

History of Longhorns in California

By Michael Casey

Longhorn cattle, which, I submit, were identical to those cattle which are today known as "Texas Longhorns" (see footnote), have played a colorful role in the history of California from the earliest days of Spanish settlement. They were the State's first economically viable trading "product" and, in that respect, enjoyed a very important place in the economic development not only of this State but of the boot and shoe industries in New England as well. Yet, somehow their role seems to have slipped through the cracks of history, and they remain forgotten heroes of our State's past.

For the origins of Longhorn cattle in this state, one must look to the Spanish missionaries and explorers of the 18th century. Although Spanish explorers and their cattle had been present in Mexico since the early part of the sixteenth century, efforts to explore California had been thwarted consistently until 1769. Ever since the mid 1600s (and to some extent before that as well) voyages by ship along the coast had succeeded in whetting the appetites of the Spaniards; however, numerous overland attempts at exploration had been rebuffed both due to savage Indian opposition and, more significantly, due to the natural barriers of the deserts which cross lower California all the way from the coast to the Colorado River. Then, in 1769, an expedition, led by Gaspar de Portola and Father Junipero Serra, achieved the breakthrough and arrived in San Diego in "Alta California" on July 1, 1769. They thereafter continued north, discovering Monterey and, ultimately, San Francisco Bay as well. That expedition, staffed primarily by soldiers and clergy, also brought with it "several hundred head of cattle...both to augment the food supply and to furnish breeding stock for the proposed missions and settlements in Alta California."¹ Those horned Spanish cattle which accompanied Portola and Father Serra were, it is believed, the first cattle to arrive in what is now the State of California.

Over the next five years an overland supply route was created, and, in 1775, Juan Bautista de Anza led the first group of colonists from Sonora, Mexico, a group of 240 hardy souls, accompanied by many horses and cattle, who ultimately made their way to Monterey and to the southern portion of San Francisco Bay. Typically, those cattle which escaped slaughter enroute survived at trail's end and, along with other cattle which had accompanied the earlier military and Franciscan trips, became seedstock for future generations of cattle which ultimately roamed semi wild throughout the State.

The Spanish explorers of the mid and late 18th centuries for the most part limited their explorations to the coastal regions of the southern and middle portions of the State. Longhorn cattle, therefore, ended up mainly populating the coastal Counties from San Diego north to Monterey, primarily inhabiting the non fenced and vast boundaries of the lands which the Spanish Crown had provided for the use of the Franciscan missionaries. They quickly multiplied under the favorable climatic conditions they found. Thus, whereas in 1774 there were only approximately 350 head of horned cattle in all of Alta California, by 1800 the missions reported holdings totalling 153,000 head.² By 1834 that total had jumped to 396,000 head of longhorn cattle populating the lands controlled by 21 missions.³ By 1850, it has been estimated that nearly 500,000 Longhorns could be found in four counties alone (Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, Ventura, and San Bernardino).⁴

Early Californians were apparently pastoral by nature. They were far better at, and more interested in, raising cattle than in cultivating the land. The former was easy - their cattle pretty much did everything necessary for their survival and procreation by themselves. To the contrary, cultivation of the soil would have entailed long days, hard work, and natural climate cycles which could, in a bad year, wreak havoc on one's efforts. Furthermore, roundups and slaughterings had an element of danger about them which appealed to the early Californians'



love of sport and excitement.⁵ Hence, Californians were content to see their herds of these semi-wild cattle continue to grow in numbers and to provide hides, tallow, and beef for purely local consumption. They initially completely failed to appreciate broader marketing opportunities.

To understand the significance of the role of Longhorn cattle in the economic development of California, it would be well to read *Two Years Before the Mast*, the classic non-fictional account by Richard Henry Dana of his two year stint on a Yankee trading vessel which travelled up and down the coast of California gathering hides for its owners, Bryant, Sturgis & Co. in Boston.⁶ Dana, who had little respect for the early settlers in California, describes an "idle, thriftless people" who seemed incapable of making anything for themselves and seemed content to do business with avaricious ships' captains for nearly everything they required. These Spanish settlers, who had nothing of value for trading purposes other than the hides of their longhorned cattle, valued those hides at \$2.00 apiece and used them as currency. The Yankee traders, in turn, would take them in trade for highly marked up merchandise from the ships' stores, such as food, tools, linen, jewelry, furniture, clothing, and other goods. A full shipload was 40,000 hides, and it generally took several years of cruising the coast for each ship to accumulate that many. Indeed, by the 1830s and 1840s it was common to see 30 or more Yankee trading ships as well as whalers anchored in San Francisco bay at any given time.

