

# THE UPGRADING OF BEEF CATTLE ON THE GREAT PLAINS

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Beef cattle are a dominant feature in the geographical landscape of the Great Plains. Whether considered from the economic or cultural or any other aspect of geography, they and their breeds should be of interest. Even the most casual geographer can distinguish between the Longhorns, which were used in greatest numbers to populate the area, and the highly uniform white-faced Herefords, which dominate the cattle industry there as well as elsewhere in the western United States.

Man willfully and purposely changed the entire cattle population of the Great Plains so completely that today one can find a Longhorn only in a park or a museum. Actually there are fewer real Longhorns in the United States today than there are buffalo. The change from the Longhorns and the so-called "native" or "common" cattle to the modern British breeds is the theme of this paper. But to say that it was merely a change from Longhorns to Herefords would be great over-simplification. It really is a very complicated story, one that goes back several centuries, and one that requires more background than factual statement from within the area.<sup>1</sup>

Since cattle were not native to the New World, all cattle of concern in this paper necessarily had to come from the Old World. Spanish cattle were introduced into the West Indies, from whence they were taken to Mexico and Florida. From Florida some Spanish cattle spread to nearby areas in the southeastern United States. From Mexico they spread northward into New Mexico, Texas, Arizona, and California.

Although some of those Spanish or Mexican cattle were of the Celtic Shorthorn type, it was the Longhorn type that gained most of the publicity. The Longhorn has been played up as being short of body, long-legged, fleet of foot, with great potential for self-defense and for walking great distances to water holes and to market. It was truly the animal best adapted to the harsh conditions of the West. There were, however, Longhorns of great size that were definitely of the *Urus* or *Bos primigenius* type rather than of the *Bos longifrons* or Celtic Shorthorn type.<sup>2</sup>

The cattle brought by immigrants and importers to eastern United States came from entirely different sources. They were predominantly British in origin with some admixtures of tan-colored Danish cattle,<sup>3</sup> and

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<sup>1</sup> Allen, Lewis F., "Improvement of Native Cattle," *Report of the Secretary, U. S. Department of Agriculture*. (Washington, 1866), pp. 294-320.

<sup>2</sup> Post, Lauren C., "Cattle Breeds as a Feature of Regional Geography," to appear in the *Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers*, 1961; Dobie, J. Frank, *The Longhorns*, (Boston, 1941).

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, Charles W., "Importance of Raising and Feeding More Cattle and Sheep," *Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture for 1864*, (Washington, 1865), pp. 249-288.

some cattle brought over by the Dutch and French immigrants. Among the British cattle it is likely that, percentage-wise, there was much of the stock which later resulted in the making in England of Shorthorn and Devon breeds.<sup>4</sup>

Since many of the American farmers were not real cattlemen as were their English counterparts, American cattle were permitted to degenerate. Cold winters, lack of feed and care, and generally poor management have been given as reasons for the decline of American cattle to the status of "native" or "common" cattle. Generally, they were so neglected that a very important trait developed in them. That was ability to survive. It is no wonder that writers at about the time of the Civil War told of the need for improving the quality of American cattle.<sup>5</sup>

The American cattle commonly reared were called "native" or "common" cattle.<sup>6</sup> Cattlemen of the Great Plains called Texas cattle "raw-hides," and some of the "states" cattle moving to the plains area were referred to as "pilgrims." Bulls of quality that had trouble foraging for themselves on the plains were sometimes referred to as "pitchfork bulls" or "bulls raised with the pitchfork."<sup>7</sup>

It is interesting to note that when British cattlemen wanted better stock, they developed their own breeds out of their native or local cattle. With the exception of the Holstein-Friesian breed, practically all of their cattle are British and have British names.

But when our cattlemen wanted better cattle, they turned to Britain for them. Not until a few decades ago did our breeders develop their first recognized American breed in the Santa Gertrudis cattle of King Ranch, Texas, fame.<sup>8</sup>

Early in the last century our breeders began buying the British breeds. The desire for the highly advertised blueblood cattle became a fad and a craze, and prices soared. The importing of British cattle became a business. Shorthorn, Aberdeen Angus, Hereford, and Devon cattle were among the improved breeds brought in,<sup>9</sup> Ayrshire, Jersey, and Guernsey represented the dairy breeds.

