Louisiana cattle ranchers: Original American cowboys

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Forget everything you ever learned about Texas and the Wild West; the first American cowboys definitely spoke French.

At least, that is what 84-year-old cattle rancher Charles Broussard said during Vermilionville's latest "In Your Own Backyard" discussion titled, "Les Vacheurs: The Cattle Ranchers of the Marsh."

Broussard, who owns the Flying J Ranch in Vermilion Parish and is a 10th generation cattle rancher, said he was always interested in his family's extensive history, an interest that finally paid off when he discovered the Dauterive Compact.

According to this document, U.S. cattle ranching first began not in Texas, but in Louisiana in 1765 with the help of four of Broussard's ancestors.

It started with a contract between a French nobleman named Dauterive and eight French refugees from Nova Scotia, half of whom were Broussards. Dauterive promised to give each of the Cajuns five cows, a bull and five calves for three consecutive years. Then, after five years, they each repaid him in kind.

"Most people thought (ranching) was started in Texas," Broussard said, "but these cattle were brought to Southwest Louisiana and were the start of the cattle industry in the United States."

Barry Ancelet, professor of Folklore and Francophone Studies at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, used Cajun music like Dennis McGee's "Cowboy Waltz" and Adam Hebert's "My Rope and My Spurs" to show how much the ranching business impacts Louisiana culture even today.

Brassieur continued: "How can you interpret why exactly they choose that form? Very curious."

Broussard, who also has a family brand, brought their actual branding rods spanning multiple generations.

According to Broussard, his ranch was originally called the Fleur-De-Lis Ranch, which his great-grandfather had tried to replicate with the family brand. However, after a young Broussard told his father the brand looked nothing like a fleur-de-lis and a lot like a "Flying J," his father changed the name of the ranch to match its symbol.

The discussion eventually turned away from history and culture and to the cattle themselves.

Ancelet explained the first cattle ranches in Louisiana used relatively small and especially tough longhorns—jerky meat, he called it.

As the industry grew, newer breeds were introduced, such as the sturdy American Brahman, the tender...
Charolais and the popular Angus. Now, universities like UL Lafayette and Louisiana State University are using genetic experiments to discover the perfect breed.

Samuel Duplantis, who has been raising pure-bred Brahman on his ranch in Vermilionville since 1974, said he does not think anyone needs to go through all that trouble.

“Brahman cattle are just as tender and just as tasty as any other breed if you’re selective enough,” he said. “Angus people have the best marketers in the world, and I try to learn from them every day. If they’ve got everybody convinced their meat is the best, they’re doing a good job!”

Both Duplantis and Broussard agreed wilder cattle, ones that have not been mixed bred or vaccinated, are the ones better suited to survive in Louisiana, because they have been allowed to adapt to their surroundings.

The Brahman, Duplantis said, have developed thin, porous skin that allows them to sit in the sun without overheating. Other cattle have to find shady areas, where they are more likely to be bitten by anaplasmosis-carrying insects.

Broussard’s Flying J Ranch contains many types of cattle, including the Charolais, the Brahman and the Angus, but the ones who are the least susceptible to disease, he said, are the wild Andalusions who had survived on their own in the Florida Everglades for almost 400 years.

Unfortunately, according to Broussard, strength seems to inversely affect taste. The Andalusions, he said, are about the same height and weight of those very first Cajun cattle—about 600 pounds and waist-high.

“The quality,” he added, “is the same quality they had in Louisiana before the Charolais came.”

The other ones, he said, may be a little more susceptible to diseases, but they tend to make up for it by being 2,000 to 3,000 pounds of juicy tenderness.