Thus was born late in the 18th century a modest trading relationship which spurred greater interest, on the part of the Californians, in accumulating, branding, and owning these longhorned cattle which were roaming, often wild, throughout the southern and middle regions of the State. With the passage of time, the large Hide and Tallow companies, both in New England and in Britain, came ever more to appreciate the existence of California's cattle population. In 1821 (the year that Spain ceded California to Mexico), Bryant, Sturgis & Co. established a permanent agent in the territory to begin the systematic collection of hides for the New England market. At about that same time, John Begg & Co., an English house, sent out two agents to undertake the same business. Within a year, nine Hide and Tallow companies had opened offices in California, and business began to flourish. For New England, this new found trading opportunity enabled Connecticut and Massachusetts to achieve dominance in the boot and shoe industry in the United States, and it also provided them with a product with which they could begin to conduct international trade with European nations. It has been said that, "[t]hrough the hide and tallow trade, more than through any other agency, New England began her expansion to the West Coast."⁷

During this same period, the Oregon Territory was also beginning to become populated by American settlers. Recognizing the need in that territory for a local source of meat, hides, and tallow, in 1837 Ewing Young led an expedition to California to purchase a number of these longhorn cattle. The expedition sailed down to San Francisco and then spread out overland in search of animals to purchase. Ultimately, they gathered up 729 head of longhorn cattle which, over the next 120 days, they walked north to Oregon.⁸ This cattle drive, incidentally, predated the better known trail drives north from Texas by over thirty years and may be the first recorded long trail drive of longhorn cattle to meet the needs of a distant market.

Meanwhile, for Californians, this new trading opportunity also meant lasting changes. At last there was an outlet for these many thousands of animals which were rapidly propagating but which had, until the early 1800s, been considered largely worthless. Californians knew how to tan hides, and the Hide and Tallow Companies had developed sophisticated vats for rendering fat (be it whale blubber or cattle fat) off shore on their vessels. However, there was still no known market for the beef of these cattle. Therefore, typically the animal carcasses, after being skinned and having the renderable fat removed, were left to rot. Tens of thousands of tons of beef simply went wasted in this way, much of it abandoned on beaches near where the longboats had loaded the usable portions.

During the earlier days of California's hide and tallow trade the cattle sellers had received, in addition to the basic goods described above, oriental silks, damask, delicate laces, Spanish embroideries, French tapestries, silver mounted saddles and ornate riding costumes with silver buttons, all of which denoted wealth and power.⁹ Once the Hide and Tallow Companies established business offices, both the landowners and the newly

independent Mexican Government (which had defeated Spain in 1821 after years of bloody revolution) began demanding payment in the form of currency which not only created liquidity and wealth for private individuals, but also created the primary source of payment of the salaries of Government workers and the Mexican military garrisons.¹⁰

In 1833, Mexico passed the "Secularization Act", a dramatic piece of legislation which brought the mission era to a quick and dramatic conclusion and "ushered in the golden age of the ranchos." That Act, by which the mission lands were taken back from the Franciscans and made available for large scale grants by the Mexican Government to private individuals, enabled those settlers fortunate enough to obtain private grants, to obtain huge holdings of land on which to raise their cattle. However, boundaries were set haphazardly at best. Indeed, the officially sanctioned method of setting boundaries was through the use of 50 yard long "reatas" which were staked at both ends. A stake would be set at the beginning point, and one of the two vaqueros responsible for measuring the boundary would then gallop to the end of the rope and set the far stake. The other vaquero would then pull the near stake and gallop on until the reata was taught again. The procedure allowed people to measure many miles of boundaries in a single day, but they were inexact and best described by the term "mas o menos" which was always part of the official title description.¹¹ The resultant "boundaries" were then frequently memorialized by piling loose stones atop one another at corner points, a practice which obviously lacked any permanence whatsoever. Furthermore, record keeping was largely non existent, and many of the records that were created were subsequently lost. This sort of feeble effort at delineating property lines worked only so long as the landowners had access to the power of the Government and the Military to protect their claimed rights.



