

Southern Pineywoods Cattle

Written by Charles M. Simon
Published from *Tributaries: The Journal of the Alabama
Folklife Association, Volume 9 (2006)*

The phrase *"forward with the past"* could well describe many people's interest in not only preserving but continuing production of living antiques in the form of the myriad varieties of old livestock breeds be it poultry, swine or cattle.

One such living antique is an obscure breed of bovine called the Southern Pineywoods Cattle. This breed of cattle could be termed as an improved version of the larger breed that is known as the Florida Cracker Cattle.

The original cattle were brought into the New World during the Spanish colonization. These cattle, which many originated in the Andalusia province of Spain, were shipped into Florida, Mexico and the California area during the 16th, 17th and 18th Century. This area of Florida (east and west) supported a number of Spanish ranches during the Spanish Colonial Period. These ranches were located from St. Augustine to Pensacola, many connecting with the Old Spanish Trail.

The American Indian did not have the means or the tradition of exploiting the native grasses in the Southeast with domesticated animals. European colonist's cattle, horses, sheep and goats were able to forage on the vast flora, particularly wiregrass found in our region. The practice of burning off the forests, especially during the winter, caused an explosion of tender forbs to grow in the early spring and summer. Livestock were able to range freely these food sources and convert this energy into body growth and offspring.

The descendants of these cattle make up the foundation of the Florida Cracker Cattle that are around today. It is interesting to note that the same genetics that are in the Florida Cracker Cattle are in the Texas Longhorn Cattle. Both breeds came from the same common parental stock but developed physically different because of their environment. Also, many lines of the Longhorn are being bred to produce those enormous horns. It is also interesting to note that the California Spanish Cattle are extinct due to many reasons, one being there were no efforts to keep any of the lines intact.

Now, where does the Southern Pineywoods Cattle fit in this story? In Southern Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and French Louisiana these were originally Spanish Criollo cattle bought by the French settlers or captured by the Anglo Americans from Spanish Florida. The cattle bought and used by the French colonists were kept essentially pure Spanish; but those captured by the Anglo Americans were crossbred with English breeds. However, by the early 19th Century all the Spanish stock were being crossed with these Anglo American breeds which were essentially English breeds. Many of these resulting cattle were bred for draft as oxen or beef production.

Early Southern cattle production techniques allowed for cattle to range freely on private and public land. Cattle were induced to remain in an area by the use of salt and not by fences. Since salt is important to their diet and is not found naturally occurring in many places, artificial salt licks were maintained to control cattle movements. These licks were small troughs usually cut out of a fallen log that was kept full of granular salt. Because cattle tended to congregate around these areas, many catch pens were located there.

Once a year cattle in the different areas were "trapped" in the local catch pen. Those cattle not caught were pursued by men on horseback with their catch dogs into the swamps and thickets. These catch dogs were of the Catahoula and/or Black Mouth Cur breeds and would literally bring a cow down by catching it by the muzzle. All cows caught would, hopefully, have their calves with them. After the calves found their respective mothers, they were caught, pulled down to the ground and ear notched and/or branded with the owners mark. These ear notches and/or brand marks had been previously registered with the county government.

Once a year surplus yearlings and cull cattle were driven to market and sold. Driving cattle was accomplished by men called drovers. One of the drovers would lead a boss cow or steer by a rope tied around its horns. The cattle followed the lead animal with the rear brought up by other drovers on horseback cracking their cow whips. "Cracker," the pejorative term for southern whites, may come from this practice. Dogs were used to catch any stray cattle that wandered from the drive.

The 20th Century brought improved breeds such as the Black Angus, Hereford, Charolais, Brahman, etc., to the South. Pastures were fenced and the old free range all but disappeared. These more modern breeds have displaced the older Cracker and Pineywoods Cattle to a point that they almost became extinct. A few families hung onto these old breeds well into the 1960s and 1970s.

During the late 1980s, concern for our disappearing breeds of livestock began a movement of preservation. Many individuals were concerned that we were losing genetic diversity because of the concentration of genetic bloodlines in modern farming production. Such a loss would leave herds more vulnerable to new diseases by lessening the odds that some parts of herd would be genetically different enough to resist new threats.

The formation and growth of organizations such as the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy (ALBC) became a reality because enough people shared these concerns. Most breeds of livestock have their own preservation organizations such as the Florida Cracker Cattle Association and the Pineywoods Cattle Registry and Breeders Association. All of these organizations provide support, breeders' lists, and a forum where members can share experiences and information.

