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Beginnings of Range Management: Albert F. Potter, First Chief of Grazing, U.S. Forest Service, and a Photographic Comparison of his 1902 Forest Reserve Survey in Utah with Conditions 100 Years Later

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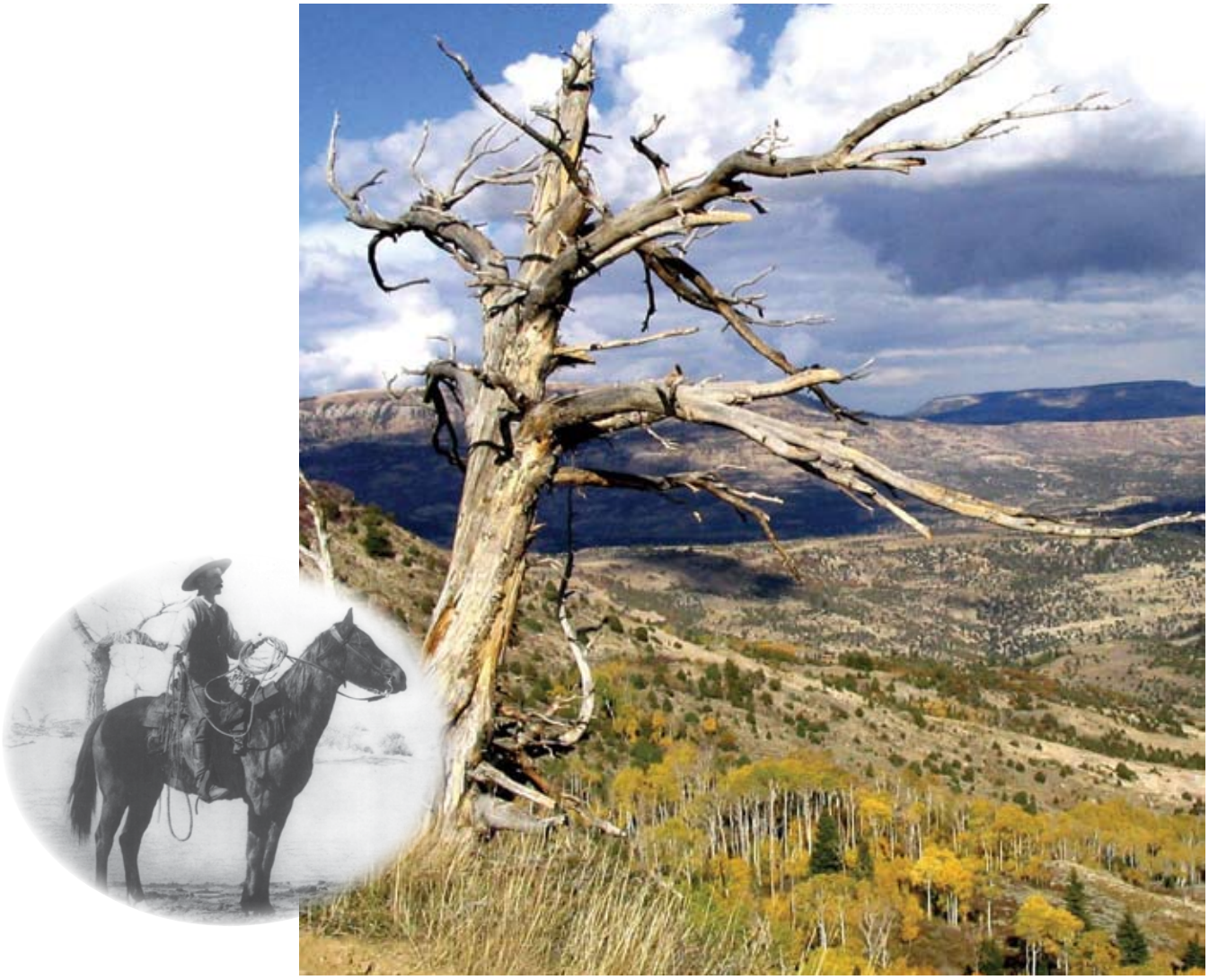

Abstract

The period from 1880 to 1900 is regarded as the period of “spoilation” of western rangelands. In Albert Potters own words, “Quick profits and fortunes lead to speculation and incredible numbers of stock were placed upon the range. Cowman was arrayed against sheep man, big owners against small, and might ruled more often than right.” The Government took no action until 1891 when the Creative Act established the Forest Reserve system under the Interior Department’s General Land Office (GLO). Lacking authority and undermined by political appointees, the GLO foundered until the reserves were transferred to the Bureau of Forestry in the Department of Agriculture (1905). This agency was shortly thereafter renamed the Forest Service.

In 1901, Albert F. Potter was hired as a grazing expert and in 1902 completed a survey of the potential Forest Reserves in Utah. During the summer of that year, he traveled over 2,000 miles of which approximately 1,650 were on horse back. He visited 42 towns seeking input on the designation of forest reserves and refined the boundaries outlined by the GLO. Potter’s diary and report of this survey survive intact today.

Albert Potter also took photographs. From the numeric sequence, he took around 400 exposures during the summer of 1902. 67 photographs survive in his report and an additional 59 with some duplication have been found in Forest and special collection files. Several of these have been relocated and re-photographed for inclusion in this document.

By 1906, Potter was Inspector of Grazing with the newly formed Forest Service, and went on to become Assistant Forester in 1907 and Associate Forester in 1910. He was the agency’s first Chief of Grazing. A close associate of Gifford Pinchot and later Henry Graves, he was the first westerner to hold a high post in the U.S. Forest Service. He organized the service’s grazing policies, regulations, and procedures. Seeking cooperation, he assured that the management of western ranges was shared with stockmen while still retaining the final decisions as to principles and details of operation in the hands of local Forest officers.

Keywords: rangeland photos, repeat photography, Forest Service history, Albert F. Potter, Forest Reserves, Utah Forest Survey, grazing history.

Cover Photo: Wood Tick Point on the Manti-La Sal NF overlooking a part of Albert Potter’s route. *(David Prevedel photo)*

Inset Photo: Albert Potter on Brownie, circa 1892.

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Albert F. Potter, circa 1910. *U.S. Forest Service photo*