



Ranching Beginnings: Carnestolendas and The Santa Petronila Ranches

by Scott Sosebee

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Scott Sosebee is Executive Director of the Association and can be contacted at sosebeem@sfasu.edu.

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(May 16, 2022) The King Ranch, XIT, Matador, and the Espuela are all names many Texans recognize as huge stock raising operations, and they are icons of one of the most pervasive Texas symbols of the state—the cattle ranch. If you ask almost anyone, anywhere, to “draw a Texan,” the image you will get back is of a cowboy, and he will most likely be astride a horse and perhaps wrangling a cow. The cowboy, and his occupation of raising stock, is synonymous with Texas. That is natural since what most Americans associate with the modern ranching industry—tending cattle on horseback—spread to the rest of the nation through Texas. However, it came to Texas from Mexico, and before Mexico was the center of such a tradition it was born on the Andalusian plain in Spain. Spaniards, unlike cattle raisers in the British Isles and France, tended their stock on an open range and from the back of a horse, and that is the tradition that those who would come to be called vaqueros brought to Mexico.

When Spain established New Spain in what is today modern Mexico, it was gold and other precious metals that first the conquistadores and later the early residents of New Spain came to mine and exploit. The early European invaders of Mexico certainly found more gold and silver than they could have ever dreamed of, but as they moved north out of the Valley of Mexico into central and northern Mexico, they also discovered something else: a vast, grassy, terrain that vaguely reminded them of Andalusia back across the ocean. Thus, some of those New Spaniards began to establish ranchos, and they did so in the manner of what they knew in Spain.

Following the instructions of the Viceroy and the traditional settlement patterns of Spanish conquest, colonizers slowly moved up the peninsula of New Spain. During the late 1600s one of the leaders of the colonizing efforts into the north was Blas de la Garza Falcoń, who would serve twice as the governor of the New Spain province of Coahuila. Governor Falcoń's son, also named Blas de la Garza, would play a critical role in establishing the first large rancho in what would become Texas, thus beginning Texas' stock raising tradition and introducing the middle of the North American continent to the Spanish "style" of ranching.

Blas de la Garza Falcoń, like his father, became a soldier. He was a captain at the Presidio de San Gregorio de Cerralvo in Nuevo Leon, a new province adjacent to Coahuila in northern New Spain. While he was part of the garrison there José de Escandón, who the Viceroy had tapped to coordinate the colonization of the northern part of New Spain, chose Falcoń to lead an expedition to explore the south bank of the Rio Grande. He and fifty men traveled from the Presidio to the mouth of the river. Escandón next instructed Falcoń to establish seven settlements along the river, villas that became the cities of Revilla, Camargo, Mier, Dolores, Reynosa, Laredo, and Vedoya. Falcoń then became the military and civil leader of the sub-province, and he established a ranch, Carnestolendas, in 1752 on the present day site of Rio Grande City.

Escandón had commissioned two expeditions to establish settlements north of the Rio Grande in the mid-1760s, but both had failed. Escandón turned to Falcoń to make it successful. The old saying is to do what you know best, and by that time Falcoń was a successful rancher, so he established another rancho, Santa Petronila, which was much larger than his previous ranch. Santa Petronila was five leagues from the Nueces River, and it became a way station and supply point for the surrounding area and those moving even farther north. A small town grew around the ranch, with a store, a school, a church, and homes for other migrants who moved to the area. Falcoń had become successful in establishing a Spanish presence in South Texas.

Santa Petronila was a vast operation. Within its lands roamed more than 5,000 Spanish horses and more than 20,000 head of cattle. These cattle were the almost feral descendants of the Andalusian bovines that the Spanish first brought to the New World, but they had adapted and transformed into an animal that could survive on the harsh plains of northern New Spain, a place where bears, jaguars, and other apex predators still roamed. They had grown muscular, aggressive, and bearing a set of long, pointed horns that allowed them to not only fight off predators, but also navigate through the thick brush of the region. They were the perfect cattle for the region and were, of course, the ancestors of the legendary Texas Longhorn.

Blas de la Garza Falcón did not live long enough to observe the tradition he began. He came down with an illness in early 1767—probably pneumonia—and returned to his home in Camargo, where he died shortly after. The remnants of Santa Petronila are gone now, but an equestrian statue of Falcón sits today on the Corpus Christi Bayfront on Shoreline Avenue, an appropriate memorial to a man who played such a large role in bringing the ranching tradition to Texas.

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