Acadiana prairies were home to early cattle industry

Scott almost certainly got its trademark motto of “where the West begins” because it was the place where the railroad divided between its eastern and western divisions. But there is also a case to be made that the West began there two centuries ago when the American cattle industry was born on the nearby prairies.

There are good historians who claim that the prairies of southwest Louisiana harbored a vital cattle industry well before Texas and some of the other states we think about when we think of beef on the hoof.

Indeed, one of the reasons that Acadians were first sent across the Atchafalaya Basin to St. Martinville was to help grow enough beef to feed New Orleans. But huge herds of livestock were grazing the prairies well before the Cajun cowboys got here. The Avoyelles Indians had introduced longhorn cattle into Louisiana years before and cattle brands registered at St. Martinville date to the 1730s, some 35 years before the arrival of the Acadians (and 30 years before the first brands were registered in Texas).

The first Acadians usually did not live on the prairies. They made their homes in towns like St. Martinville and went out each year to round up their half-wild cattle and drive them to the market in New Orleans.

Many of them followed what is known as the Collet Trail along natural levees along Bayou Teche and Bayou Black.

By 1814, historian Henry Marie Breckenridge could write: “The number of cattle composing the herds which some of the wealthier possess would in other parts of the United States be considered incredible; there are several who market from one to two thousand calves a year. The cattle driven to New Orleans for sale bring fifteen to twenty dollars a head.”

In 1816, William Darby found “vast herds of cattle which afford subsistence to the natives and the inhabitants of New Orleans.” “It is certainly one of the most agreeable views in nature,” he wrote, “to behold from a point of elevation, thousands of horses and cows, of all sizes, scattered over the interminable mead, intermingled in wild confusion.”

He said that a Mr. Wikoff of Calcasieu Parish at the time was “the leading pastoral farmer in the United States.”

But not everything was peaches and cream.

By 1859, cattle rustling was so prevalent that the prairie ranchers organized into a vigilante committee to establish law and order. There was a big showdown in 1859 at Bayou Queue de Tortue when the cattlemen confronted the rustlers.

There may have been more rustlers than vigilantes, but the vigilantes had a cannon. That made the difference.

The bad guys were rounded up. Some of them were thrown into jail. Some of them were given an even worse punishment. They were exiled to Texas.

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