

The Nueces River Valley: The Cradle of the Western Livestock Industry

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"For the sake of clarity we may describe the territory in question as a diamond-shaped area, elongated north and south. The southern point of the diamond (the southern tip of Texas) is formed by the convergence of the Gulf coast and the Rio Grande. San Antonio forms the apex of the northern angle, and lines drawn from San Antonio to the Gulf coast on the east and to Laredo on the west form the upper sides of the diamond. San Antonio, Old Indianola, Brownsville, and Laredo form the four points of the diamond. This restricted area was the cradle of the western cattle business, an incubator in which thrive and multiplied Mexican longhorns, Indian horses, and American cowboys....In this region and on its borders were to be found all the elements essential to the ranch and the range cattle industry."

W.P. Webb

Walter Prescott Webb published his monumental sociogeographical work, *The Great Plains*, in 1931. Based on environmental and cultural factors, he concluded that south Texas was the natural cradle for the foundation and growth of the western U.S. livestock industry. The region offered ideal conditions for raising livestock: the country was open with plentiful grass, sufficient water, and a mild climate. It was a place where men on horseback

could manage cattle. Also, the vaquero and the ranchero had the know-how to raise livestock on the open range. Consequently, the livestock industry has had a long history in south Texas.

Webb's thesis has been disputed by a few recent historians. They point out a close link between cattle raising in the southeastern states and the western industry. It is doubtful that the south Texas diamond was the sole foundation and basis of the western livestock industry. However, there is no doubt that the contributions of the Texas Rio Grande Plain and Coastal Prairie facilitated the extension of the industry,

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The first colonizing expedition into Texas, headed by Captain Alonso de Leon brought cattle into Texas in 1690. (Used with permission of the artist, Mr. Jose Cisneros, El Paso, Texas.)

which, by 1876, had enveloped the unoccupied grasslands of twelve western states and Canada.

The Land

The Rio Grande, Nueces, and San Antonio River valleys were the regional centers of the south Texas livestock industry. For the past century this country has been called the brush country, *brasada*, or *monte*. A mixed brush complex that occupies over 93% of the Rio Grande Plain. Thirty-four percent of the coastal prairie has some degree of brush infestation. However, 400 years ago much of the land consisted of extensive prairies and savannahs. In 1580, one traveler described the land as "an open country, with plains and few dense woods...short pasture...with large, and dense

first settlement in what is now Neches County. His ranch, the Santa Petronila, near the present community of Chapman Ranch on the outskirts of Corpus Christi, was described as having a goodly number of people, a stock of cattle, sheep and goats, and cornfields. Eventually, over 140 Spanish land grants of varying size were granted to individuals south of the Nueces during the Spanish period. One of these grants included Padre Island, the barrier island that parallels the lower Texas coast, and named for Padre Nicolas Balli, a member of an early ranching family.

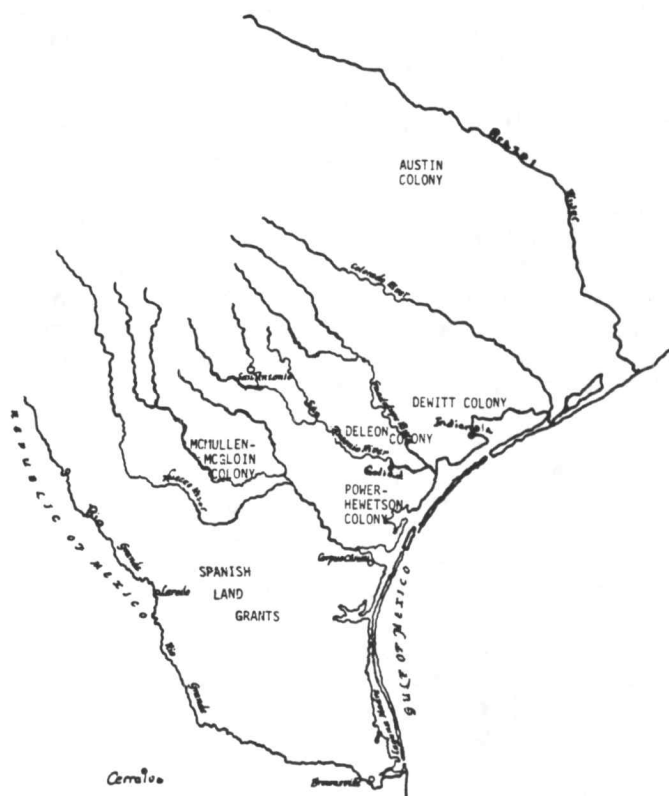
In the years after 1766 more and more Spanish cattle came to graze the fertile lands around Corpus Christi Bay. As the herds and flocks along the Rio Grande multiplied, they wandered east toward the Gulf and northward past the Nueces River.

