

Arizona's Five C's

Cattle

According to a recent genetic study, cattle were domesticated from wild ox in the Near East about 10,500 years ago. Christopher Columbus brought the first cattle to the New World in 1493 and other Spanish explorers brought cattle to Mexico about the time Cortez captured Mexico City in 1521. Over the years, Mexican cattle spread northward with the Spanish missions; the missionaries encouraged the indigenous people to raise domestic animals.

Hispanic Beginnings

The first cattle in Arizona were driven in from Sonora by Jesuit missionary Father Eusebio Kino in 1691, starting 20 years of mission development in the Santa Cruz Valley. Cattle became "the mainstays of the mission economies and a major attraction for Native American converts."

At about the same time, Spanish ranchers started small cattle ranches in the San Rafael Valley, at the headwaters of the Santa Cruz River.

In 1736 a nearby silver discovery triggered a temporary mining boom in southern Arizona, creating an expanded market for beef. Because of its consistently mild climate and rolling grasslands, the Santa Cruz Valley attracted many ranchers, establishing Hispanic families permanently in southern Arizona.

To further encourage settlement, the Spanish offered land grants. The Canoa Ranch, south of Tucson, and the Arivaca Ranch, southwest of Tucson, had their starts from these grants.

After Mexican Independence in 1821, to attract additional settlers, the Mexican government continued the Spanish practice and awarded ten private land grants in southern Arizona – five along the Santa Cruz River or its tributaries, four in the San Pedro River watershed, and one, whose northern tip only jutted into Arizona, east of Douglas. It was from these land grants that southern Arizona's most important cattle ranches would later emerge.

According to Thomas Sheridan in his Arizona history, Mexican period mixed-breed long horn cattle numbers probably never exceeded thirty thousand animals. Droughts and Apache raids took a heavy toll and by the 1840s most of the Mexican ranches were abandoned and cattle herds ran wild. Thereafter, the continuous slaughter of wild cattle by Apaches, American soldiers, civilians, and gold seekers crossing Arizona in the late 1840s and early 1850s, exterminated wild cattle from southern Arizona.

Southern Arizona

Following the Gadsden Purchase in 1854, American cattlemen tried "to make a go of it" in Arizona. But continued Apache depredations and the outbreak of the Civil War severely limited these efforts.

The cattle boom in southern Arizona started after the Civil War ended, when large numbers of Texas longhorns, from overgrazed pastures, were driven to the attractive empty grasslands of southern

Arizona. The federal government was the stimulus for a growing cattle industry, buying large amounts of beef for U.S. Army posts and Native American reservations.

A few large ranches and numerous small ranches were founded in this period. New England native Colonel Henry Hooker established the Sierra Bonita Ranch (north of Wilcox), Englishman Walter Vail bought and expanded the Empire Ranch (south of Vail), and the Cienega Ranch developed along Cienega Creek, southeast of Tucson. The Sierra Bonita ranch was the first permanent American cattle ranch in Arizona, continues as a working cattle ranch today, and in 1964 was declared a National Historic Landmark.

The completion of the Southern Pacific transcontinental railroad in 1881 enabled the southern Arizona cattle industry to expand rapidly. Big money investors shipped into Arizona from various locations around the country, particularly from Texas, where cattlemen were looking to escape mandatory grazing fees on state lands. Also, windmill technology improved to allow pumping of ground water into ponds, freeing cattle to graze over extended distances from natural sources of water. And Hereford cattle were introduced into Arizona to improve the herd.

In this period, Pennsylvania-bred Colin Cameron purchased the San Rafael Ranch, and Texas native and Cochise County sheriff John Slaughter purchased the San Bernardino Ranch east of Douglas, both of which grew into major Arizona cattle operations. The San Rafael survives today as the San Rafael State Natural Area (not currently open to the public). The San Bernardino Ranch became a National Historic Landmark in 1964.

With the decline of warfare against the Apache, previously established Hispanic families returned to ranching in southern Arizona. Also, newcomers from Mexico arrived.

The number of cattle in Arizona” grew exponentially.” By the 1890s there were about 1.5 million cattle in Arizona.

Northern Arizona

Meanwhile, another transcontinental railroad, this one across northern Arizona, was completed in 1883. The Atlantic and Pacific Railroad – linking Holbrook, Flagstaff, and Kingman - provided access to the unexploited lush grasslands of the Little Colorado River Basin in east central Arizona.

The Aztec Land and Cattle Company, a consortium of eastern businessmen and Texas ranching interests, purchased over one million acres along the railroad route and from 1884 to 1887, shipped tens of thousands of cattle from overgrazed Texas ranges to Arizona, and quickly built a herd of 60,000 animals. For a while, the Aztec Ranch was the third largest cattle ranch in North America.

But throughout the 1890s, successive draughts and range deterioration from overgrazing by too many animals caused heavy losses of cattle from starvation. In 1900, after only 16 years of operation, the Aztec Land and Cattle Company declared bankruptcy, ending the speculative cattle ranching era in the region, having a decidedly negative effect on the peoples and communities that depended on these ranges for their survival, and reducing future range productivity drastically.

A more successful cattle operation in northern Arizona was started in 1886 by Cincinnati-businessmen brothers David and William Babbitt in mountainous pastures around Flagstaff. Their CO Bar Ranch grew steadily through acquisition of other ranches and became one of southwest's most successful cattle ranches, still operating today.

Modern Cattle Industry

The severe draughts in the 1890s and overgrazing affected all Arizona cattle operations. To survive, cattlemen had to adopt a different approach – the open range gave way to stock raising as a modern business enterprise. From growing the largest herds possible, Arizona ranchers increasingly specialized in breeding superior beef animals and then shipping them to other states for fattening. They limited the number of cattle, invested in the land, and practiced good management. Small ranches proliferated – to all 15 Arizona counties.

Herds peaked at 1.75 million head in 1918, fell to 750,000 by 1930, increased to 1.4 million in 1974, and gradually decreased to about 900,000 at the beginning of 2013. Surprisingly perhaps, Arizona ranks only 32nd in the U.S. for number of cattle.

Cattle ranching in Arizona today is about half what it was during its peak, but remains a large source of revenue. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, cattle ranching's total value to the Arizona economy in 2012 was \$1.02 billion.

Some of the ranches found in Arizona today are guest ranches where cattle are grazed and where modern cowboys demonstrate cow herding skills. Rodeos, county fairs, and the National Livestock show, the largest livestock show in the southwest, held annually in Phoenix, are other ways for us to remember our cattle ranching roots.

Cattle Facts ...

The Arizona Rangers were formed in 1901 specifically to stop cattle thieves.

Arizona had more cattle than people until about 1950.

Arizona produced 413.7 million pounds of beef in 2010, enough to feed 6 million people.

There were 3,800 cattle ranches in Arizona in 2010.

There were 11,566 cattle brands recorded in 1908 and about 12,200 in 2011.

Selected Sources and Information: *Arizona – A History* (Thomas E. Sheridan, 2012); Arizona Agricultural Statistics U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2011); Arizona Annual Livestock (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2013); Five C's Supported the Arizona Economy, arizona100blogspot.com; A quick history of Arizona cows & cowboys, azstarnte.com; Babbitt Ranches, babbitranches.com; DNA traces cattle back to a small herd domesticated around 10,500 years ago (University College London, 2012); Early Cattle Ranching in the Little Colorado River Basin, cpluhna.nau.edu; Ranching Traditions (1680 to present), www.archaeologysouthwest.org.



*This “real photo” postcard shows a typical cattle roundup in southern Arizona.
(Postcard courtesy of Al Ring)*