By the time that control of California passed to The United States in 1848, the State's economic prosperity was largely tied to its hide and tallow export trade. In that year alone the province exported 80,000 hides and 1,500,000 pounds of tallow.¹² At that time, however, pressure to contest the titles to these ranchos was building, first by many Americans who were by then crossing by wagon train and seeking land to homestead, and later by miners after gold was discovered. This mounting and chaotic pressure caused Congress to hastily pass the Land Act in 1851. That Act caused the establishment of a commission based in San Francisco whose charge was to pass judgment on all titles held under

Spanish or Mexican grants and to require forfeiture of all such titles which could not be proved within two years. Over the next five years, the Commission decided over 800 claims involving over 12,000,000 acres of land. Although over two thirds of the titles were confirmed, even the successful owners often found much of their lands eroded or foreclosed because of attorneys fees and the huge costs of submitting their proofs. Many had to borrow money to cover these proceedings, and the interest rates, which then ranged from a low of 3% to a high of 10% per month wiped out many legitimate landowners and reduced them to poverty.

On January 24, 1848 gold was discovered in Northern California. That created a whole new industry for the north and brought in people by the tens of thousands literally overnight. This teeming new population required food as well as clothing. As Northern California became wealthy, not only from the gold generated in its mines but also from the growth of supporting industries, the business of raising and selling cattle began taking a far less important role in their economy. Now, instead, those in the northern part of the State became consumers of the products of cattle raised by others. The southern part of the state, which had found itself cut off from any direct share of this newly discovered northern wealth, seemed to be the perfect supplier to this new and growing market. Therefore, the southern counties, and particularly those located along the coast, became increasingly invested in and dependent on the cattle business, not only because of its historic trading opportunities but now suddenly also because of the new markets in the north. To the newly rich Northern Californians, these southern counties were derisively referred to as the "cow counties".

Just as in every other section of the State, these southern cattle raising counties were, at this time, facing the confusion of transition from Mexican to American control, and many formerly large holdings were being decimated by title disputes, squatter claims, and mortgage foreclosures. Still, there remained large landholdings "upon which still roamed vast herds of long horned, slim bodied cattle."¹³

For these cattlemen of the south, the demand for beef from the miners in the north initially provided a new and lucrative market; however, due to the breakdown of most of the large ranchos, and also because of the sheer size of the population explosion in northern California, supplies were simply inadequate to meet demand. Prices escalated through natural market forces, and suddenly it became profitable for ranchers as far away as Texas and New Mexico to drive cattle westward to feed this large new market. Clarence Gordon, in his "Report on Cattle, Sheep, and Swine", appearing in Volume III of The Tenth Census of the United States, (1880), estimated that during the decade of the 1850s approximately 100,000 head of cattle were driven west into California.¹⁴ On the other hand, J. Frank Dobie, in a footnote appearing at page 363 of his definitive book, *The Longhorns*, (Little, Brown & Co, Boston, 1941), noted:

"I have a mass of records on drives before the Civil War that show a much livelier movement than chroniclers of the cattle trade seem to have been aware of."¹⁵

Whatever the actual numbers were, it seems clear that the beef requirements of Northern Californians were initially met during the early 1850s not only by Southern California longhorn ranchers but also by the importation of large numbers of longhorn cattle from Texas and New Mexico. Those drives, which were actually longer in distance and required passage through hostile Indian country, predated the more famous great northern drives by a decade or more.

In 1856, a severe drought caused the loss of at least 100,000 head of cattle in Southern California. That calamity was followed by another drought in 1860, and, finally, by the great disastrous drought of 1864. In that latter year alone an estimated 50-75% of the entire cattle population of Los Angeles County died of thirst or starvation. Land values plummeted, mortgages were foreclosed, and the industry never recovered. After 1864, most of the remaining ranches were sold into smaller holdings, and landowners began diversifying out of cattle and into other more profitable and stable forms of agriculture.

One rancher whose holdings endured and who actually profited by the drought of 1864 was a man by the name of Henry Miller, a one time butcher in San Francisco who went on to become probably the largest private landowner in the State. Although his holdings expanded during the 1860s and in later decades, (and, indeed, are largely still owned by his descendants today), he was one of the first, if not the first, rancher in The United States to bring in Durham and Hereford bulls to breed to his longhorn cows. Thus, as fascinating a story as his is, it is ultimately a story which parallels that of the 1880s and 1890s throughout the herds of Texas and the South where purebred longhorns became nearly extinct due to the changing demands of the marketplace toward fattier British breeds.