George F. Lemmer,<sup>10</sup> in an article entitled "The Spread of Improved Cattle Through the United States in 1850," made these points, especially for eastern United States: most of the native stock was descended from the Devon cattle brought in by English settlers. The first conscious and

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<sup>4</sup> Thompson, James Westfall, "A History of Livestock Raising in the United States, 1607-1860," *USDA Agriculture Series No. 5*, (Washington, 1942) Lemmer, George F., "The Spread of Improved Cattle Through Eastern United States to 1850," *Agriculture History*, Vol. 21, No. 2, (April, 1927), pp.79-92.

<sup>5</sup> Thompson, *op. cit.*; Bidwell, Percy Wells and Faulconer, John I., *History of Agriculture in Northern United States, 1620-1860*, (New York, 1951).

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, H. M., "Importance of the Range Industry," *Second Annual Report of the Bureau of Animal Industry*, 1885, (Washington, 1886), pp. 293-325.

<sup>7</sup> Osgood, Ernest Staples, *The Day of the Cattleman*, (Minneapolis, 1920).

<sup>8</sup> Rhoad, A. O., "The Santa Gertrudis Breed," Reprint from *Journal of Heredity*, Vol. 40, No. 5, (May, 1949).

<sup>9</sup> Briggs, Hilton M., *Modern Breeds of Livestock*, (New York, 1949); Snapp, Roscoe R., *Beef Cattle*, Fourth Edition, (New York, 1952).

<sup>10</sup> Lemmer, *op. cit.*

sustained effort at improving the cattle was through the importation of Shorthorns. There was improvement in the cattle and also in their care. People liked the Devons and the old native cattle because they were red, and it was easy to match the oxen. Herefords did not catch on as did the Shorthorns and were not extensively bred until after 1850. However, Henry Clay did take some Herefords to Kentucky as early as 1817.

This study, which involves primarily the transfer of blooded stock to the United States, also brought to mind the same type of development in Argentina where cattle were changed perhaps as completely as in our best cattle areas in the United States.

For a current example of upgrading of native cattle, one might make a full investigation of the purchase of registered Brahman and Santa Gertrudis bulls by Middle American cattlemen in Texas, Florida, and Louisiana.<sup>11</sup> Attempts at rehabilitation and helping many war-torn or underprivileged areas of the world have involved transfer of blooded stock of both beef and dairy breeds from the United States.

But the case of particular interest here is the sale of purebred stock from the Ohio Valley states and several Corn Belt states to cattlemen on the ranges. For that story we turn to several of those areas for statements on their cattle as to breed composition.

Of course, it took time to upgrade the native cattle, to develop superior herds, and to get any considerable numbers of them into Kentucky, the Ohio Valley, and the present Corn Belt areas, before purebred cattle could be shipped to the Great Plains.

References to our topic can be divided into three parts. Very important are a score of articles published between 1863 and 1900 in the *Reports of the Commissioner of Agriculture* and the *Annual Reports of the United States Bureau of Animal Industry*. These large volumes antedate the better known *Yearbooks of United States Department of Agriculture*.

Another source of great importance is in the writings of James Westfall Thompson, J. Frank Dobie, James C. Malin,<sup>12</sup> Joseph G. McCoy,<sup>13</sup> E. S. Osgood, and other standard authorities on cattle and the Great Plains.

A third source is photographs. Early pictures have served to depict types of native cattle since photography came early enough to show cattle used in wagon freighting, as well as some of the herds before upgrading changed them. Dee Brown's *Trail Driving Days, Before Barbed Wire* by Brown and Felton, Mark Brown's *The Frontier Years*, and Prettyman's *Indian Territory: A Frontier Photographic Record* show the early types of

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<sup>11</sup> See various articles in *Gulf Coast Cattleman and Louisiana Cattleman and Stockman*, P. O. Box 2087, Beaumont, Texas.

<sup>12</sup> Malin, James C., *The Grassland of North America: Prolegomena to Its History*, (Lawrence, 1947).

<sup>13</sup> McCoy, Joseph G., *Historical Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest*, Kansas City, 1874, Republished by Long's Book Company, (Columbus, Ohio, 1951).

cattle. Of all of the early photographs, Prettyman's pictures come nearest to showing real Longhorns.<sup>14</sup>

Although not in the Plains area, another work shows photographs which might be considered pertinent to this topic. *Redwood Classic*, an illustrated book by Ralph Andrews, tells of logging in the redwood forests of California. His photographs show clearly more than one hundred oxen used in logging in the 1880's.<sup>15</sup> A great many of them appear to be of the early American type of native cattle, but there is a rather strong showing of Shorthorn blood in some of them. A few had mottled faces, the telltale of Hereford blood. It is likely that the California oxen, except for the upgrading, were similar to those used on the trails a few decades earlier.

