CHAPTER I

The Early Years

When one thinks of southwest Louisiana, what generally comes to mind are images of pulsating music, well-seasoned food, and romantic stories of desperate French-speaking exiles arriving on the wild shores of Louisiana. Today, south-central and southwest Louisiana produce rice, sugarcane, oil, natural gas, artists, musicians, and writers. And commercial fishing along the banks of the region's coastal parishes ranks among the most productive in the world. In the face of those resources for which the region is known, the thought of south Louisianians as cattle ranchers and cowpunchers seems foreign. Yet, many Louisianians, including Acadians, have flourished in the cattle business from the mid-eighteenth century up until the present day. They drove cattle across bayous, marshes, and rivers from the vast open grassland prairies and marshes of south Louisiana to the Sabine River in the west and to the Mississippi in the east.

The Acadians were not the first ranchers in Louisiana. The Creoles and European settlers here before them had ranched in the prairie region west of New Orleans even before the posts at Opelousas and Attakapas were established. The first settlers to move onto the prairie region not only discovered a sea of grass, they found horses and cattle.

Where did the horses and cattle come from? Neither are native to North America. They were brought over on ships by the explorers. The Spanish *entradas* out of Mexico moved into Texas bringing large herds of horses, cattle, and sheep with them. They intentionally stocked the land with horses and cattle as they traveled, turning out one stallion and one mare, and one bull and one cow, at each major river crossing.

Since the 1500s, the Native Americans, seeing the advantage these domestic animals gave the Spanish, have stolen and traded for them, bringing them north, even into Louisiana. When Tonti, looking for the lost explorer La Salle, made it to the Caddo Indian village at Natchitoches in 1690, he found they had many horses. In fact, the Natchitoches Post (founded 1713), which predates New Orleans by five years, was started in large part to facilitate livestock trade with the Native Americans.[1]

Even though the Acadians were neither the first, nor the most numerous ethnic group in southwest Louisiana, in the end, their culture came to dominate the region. Though certainly not the only people in this occupation, they quickly became the largest ethnic group in ranch work. Despite their prominence in the area, their entry into the cattle business is not widely known or acknowledged and is worth chronicling.

The story of the Acadians' arrival in Louisiana is known to most schoolchildren. Longfellow's *Evangeline,* romantically chronicling the expulsion of the Acadians from Nova Scotia, is one of this country's great epic poems. The first large group of Acadians came to Louisiana in 1765 at the invitation of Antonio de Ulloa, Spain's first governor in the former French colony. Ulloa needed hardy settlers to occupy the land, to solidify Spain's claim to the territory, and to farm the rich land along the banks of the Mississippi River north of New Orleans.

Governor Ulloa, however, was not the only one to greet the new settlers and to make them a proposition. Antoine Bernard Dauterive, a *vacher* (rancher), owned more than five thousand head of branded cattle near the Opelousas Post west of the Mississippi. He must have known something about Acadians and their history in Nova Scotia, for his proposition dealt with cattle. To the Acadians who landed in New Orleans without money and hardly any possessions, Dauterive agreed to give each family five cows and one bull each year for six consecutive years. At the end of the six years, the Acadians had to return to Dauterive an equal number of cattle of like kind and quality. In addition, he would divide the offspring, with the Acadians keeping half. Dauterive and his partner, Edouard Masse, also offered the Acadians land along Bayou Teche from Opelousas south to Attakapas Post, today's city of St. Martinville.[2]

It seems a good deal for both sides. Dauterive got free care of his cattle, half the profits, and a source of skilled labor. He was provided the needed *cavaliers* (horsemen) to tend his cattle and drive them to market, for herding cattle on the open range and on regular trail drives to New Orleans required a number of men. Acadians, in turn, got a start in the cattle business without having to come up with the capital. This was the "Dauterive Compact" that helped start the Acadians on their way to becoming the dominant force in the dominant economic activity of southwestern Louisiana for more than a century, cattle ranching. The very first Acadians to arrive in Louisiana became cattlemen.

The Acadians—with a long history as *graziers,* trappers, hunters, and fishermen in Nova Scotia—liked Dauterive's offer better than Governor Ulloa's idea of farming. The names on the original Dauterive Compact read like today's Acadian *Who's Who.* There were four Broussards, a Guilbeau, a Duga(s), a Tibaudau (Thibodeaux), and an Arcenaud (Arceneaux), all of whom were referred to as "Acadian chiefs." These names appear again and again, even into the twentieth century, as important players in Louisiana's cattle industry.

Though the these first Acadians ultimately did not choose lives as farmers under the Spanish government, Governor Ulloa gave the Acadians powder and shot, a few tools, and a three-month supply of corn, and off they went into the prairies and marshes to re-create what they had lost in Nova Scotia. No people could have been better equipped with courage, temperament, talent, and experience to succeed in cattle ranching. And they did succeed. In 1769, when Spanish governor Alejandro O'Reilly sent envoys into the southwest interior to learn what was out there on the prairie, they noted that Acadians were beginning to prosper as ranchers. The envoys found more than two thousand head of branded cattle at the Opelousas Post and a thousand head at the Attakapas Post. By 1803, when Louisiana became a territory of the United States, branded cattle in the Opelousas district numbered in excess of fifty thousand head.

When the Acadians arrived at the Opelousas Post, they found an amazing land awaiting them. There were a few *vacheries* (ranches) run by French, Spanish, and English settlers, but the land lying between Bayou Teche and the Sabine River was largely unpopulated. It was a sea of unfenced, free grass, a land of opportunity for people suited to it. Other than a few garden patches, the plow had not touched it. The wide vistas of the prairie held a few thousand branded (tamed) cattle, but many more running wild and free for the catching. The same was true for horses, a love for which blossomed among the Acadians, who quickly found skill and sport in breaking and racing the animals.

In 1805, two years after the Louisiana Purchase, American surveyor William Darby, setting out from New Orleans, described the region in his report: "Continuing westward, a new and astonishing scene would open: the wide, green plains of Attakapas and Opelousas, varied by the irregular chains of woods, narrow and indented." Darby was immensely impressed by what he saw. "The face of the earth exhibits an expanse of grass, interrupted only by an occasional clump of oak or pine trees. . . . The winds breathe over the pathless waste of savanna. The wild fowl is seen flitting or the deer skimming over the plain."

In describing the Attakapas prairie between Bayous Teche and Vermilion and the Opelousas prairie between the Teche and the Mermentau River, Darby notes:

> Here you behold those vast herds of cattle which afford sustenance to the natives, and the inhabitants of New Orleans. It is certainly one of the most agreeable views in nature, to behold from a point of elevation, thousands of horses and cows, of all sizes, scattered over the interminable mead, intermingled in wild confusion. . . . If the active horsemen who guard them would keep their distance, . . . it would transport us backwards in the pastoral ages. When we estimate the extent of ground that must forever remain covered with grass, it is no extravagant declaration to call this one of the meadows of America.

When he got to Prairie Mamou, between Cane Bayou and Bayou Nezpique, he found a prairie devoted to the rearing of cattle, with the larger vacheries holding several thousand head each. It is clear that by the time of Darby's visit in 1805 ranching was the biggest business in southwest Louisiana.

Darby surveyed as far west as the Sabine River. Noting the thinness of the topsoil, he says the Sabine Prairie, located between the Sabine and the Calcasieu Rivers, owes its importance to "its position, rather than from its intrinsic value" for either soil or timber. He was right. This is where cattle and horses often entered Louisiana, smuggled in at first and then later brought in openly on well-defined trails to New Orleans. Because the soil is not as good for farming as that farther east, the Sabine Prairie is used mostly for cattle even today.

Darby noted the year-round grazing available in the region and the ranchers' inattention to providing winter feed for the periods when no grass was available. As will be revealed later, absolute reliance on nature would prove disastrous when severe winter weather did occur.

Later, in 1817, Darby described the livestock he found in the region. He understood that the cattle, horses, and methods of managing such livestock were brought to Louisiana from Texas, that former Spanish province. Those Texas cattle then so prevalent in Opelousas and Attakapas were "high, clean limbed and elegant in appearance," while the horses, of Andalusian or Nubian descent, were, "like their ancestors, small, compactly built, and inconceivably durable."

In his travels in the region, Darby found cattle kept "under herd." Horsemen herded them constantly, sometimes daily. Cattle received no supplemental feeding, and they had to be driven from place to place for grass and water as the seasons and range conditions dictated. Careful attention was paid to protect tame cattle from the large numbers of wild cattle that roamed the prairies.[3]

Two concepts characterized cattle operations on the Cajun Prairie: the notion of free grass or open range (no fences) and the practice of running cattle in common, meaning that cattle of different owners were mixed and ran together on the open range as one herd. These practices led to distinctive methods of working as well as specialized skills. Common herds required cooperation between the different owners and their hired hands to work the large herds of mixed-ownership cattle. This meant that owners and bosses learned to work cooperatively, with a unified plan, to get the job done. Thus the most independent souls, cow people, had to work together as a community to prosper.

Open ranges and running herds in common also required unique skills. Certain elements are common to all cattle operations wherever located: spring roundups to brand new calves; trail drives to fresh pastures and good water; selecting and separating animals ready for market; and driving cattle to market. When cattle of mixed ownership are worked, however, all the normal tasks are made more complicated because the unbranded calves must be paired correctly with the proper mother cow. This requires the utmost skill and knowledge—"cow sense."

In addition to separating branded cattle from different herds, cowhands had to prevent the infiltration of wild cattle. Wild cattle on the Louisiana grasslands, present when the settlers arrived, presented both a problem and an opportunity. They were a problem insofar as the wild cattle would mix with tame ones, then lead them off. Such mixing could make it impossible to gather and handle branded cattle. Problems caused by wild cattle occupied settlers for many years.

The problems posed were somewhat offset by the opportunities wild beef presented. If a man could catch, brand, and place wild cattle under herd, they were his. Additional cattle meant instant wealth if they could be tamed sufficiently to drive to market. Acadians and the other early settlers were successful at doing this. Because the prairie was truly a wide-open space, Louisiana cavaliers could see and follow wild cattle until they had them under control. Another tactic was to use tame cattle as bait for scattered wild ones. The rougher renegades were chased and roped, often with the help of cow dogs trained to track and bay them. Once one was roped and tied down, a group of gentle cattle could be driven to it, and the roped animal released to join the herd and then be driven off with them. The worst ones, the truly incorrigible ones, eventually were hunted down and shot.

Wild cattle had become such a problem in the early Spanish colonial era that in 1770, Governor O'Reilly issued a decree stating,

> Nothing can be more injurious to the inhabitants than strayed cattle, without the destruction of which tame cattle cannot increase, and the inhabitants will continue to labor under those evils of which they have so often complained to us; and considering that the province is at present infested with strayed cattle, we allow the province until the first day in July 1771 and no longer, to collect and kill, for their use, the said strayed cattle; after which time they shall be considered wild, and may be killed by any person.[4]

Odd as it may seem, for cattle ranching to flourish, wild cattle had to be removed from the range. What had once been a blessing was now a curse. The problem of wild cattle plagued the Cajun Prairie and southwest Louisiana until well into the 1800s.

Because cattle roamed in common and at large, brand laws were necessary to solve questions of ownership. Though cattle brands have been registered in Louisiana since 1739, Governor O'Reilly took the problem seriously: "All cattle shall be branded; and those who shall not have branded them at the age of 18 months cannot thereafter claim any property therein." O'Reilly published other laws to enforce and protect legitimate owners. No one was allowed to slaughter an animal without two witnesses present to verify the brand. No one could make a branding iron without first notifying the post commander. Before cattle could be moved from the Opelousas Post, the post commandant had to inspect all brands.[5]

Early brand records are instructive. They reflect not only how dominant cattle ranching was in early Louisiana, but they also trace the settlement patterns as different groups flowed into Louisiana. In the "Brands of the Attakapas and Opelousas Districts, 1760-1888," more than twenty-seven thousand brands are listed. In the beginning, there were French and Spanish names, then Acadian and Anglo-Saxon names became common. There are Attakapas Indian names, and from early on, brands registered to free men of color.

By the 1770s, Acadians had become large owners and sellers of cattle and prominent as drovers. Their work entailed horses, ropes, dogs, boats, and whips, all hallmarks of Louisiana cowboys throughout our history, as we shall see. They built their herds and prospered. The wages they made as drovers for established vachers also financed their growth. In 1771, six years after the first ones arrived, each Acadian vacher owned an average of 22 cattle and 6 horses. By 1803, they owned an average of 125 cattle and 23 horses. From 1780 to 1800, the Attakapas Post reported shipping 150 head a month. By the late 1780s, Acadians owned most of these.[6]

As herds were established, creating a self-sustainable inventory for sale, the emphasis shifted to getting the cattle to market. Though the Acadians were fiercely independent, as were other folk on the prairie, the work of raising cattle and getting them to market required joint efforts. Long accustomed to such in their native Nova Scotia, these *coup de main* efforts continued.

There were the spring and fall roundups and branding to be done. Cattle ready to be sold had to be parted, made up into herds, and trailed to market. Ownership within the trail herds would be mixed, and since a trail drive was a big, important enterprise, the best leadership was needed. In true democratic fashion, and one imported from Acadia, the Acadians elected their trail bosses, and they not only had to direct the cavaliers in getting the herd to market, they also had to sell the cattle when they got there—even for absent owners.[7]

Shortly after settling in the region, they joined in and led the early trail drives from the Opelousas Post to the New Orleans market. In 1773, Amant and Pierre Broussard, along with eight or nine other cavaliers, regularly drove small herds of 100 and 150 head to New Orleans along the Collet Trail. They followed Bayou Teche down to Bayou Black, crossed the Atchafalaya River and swamp, and went up Bayou Lafourche to the Mississippi River and down to New Orleans. The 150-plus-mile drive required the drovers to make numerous swims and fight bogs, swamps, and thick woods. The journey took almost two weeks. There were no chuck wagons, for the terrain was unsuitable, and each man carried his own food and slept out in the open at night.

The trail to New Orleans was a difficult journey, and the collective fates of all ranchers depended on being able to get their cattle to market. It was no small task to drive these half-wild steers to New Orleans, and any animal that escaped represented a significant financial loss to its owner. In 1783, early ranchers taxed themselves to construct a better road on which to drive their cattle to the New Orleans market, another cooperative effort that is a major feature of Louisiana ranchers.

Another talent Acadians brought with them to Louisiana was their ability to find the best markets—the highest prices for their goods—and deliver those goods regardless of the niceties of trade laws; in other words, they were good smugglers here, just as they had been in Nova Scotia.

After taking possession of Louisiana in 1765, the Spanish established trade policies for Texas and Louisiana. Despite owning both territories, the Spanish prohibited trade between Louisiana and Texas and with English settlers east of the Mississippi River. English settlers, however, had iron tools and other goods such as powder and shot that Acadian graziers needed. On the other hand, Acadians had beef and horses and mules needed by the English. So an active but illegal trade prospered back and forth across the Mississippi River at the Manchac settlement south of Baton Rouge.

Looking to the west, Acadians also traded with Texans. Cattle and horses secured in Texas were driven east to the English at Manchac and French plantations along the Mississippi. Acadians used the money they obtained from smuggling to help finance the growth of their herds and vacheries.

Ranching the Louisiana Prairies

Throughout Louisiana's long history, the tallgrass prairies and the coastal marshes have played an important role in the lives and culture of the people who have made their living from the earth. To look hard at this little piece of land is to uncover an important part of the history of Louisiana that is little known and largely forgotten. But Acadians were not the first settlers in the southwest Louisiana prairie. French colonists and other ethnic groups had been there for years prior to the Acadians' arrival. For example, after Spain took ownership of Louisiana in 1763, British colonials living east of the Mississippi River in Natchez moved into the grasslands of Opelousas. They were cattlemen in English territory, and Spain offered them a chance to relocate in better cattle country. In fact, the Natchez folk gave Opelousas its first big population spurt. Some of them made it all the way to the Sabine Prairie between the Calcasieu and Sabine Rivers, though they could not sustain settlements that far from Opelousas. And, of course, Texans crept in from the west.

People of African descent also formed a significant part of the population in the southwest prairie. Louisiana, in the Opelousas area and west, always had a high population of freed blacks, outnumbering slaves until the 1800s. Freed blacks (*gens de couleur libres*) were, from the beginning of the Opelousas Post, a significant economic force, in some cases nearly equal to Europeans. Freed blacks held some of the earliest brands recorded. They always made up a high percentage of the cavaliers of southwest Louisiana, and that continued into the twentieth century.

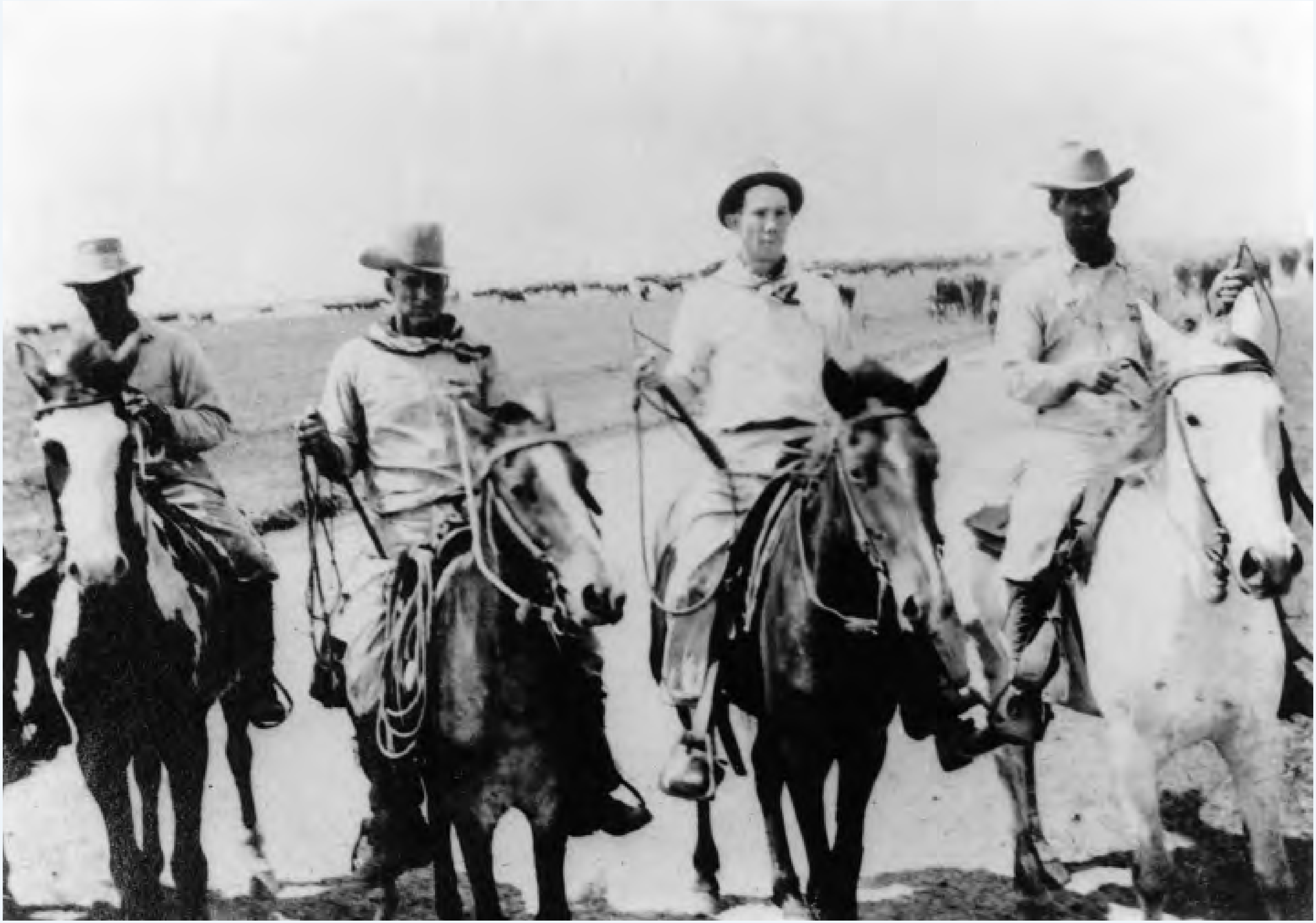
Many black slaves became cowboys as well. During the Spanish period, Governor O'Reilly decided to deed land to settlers (legislation similar to the later Homestead Act), but to get a Spanish grazing land grant, one had to have at least one hundred head of tame cattle (meaning branded and under herd) and two slaves to tend them. And to tend to the cattle, these slaves had to be horsemen, cavaliers.

These various groups were so successful at ranching that as early as 1784, the Attakapas chief complained to the commander of the Opelousas Post that the large numbers of cattle had pushed the game out of their traditional territory, forcing the tribe to move farther and more often than customary in search of food. But there was no stopping the growth of the cattle industry in southwest Louisiana. In response, it is likely that the Native Americans became cowboys, going to work for the vachers. Too, the Attakapas show up in the early brand records, so they soon owned cattle themselves. A century later, Western tribes would follow the same path when the western migration of American settlers also ended their nomadic way of life.

As the wealth of grass became known to the Texans via their movements of cattle, legal and otherwise, across the lower Louisiana prairies, they too entered into ranching in the region. In 1790, a Texan, Daniel Johnson, moved to what is now called Johnsons Bayou along the southwest Louisiana coast and started ranching from a home he built on the north ridge above Deep Bayou. Joining Johnson was his son-in-law, Henry Griffith, who would ranch extensively between his two ranches at Johnsons Bayou and Old River Cove in Anahuac, Texas. Griffith took his cattle to market through Texas, swimming his herds across the Sabine River at Blue Buck Point, then by foot along the beach to his Texas ranch, and from there up the trail to market. This circuitous route was necessary, for the marshes north of Johnsons Bayou blocked any movement in that direction.

The several long, high ridges in the Johnsons Bayou area are what attracted Johnson and Griffith, but instead of calling them chênières, the men named them Buck Ridge, Blue Buck Ridge, and Hackberry Ridge, reflecting their English origins. The first French family to move into Johnsons Bayou was the Trahan family, followed by the Pevotos. Other familiar names like Berwick and Smith came in the early 1800s. A well-known family, the Erbeldings, came to Johnsons Bayou directly from Germany in about 1845.

Despite the great mix of races and backgrounds involved during the infancy of southwest Louisiana's ranching, in the end, it was the Acadians who proved to be the dominant ethnic and cultural force on the prairies. This was so true that the land they lived on goes by their name—the Cajun Prairie.



Welsh, LA, circa 1915. Working vachers on the prairie. All pack the short-handled whip still carried today. *(Photo courtesy Jerry Lognion, whose grandfather is one of the men pictured. Jerry follows cattle like his grandfather.)*

After the Civil War

The Civil War wrecked the cattle industry in southwest Louisiana, just as it wrecked the entire South. Herds were decimated, left to run wild without men at home to herd them, or stolen by Jayhawkers. These outlaws operated from Johnsons Bayou to Pine Prairie near the Mermentau River, keeping both Union and Confederate troops out and destroying much of what one hundred years of labor had built. Farms went fallow, abandoned for lack of labor. The South as a whole lost many of its able-bodied men in conflict. The poison of brother against brother was visited on this part of the state as well. One Cameron rancher had a ten-thousand-dollar price on his head because he had sold cattle to the Yankees during the war.

