

## South Texas Cattle Industry before the Civil War

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In an effort to ease national suffering and mental anguish during the Great Depression and World War II, motion picture studios created a new genre, the western movie where good guys wore white hats and rode off into the rose-colored sunset. The motion pictures and their stars influenced the general population's thinking about the Wild West, cattle drives, and Southwestern culture in general. Among other things, Americans were led to believe that the cattle industry emerged full blown immediately after Lee surrendered to Grant. Since this is a conference to re-evaluate certain mid-nineteenth century myths, let's examine the economics of the cattle industry in Texas prior to and during the Civil War.

As minister to England and France seeking recognition and loans for the Republic of Texas, James Pinckney Henderson assured those governments that the young country was strictly agrarian; it was dedicated to providing raw materials for industry in Europe and America. Cotton, corn, wheat, tobacco, hides, and tallow were produced in exchange for commercial goods from the industrial capitals of the world. All that was needed from Europeans and the United States was recognition, loans, and markets.<sup>1</sup>

Texas was literally land and cattle poor at the time. Numerous anecdotal accounts mention the availability of wild cattle on Texas prairies even before 1800. Those cattle were descendants of six or seven Andalusia heifers and a young bull brought to New Spain by Hernando Cortes in 1521. The Spanish breed was known for muscular bodies, long legs, and wide horns. In 1540 Francisco Coronado led an expedition through the American Southwest in search of the fabled Seven Cities of Gold. Accompanying the

expedition was a large herd of 500 *criollos* or Spanish cattle, a moving commissary, so to speak. Later Juan de Oñate brought 400 settlers and soldiers, along with 7,000 head of horses, cattle and sheep to the headwaters of the Rio Grande del Norte. By 1690 Spanish authorities sent priests and soldiers to Texas with cattle, horses, mules, and goats to establish missions, convert the Native Americans, and keep a watchful eye out for the French. When the natives turned on the priests at the missions, the Spaniards fled to Mexico leaving the livestock to fend for themselves.<sup>2</sup>

Like all cattle, New World herds tended to stray in search of better grass and sufficient water. Over the years they had ample opportunities to roam a vast area that is now Texas and Mexico. Running wild, they increased enormously in sheer numbers. Horns widened to give the animals an advantage in brush lands. Long legs allowed the animals to travel to better grazing locations with less stress. In the process they actually gained weight. A typical Andalusian cow produced a calf every year with little difficulty. Hence the large numbers of wild cattle found between the Colorado and Rio Grande rivers by the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup>

At the beginning of the American Revolution, Bernardo de Gálvez was named the fifth Spanish governor of Louisiana. Politically anti-British, he supplied Colonial North American rebels with much needed supplies in Spanish Florida and denied the British the opportunity of invading the American rebels from the Mississippi River. Tejano stock raisers from the region south of the Nueces River drove herds of longhorn cattle to Gálvez's army at the mouth of the Mississippi River in support of the Spanish effort. Those Tejano stockmen are today considered American patriots.<sup>4</sup>

During the Texas Revolution both Anglo and Tejano stockmen supplied the struggling nation with beef for soldiers and refugees. Noah Smithwick reported serving in a ranging company instructed to forage supplies for both the army and civilians in the Runaway Scrape. Wild cattle were often only a few miles off the trail.<sup>5</sup>

When General Zachary Taylor arrived in Corpus Christi in 1846, one of his first jobs was to find Tejano stockmen to provide beef and transportation for supplies to the Rio Grande, 174 miles to the south. The job was hot and dry but ably handled by the contractors. Yet, Texas stockmen needed more than wars to furnish marketing opportunities for their extensive herds.<sup>6</sup>

Land with fertile grass as tall as the underbelly of a horse and adequate water were usually available. Beef cattle on the open range increased in numbers each year. What was needed was a reliable market. To get to that market required transportation, the one variable missing in the equation. Early records indicated that enterprising Tejano stock raisers trailed cattle along the Opelousas Trail to markets in Louisiana and even across the Mississippi River. By 1850 Charles Morgan and associates developed a special steamship line designed to carry cattle and horses to markets in Galveston, Sabine Pass, New Orleans, and Mobile from the Texas port of Indianola. These special ships were known as “sea lions” or “coasters” because they hugged the Texas shoreline. Cattle were off-loaded at New Orleans, loaded onto riverboats for stops at Natchez, Vicksburg, Memphis, and other ports before reaching Cairo, Illinois, at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. There the remaining cattle were sold to Midwest farmers to be fattened before a trail drive to Chicago slaughterhouses.<sup>7</sup>

South Texas stockmen were not the only cattlemen in Texas searching for elusive markets. North Texans herded cattle to Union Soldiers on the frontier and provided beef to reservation in Indian Territory. Acadians and Anglos from Louisiana moved into the state when it was still under Spanish rule. They brought in cattle originally imported from France and bred them with Spanish longhorns. Eventually they discovered the advantages of moving cattle along the Opelousas Trail and of loading cattle on the Morgan Line steamboats at Anahuac. During the 1850s cattle were driven to the New Orleans market from as far away as Jack County in North Texas.<sup>8</sup>

Other cattle drives went west to California, an extremely dangerous trip that encountered at least two extremely hostile Native American tribes in addition to desert conditions requiring cattle to be night herded for safety. Those California drives were very lucrative but seldom made more than once by drovers.<sup>9</sup>

One unidentified Texan reportedly drove 1,500 Longhorn steers north to Missouri in 1842, but details are sketchy leading historians to believe it may have been a myth. By 1854 several trails had been established to the railheads in Missouri and on to the border of Kansas Territory. Three years later 52,000 head of cattle reached the Kansas City market, two-thirds driven from Texas.<sup>10</sup>

Not everyone approved of the Northern markets. When a very large herd of cattle were driven through the streets of Dallas, the local newspaper echoed the bitter feelings and resentment present in Texas in 1859: "Close to two thousand cattle were herded through our city today...headed north to feed our abolition neighbors. We hope that southern diet may agree with them."<sup>11</sup>

The 1860 Texas tax rolls listed 3, 786,443 head of cattle. This was probably a low figure as the owners were the ones to render the count and seldom over-estimated the number of taxable livestock they owned. As the Confederacy began to organize, it was quickly obvious that Texas cattle were desperately needed. However, on April 9, 1861, President Lincoln declared a blockade on the coasts of Confederate states, effectively ceasing all transportation of cattle by water. Four months later Lincoln prohibited all commercial trade with seceding states hindering all movement of cattle north and west of the state.<sup>12</sup>

A network of beef contractors was hired to deliver cattle across the Mississippi. On October 11, 1862, a statute passed by the Confederate Congress exempted from draft a certain number of individuals engaged exclusively in raising stock, but only one man was exempt for every five hundred head of cattle when a drive actually needed at least five drovers. Contractors usually sold the culls from their herds as well as small herds purchased at rates of twenty to twenty-five dollars per head from women and older men in the neighborhood. These were then driven to New Orleans, to Shreveport, and to Vicksburg. Most Texas cattle swam across at Donaldsonville, Louisiana, in the fall when the Mississippi was at its low water mark. As the war progressed Texas beef contractors rushed herds across the Mississippi to meet the ever increasing demand, thus selling tougher beef from the hurried drive.<sup>13</sup>

But Confederates were not the only ones looking for beef. Federal officers offered gold coin instead of rapidly devaluated Confederate currency, often tempting beef contractors. Once cattle sold to the Confederate or Union Commissary personnel, it was the responsibility of troops to sort and butcher the animals. Branch Isbell, a young boy in

Sumter County, Alabama in 1863, remembered a squad of Rebel soldiers driving a herd of 300 big Texas steers through his mother's fields on the way to cross the Tombigbee River some four miles from his family farm. He was allowed to ride with the Rebels and would always remember part of a lengthy song they sang:

“Driving cattle's our promotion  
Which just exactly suits my notion,  
And we perform with great devotion,  
There's work enough for all.

