



LOUISIANA COWBOYS

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Bill Jones



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Preface

When I was studying animal husbandry at Louisiana Tech in the late 1960s, I had a teammate on the football team named C. T. “Speedy” Campbell. We shared a love for working cows by horseback. We spent our college summers working on big ranches in Montana for low pay instead of making some real money roughnecking offshore on the oil rigs.

Speedy grew up in Sulphur, and I knew that a lot of good rodeo cowboys came from down there. I found out why when Speedy told me of his experiences working cattle for ranchers named Kinney, Lawton, and Vincent. I was surprised to learn how big the cattle business was down there. It was so big and such a part of the culture that Speedy could be excused from school for a week in the spring to help gather cattle, brand calves, and trail herds to and from the open woods south of DeQuincy to the marsh below Hackberry. I thought such things only happened long ago, and out West.

In later years, I published some articles about various cowboy experiences for *Western Horseman* magazine. When they asked me to write something about cowboys in the South, as many of their readers live there, I called up Speedy. He put me

in touch with Kent Ledoux, who manages the Gray Ranch, and I began to learn about ranching in southwestern Louisiana by staring at the south end of a northbound cow on a place called Perry Ridge.

I ended up spending several months living and working on the Gray Ranch. I listened to the horsemen I met, and I felt a calling to preserve the lives and stories of the old-time south Louisiana cowboys I came to know. It is their stories I bring you. Their lives are a direct link to the way of life led by the first settlers in southwest Louisiana. We haven’t changed all that much from our earliest beginnings, at least down here in the “Neutral Strip”—the area between the Calcasieu and Sabine Rivers in the extreme southwestern part of the state. We still follow the grass in its seasons.

This is the story of a place—and the men, horses, and herd of cows that lived there. It is a lonely and curious land, the far western fringe of the great grasslands that once covered southwest Louisiana. At the center of this story is the Gray Ranch, headquartered at Ged, just west of Vinton, and extending all the way to Johnsons Bayou and the Gulf of Mexico.





Perry Ridge, 1993. A small bunch is trailed to the pens. Though prickly pear grows on the coastal dunes, lily pads are more common than cactus in Louisiana's sea of grass. *(Photo courtesy Brad Weimar)*

To look hard at this place uncovers a lot of Louisiana's early history, a history that has been little known and largely forgotten. That history concerns cattle, horses, and the open range. Raising cattle was the dominant economic pursuit in southwest Louisiana for the first 125 years of its settlement history. The

Gray Ranch and its "old herd" represented the last remnant of the open range, migratory cattle ranching that once was the central feature of southwest Louisiana. It lasted a long time, through most of the twentieth century, long after the open range and long trail drives ended in the far West.

Acknowledgments

There are several groups of people who made this project a reality. The first is my family: my parents, Dub and Schump Jones, who raised me believing that life is an adventure and who have always encouraged me in all my endeavors, no matter how harebrained they seemed at the time; my brother and business partner, Bert Jones, who graciously allowed and encouraged me to leave our lumber business for six months in order to ride the marshes and gather these stories; and my wife, Rhonda, without whose love, support, patience, editing, and computer skills, this manuscript would not have been possible.

Bob Mann was the first professional writer to tell me that my personal project would be interesting to others. Michael Sartisky and John Kemp at the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities did the same and featured an excerpt in *Cultural Vistas* magazine. John Kemp then worked with me throughout the process. His professional skill and kindness to a first-time author are immeasurable, and much appreciated.

And then there are my friends, the cowboys of the Gray. Kent Ledoux, current ranch manager of the Gray Ranch, and his wife,

Becky, literally opened their home and hearts to me, facilitated the interviews, and extended too many other kindnesses to list. Donnie Moore, Billy Stelly, and A. J. Hoffpauir, the cowboys on the Gray with whom I rode in 1999, welcomed and befriended me. Kent, Donnie, Billy, and A. J., you are worthy heirs to this tradition, and I know that all the *vachers* who preceded you on the land I write about look down now and are proud of the way you do it today.

And to the storytellers who shared their lives with me, how can I express my gratitude? Coy, Clint, Boo, Dennis, Joe, Peanut, Johnny, Archie, and others too numerous to list, the hours and days we spent together were worth more to me than I can say. I owe a special debt to Bubbie Henderson, whose father was Pete Henderson and who grew up on the Gray. His knowledge, interest, and assistance were invaluable.