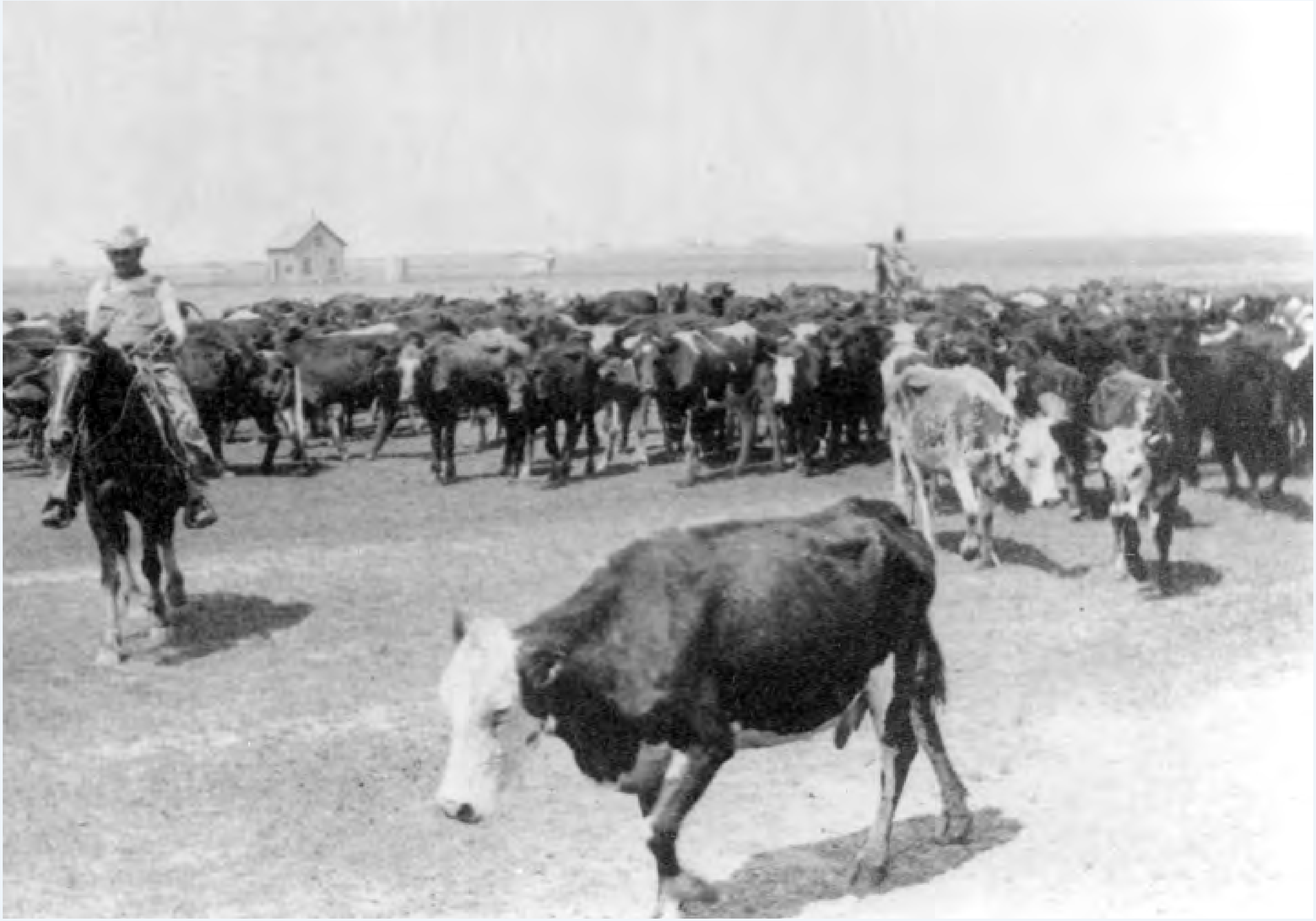
And in what might be seen as divine retribution, four years of terrible weather followed the war, causing massive crop failures across the South. Banks in New Orleans failed. Louisiana, including the Cajun Prairie and the Neutral Strip, was bankrupt. By the 1870s, the grass prairies of southwest Louisiana, like the entire South, had a Third-World society structure, with a very few rich families, very few middle-class farmers and cattlemen, and many poor people. The rebuilding process took a long time. The end of the Civil War marked the beginning of an eighty-year economic depression in the South that lasted until World War II.