“I'd like to be a Virginia picket,  
But I'd rather be in the cattle thicket  
Where the hooting owl and screaming cricket  
Make noise enough for all.”

After the fall of Vicksburg, Major General W. T. Sherman reported that 5000 head of Texas cattle were captured at Natchez. Some two thousand were sent to Major General N. P. Banks' men in the field, and the remainder fed soldiers and civilians at Vicksburg.<sup>14</sup>

When the secession referendum passed in Texas, stockmen began shipping to New Orleans at a greater rate than ever before. In the last six months of 1861, W. B. Duncan of Liberty County noted at least sixteen herds on the trail to New Orleans. One of the best firsthand accounts of cattle drives out of Texas during the Civil War can be found in the Victoria College- University of Houston/Victoria Library Special Collections.<sup>15</sup>

Joseph Morse Bickford was a schoolteacher in Saluria on the eastern end of Matagorda Island. By the 1850s the surrounding area was a thriving ranching center where cattle roamed the salt grass dunes of the island. On Friday, April 26, 1861, Bickford closed his school to take the oath; although he did not specify which oath he took. Since he maintained close connections with Massachusetts and New Hampshire

relatives, he may have joined the Union Army or simply taken the Oath of Allegiance to the United States.

Bickford accepted an offer to serve as tallyman on a drive L. DuBois organized. His diary doubled as a logbook for expenses incurred during the 1861 drive to New Orleans. Less than a month later the cattle were ready to go; they had been rounded up, counted, and branded. The first day they crossed over to the mainland and circled the town of Lavaca. From there they paralleled the Texas coastline, remaining about fifty miles inland. Their route roughly followed the Opelousas Trail.

Bickford recorded crossing at least two dozen rivers on the way. The herd consisted of 500 to 600 head of cattle driven by five men in addition to Bickford and DuBois. The trip lasted from late May to early July, moving up to twenty-five miles per day at the beginning of the drive when the cattle were restless. This speed lasted about three or four days until the cattle settled into a routine where they traveled five to ten miles daily. The Colorado River crossing was the only place where the water level was high enough to pose a real danger. There they allowed the herd to graze while the water level went down. Several horses were lost in the high water but no steers. While waiting for the river to recede, DuBois profited from his unplanned delay by purchasing another herd to sell in New Orleans.

Crossing the Brazos River at the town of Richmond, two steers were lost, one dying while mired in the mud that indicated the Brazos was at a low water level. At Cyprus City between Buffalo Bayou and the San Jacinto River, Bickford and DuBois realized they were on the wrong trail and had to make adjustments. They crossed the Neches River at either Tevis's or Collier's Ferry to avoid the streets of Beaumont, where

citizens awoke daily during the Civil War to the bellowing of cattle being driven east to feed troops. After crossing into Louisiana at the Sabine River, the drovers began to experience chills and fevers associated with low-lying swamps riddled with mosquitoes and other disease-bearing insects. Rain set in and Bickford reported heavy rainfalls every day. None of the men died on the trail, but two were so ill they had to remain at the homes of strangers along the way. When recovered, they rejoined the herd.

As the tallyman, Bickford kept accurate records of the expenses involved in the cattle drive. While steers swam rivers, supply wagons and extra horses or mules crossed on ferry. The toll for ferries increased as the herd moved eastward. The cheapest was near Lavaca on the Navidad River where the fee was ninety-five cents total. The most expensive ferry cost \$20.25 at the Sabine River. Extra hands were hired to help cross the Brazos and Sabine rivers. Pasturage in Texas cost between four and five dollars per night, but because of denser populations and less open range in Louisiana the price rose to fifteen dollars. When the herd got into a field of corn and ate the ripening crop, Bickford was forced to settle with the irate farmer for thirty dollars. On June 29, nearing New Orleans, the men first encountered Confederate troops. By July 9 the herd was close enough to New Orleans to separate the steers by weight. Most of the drovers left for home then, but Bickford and DuBois remained after they loaded the herd onto a steamboat bound for New Orleans. Bickford rode on the cattle boat and spent several days seeing the sights of the city. He did not record who bought the herd. It could have been butchers in the city or Confederate commissary agents. At that early date, Southerners were optimistic of winning the war quickly. Beef prices in New Orleans at the beginning of the war ranged as high as thirty to fifty dollars per head.

