

Chapter 16

Reserves Held in Common, Commonages, and Grazing Reserves

This chapter provides some basic background information and lists resources for research projects relating to reserves held in common, commonages and grazing reserves. The topics are discussed together because the research process is similar in many cases, although you will encounter some distinct issues in grazing reserve research.

Historical Overview and Key Terms

Reserves Held In Common

The Joint/Indian Reserve Commission (J/IRC) (1876-1878 and 1878-1910) designated certain reserves as shared reserves to be used by two or more bands. They were designed to give two or more bands access to a shared resource, such as a fishing or ranching area. These reserves were identified as “reserves held in common” in **minutes of decision** and in reserve schedules. In some cases they were incorrectly referred to as commonages in these and other documents.

Commonages

The J/IRC created commonages for the shared use and benefit of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. These were reserved areas of land to be used generally for the purpose of grazing cattle. The policy of the J/IRC indicated that, in the event that the commonage did not work out, the land was to become reserve land for the exclusive use of the band that had rights to it. However, these commonages were alienated by the provincial government without the consent of the bands and thrown open to settlement little more than a decade after they had been allotted.

There is another type of commonage that you may encounter in the course of your research that did not include Indigenous people. These were common lands set aside for non-Indigenous settlers. Under the 1876 legislation, *An Act to provide for the better protection of Cattle Ranges*, landowners could petition the provincial government to create grazing commonages. These areas are more accurately described as grazing lands.

Grazing Reserves

Many communities in the Interior asked for land for grazing, hay meadow and pasture. Not all of these requests were fulfilled. (UBCIC Collection)



Many of the Interior bands that addressed the McKenna-McBride Royal Commission (1913-1916) asked for more lands for the purposes of grazing, hay meadow and pasture. As a result, the federal government purchased some meadow and grazing land from the BC government in the 1930s and designated it Indian reserve land in the 1940s. This fulfilled the request of some bands, though not all requests were met.

Researching Reserves Held In Common, Commonages, and Grazing Reserves

Researching these different types of reserves will involve gathering a variety of government documents. When you are doing research into a reserve held in common or commonage you should clearly identify it as a shared reserve in your findings. If you are looking into the circumstances around any transactions that occurred on such a reserve, you will find that there will be relevant information in files relating to all of the bands sharing the reserve. It is important to note any references to rights specific to the land in question, such as water, fishing or timber rights, and to individual bands.

You will want to start with the Joint/Indian Reserve Commission's Minutes of Decision. These documents will provide you with information you need about the establishment of your community's reserve(s). The reserve may also be listed under each of the individual band's names on the Reserve General Register and in reserve schedules. With these and other records you will want to determine if your community ever made any requests for additional lands or made complaints or petitions on the subject.

You will need to review Indian Affairs Record Group 10 (**RG 10**) records on microfilm for any additional information. Once you have collected everything that is publicly accessible you may want to review unfiled original Indian Affairs records from LAC offices in Ottawa and Burnaby (see Chapter 3: Resource Institutions for further information). For additional information on the documents listed here see Chapter 4: Documents.

Researching Reserves Held in Common and Commonages

Specific issues to consider

- It may be impossible to uncover the complete story of what happened in this type of situation without access to another band's files. While the information in another band's files should be virtually identical, it is possible that one or more key documents exist only in one band's files.

- If the issue you are looking into is more recent you may also want to request active files from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC). Normally, you cannot review original Indian Affairs files for another band if you do not have written (and current) authorization. However, because there may be some information in another band's files relating to the band for which you are researching, you are perfectly justified in making a request for access. You should be able to review any documents in the file that make reference to the band for which you are authorized to do research. The files you request access to will be screened, and any documents that are not directly relevant to your request will be severed (removed) to protect the privacy rights of the other band.

For more specific information about commonages created for the joint use of a band and its non-Indigenous neighbors, consult RG 10 records.

Researching Grazing Reserves

You should try to get an overview of the policies and the legislation in this area before you get too far into your research. Remember that some key colonial and provincial officials with decision-making powers were in a conflict of interest when it came to decisions about Indigenous lands, especially in cases in which they had personal or political interests in cattle-ranching.

Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people have used, and continue to use, Crown land for cattle grazing. Therefore, your research may involve investigations into Crown land that is leased by permit for grazing or range purposes. Grazing leases may extend for as long as 21 years. You may find some helpful information in BC Lands Registers, BC Lands files, annual reports and BC Gazette notices.

There are several good general histories about cattle ranching in BC, some of which are listed at the end of this chapter. You will probably find good information on ranching activities in local histories and settlers' accounts. Interesting material can also be found among the records of livestock and stockbreeders associations. These are often accessible at local archives.

Helpful provincial resources at the BC Archives include:

- BC Land Register entries
- BC Lands files (including the General Indian Affairs file 026076)
- Ministry of Forests files (including Range Branch file 028428 concerning Indian Grazing Lands 1920-1973)
- BC Gazette notices
- Ministry of Lands and Ministry of Forests Annual Reports (in some years, there were annual grazing reports).
- For a period of time, the province had a Grazing Commissioner who was empowered to investigate grazing issues and disputes. This correspondence is spread over several record groups. Check the blue binders describing the different Government Record (GR) holdings, particularly the binders for Agriculture (13), Forests (14, 14A, 14B), Crown Lands (15, 15A, 15B, 15C, 15D) and the Department of the Interior (21).

- If the land you are investigating is within the Railway Belt, you will also want to look at any GRs at BC Archives dealing with Dominion (Interior) lands.

Useful federal resources at LAC include RG 10 (particularly Inspector of Indian Agencies files) and Department of the Interior - Timber & Grazing Branch 1873-1953 (RG 15).

Resources

Balf, Mary. 1978. *Bunch-grass & Beef: Ranching in the Kamloops District*. Kamloops: Kamloops Museum.

Cail, R. E. 1974. *Land, Man and the Law: The Disposal of Crown Land in British Columbia, 1871-1913*. Vancouver: UBC Press.

Harris, Cole. 2002. *Making Native Space: Colonialism, Resistance, and Reserves in British Columbia*. Vancouver: UBC Press.

Laing, F.W. 1939. *Colonial Farm Settlers on the Mainland of British Columbia, 1858-1871*. Victoria: N.p.

Okanagan Tribal Council. 1986. *A Study of the Commonages*. Penticton, BC: Okanagan Tribal Council.

Weir, Thomas R. 1964. *Ranching in the Southern Interior Plateau of British Columbia*. Memoir 4. Ottawa: Canada. Department of Mines & Technical Surveys Geographical Branch

Woolliams, Nina . 1979. *Cattle Ranch: the Story of the Douglas Lake Cattle Company*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre.