

Texas Ranching

What do you picture when you hear the word ‘ranch?’ Maybe you see a cowboy driving a herd of Texas Longhorns, or envision sprawling ranch houses. It is a surprise to many that ranching did not start in the Wild West or in Texas, but has roots reaching back into history. Spanish ships seeking to establish new colonies for Spain brought cattle to the Americas in the 1600s. In many regions of Mexico, which included current-day Texas, the vast grasslands held promise. Whereas rich soils in other regions might be used to grow crops, the grassy plains supported grasses for forage, as long as the number of livestock per acre was kept fairly low. Therefore a large tract of land was needed to sustain a cattle operation.

The word “ranch” came from the Spanish term “ranchero,” a person who takes care of cattle. To succeed as a rancher, these early Texans needed physical and mental toughness, expertise in wilderness survival and animal husbandry, and the willingness to live far from neighbors. As Texas was settled the cattle industry grew, and vast ranches such as the King Ranch were made famous. Over the past three centuries, Texas ranching has given rise to the American cowboy, the icon of the Texas Longhorn and sprawling ranches.

Many early ranchers in Texas held cattle drives, in which cowboys on horseback herded cattle across southwestern Louisiana to the market in New Orleans, but soon ranchers realized that they could catch a higher price for their cattle further north. Trails such as the Chisholm Trail gave rise to Fort Worth, a famous cow town, and many other communities that relied on the northern cattle trade.

As you look outside your window you see many pastures of grass bordered by roads and trails. Can you picture how hard it would have been to drive thousands of head of cattle across these open fields centuries ago? Cattle drives sometimes took weeks to reach their destination, and cattle were lost due to weather or unpredictable events. In many ways, the lifestyle of ranching shaped early American western culture. Even to this day many western states consist of small towns that are economically fueled by some form of ranching, simply because the land is perfect for it.

With the advancements in society such as roads, trucks and trailers, ranching has become a lot less strenuous but still requires a strong work ethic. In recent decades, technology and equipment have enabled some ranching operations to expand. The largest is still the King Ranch, with over 1200 square miles on land in the Corpus Christi area. Rails such as the one you are on right now allow convenient transport of hundreds of cattle overnight to processing factories. This enabled Texas to become the biggest exporter of beef in the nation, and to maintain this fascinating Texan lifestyle.

Source(s):

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Author(s):

Written by Andria N. Godfrey (Graduate Student) and Foster Smith (Undergraduate Student) in the Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences at Texas A&M University, as part of a National Park Service Trails and Rails project funded by Amtrak, 2011.