My hope is that all the good cowboys I have ridden with, from the Rocky Mountains to the marshes of No Man's Land and many points in between, will enjoy this and feel honored by it, for that is my intent.



Introduction

Every recorded, primitive civilization in the world was built directly on wild grasses supplemented by their cultivated kin.

—Leo Edward Melchers, *Grasses in Kansas* (1937)

Grass is that indispensable form of plant life without which civilization, as we know it, would not exist.

—Sellers Archer and Clarence Bunch,
The American Grass Book (1953)

The reason cattle have figured so prominently in Louisiana's history is geography. Before Europeans arrived, and for a long time afterward, southwest Louisiana was a tallgrass prairie. Four thousand square miles of Louisiana—2,500,000 acres—was a “sea of grass.” All the rice, soybean, and cotton fields we see today were once covered in grass and wildflowers five feet high. If one draws a line from a point on the Sabine River a few miles north of Vinton, northeast to Ville Platte, and then south to St. Martinville, that triangle is a rough approximation of the tallgrass prairie region of Louisiana. It is divided by many rivers and bayous, and the early settlers named the prairies after those

Grasses are the greatest single source of wealth in the world.

—Agnes Chase, *First Book of Grasses* (1959)

Every American has the right as part of his cultural heritage to stand in grass as high as his head in order to feel some small measure of history coursing his veins and personally establish an aesthetic bond with the past.

—William H. Elder, “Needs and Problems of Grassland Preservation” (1961)

waterways—Vermilion, Mermentau, and Mamou on the eastern side and Calcasieu, Lacassine, and Sabine on the western side. In time, the prairie region of Louisiana became known as the “Cajun Prairie” because its culture was dominated by the people of the Acadian exile.

Between those prairies and the Gulf lies a swath of land 110 miles long (from Vermilion Bay to the Sabine River) and approximately 20 miles wide (from the Gulf of Mexico north to the prairies), referred to as the chênrière plains. It covers more than 1,500,000 acres. People down here refer to it as the “marsh.”

The ultimate focus of our story is the Sabine Prairie (between





the Sabine and Calcasieu Rivers) and the *chênière* plains below it. This part of Louisiana is referred to as “the Neutral Strip,” or “No Man’s Land.” It was the most remote and isolated part of our state for a long time. The soil of the Sabine Prairie is thinner and poorer in quality than the rest of the prairie region. Consequently, less of it was put to the plow and more of it has remained in grass. Also, the woodlands reach closer to the marsh, which oddly enough was actually an asset for ranching. The old ways of cattle ranching dating back to the 1700s hung on in No Man’s Land longer than anywhere else in Louisiana, and until the 1970s, a *vacher* from the late eighteenth century would have felt right at home. Men rode horses and cattle walked to get where they needed to be.

Though the prairies and marshes are different, both furnish forage. Taken together, the 4,000,000 acres of the Cajun Prairie and the *chênière* plains were the largest block of natural grassland in the United States until Texas joined the union. It remains unique in all of America.

This vast surface is flat and practically level because it was formed by the sediment brought down by the Mississippi River. When the Mississippi dropped its load of soil, it laid down a layer of clay first, which created a hardpan almost impervious to water and too hard for tree roots to penetrate. Indeed, that is

a major reason why this is rice country today—once flooded, it holds the water.

When the first settlers arrived, the only trees on this vast plain were found along the banks of watercourses, where the soil from alluvial overflows became deep enough to allow trees, usually the distinctive live oaks, to sink their roots. The prairies were a vast stretch of tall grasses and wildflowers, literally a sea of grass. The early settlers referred to this land in nautical terms because the tree lines on the bayous give the impression of a coastline, creating “coves” and “points” as they curve around, hence place names like Gum Cove.

In the beginning, for the first 125 years of the state’s settlement, it was grass—grass and the cattle and horses that grazed it—that was the dominant scene of southwest Louisiana. The firsthand accounts of our storytellers, the twentieth-century *vachers*, reveal the last vestiges of the open range, migratory-ranching activities that dominated the region’s early history. What our storytellers did and how they did it stretches all the way back to the first settlers here and their ranching activities. It is a direct link to our ancestors’ lives on this land. Words without context are meaningless—and it was the natural world that was the context of their stories. That is what shaped their lives. Their lives and the stories of their lives are a result of the grass.’





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