Thus, while delegates to the Continental Congress assembled at Philadelphia in the summer of 1776 to spell out their grievances against King George III of England, a few ranchers, subject to the King of Spain, chased mustangs and tended their cattle on the rangelands of south Texas. However, markets were scarce for these early rancheros. When, in 1779, Spain joined the American colonists in their fight against the British, a market was inadvertently created for the Texas longhorn. A Spanish army of 7,000 men had to be fed, therefore, between 1779 and 1782, over 9,000 head of cattle were driven from the ranges at Bexar and La Bahia to Louisiana for this purpose. By defeating the British in a series of campaigns along the Gulf Coast, Spanish forces made it easier for George Washington and his Continental Army to fight and defeat the British along the eastern seaboard. Indirectly, Texas cattle played a significant role in winning American independence.

The 1780's were a dynamic and difficult time for Texas cattlemen. It was a time of unprecedented expansion, consolidation, and prosperity. The missions' role as the province's principal cattle raisers declined while the number of privately owned ranches increased. Although small annual roundups had taken place, it wasn't until 1787 that an agreement between the missions, the private ranchers, and the government called for a general roundup and branding of all stock. During this time, the first serious attempt was made by the Spanish colonial administration to regulate the cattle industry and manage its growth through export regulations and taxation. The trailing of cattle to Louisiana and to towns south of the Rio Grande began on a systematic basis. This was the time when the major techniques of open-range livestock handling were tried, tested, and proved for the future generations of ranchers from the Spanish borderlands northward to Canada.

Mexico, Texas, and the U.S.

Mexico revolted against Spain in 1810 and achieved independence in 1821. The new government was weak, bankrupt, and defenseless on its northern frontier. One of the earliest moves by independent Mexico was to encourage colonization of Texas as a buffer against foreign invasion and Indian raids. Empresarios were given large tracts of land if they could successfully establish settlements on the grants. The Austin colony, the DeLeon colony at Victoria, and the Power and Hewetson colony at Refugio, and others each had its



Mexico encouraged colonization and settlement of Texas during the 1820's.

inception during the 1820's as part of the colonial effort. Colonists were attracted from many distant locations, including Mexico, the United States, and Ireland.

Grants of land were made to prospective emigres as enticements to settle. If the land was arable and the settler professed to be a farmer, he was granted a *labor* or 177 acres. If he declared as a stock raiser, he was granted one league or 4,426 acres of land. Naturally, more stockmen than farmers immigrated to the colonies under these conditions. When Stephen F. Austin formulated the code that governed his colonists, he included two clauses pertinent to the raising of stock. These concerned the registration of cattle brands and the regulations over strayed livestock, reflecting the Spanish experience and influence.

The new colonists immediately adapted themselves to this different form of animal husbandry. Enterprising men obtained grants for themselves and for former members of their families; they bought grants from their neighbors, and otherwise enlarged their holdings. Some ranches in existence today were founded during colonial times and have remained in the hands of their descendants.