Just as purebred Longhorns largely disappeared from Texas during the 1890s, the same had already begun to happen in California several decades earlier. Ultimately, however, it cannot be denied that, during their heyday, the impact these animals had on the growth of trade and prosperity in this State was a very significant one. Indeed, one might argue that, had the gold rush never occurred in California (and thereby eclipsed the role of the Longhorn in the State's prosperity), the California Longhorn might have been given a far more important place in the history in the United States.

Footnote:

Descendents of the longhorn cattle which inhabited California during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are, to the best of the author's knowledge, no longer in existence. While it is known that, for a time between

1850 and 1853, the California animal was slaughtered in California alongside longhorns which had been driven from Texas to feed the burgeoning population of gold miners and others who flocked to this state during that time period, there is no known account from butchers, cowboys, or other contemporary sources in which the animals were described side by side. Nor do the records of Henry Miller (the largest landowner and cattle rancher in the State during those years, - whose voluminous records are archived at both the Bancroft Library in Berkeley and the Huntington Library in Pasadena) shed any light on the subject.

The following information has come to light, thanks to the painstaking research of Professor Terry Jordan (Professor of History and Ideas in the Department of Geography at the University of Texas at Austin), and is based on his 1993 book, *North American Cattle Ranching Frontiers*. It points to what appears to the author, to be an inescapable conclusion that the animals were identical.

A. Ancestors of both the California and Texas variety of longhorns ultimately trace back to the estuarian marshes of Andalusia in Southern Spain as well as the more wooded region of Extramadura in Western Spain. The people who inhabited those regions comprised the largest block of settlers who came to the new world with Columbus, beginning in 1493. They settled in the four islands comprising the Antilles chain (Hispaniola, Jamaica, Cuba, and Puerto Rico). Professor Jordan reports that the cattle those settlers brought with them were allowed to roam freely and became semi-feral, giving birth to offspring which often displayed spotted and speckled color patterns typical of feral animals.

B. Beginning in 1519 many of the Antilles settlers left for the Mexican mainland in search of gold and other rumored treasures. They took with them their cattle, and those cattle began populating Mexico. Once there, they accompanied their Spanish owners on a slow northward migration along both the Pacific and Caribbean coastlines (as well as the central highlands). Along the eastern coast, the ancestors of "Texas Longhorns" entered south Texas in the mid 1700s by way of the Nueces Strip (a region of South Texas lying between the Nueces and Rio Grande Rivers). Brought in largely by Spanish missionaries, they quickly populated the San Antonio River Valley out as far as Goliad on the coast. In 1806 Martin DeLeon began ranching in the Nueces Strip and ultimately drove his Andalusian cattle eastward toward New Orleans, adding to his ranchlands along the coastal plains of Texas beyond the Guadalupe River.

C. Although there was arguably some interbreeding between British and Andalusian cattle in Florida in the early 1700s, that appears to have been of little, if any, consequence. The Andalusian cattle had entered Florida with Spanish explorers eager to push their colonial boundaries ever northward; however they were routed by British forces fighting alongside their Creek Indian allies. Those few longhorns that survived did, undoubtedly, mix to some small extent with British cattle being driven along the gulf coast by early American settlers, primarily from South Carolina. However, unlike the Spanish, the Americans who were moving west along the gulf coast exerted far tighter control over their cattle, penning them at night, driving them in closely watched herds during the days, and otherwise limiting much exposure by their cattle to interbreeding with the feral longhorns. Those settlers were also motivated to minimize contact between their animals and the wild longhorns since (as documented by Frank Dobie in his classic work *The Longhorns*, (at page 32) longhorns were immune to a disease, variously referred to as "Spanish Fever", "Texas Fever" and "Cattle Tick Fever." Spread by a tick that longhorns often carried, this disease was frequently fatal to other cattle which had not developed an immunity to it. (Please also see the excellent article by Dwight G. Bennett, DVM, entitled *Driving Cattle*, and *Piroplasmiasis (Tick Fever)*, published in the February 1999 issue of the *Western Horseman*.) Hence, it is likely that whatever interbreeding may have taken place among those animals was quite minor and of no practical consequence in the makeup of the breed of animals now known as "Texas Longhorns." That same disease carrying attribute also made longhorns very unwanted guests around the cattle which came into Texas from the north and northeast by way of settlers coming through the Cumberland Gap. Indeed, many those settlers are known to have developed a policy of shooting longhorns in order to protect their herds.

