PECAN ISLAND - A stiff southern wind carries the sound of cracking whips, bleating calves and hollering cowboys, like ghosts from the high plains of Montana. Through the dust, the herd and a group of two dozen riders appear as a distant mirage, slowly creeping forward on the shell road.

By now, the cattle drive is on the homestretch, halfway to Pecan Island in Vermilion Parish via a gravel road which juts into the marsh. Huge oilfield trucks are forced to stop and wait on the side of the road as the cattle train, strung out over a quarter of a mile, slowly passes. The riders keep the animals moving, and the large bulls begrudgingly trudge along.

This is the last drive of the spring season for the cattle farmers who keep their livestock in the marsh during the winter. The animals must move to different grazing grounds, depending on the season. In the late spring, the cattle will be taken to summer pasturelands, away from the marauding hordes of mosquitoes that make the marsh intolerable, and from the threat of hurricanes. In the fall, the livestock are brought back to the marsh to feed on the wetlands, which abut the Gulf coast.

Most of the cattle are owned by the Sagrera family, which has been raising cattle for more than 100 years in the marshland. “We were born and raised doing it’s in your blood,” said cattleman Wayne Sagrera of Esther, who also has an alligator farm. The marshy grazing land is near Cheniere Au Tigre, a high spot on the coastline that was once an independent community for more than 100 residents.

For several years, the Sagrera family used a tug and barge to take the cattle back and forth to Intracoastal City. Only 100 or so head could be hauled on each trip. “It would take us three weeks to move the cattle out,” said Austin Sagrera of Esther.

A lock structure built to prevent saltwater intrusion provided a bridge across the Freshwater Bayou Channel, five miles west of Cheniere Au Tigre, enabling the drive to cross the waterway.

Cowboys drive a herd of cattle over a bridge in the marsh south of Pecan Island.

‘Coastal cowboys’ working long, hard hours

By BRUCE SCHULTZ
Acadiana bureau

PECAN ISLAND — A stiff southern wind carries the sound of cracking whips, bleating calves and hollering cowboys, like ghosts from the high plains of Montana. Through the dust, the herd and a group of two dozen riders appear as a distant mirage, slowly creeping forward on the shell road.

By now, the cattle drive is on the homestretch, halfway to Pecan Island in Vermilion Parish via a gravel road which juts into the marsh. Huge oilfield trucks are forced to stop and wait on the side of the road as the cattle train, strung out over a quarter of a mile, slowly passes. The riders keep the animals moving, and the large bulls begrudgingly trudge along.

This is the last drive of the spring season for the cattle farmers who keep their livestock in the marsh during the winter. The animals must move to different grazing grounds, depending on the season. In the late spring, the cattle will be taken to summer pasturelands, away from the marauding hordes of mosquitoes that make the marsh intolerable, and from the threat of hurricanes. In the fall, the livestock are brought back to the marsh to feed on the wetlands, which abut the Gulf coast.

Most of the cattle are owned by the Sagrera family, which has been raising cattle for more than 100 years in the marshland. “We were born and raised doing it’s in your blood,” said cattleman Wayne Sagrera of Esther, who also has an alligator farm. The marshy grazing land is near Cheniere Au Tigre, a high spot on the coastline that was once an independent community for more than 100 residents.

For several years, the Sagrera family used a tug and barge to take the cattle back and forth to Intracoastal City. Only 100 or so head could be hauled on each trip. “It would take us three weeks to move the cattle out,” said Austin Sagrera of Esther.

A lock structure built to prevent saltwater intrusion provided a bridge across the Freshwater Bayou Channel, five miles west of Cheniere Au Tigre, enabling the drive to cross the waterway.

See Roundup, Page 2B
The cattle are rounded up in the marsh near Cheniere Au Tigre, then brought through the former community where the cattle train proceeds down the beach for approximately five miles before turning north to the Freshwater Bayou lock.

The bewildered cattle view the footbridge on the locks with trepidation. Hay has been spread on the walkway to prevent the cattle from slipping on the metal surface. They must cross single file on the narrow lane. Some try to hold up progress, stopping on the bridge until motivated by a whip.

One small group of stragglers is the last to cross. A few spindly legged calves, already tuckered out, must be carried on horseback over the locks.

A cow, apparently separated from its calf, refuses to join the rest of the herd, and she dashes back over the locks, forcing one veteran driver to jump up on the bridge railing to avoid being trampled. One of the Sagreras, Lynn, spurs his horse to pursue the errant cow, eventually catching it near a gate.

Once across the locks, the herd waits in a field while the riders eat lunch and swap stories before making the final 10-mile push on a shell road to Pecan Island. Once there, the owners will separate their cattle to be hauled to the summer grounds. Calves will be sold at stockyards.

Wayne Sagrera’s father, Ralph Sagrera of Esther, remembers the days when cattle were driven all the way to the summer pasture, with no barges or bridges to ease the difficulty of the journey.

He was born at Cheniere Au Tigre and lived there until he turned 23 in 1938. Eventually trapping and raising cattle couldn’t generate enough income to make a living, he said, and the last residents moved from the island in the early 1940s.

“I have a lot of wonderful memories,” he said.

He recalls that it wasn’t unusual to make the boat trip to the mainland only once a year.

“You had plenty of work to do, but you couldn’t go anyplace,” he said. “There was no idle time.”