One morning in the late 1850s, a planter living near Lafayette found his favorite cow missing. He searched the nearby prairie with no luck, but later found the cow's hide, hanging at a little store several miles from his place.

He asked the storekeeper how he'd gotten the hide, but couldn't get a straight answer.

"That hide is from a cow that was stolen from me last night," the planter said. "How did you get it?"

"If you'd have been here a little sooner, you would have seen the man who sold it to me," the merchant answered. "He just left, but I won't tell you who it was."

"You'd better tell me, or I'll charge you with stealing my cow," the planter warned.

The storeman held his tongue, even after the grand jury indicted him for the theft. Even though he kept the secret during the trial, he was acquitted.

He explained why later.

"The man who sold me the hide was on the jury," he said. "So were five others in his gang. If I'd given his name, my store would be in ashes, and I'd probably be dead. I thought I'd rather take my chances with the jury."

Just as Acadiana can lay a claim to being the birthplace of the American cattle industry, it can also claim the birth of big time rustling. Things got so bad here that the outlaws and a band of irate citizens squared off for a battle that might have rivaled anything the Civil War would bring.

Rustling grew up with the cattle industry. At first a few cattle were stolen at night and either slaughtered or sold in neighboring parishes. But success bred boldness, and, before too long, the outlaws had organized themselves into a huge paramilitary band — strong enough to corral and drive whole herds of stolen cattle in broad daylight. Soon they were stealing more than cattle.

When the bandits were blamed for torching much of St. Martinville, killing 14 people and destroying its business district, the citizenry took charge. Vigilance Committees, headed by men such as former Gov. Alexandre Mouton, were organized in St. Martin, Lafayette, St. Landry, Vermilion and Calcasieu parishes. On March 16, 1859, they issued a proclamation laying down the gauntlet:

FELLOW CITIZENS, we have been subjected to a system of rapine and plunder without parallel in the history of this country; our property is destroyed daily and hourly; our houses are burglarized and rifled...; crime has its army in our midst, with its generals, officers and soldiers... We have seen the assassin and the incendiary following in the footsteps of the thief and of the robber; we have seen corruption festering in our midst... The bandits have a numerous and
The proclamation created a stir across the state. Within weeks, the organization could marshal from 3,000 to 4,000 men. Some outlaws fled at the first sign of resistance. Others were caught, horsewhipped and exiled (most of them to Texas). One or two found the end of a rope.

In May, the governor accused the vigilantes of taking the law into their own hands, and urged them to disband. The vigilantes refused. But the outlaws grew bolder, thinking the state militia would step in against the citizen committee.

The bandits had collected arms and ammunition on Emilien LaGrange's farm on Bayou Queue de Tortue (Tail of the Turtle) in what is now Acadia Parish. Nearly 2,000 well-armed outlaws gathered there on September 3, 1859, ready to take on the vigilante organization.

But the vigilantes had been keeping a wary eye. Five hundred strong, they marched out of Lafayette in three columns, under the leadership of Alfred Mouton, a graduate of West Point (who would die in the Civil War Battle of Mansfield). The little army was reinforced along the way by 200 men from St. Landry Parish, and numbered 700 when it reached the LaGrange farm.

There was deadly silence as the outlaws and vigilantes deployed themselves. Before the fight began, Gov. Alexandre Mouton decided to try to talk with the outlaw chiefs. He and a Major St. Julien, Capt. Valmont Richard, and Lt. Steak walked up to the fence enclosing the LaGrange house.

Gun barrels glinted from loopholes within the walls. Vigilantes aimed back from behind fence and tree. LaGrange and another outlaw chief came to the fence.

"What do you wish, gentlemen?" LaGrange asked.

"We have come to find out the object of your meeting."

"It is nothing but a political gathering."

"You have among you...men who have received orders to leave the state," Mouton said, "men that we intend to (punish) for their disobedience to our orders."

"We don't know these men," answered the outlaw.

"Then you refuse to give them up?"

"LaGrange," said St. Julien, "what's the use of talking with these men? They refuse to deliver their friends. Let's return to our posts and open fire."

"LaGrange," said the governor, "you should send away the women and children I see in your yard. We have come to fight men, not children."

The vigilantes returned to their posts, and, as they did, a cannon, a brass 24-pounder they had hauled with them, was brought from behind the trees and trained on the house.

The sight of the cannon undid the outlaws. They fled in every direction.

A helter-skelter chase followed. The vigilantes captured more than 200 prisoners, and over 1,000 rifles, guns and revolvers.

When the prisoners were questioned, they had a scary tale to tell. The outlaws had planned to sack the plantations on their way to Lafayette, to plunder and burn the town, and to rob and kill its most prominent citizens. Had the vigilante army not acted when it did, Lafayette might have been destroyed.

Instead, the bandits scattered to the four winds. The vigilantes disbanded. Acadiana breathed a sigh of relief and went back to farming.