Evolution of an Early Texas Ranch

Frank Hawkins Lewis

In the beginning. . .

The Hawkins Ranch in Matagorda County, Texas, is one of the oldest ranches in the upper Gulf Coast. Since 1846, it has been operated continuously by five generations of the Hawkins family. Its development was influenced not only by its tidewater location on the north shore of Lake Austin, a tidal lake tributary to East Matagorda Bay, but by early history of the livestock industry in the Gulf Coast area by the Southwest.

The upper Coastal Plain is crossed by most of the major rivers of Texas and a number of lesser waterways at intervals of about 50 miles. Some of these waterways are interconnected by a vast system of estuaries protected from the open gulf by Barrier islands paralleling the shore. This unique network of waterways provided early explorers and settlers an ideal means of transportation and communication by small boats along more than 300 miles of coastline.

This area of relatively high rainfall, semitropical climate and lush vegetation of rather inferior quality can trace its subsequent development back to Columbus's landing of cattle in Santo Domingo. By 1521 the first seed stock were transported to the mainland of New Spain. (Mexico)

The first breeding cattle of any consequence came to Texas in 1690 with the establishment of the first Spanish mission, located near the Louisiana line. The mission's breeding herd of 200 castillian black cattle were driven overland from far south of the Rio Grande River. Animals escaped or dropped out of that herd and from herds of subsequent missions established by the Spanish during their feverish first efforts to Christianize the Indians and to strengthen their hold on their sprawling new empire which by then included Texas. A quarter century later thousands of black castillian cattle, as well as wild horses, were reported in the vicinity of these early missions in spite of wholesale capture and slaughter by the Indians. Gradual infiltration of this black castillian strain by mongrel American blooded cattle modified the horns and bodies, though not the disposition, of the resultant blend now commonly known as "Longhorns."

By 1731, missions near San Antonio claimed immense herds of branded and unbranded cattle. Each new family of settlers arrived with an assortment of breeding stock, always including horses and cattle. Stock raising became the principal civilian occupation among mission settlements despite government attempts to enforce crop raising. Spanish affinity for livestock is an understandable outgrowth of their ancestral background in their arid, rocky homeland, which was much better suited for the grazing of livestock than for growing of crops.

A Frenchman who crossed Texas in 1767 described the wild castillian cattle he saw on the Brazos and Colorado Rivers as "incredible in number" and he further noted they ranged far from the settlements, whose inhabitants hunted them as game animals.

The first book on Texas published in English by Mary Austin Holley noted that in 1833 the principal occupation of the English speaking settlers was farming and raising black cattle.

In 1845, Colonel J.B. Hawkins, a young man rather well educated for his time, and an experienced planter, arrived by boat at Galveston from his native North Carolina in search of land suitable for the establishment of a sugar plantation. In January of 1846, he wrote his brother and financial backer in North Carolina describing the plantation he was putting together on Caney Creek and the sugar mill he was building. He also described with typical enthusiasm the new home he soon expected to build on a tract of prairie land he had just purchased near Lake Austin.

From all accounts, Colonel Hawkins prospered and raised a large family while developing his sugar and cotton plantation at Hawkinsville. As evidenced by numerous shipping documents found among his papers, he built up an active trade in sugar, molasses, cotton, corn, and hides which were delivered on customers' orders to the ports of Matagorda, Indianola, Lavaca, Corpus Christi, and Galveston by small coastwise boats direct from his wharves on Caney Creek.

Longhorn days. . .

During the late 1840's and 1850's, he was not only engrossed with his burgeoning plantation, but he was rapidly acquiring additional cheap land in his vicinity whenever it was offered for sale. Little time or attention was given to the increasing herds of semiwild longhorn cattle and horses that ranged his newly acquired lands. Management of the herds was limited to an annual round-up, tally, and branding of those animals that could be caught. At the same time replacement work oxen, saddle mounts, and buggy horses were selected and assembled for breaking.