Photographers seldom photographed Longhorns in their native habitat. Men did not approach those cattle on foot.

My own collection of pictures shows thousands of head of cattle. A great many of them are pictures from printed sources and have been grouped according to breeds. Pictures taken in Louisiana, and in the feed lots of Baja California and the Imperial Valley do much to connect the old with the new. A slow trip through a feed lot in the Imperial Valley will make a cattleman think he is seeing all breeds represented in all percentages and in all combinations with all other breeds. No wonder the modern breeders strive for uniformity in their stock.

Willim Henry Jackson,<sup>16</sup> a Civil War veteran who drove an ox team west in 1866, was primarily an artist and painter in his early years although he later became a very important photographer. He sketched a great many oxen, beginning in 1886, and invariably his oxen on the Overland and other western trails were of the native or common strains. They were not characteristic Longhorns, nor were they of the modern British breeds.

During the years of heavy freighting on the Santa Fe Trail, the Overland Trail, and other ways leading to the west, there was a tremendous demand for work oxen.<sup>17</sup> This demand was filled out of the native cattle of the settled areas. That was an entirely different demand from that for stocking the Plains with breeder cattle. The latter movement, naturally, could hit its stride only after the removal of the Indian and the buffalo, which took place after the Civil War.

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<sup>14</sup> Brown, Mark H., and Felton, W. R. *The Frontier Years: L. A. Hoffman, Photographer of the Plains*, (New York, 1955); *Before Barbed Wire, L. A. Hoffman, Photographer on Horseback*, (New York, 1956); Taft, Robert, *Photography and the American Scene*, (New York, 1938); Prettyman, W. S. *Indian Territory: A Frontier Photographic Record by W. S. Prettyman*, (Selected and edited by Robert E. Cunningham) Norman, 1957.

<sup>15</sup> Andrews, Ralph W., *Redwood Classic*, (Seattle, 1958).

<sup>16</sup> Jackson, Clarence S., *Pageant of the Pioneers, The Venerable Art of William Henry Jackson, Picture Maker of the Old West*, (Minden, Nebraska, 1958).

<sup>17</sup> Settle, Raymond W., and Settle, Mary Lund, *Empire on Wheels*, (Stanford University Press, 1949).

More than 5,000,000 head of cattle were driven northward out of Texas during the trail days from 1866 to 1888.<sup>18</sup> Many of those cattle were steers destined for the eastern markets, many went to feed Indians on the northern reservations and the soldiers who were guarding the Indians, but the Texas drives were the main source, as far as numbers were concerned, for populating the northern Plains with breeder cattle. The Texas cattle continued to be the main types of cattle on the Great Plains until demands for better cattle and beef called for a change, and when windmills, barbed wire, railroads, and other features made better cattle feasible.<sup>19</sup> With fencing it was possible to keep one's own purebred bulls on one's own range. With fencing and the saving of some hay for winter use, it was possible to keep the better stock that had been reared to expect feed in the winter time.<sup>20</sup>

The upgrading came mainly through the use of better bulls, whether purebred or grade.<sup>21</sup> (Grades are cattle usually with half or more blood of a modern breed, the rest being native blood.) With this system of upgrading, "the battle of the bulls was on."

Now let us turn back to the sources of the cattle, especially bulls, used in the upgrading. The upgrading of cattle in the Ohio Valley and the Corn Belt area had such an important bearing on the cattle industry to the west that a few paragraphs on this subject are essential here.

Of the 1,800,000 head of cattle in Ohio in 1885, forty per cent were "high grade," with half or more of their blood from improved breeds. In them Shorthorn was most important. In Indiana in the same year, thirty-eight per cent of the cattle showed influence of purebred stock and again Shorthorn was the most important breed.<sup>22</sup>

Illinois had thirty-five per cent high grade cattle. Nearly every county had one or more herds of highly bred Shorthorns, and correspondents from two hundred forty-four different localities mentioned Shorthorns as the breed used in improving the native stock. Herefords were mentioned by eighty correspondents, Aberdeen Angus by twenty-eight, Devons by seventeen, and Galloways by three.

The same source, Edward H. Perry, in a *Report of the Bureau of Animal Industry*, said that:

The development of the cattle industry of the Plains beyond the Mississippi River created a strong demand for bulls of pure blood with which to improve the stock of that vast region, and the cattle breeders of Illinois have been called upon perhaps to a greater degree than those of any other state in the Union to supply that demand.