D. Further evidence of the absence of any meaningful dilution in Texas of the pure Andalusian blood strains of the "Texas Longhorn" is provided by a look at more recent history. Thus, M.P. Wright's "Bow and Arrow"

ranch, which bordered the Nueces River on both sides was started in the 1870s and is one of the oldest ranches in the country. In an article published in the Fall, 1977 edition of the Texas Longhorn Journal, Mr. Wright was acclaimed for his foresight in resisting the strong temptations of the day to "upbreed the scrub cattle" and for his insistence in preserving for posterity a herd of purebred longhorn cattle. As every longhorn breeder is well aware, the "Wright" herd is one of the seven families from which all purebred Texas Longhorns derive today. That same edition of the Texas Longhorn Journal contains an article on the Wichita Refuge (another of the recognized seven families). That article (as well as a later article appearing in the same magazine in the May/June 1984 edition) reports on WR's early collection practices, noting that its initial collection efforts were centered in the Nueces Strip and that they went to Mexico in 1931 and again in 1935 in order to find purebred bulls. Finally, the Yates ranch (another of the seven families) is located 70 miles from the Mexican border in Marathon Texas, an area of Southwestern Texas below Ft. Stockton which is widely considered to have been free from any influence of settlers importing British breeds of cattle. Its founder, Cap Yates is widely known for his insistence on breed purity and for his trips to Mexico to find and buy his cattle.

E. While some of the Andalusian cattle were making their way north along the eastern seaboard of Mexico, others were finding their way north along the Pacific. There, the relative isolation of the coast as well as its favorable climate, combined to create an ideal environment for cattle raising and hastened their northward progress. The Church established an early presence in western Mexico, and, by 1637, the Jesuits had established missions which had a total population of longhorn cattle in excess of 100,000 living in the region between Sinaloa and Sonora. The settlers who were recruited by Portola and Anza for the overland expeditions into Alta California (present day California) in 1769 and 1770 came largely from Sonora, and the cattle they brought with them, and which came to form the seedstock for all later longhorns in California, were those same Andalusian cattle which had come north with Church missionaries along the Pacific coast a century or so earlier.

The foregoing, while not establishing proof beyond a reasonable doubt, certainly supports the author's hypothesis that the cattle which are today known as "Texas Longhorns" are the same breed of cattle which populated early California and provided that State with its earliest export opportunities.

Endnotes:

1. Cleland, From Wilderness to Empire, A History of California - 1542-1900, page 60;
2. Mora, Californios, 1949, The Country Press, Garden City, NY, pages 33 and 34.)
3. Dwinelle, The Colonial History of San Francisco, published by Towne & Bacon in 1867, page 44)
4. Taylor, Bayard, Eldorado - or Adventures In The Path of Empire, published in 1949 by Alfred Knopf, New York).
5. Cleland, A History of California - The American Period, published in 1939 by The McMillan Co. in New York
6. Dana, Two Years Before the Mast, 1840, (Reprinted by Houghton, Mifflin & Co. in 1869 as the "New Edition, with Subsequent matter by the Author").
7. Cleland, A History of California - The American Period, supra at page 45.
8. Edwards, The Diary of Philip Leget Edwards - The Great Cattle Drive from California to Oregon in 1837, published in 1932 by Grabhorn Press in San Francisco.

9. Coolidge, Old California Cowboys, published in 1939 by E.P. Dutton & Co, New York.
10. Cleland, A History of California - The American Period, supra.
11. Cleland, The Cattle on a Thousand Hills, 1941, published by the Henry Huntington Library and Art Gallery, pages 26 and 27.
12. Cleland, The Cattle on a Thousand Hills, supra, at page 33
13. Cleland, A History of California - The American Period, supra, at page 305.
14. Clarence Gordon, "Report on Cattle, Sheep, and Swine", Volume III of The Tenth Census of the United States, (1880),
15. Dobie, Frank, The Longhorns, (Little, Brown & Co, Boston, 1941)