By the end of the Civil War in 1865, planters on Caney Creek and elsewhere along the Texas Coast underwent a period of severe depression and political chaos. Men from a ragged,

This article is based on a slide talk given by the author at the 1977 Annual Meeting of the Texas Section, SRM. The author is a great grandson of Colonel Hawkins and a past president of the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association. In 1974 he was the recipient of the Texas Section Award for Excellence in Grazing Management.

defeated army returning home from 4 years of tragic war found their homes falling in decay, tools worn out, money worthless, their lands grown up in grass and weeds and overrun by herds of wild cattle and mustang horses.

During the middle 1870's the great buffalo herds were rapidly being killed out and the western Indians were being restricted to their reservations, leaving an immense grassland on the plains void of its original occupants and ripe to receive the great stream of Texas cattle which poured north during those years immediately following the Civil War. The story of the famous cattle drives and the fortunes that were amassed during these hectic times is a familiar one. Texans, lured by the promise of huge profits, pitted their wits and ingenuity against outrageous odds to move almost worthless cattle by the thousands from the coastal prairies to the northern grasslands and markets.

Livestock brokers and dealers soon appeared on the scene as integral part of that remarkable livestock marketing effort. One of the best known and most successful of these was A.H. Pierce, better known as "Shanghai." A handwritten note dated January 21, 1888, from Mr. Pierce to Colonel Hawkins' son has a familiar ring today:

> Dear Frank:
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> Your father told me you were going to sell all your steers 2 years and up this spring. I don't expect to buy but a few—but could handle yours. But you are aware cattle are low and no brighter prospect ahead. If you do sell, come up and I will try to trade with you. I would want them by March 1st and will pay cash on delivery. I will be at my Duncan place next Monday and Tuesday.
>
> Respectfully yours
> A.H. Pierce

Texas by now had become the primary breeding range from which millions of cattle moved north and west in an endless stream for a quarter century. This new era of economics and the prospect of profits stimulated a new interest among Texas ranchmen in upgrading and increasing their cattle herds.

It had been demonstrated that the introduction of Brahman blood into native gulf coast herds in the 1880's had increased heat tolerance and resistance to disease.

In a letter dated 1891 answering an inquiry from Frank Hawkins, Mr. J.M. Frost, stock raiser and commission merchant of Houston, Texas, offered Brahman bull calves of ¾ and ⅞ blood for sale at $50.00 per head. Hawkins, as well as many other gulf coast owners, was apparently aware of the potential of this new breed and was moving toward improving the quality of his livestock.

In the 1890's it was successfully demonstrated on the public square in San Antonio that barbed wire could withstand the charge of a herd of stampeding Longhorns. This proved to be a successful feat of advertising, since from that time on the open range began to disappear as farmers and ranchers enclosed their property with fences built of this comparatively inexpensive but effective material.

In his will, dated April 9, 1900, Frank Hawkins made specific disposition of his 4,000-acre north pasture, which he described as "now being enclosed in a fence." Other contemporary family records indicate considerable expenditures being devoted to the construction of dams on creeks and draws for the impoundment of water for livestock. It now appeared that the Hawkins Ranch, along with the range cattle industry as a whole, was departing the era of open range with its wild, haphazard techniques and entering upon one of conscious effort at herd improvement and range management.

The author standing in a stand of Eastern Gama grass.

A fenceline comparison—deferred on the left and grazed on the right.

On today's range. . .

Frank Hawkins' first efforts at herd improvement, livestock control with fences, and provision of more reliable stock water with dams, were followed some 75 to 80 years later by establishment of a system of wells to provide stock water at intervals of no more than 1 mile apart; also the installation of cross-fencing to permit systematic grazing of native pastures and management of improved pastures. Earthen walkways have been constructed into marshy areas to provide better footing for animals entering the marsh, as well as for a dry bedding ground and calving area. A far greater percentage of animals tend to use the highly nutritious marsh grasses, and grazing is much more uniform when provided with such improved access to the marshland pastures.

The most efficient cattle on this ranch to convert forge production to marketable beef is a crossbreed cow herd of approximately half Brahman and half Hereford blood. The breeding program is varied by the introduction of purebred and F-1 crossbred bulls of the two breeds in whatever combination necessary for maintaining as near as possible a half and half balance of the two basic strains in the breeding herd.