The market thus afforded for bulls of good breeding has been of almost incalculable value to the breeders as well as to the improvement of cattle in the West.

<sup>18</sup> Taylor, H. M., *op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> Osgood, *op. cit.*

<sup>20</sup> Raine, William MacLeod, *Cattle*, (Garden City and New York, 1930).

<sup>21</sup> Sonnichsen, C. L., *Cowboys and Cattle Kings*, (University of Oklahoma Press, 1950).

<sup>22</sup> Perry, Edward H., "Cattle Trade and Dairy Interests of Alabama, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio," *Second Annual Report of the Bureau of Animal Industry*, 1885, (Washington, 1886), pp. 335-417.

Much of the above trade was in Shorthorn cattle. The rearing of Herefords to succeed them to have taken place principally in territory farther west, especially in Missouri and Kansas.<sup>23</sup>

Joseph McCoy in 1874 told of the use of Durham bulls in upgrading Texas cattle throughout the West. He said that, by 1873, both Colorado and Wyoming had passed statutes permitting cattlemen to shoot on sight any Texan or scrub bulls wherever they met them on the commons.<sup>24</sup>

In McCoy's time the Shorthorn was still dominant. Osgood<sup>25</sup> writing of the early 1870's, told of improvement of cattle in the Northern Plains through the use of Durhams, as the Shorthorns were called at that time by many cattlemen.

Improvement of cattle was to come through the use of better bulls, but it was the old types of cattle which gave to Texas and other western cattlemen the wherewithal for buying good stock.

J. Evetts Haley, in the biography of Charles Goodnight, said that when Goodnight realized that a new day was dawning in the cattle industry with foreign investments, artificial watering facilities, and with barbed wire changing range conditions, he took the lead in the campaign to improve the range cattle in which he had been dealing.<sup>26</sup>

In 1881 he bought 200 Shorthorn bulls and 300 Shorthorn heifers at Burlingame, Kansas. He was upgrading, but he was not satisfied with the Shorthorns. He tried Aberdeen Angus cattle, but when W. S. Ikard got interested in Herefords at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876 an impetus was given to that breed.<sup>27</sup> Goodnight, a few years after his venture with Shorthorns, tried Herefords. He bought a herd for the JA Ranch that he was managing along with Adair, and those Herefords turned out to be "the cheapest cattle the JA ever bought."

O. H. Nelson brought more than 10,000 Hereford bulls into the Panhandle and did more than anyone else in establishing that breed on the Great Plains, thus earning the name of "Bull" Nelson.

Later, Goodnight said that the best herd of beef cattle he ever saw was the JA herd eleven years after the Herefords had been introduced. The cattle still had a trace of Longhorn to give them trail and open range self-reliance, and they had a little Shorthorn to give added bone and weight. He felt that this combination, which was predominantly Hereford, was never excelled even among the highest bred cattle of later years.

Stock farms in the Midwestern or Central states continued to find a bonanza in supplying purebred or grade stock to be shipped west for crossing with the Longhorns. McCoy wrote that:<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Briggs, *op. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> McCoy, *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> Osgood, *op. cit.*; Standart, S. H., in an article in the *Report of the Bureau of Animal Industry*, 1885, entitled "The Livestock Industry of Colorado and the Territories of the Northwest," told the same story.

<sup>26</sup> Haley, J. Evetts, *Charles Goodnight: Cowman and Plainsman*, (University of Oklahoma Press. 1949).

<sup>27</sup> Nordyke, Lewis, *Great Roundup: The Story of Texas and Southwestern Cattlemen*, (New York, 1955); Haley, *op. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> McCoy, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

So great and growing is the demand for blooded bulls to place upon cattle ranches, with Texan and Indian cows, that the business of producing the full bloods and grades, is becoming very large and lucrative. In the foremost rank of breeders, Mr. Wilson (Andrew Wilson of Kingville, Kansas) has established a reputation and a herd second to none in the West. . . . He proposes in the future to make his the largest and best herd of cattle in the West, and to furnish annually large numbers of grade bulls to ranchmen. This line of business will in the future be profitable and pleasant, and in pursuit of it a man can confer great benefits upon humanity, besides securing lasting fame and fortune.

