Shire might be mismatched in size...don’t tell Silas. Silas works well with the Shires and keeps up in stride. Silas is also the first to detect when a moose is in the area. That particular location is along a creek with many willows that attract moose in the winter months.

Lupher works his animals year-round. In the spring, they are used to drag the meadows. And in the summer months, they are cutting and putting up hay...lots of hay.