The primary goal of these breed associations is to use the concept of conservation breeding to keep the old lines or strains of different breeds from extinction. There is a

difference in the two concepts of breeding which are conservation breeding and production breeding.

A leader in conservation breeding of old livestock breeds is Dr. Phillip Sponenberg who is a professor of Pathology and Genetics at the Virginia Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine at Virginia Polytechnic Institute. He, along with Carolyn J. Christman, former Program Coordinator of the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, wrote a handbook on conservation breeding. The manual is available from ALBC and is entitled *A Conservation Breeding Handbook*.

So, what is the difference in these two breeding concepts? Conservation breeding is multiplying the members of a certain line or strain without much regard to the prevailing meat or egg market of modern agriculture. All members of the line or strain are looked upon as contributing genetic material to the pool. No attempt is made to cull members that do not fit a certain "look". This keeps genetic diversity large within a breed.

Production breeding is concerned in developing livestock to conform to an "ideal" body type to fit a particular market place. The market place is dictated by the consumer who votes with their dollars. To achieve this end, producers will develop pure lines of livestock as seedstock to fit what the breed associations dictate. Other producers take these seedstocks and crossbreed to produce the meat, milk or eggs that are wanted in the market place.

An illustration of this is combining two or more seedstock breeds to produce an ideal 1100 – 1200 lbs. mature steer that will give packing box size meat cuts with the right amount of tenderness and marbling in the meat with as little waste as possible.

There is a demand for good quality steaks, therefore, restaurants and grocery stores want to provide these steaks in pre-packaged sizes. The problem with this is that we lose too much genetic diversity within the breeds and everything becomes cookie cutter. If the need arises to change the breed quickly, we will not have enough of a diverse gene pool to accomplish this. Dr. Sponenberg put it plainly when he wrote, "A key here is that the broader, lower form of genetic organization of "landraces," species that are adapted to specific locales, such as the Pineywoods Cattle breed, is fairly resistant to damaging effects of changes in the environment." Imagine the three different types of "breed structure building" in an earthquake, or major shift in the production system. The lower, broader, more variable organization is likely to persist more than is the tall narrow skyscraper. This is a compelling for breed conservation and also for strain conservation within the breed.

Don't fault modern agriculture for its approach. People have to make a living and they produce what is wanted by the market place. People have practiced production breeding since Robert Bakewell began improving the old English longhorn breed in the 18th century. We have a quality, reasonably priced food supply because of this practice. It is not all bad.

However, we also need to recognize that a safe deposit of genetic diversity needs to be maintained also. That is where conservation breeding and the old lines and strains of old livestock breeds fit in. Right now, there is not a lot of financial reward in keeping these old breeds but people are stepping up, nevertheless, and doing it.

These people have their own personal reasons for preserving a favorite breed(s) of livestock. Some of these reasons can be that their family has always had these animals and that there is a renewed interest in their continuation. Many buy a small piece of land and are attracted to a particular breed because of its novelty, rareness or the joy of having a living piece of history to preserve.

Pineywoods Cattle are a unique piece of history that I found requires work and knowledge in basic cattle production. The intensity of the production is less than would be required if one had a modern, more highly developed breed such as Angus, Charolais, etc. Pineywoods Cattle are a small breed with cows weighing around 800 – 900 pounds. A good thick muscled, heavy bull will weigh-in at around 1,500 pounds. Being of small stature, these cattle will require less forage to maintain their weight. I feed mine hay and shelled corn, plus minerals, during the winter and they do well.

Pineywoods Cattle are a good choice for a small farm of 30 – 100 acres if your objective is not to make a large amount of money. These cattle on the average will bring around 20 – 30 cents per pound less than market price of a commercial animal at a local auction.

Personally, I have Pineywoods Cattle because of preservation and they fit well on my land and lifestyle. I want my children to grow up around cattle, chickens and other critters on a farm. This alone out-weighs any financial losses I may incur from these cattle.

What are your objectives? Is there a place on your property for a minor breed? It does not have to be cattle; it could be one of the poultry breeds, swine or even horses. Check out the different breeds; there may be one for you.

SOURCES:

American Livestock Breeds Conservancy
www.albc-usa.org/about.htm

Pineywoods Cattle Registry & Breeders Association
www.pcrba.org