Repeatedly, McCoy praised the results of crossing Durham bulls with Texan and Indian cattle and told of other stockmen going into the business of producing Durham cattle for such purposes. To McCoy, "Indian cattle" were those in the Indian territory. He said:<sup>29</sup>

In the Nation are found thousands of cattle whose progenitors were the old-fashioned American cattle such as existed throughout the Union before the advent of the heavy quartered Durham, whose rounded progeny are found in great numbers upon every farm in central and eastern Missouri.

McCoy's book is a good one. He was a real cattleman who told his story well, but his story finished before the advent of the Hereford.

James C. Malin, eminent authority on the grasslands of North America, said that: "The stocking of the range from the East is possibly the most important, certainly not less important than the Texas source."<sup>30</sup> He also said that immigrants to Oregon and California took cattle over the trails and that the Kansas City area was "the stock market for the territory west."

While Malin says much in the following quotation, it is his opening statement that is misleading. He said:<sup>31</sup>

In the long run, the most important sources of range cattle were the purebred herds, some being shipped direct from Great Britain, but more from stock farms of the Mississippi Valley. The first shipments were Shorthorn bulls to cross on Texas and other range herds. The Shorthorn was typically a tall grass or rather tame grass animal, and upon the short grass plains did not prove satisfactory. At the end of the seventies, Scotch black polled cattle, first Galloways, and later Aberdeen-Angus, were tried out and boomed in the early eighties, but did not hold their own. The Hereford, popularly called Whitefaces, gained ground rapidly after 1876 but were handicapped at first by deficiency in the hind quarters. In 1881, Gudgel and Simpson, breeders of Independence, Missouri, imported Anxiety IV, a Hereford bull of unusual conformation and potency. The Anxiety IV blood strain immediately gained recognition as one of the most significant of the breed. Hereford quickly became the dominant range breed because of their vitality, rustling abilities, early maturing, and fattening qualities, and over 75 per cent of the range cattle of the 1930's were Whitefaces.

While it is true that this area and the settled farming country produced the work stock that pulled the wagons over the trails, that is the significant contribution. The work stock did not reproduce. The farming areas continued to sell oxen to such outfits as Russell, Majors, and

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<sup>29</sup> McCoy, *ibid.* p. 399.

<sup>30</sup> Malin, *op. cit.*, p. 274.

<sup>31</sup> Malin, *ibid.* p. 275.

Waddell, which at one time had 7,500 oxen under the yoke.<sup>32</sup> But they were in buffalo and Indian country still. Cattle did not occupy the ranges of the Great Plains until after the buffalo and Indians were cleared out, which was after the Civil War.

To repeat, I hold that Malin's following statement is misleading. He said that "In the long run, the most important sources of range cattle were the purebred herds, some being shipped direct from Great Britain, but more from the stock farms of the Mississippi Valley."<sup>33</sup>

It was rather a battle of the bulls. The foundation stock, mainly cows and heifers, had come up from Texas. First it was Durham or Shorthorn bulls that were used in upgrading. Then Aberdeen Angus and Galloway bulls had a chance, but it was the white-faced Hereford that finally won out and today is the dominant beef breed of the Great Plains and the entire West.<sup>34</sup>

The Longhorn had served its purpose and served it well, under the conditions. Where water holes were far apart, the markets hundreds of miles away, and there were predatory animals, there was no animal better suited to populating the Great Plains. With the changing times, conditions, and facilities, another kind of cattle superceded the Longhorn.<sup>35</sup> But the Longhorn was not killed off as the passenger pigeon was killed off, nor was he killed off as the buffalo was killed off nearly to extinction. He was bred off. He was bred out. His horns and other characteristics gave way to a more efficient and more uniform type of beef animal.<sup>36</sup>

But one question so far has remained unanswered. Of all of the beef breeds available to the United States, and with the many that were tried out, how can we explain the fact that the breed of bulls that came to dominate all others came from Herefordshire, England? Yet from that mild humid climate came the beef animal that is best adapted to survival and beef production in the varied western climates, no matter how cold the winters nor how hot the summers. The Hereford today is unquestionably the symbol of the western beef cattle industry.

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<sup>32</sup> Settle, *op. cit.*

<sup>33</sup> Malin, *op. cit.*, p. 275.

<sup>34</sup> Nordyke, Lewis, *Cattle Empire: The Fabulous Story of the 3,000,000 Acre XIT Ranch*, (New York, 1949).

<sup>35</sup> Culley, John H. (Jack), *Cattle, Horses, and Men on the Western Range*, (Los Angeles, 1940).

<sup>36</sup> Dobie, *op. cit.*

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<sup>36</sup> Dobie, *op. cit.*