Cattlemen, however, had a better chance at regaining their prewar prosperity. The cattle were still out there if one knew where to find them and how to get them to market. The grass was still free to those who knew how to use it. Though it took a lot of sweat to do it, it did not take much money or deeded land to ranch. In a scene that must have been reminiscent of their original settlement in Louisiana, the cavaliers took up the task of gathering, branding, and trailing cattle to and from grass and to market.

It took a while to rejuvenate the once-thriving cattle industry, for the New Orleans market was almost nonexistent during the first few years after the war. There would not have been enough breeding stock anyway to support demands similar to those of the prewar market. Union troops under Gen. Nathaniel Banks had driven off thousands of tame cattle and consumed thousands more. In 1860, there had been almost seventy thousand cattle in domestic herds on the Cajun Prairie, but it would take more than a decade to regain those numbers.

By 1880, markets had improved all across the country. This period marked the numerous trail drives out of Texas to feed the miners in the Rockies, stock the new ranches springing up in the Northwest, and meet the emerging railheads in Kansas that shipped beef to the Chicago packers. The railroads made it possible to ship cattle back east to a growing urban, industrial-age population, and this opened up huge new markets and fueled the postwar growth of the cattle industry nationwide.

Similar activities were taking place in Louisiana, though the state's terrain mandated certain changes. For example, many cattle were shipped by steamboat, which was far easier than fighting the swims and bogs and swamps of the Collet Trail to New Orleans. The biggest port used by the ranchers was Washington Landing on Bayou Courtableu. In 1877, fifteen thousand cattle were shipped to New Orleans out of Washington on "round boats." The steamboats out of Washington Landing received this name because they went a



Welsh, LA, circa 1915. Cow works; note how open the prairie was before the tallow trees arrived. *(Photo courtesy Jerry Lognion)* roundabout way to reach that port: up the bayou to the Atchafalaya River and Red River, then downstream to the Mississippi, and eventually to New Orleans.

Cattle were moved by land as well. By 1877, large herds were reported going through Lake Charles east to New Orleans, where they were readily sold. The trail was traveled so heavily that it had a distinct drop of approximately three feet, which could be seen for many years after Lake Charles became a growing, bustling town.[8]

By 1880, cattle numbers on the southwest prairies were up to 102,000. In that decade prices were good. Returns on cattle were reported as high as 25 to 40 percent. The ability to raise cattle without supplemental feeding made such profit levels possible. Use of the marshes for winter forage was firmly established, and the best time to send cattle to market was February, when they came off the marsh pastures of joint grass fat and ready for slaughter.[9] The only major expense was labor to herd, brand, corral, and trail to market.

Travelers from the Midwestern United States who settled in Louisiana in large numbers after the Civil War noted the excellent quality of the grass and decided to use the resource themselves. It was the influx of Midwestern farmers in the 1880s and their large-scale farming techniques, along with the advent of rice as a major commercial crop, that resulted in the prairie region being transformed into farmland. That was the end of the tallgrass prairies. Because the land in the Neutral Strip was poorer in quality, less suitable for farming, more of it remained in grass and exists as such today. East of the Calcasieu River, the large-scale ranching became concentrated in the marshes.