The successful Texas revolt from Mexico in 1836 and the subsequent 10-year period of the Republic brought significant change to the structure of the cattle industry in Texas. Aside from land and people, livestock were the only item of value in the new nation. The aftermath of revolution drove many Hispanic ranchers out of Texas, abandoning their cattle to fend for themselves. Land grabs, the imposition of an alien culture, and other factors also forced many of those

Hispanics loyal to the Texas cause to return beyond the Rio Grande. The newcomer Anglos were interested in ranching and many either intermarried into Hispanic ranching families, bought the land from disinterested Hispanic owners, or, in the case, of the open-range areas of the country, just registered a brand and built up a herd from the numerous unmarked range cattle. Between 1820 and 1850, large scale, open-range cattle ranching developed and thrived all along the middle and upper coast. The majority of persons engaged in this ranching were Anglo-Americans from the southeastern states. By 1840, ranching on the upper coast of southeast Texas formed a connecting link with Spanish-derived ranching in south Texas and operations developed in the pine barrens of Georgia and Florida. The Texas influence met and merged with the Georgia influence in the Louisiana and East Texas regions.

Texas supported an estimated 240,000 head of cattle in 1845, but markets were scarce for Texas stock raisers during the Republic and after statehood in 1846. Some cattle were driven to market in the U.S. and Mexico. Others were shipped across the Gulf of Mexico to New Orleans. A few herds were trailed west to California to satisfy the needs of the prospectors during the gold rush of 1849. However, the bulk of the cattle raised along the coast were marketed in the form of hides and tallow. Numerous rendering plants were established to convert thousands of head of cattle to these products; the meat was discarded. Contemporary reports note that meat was free for the taking, whereas others recorded that the flesh was discarded into the bays where sharks and other fish consumed it. Markets continued to be almost nonexistent until political change and the Civil War allowed Texas cattle to reach a meat-hungry Northern population.

The period following the Civil War has been documented too often to repeat in detail here. In brief, as railways moved westward to Kansas in the years following the Civil War, enterprising ranchers in south, coastal, and southeast Texas began trailing their herds northward to the railhead towns of Abilene, Dodge City, and others. Herds were also moved into western and northern parts of Texas as well as other western states to form the nucleus of the ranching industry throughout the Great Plains.

The Industrial Revolution brought new technologies to the range country that assisted in change. The invention of barbed wire and the windmill allowed better control of the herds, which in turn allowed upbreeding of cattle. This spelled the doom for the Texas longhorn. Barbed wire also

confined cattle to enclosed areas, which led to overgrazing and the resultant increase and spread of brush species. The beginning of this change was noticed in 1795 when a Spanish official recorded having seen overgrazed areas near the towns and ranches. He noted that livestock carried seeds from one site to another and the owners did not bother to clear the brush. More than 150 years would pass before the owners would do or care much about this problem.

The Hispanic/Texas Legacy

The Spanish influence of ranching did not end with the Anglo colonization in Texas. Many early Anglo arrivals brought considerable stock-handling expertise with them; however, they learned and profited from contact with the established system they found in Texas. The Hispanic influence declined as a result of military, political, and economic power shifts after the Texas revolution.

Volume after volume in the Bexar archives documents the fact that ranching was a major industry in Spanish Texas and exerted significant influence on the social and economic institutions of the region that are apparent today. The techniques, accouterments, and language of the cattle industry were developed in the region and then were preempted and adopted by the Anglo cattleman and incorporated into his way of doing things.

The story of western ranching cannot easily be separated from these deep Spanish roots. These roots were planted in the Nueces River valley and surrounding ranges and the area became the center of the region supporting the beginnings of the western livestock industry. The ranges in and around Corpus Christ, site of the 1988 Annual Meeting of the Society for Range Management, supported many of the Texas longhorns that made the long trek to Kansas railheads and beyond. The ancestors of these longhorns came with the first settlers to the mouth of the Nueces River more than two centuries ago.

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