High phosphate minerals are fed year round in all pastures. As salt tends to limit intake of these essential minerals, they are not

mixed but fed separately. All cattle are sprayed or dusted whenever they are penned for any operation but are not routinely gathered for the purpose of controlling external parasites. The entire cow herd is vaccinated against anthrax and red water each spring and receives treatment for internal parasites. At the same spring working, calves are marked, castrated, and vaccinated against blackleg. Steer calves to be sold are then moved with their mothers into the best pastures available for the summer. As the calf crop is sold or weaned, the mother cows are culled and treated again for internal parasites before moving into cord grass and marshland pastures for winter.

Calves are normally marketed through commission firms or by direct sales to feed lots at about 450 pounds, and approximately 7 to 8 months old. Lighter calves are carried over on temporary cool-season pastures for sale at normal weights the following year. Replacement heifers are selected in sufficient numbers to replace 15% of the cow herd each year before any sales are made. Since no more than 10% of the cow herd is usually replaced annually, the extra replacement heifers are carefully culled and sold before the remainder is placed in the cow herd.

The Soil Conservation Service has provided invaluable assistance over a period of almost 30 years in helping in the development of and continual up-dating of a constructive and economically sound conservation plan which blends and balances all the best features of many of the native climax grasses and legumes with the objective of maximum production of highest quality forage possible under the inherent climatic conditions.

The overall objective of the conservation plan along with the management plan on the Hawkins Ranch is to maintain a balance between livestock numbers and available forage by seasonal grazing of native and improved pastures in such a way as to promote maximum production of the highest quality forage achievable within the bounds of sound economics. This is a rather ambitious objective and one that requires considerable effort and attention by management.

A combination of Dallis grass, common Bermuda, and white clover is the old "standby" pasture that comes closest to providing year-round grazing for this part of the upper gulf coast. Weed control in such pastures is a constant problem and essential to their success. Kentucky fescue, white clover and gulf ryegrass over-seeded on summer tame grass pastures provide essential winter grazing for young cattle being carried over for spring marketing, as well as for first-calf heifers. Well-fertilized coastal Bermudagrass and introduced bluestems such as gordo, angelton, and medio provide warm-season intensive grazing and hay potential of high quality so essential to the achievement of higher weaning weights and improved calving percentage in this mineral deficient high rainfall section of the gulf coast.

Each grass has a period of best use during which it is capable of making its most effective contribution to the overall forage potential of the ranch. Tame grass pastures have been included in the management plan not only to provide better quality forage to certain classes of livestock, but also to relieve the grazing pressure on the native grass pastures and permit them to reseed and maintain a sufficient root system for vigorous growth.

Milk Production of "Cattalo" Cows

Dr. D.G. Keller
Animal Geneticist

Cattalo cows produced an average of 938 kg of milk in a 185-day nursing period in a Lethbridge Research Station study. The cattalo cows, of which there were 61, resulted from crosses of domestic and part-bison bulls with part-bison cows and averaged 16 percent bison-84 percent domestic.

The average daily milk yield of 5.1 kg during the lactation period of these cattalo cows appears to compare favorably with straightbred Herefords raised under similar environmental conditions at Manyberries, Alberta, and in herds elsewhere. These results may have been expected as the cattalo were predominantly of Hereford extraction.

The cattalo cows in this study ranged from about 10 to 20 percent bison. Within this narrow range, each increase of 1 percent bison in the cow resulted in a reduction of 10 kg in the 185-day milk yield. For example, cattalo cows that were 20 percent bison would be expected to produce 100 kg less milk than those that were 10 percent bison. There should be no attempt, however, to extrapolate beyond the range or percentage bison reported here.

Although increasing percentage bison of the cow decreased milk yield in cattalo cows, it had little influence on average daily gain of the calf from birth to weaning. This suggests either that cattalo calves compensated for any apparent deficiency in milk yield by an increase in foraging or that the nutritional value of differences in daily milk yield were not large enough to appreciably alter the weight gains of the calves.—*Weekly Newsletter,* Agriculture Canada, Lethbridge Research Station.