Bickford remained in Louisiana with DuBois 15 October. DuBois had relatives in the area with whom he visited and from whom Bickford learned the French language. Fourteen days after leaving the New Orleans area, Bickford returned to Matagorda Island. The trip was successful, little stock was lost, and no men died.<sup>16</sup>

Between 1861 and 1863 more than 30,000 steers were delivered to the Confederate government at the military stockyards in New Iberia for slaughter at the packing plant in nearby Alexandria, Louisiana. Packing plants in Jefferson and Liberty, Texas, as well as those in Louisiana were adjacent to tanneries, boot, and saddle makers. By December of 1861 the Confederate Army in Department Number One had heavily armed the areas of pasturage near New Orleans and expected to create a citadel around the city. At Calcasieu Bay, two 24-pound cannons were installed to prevent Union foraging parties from reaching cattle-grazing pastures around the lake. Atchafalaya River was even more fortified with one 32-pound rifled gun and four 24-pounders. Major-General M. Lovell of the Confederate army expressed optimism about the defense of New Orleans. In a report of December 5, 1861, he stated “beef cattle from Texas would enable us to stand a siege of two or three months, if it should be necessary.” Reliance upon Texas cattle was one of a key issues.<sup>17</sup>

One of the arguments that Texas produced very little beef for the Confederacy was that all able-bodied men were fighting east of the Mississippi. This, however, was not true. Those families that had at least one son between the ages of eight and thirteen managed better than most. The boys knew the cattle business from the time they could walk. They watched the herds, protected their families and neighbors from marauding Native Americans and Mexican bandits and kept life on a somewhat even keel. On many

occasions women were competent with rifles, able to fend off Indian attacks. Several letters exist written by husbands away at war to their wives giving explicit instructions for keeping the cattle herds alive and together. It was possible but rare for families to survive the war without losing everything. Confederate currency accounted for the most devastation to stock raisers.<sup>18</sup>

A challenge that affected the Texas cattle industry just prior and during the Civil War was the weather. Colonel Robert E. Lee wrote his wife in the summer of 1857 that the temperature in the hospital tent at Camp Cooper reached 112 degrees. Very little rain fell that year resulting in withered grasslands, lack of water, and the starvation of many cattle. Drought conditions continued through the winter of 1858-59 when an infamous blizzard froze lakes and ponds in South Texas. There was some rainfall in late 1859, but by the summer of 1860 temperatures again rose to triple digits. Marshall, Texas, recorded a high of 115 degrees when several North Texas towns experienced devastating fires known as the Texas Troubles. Rain again fell in the fall of 1861, but did not return until the winter of 1864-1865. Numerous dry northers crossed the Red River headed toward the Rio Grande. When north winds blow, cattle and horses turn their backs to the wind and start walking toward better conditions. With open range, livestock were not limited to a specific area but were able to walk to more temperate pastures. Thousands of cattle halted south of Austin in what became known as the Great Drift. Many had brands registered in counties miles away to the north.<sup>19</sup>

Indian depredations along the frontier caused many women to retreat eastward to safety. They too abandoned their livestock, much as the Spanish missionaries had done

at an earlier date. With little local law enforcement and stray laws no longer enforceable, rightful owners did not claim the cattle.

The Texas cattle industry came into its own during the Civil War. Americans became aware of the quality of the beef, but the fall of Vicksburg and Port Hudson closed the Mississippi River to further markets. Texas herds drifted south, died from the drought, or were driven off by Native Americans or Mexican bandits. Worthless Confederate currency dealt a crucial blow to the entire South, including Texas ranchers. C. C. Slaughter of Palo Pinto County boxed up his devalued currency and sent it to the local school for children to practice their letters.<sup>20</sup>

Yet the hardy Texas Longhorn continued to increase in such catastrophic times. Cattlemen faced an unsettled future when the war closed. The challenge was to re-establish markets, the age-old problem.

