

Cattle boom of 1850s short-lived in Solano

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

Sunday, February 17, 2008

In my last column, Luzena Stanley Wilson described her experiences of riding across the hills of Solano County around 1851 to visit her Wolfskill neighbors at Putah Creek and encountering the vast herds of grazing black Spanish steers.

The cattle were raised mainly for their hides and tallow, with hides selling for an average of \$4 a head. While profitable, cattle raising remained much of a bucolic enterprise.

All this changed with the Gold Rush. Suddenly, hides and tallow were of secondary importance; with thousands of fortune seekers pouring into San Francisco and the gold mines, the demand for meat grew exponentially.

Cattle prices rose quickly. Suddenly, beef cattle fetched around \$35 per head if sold at the rancho or up to \$75 per head if brought all the way to San Francisco.

Herds numbering thousands of steers were driven from Southern California up the coast or through the Central Valley. The herds traveled at 10 to 15 miles a day, spending a month or longer on the trail.

Solano ranchers also took the chance to improve their business. The Solano County Herald reported the following on May 17, 1856:

“On last Monday and Tuesday over a thousand head of cattle crossed on the Martinez Ferry Boat, on their way to Suisun Valley, being the property of Messrs. A. M. Stevenson and Ed McGarry. They were as fine a lot of Spanish cattle as we have ever seen. They were driven from Los Angeles county.”

Midwestern ranchers also recognized an opportunity. By 1853, more than 62,000 cattle had made the trek from Missouri to the new California markets. According to the Los Angeles Star on April 7, 1860, more than 800,000 cattle grazed in California.

In Solano County, the 1852 census listed 2,185 cows, 1,085 beef cattle and 1,149 work oxen.

Five years later, the Solano County Herald reported on November 28, that the numbers of livestock was increasing rapidly.

Ranchers usually started out raising the local Spanish steers, but also brought new cattle breeds in to improve the stock. Local history tells of several ranchers to take steps in improving their herds, including A. M. Stevenson, who went back East in 1856 to bring cattle to California.

On August 8, 1857, the Solano County Herald said "a drove of blooded cattle, intended for Solano County, had started from Missouri the property of Mr. S. W. Long, who resides in Vaca Valley, where he intends to improve the stock of California."

A few years later, in 1862, the county assessor reported that less than ten percent of cattle was from Spanish stock.

To finance their cattle purchases, many rancheros throughout California acquired short-term mortgages with high interest rates of up to 7 percent per month, thinking to make a quick profit on their sale of beef cattle to the gold miners.

Warning voices could be heard that too many ranchers spent their newfound gains but neglected to restock their herds.

Like all booms, this one proved short lived, too. Starting in December 1861, heavy winter rains continued for four weeks, culminating in the largest recorded flood in California. Both the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys were completely under water.

Throughout the state, close to 200,000 cattle drowned; estimates said that one quarter of the State's taxable wealth was destroyed.

The flood was followed by two years of drought.

By the end of that period, the remaining starving cattle sold for less than \$8 a head, for hide and tallow use only. Many of the rancheros lost not only their herds, but also their land.

After seven years of seemingly endless profit, the crash of the California cattle boom ended the era of the California ranchero.

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/395>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/395/>