



Do Fence Me In: Barbed Wire and the Texas Cattle Industry

by Scott Sosebee

The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.

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

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(July 7, 2022) Texas, and much of its identity, is synonymous with the cowboy, and he in turn is indelibly allied with the state's ranching industry as no state is more closely affiliated with cattle than Texas. While the cowboy image is probably most often celebrated as part of Texas' open-range ranching heritage, Texas' prominence as a cattle-raising state—the business side of “cowboying”—owes more to the passing of the open-range era than to that short romantic period so often portrayed in film and literature. Texas' rise as the nation's premier bovine producer is mostly due to the end of the open range, a demise largely brought about with the invention and wide-spread use of a specific kind of technology—the barbed wire fence.

When cattlemen in the 1870s first ventured onto the plains of Texas, the wide-open spaces that were so conducive to the raising of stock, they found a place that seemed perfect for the accepted Spanish/Mexican tradition of the open-range that had migrated to Texas from Mexico in the eighteenth century. A man could round up thousands of South Texas bovines, those primary descendants of the Spanish breeds brought to Texas in the 1700s that had evolved into the legendary “Texas longhorn,” and then simply let them loose upon the plains and allow them to feed and prosper on the natural buffalo grasses of the Texas plains. The Texas open range had become a reality.

The “Texas longhorn” of the late 19th century actually bore little resemblance to the longhorns of today. Instead, these were small, wiry, tough, feral cattle that had evolved in South Texas to protect themselves from predators, drought, and any conditions nature could throw at them. They were also not some beast genetically selected to produce high-grade beef. On the contrary, their meat was stringy, tough, and “gamey,” a product that a discerning palate would probably call inedible. That did not matter in the 1870s because the teeming masses in the cities of the East wanted meat, and discerning was a term never used to describe their tastes in

cuisine. For them, the Texas longhorn worked just fine. Open range cattle ranchers began to carve out a good existence on the West Texas plains.

Such a system worked just fine when hardly anyone lived in West Texas. Cattlemen could graze their herds on the open public lands, which meant there was no need to actually secure title to the range. A West Texas cattle raiser might buy (or claim) acres around a water source and a place to locate a headquarters building and pens, but there was no need for any more holdings. It was an economical system, one that allowed men of little means to become agricultural entrepreneurs.

The open-range system was economical, but it still had problems. One of those was efficiency. Open range stock could not be selectively bred, and the bovines could not be acutely culled; stock that was ill-suited to meat production continued to breed and taint the herd through generations. The only way to solve that problem was through fencing. Barriers were also the preference of the migrants who followed the cattlemen - farmers. The open range was anathema to those who cultivated the soil; unpinned cattle trampled and ate crops. The two agricultural pursuits could not co-exist without fences. The problem was that fencing of the era was very expensive and not practical on the vast plains of West Texas. Stone and wood fences were the norm in East Texas, along with water-filled ditches, thick, planted hedges, and sod blockades. Stone large enough to build fencing was scarce in West Texas, and wood was almost non-existent. Even if those had been plentiful, the labor and expense to enclose thousands of acres, and given the scarcity of water and foliage on the plains that was the size of the ranches, was prohibitive. Thus, West Texas ranches faced two problems: population and town building depended on the establishment of farms, and selective beef breeds needed enclosure, but economics trumped such solutions.

Everything began to change in 1874. In that year, Joseph Glidden of Illinois gained a patent for a new fencing material, a series of sharp points wrapped around a single strand of wire that would eventually come to be known as “barbed wire” (not “bob wire” which is what many Texans call the material). The new material would prove perfect for the plains cattle industry. Barbed wire salesman began to sell miles of their strands to Texas ranchers, particularly after a famous demonstration of its effectiveness in holding a pen of cattle on Alamo Plaza in San Antonio. When large operations such as Charles Goodnight’s JA and the famed XIT began to enclose their holdings, the die was cast -- “the Devil’s rope” would become the preferred fencing material of cattle ranchers.

The invention of barbed wire changed Texas' cattle industry. Cattlemen could now buy and gain title to huge tracts of land, which would give them clear grazing rights to develop herds. Also, they could now stock the fenced range with breeds specifically engineered as beef cattle, which ended the reign of the longhorn and ushered in the age of the Hereford, Angus, and other beef cattle. Farms could find their place on the plains, and that would lead to towns, which would bring the railroad, which then helped to end the era of the cattle drive. Ranchers became more prosperous, and West Texas grew in population, and much of it was because of a cheap strand of wire studded with barbs. Sometimes, history turns on things that seem inconsequential at the time.

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