

Ranching in the Louisiana Marshes

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Some people are surprised that marsh country is used as cattle range. This is particularly true of folks who have never seen our Louisiana marsh range country. Most tales that get about are full of alligators, mosquitoes, bogging cattle, bad storms and disease. While we have to admit that these things are here, there's a rosy side to the picture that keeps people from pulling up and moving elsewhere.

My own family, for example, has been growing beef right here in the vicinity of Grand Chenier for over 100 years. Pierre Valcour Miller, my grandfather, or "grand pere," as we say in French, moved here with his parents in 1845, married in 1850, and raised a family of ten children. Cotton farming, trapping and hunting have always been important to us, but in recent years cotton has given way to corn and other feed crops for the stock.

Marsh Range

The marsh is a big flat area, bordering the Gulf of Mexico, cut only by a few oak ridges or cheniers. Marsh soils are covered by water a large portion of the year. The geologists tell us the narrow chen-

iers, which reach an elevation up to about five feet, are old beaches of the Gulf. At any rate they are the only high land for homes, fields, trees, and roads. A twenty-five acre field is a large one in this country, but the soil is strong and good crops and gardens are produced each year.

Until the past few years, cattle received little care and roamed the marsh at will. There is considerable driving to salt-marsh ranges in winter and back to fresh-marsh or high-land range for summer, but fences or other improvements were

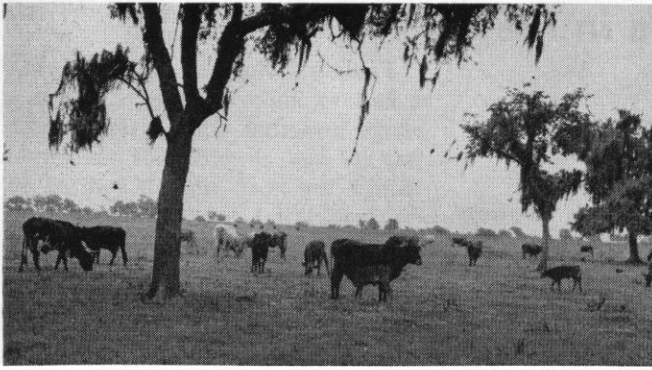
restricted to the ridges until recent years. There were no roads up until 1914 and cattle were shipped out by steamboat and later trailed to Abbeville.

As the land has become more settled, cattle numbers have increased, and free range has become almost a thing of the past. Now, we must manage our marsh range more carefully and develop our ridge land more intensively.

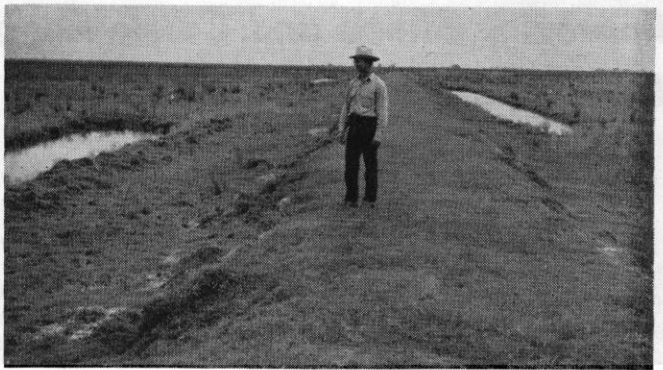
By 1936 vaccinations for charbon and black-leg were started, and in 1948 many cattlemen joined in the program against Bangs disease. Native cattle, which from all reports trace back to the old Spanish cattle, were used entirely until about 1940. About that time Brahman cattle were brought in for cross-breeding. Now, many of us use both Brahma bulls and bulls of



Marsh range before and after treatment. (Left) Francis Ezernack, SCS technician, Mr. Miller and son-in-law, Charles Theriot, examine giant cut-grass areas before treatment. (Right) An excellent stand of longtom which came in on marsh area following water control, weed eradication and proper grazing management (Theriot and Miller).



Miller's ridge pastures furnish excellent grazing from Dallis grass, Bermudagrass, white clover, longtom and Italian ryegrass after clearing brush and trees, seeding, fertilizing and controlling weeds.



Cattle walkways increase accessibility of marsh range and encourage uniform range use and allow easier handling of cattle.

the English breeds to improve our cattle. I think cross-bred cattle are better for our conditions.

Ranch Development

I bought this farm in 1911. It consisted of 40 acres at first, but in 1947 I bought 270 acres giving me a total of 310 acres of ridge and marsh land. In addition, I run about 1,000 acres of marsh range. My farm was the worst place on the ridge for weeds and wild hogs, and we didn't get a hog law until twenty years ago. I finally got things under control and raised pretty good crops. In fact, a bale of cotton per acre was common. My main trouble was being short of pasture and hay land to go with the marsh range. In 1950 I made a plan to improve my land and balance out my operation. Men from the Soil Conservation Service who were working with the Gulf Coast Soil Conservation District gave me help in making the overall plan. First, I hired the Soil Conservation District bulldozer to clear the jungle of brush and scrub oak from my ridge pastures, and I poisoned the palmettos with tractor fuel. These areas were then seeded with white clover and Dallis grass. There was some Bermuda grass and longtom already present to complete the mixture. Ryegrass is overseeded on the ridges each fall for winter grazing.

Next, we planned a levee and

pump system to help control the water in the smaller marsh areas between the ridges. By removing excess water, mowing, and regulating the grazing, the vegetation on these marshy areas has changed from giant-cutgrass to longtom. When water was first pumped off the area, weeds gave us a lot of trouble until the longtom made a good cover. We used airplane spraying and mowing to kill weeds. Giant cutgrass is one of the best fresh marsh range forage plants, but longtom is a good pasture and hay plant. Both of these grasses are native and do not have to be seeded — just managed properly. Before putting in this levee and pump system on the area, a horse had a rough time getting through, and at times, couldn't get through at all. Now I can ride the area in a jeep and look after my cattle.

I have three longtom and Bermuda grass pastures consisting of about 282 acres. About 38 acres of this is ridge land. In one pasture I have 130 acres; one of 100 acres, and another of 52 acres. A well and two water troughs have also been added. With three pastures I can rotate my grazing, and one pasture can be saved for hay.

Improving Livestock Distribution

We also planned a system of cattle walkways for my marsh range to give better grazing distri-

bution and to help control the cattle more easily. Walkways are levees with staggered pits to permit cattle to graze from either side.

Now when a cow has a calf on the range, she can be brought in and kept up on pasture until the calf is weaned. Our calf crop has increased from 50 to 75 percent and calves are considerably heavier. We seldom lose a cow any more and culls are sold whenever they get in good shape. Our ranch now takes care of about 300 mother cows twelve months out of the year.

We make around 400 bushels of corn and 700 to 800 bales of hay. This feed is used mostly for the milk stock, but in bad weather we feed the range cattle some.

With duck and geese hunting in the fall, trapping in the winter, fishing, shrimping, and crabbing most of the year, there is plenty to do along with farming and ranching chores. Good roads, radio, and now television have brought an end to the isolation of the cheniers. But, if a person wants to be by himself, he has only to get out in the marsh, where the tall grasses, birds, and animals are much the same as grand pere Miller found them in 1845.

Assistance in the preparation of this article was given by Robert E. Williams, Range Conservationist, SCS, Lake Charles, Louisiana.