

productivity that 640 acres could not support a family. The only beneficiaries were the stockmen.

As compared with the total population western stockmen are few in number, but in the range states they rank high in wealth, prestige and influence. Not only are they influential in state politics but they also carry considerable weight in Congress, especially in the Senate. There are few groups of comparable size, if any, which are as politically powerful as are the Western stockmen. ⁶

The cattle and sheep owners pushed through the revised Homestead Act and got free tracts in units of a square mile (640 acres equals a square mile).

Then they put twice as many animals on the range as it should hold; as a result the grasses gave way to sagebrush and cactus; the cattle became leaner, stringier and more costly to the people who had come to rely on beef as their most important staple (even if it was only in the form of hamburger or stew meat).

When the great dust storms of the early 1930s coincided with the great depression, alarm spread over the country. The overgrazed range and abandoned farmlands in the West, where fields bare of vegetation turned to powder in one of the worst droughts of the century, were the cause of the tragedy. Winds blew the powdered earth to every corner of the continent — symbolically, it settled on the Capitol in Washington. In the Dust Bowl region itself — Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado and parts of Texas — homes, barns and fences were buried by the drifting dunes, and hordes of farm families fled west and east. (Their plight was eloquently told in John Steinbeck's novel *Grapes of Wrath*).

This at last forced Congress to act — after much debate and accusations of "interference" by stockmen. The Soil Conservation Service was created, and the Taylor Grazing Act was passed in 1934.

The avowed intention of the latter was "To stop injury to the public grazing lands by preventing over-grazing and soil deterioration, to provide for their orderly use, improvement, and development, to stabilize the livestock industry dependent upon the public range, and for other purposes."

The one thing that can be said for the Taylor Grazing Act is that it *did* stabilize the livestock industry. It elaborated a rigid code of



Corn on the left is grown on soil enriched by the planting of a nitrogen-fixing crop.