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<sup>1</sup> "James Pickney Henderson", *Handbook of Texas*, Vol. III, 554

<sup>2</sup> [www.burketexas.com/industry/cattleraising.php](http://www.burketexas.com/industry/cattleraising.php) accessed 30 July 2011; Tom Lea, *The King Ranch*, Vol. 1 (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1957), 112; Martha Ann Turner, *Clara Driscoll: An American Tradition* (Austin: Madrona Press, 1979) 6; John R. Erickson, *Through Time and the Valley* (Denton: UNT Press, 1995 reprint) 106; <http://doublehelixranch.com/History.html> accessed 30 July 2011; C. L. Douglas, *Cattle Kings of Texas* (Austin: State House Press, 1989) 3-5; Joe C. Paschal, "Beef Cattle Breeds and Breeding Systems in South Texas" <http://cnrit.tamu.edu/cgrm/whatshot/paschal.html> accessed 30 July 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Erickson, 195; Lea, 107, 180; [www.burketexas.com/industry/cattleraising.php](http://www.burketexas.com/industry/cattleraising.php) accessed 30 July 2011; Noah Smithwick, *Evolution of a State or Recollections of Old Texas Days* (Austin, UTPress, 1983) 88, 1, 155; <http://doublehelixranch.com/History.htm> accessed 30 July 2011;

<sup>4</sup> Lea, 95; Sara R. Massey (ed), *Texas Women on the Cattle Trails* (College Station: TAMU Press, 2006) 6.

<sup>5</sup> Smithwick, 74, 90.

<sup>6</sup> Robert H. Thornhoff, "Taylors Trail in Texas," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* (hereafter cited as *SHQ*) 70 (1966): 7

<sup>7</sup> Massey, 6; Erickson, 195; [www.burketexas.com/industry/cattleraisingphp](http://www.burketexas.com/industry/cattleraisingphp) accessed 30 July 2011; Lea 113-114; [www.onlinelibrary.wiley.com](http://www.onlinelibrary.wiley.com) accessed 1 August 2011; "Morgan Lines," *Handbook of Texas*, Vol. IV, 838; <http://doublehelixranch.com/cattletailing.com> accessed 1 August 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Jim Bob Jackson, *They Pointed Them East First* (Houston: Kemp & Co., 2008) 1-12; Douglas, 20, [www.burketexas.com/industry/cattleraising.php](http://www.burketexas.com/industry/cattleraising.php) accessed 30 July 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Jackson, 54-55.

<sup>11</sup> <http://doublehelixranch.com/History.html> accessed 30 July 2011.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, Jackson, 58-60.

<sup>14</sup> Branch Isbell, "Days That Were Full of Thrills," J. Marvin Hunter (ed.),

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*The Trail Drivers of Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985 reprint) 571; George L. Gillespie to C. L. Stevenson, March 3, 1863, *OR*, 1, 24: 3:651-52.

<sup>15</sup> Jackson, 62-64; "Joseph Morse Bickford Diary 1861," Sidney R. Weisinger Collection, Victoria Regional History Center, Victoria College/UH-Victoria Library; s.v., "Saluria, Texas."

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> M. Lovell to J. P. Benjamin, December 5, 1861, *OR*, 1, 6, 774-776.

<sup>18</sup> J. Marvin Hunter (ed.), *The Trail Drivers of Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985 reprint), 183, 363, 374, 387, 420-421.

<sup>19</sup> Ty Cashion, *A Texas Frontier: The Clear Fork Country and Fort Griffin, 1849-1887* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 46; William Curry Holden, *A Ranching Saga: The Lives of William Electious Halsell and Ewing Halsell* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1976), 32-34; Don E. Reynolds, *Editors Make War; Southern Newspapers in the Secession Crisis* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1970), 7.

<sup>20</sup> Mary Clark Whatley, *The Slaughter Ranchers & Their Makers* (Austin: Jenkins Publishing Co., 1979), 51-52.