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Selection

Development of the Beef Cattle Industry

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Historic Document

Man has used cattle for the past 6500 years as a source of meat, milk, clothing, objects of worship, and as beasts of burden and power.

The art of raising animals for food, fiber and power has paralleled the development of our civilization. In fact, changing the natural habits of animals to meet the needs and desires of man was necessary to allow people to rise above barbarism. Cattle were probably hunted for food and fiber in the Old Stone Age. The New Stone Age brought the first primitive type of cattle domestication. During this period, man needed a more steady, and perhaps a more desirable, meat and milk supply.

Cattle herding was one of the prestige symbols in primitive times. Among the primitive people, cattle (meaning chattel or capital) were their most valuable possessions and were sometimes used as a measure of the value of other items of property (including wives on occasion).

Introduction in U.S.

The modern American cattleman would shudder at the sight of the first cattle imported into the Western Hemisphere. Columbus, on his second trip in 1493, brought a few cattle intended for work animals. Three strains of cattle were obtained from the animals brought to the New World by Columbus and other Spanish explorers: 1) the wild cattle of the Caribbean Islands, 2) the fighting bulls of Mexico and 3) the Longhorns of the American plains. Portuguese traders also brought some cattle to Nova Scotia in 1553. However, the first sizable group of British cattle arrived in the Jamestown Colony in 1611. Plymouth Pilgrims also imported one bull and three cows from Devonshire, England in 1624.

Cattle spread across the Alleghenies and into Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana by 1800 and into Illinois and Missouri by 1840. However, the Eastern population, and their desire for quality beef, grew much faster than the available supply.

In the great Southwest, particularly the Texas rangelands, the first herds probably grazed shortly after 1525. These cattle were the typical Spanish Longhorns, brought into Texas from Mexico. By 1840 cattle were widespread over the Southwestern rangeland, and by 1855 there were 10 head of cattle in Texas for each person. Naturally, the problems of moving this gigantic supply of beef eastward to the population centers had to be solved.

Early Markets

1845 to about 1865 were the days of trailing cattle from the great Southwest ranges to the Central and Southern slaughtering centers. In the 1840's many thousands of cattle were slaughtered for only the hides and tallow. The meat often ended up as coyote and buzzard food because of inadequate storage and transportation. Some of the meat was saved and sold as salt-packed beef. Market information was passed verbally to the drovers trailing cattle by those returning from the market.

The first attempt to ship live cattle by rail was in 1952, but it was not until 1860 that rail movements of cattle became important. Larger numbers of Western cattle were moved to Midwestern farms where they were fattened before continuing to the Eastern markets.

The refrigerated railway car did more than any other invention to revolutionize the beef industry. It was in limited use in 1860 and by 1880 was an accepted part of the meat packing industry. This allowed cattle which were slaughtered in the West or Midwest to be sold on the Eastern meat markets. High demand for "Western dressed beef" on the Eastern markets was established rather quickly. The number of cattle on the Western rangelands more than doubled between 1880 and 1900.

Upgrading of Western Cattle

Until about 1870, the slow-maturing, thin-fleshed, wild Spanish Longhorn roamed the Western ranges. The Western cattleman probably made little or no effort to improve his cattle. The Midwestern cattle feeder, having a choice of feeding the Longhorn, or the Midwestern-raised "beefy" British cattle prompted the Western cattleman to up-grade the Longhorn.

The Western cattleman then began an intensive search for bulls of hardy British breeding in order to maintain his newly-found cattle market. Soon afterward breeders of purebred British cattle were established in the West and became a nearby source of stock for upgrading the native Western cattle. It is indeed fortunate for the industry that a supply of true beef bulls was available when the great increase in cow numbers occurred. The beef industry has continued to grow into the largest single agricultural industry in terms of cash farm receipts.

Beef Consumption Has Increased Markedly

Beef is the preferred meat of the American consumer. This is shown by the increase in beef consumption per person in the U.S. from 56 pounds in 1937 to about 100 pounds in 1964. This means that, on the average, every man, woman and child in the U.S. eats 100 pounds of beef each year.

Why this increase in beef consumption?

Several factors have contributed to this increase:

1. Increased purchasing power of the consumer.
2. Beef is a leaner-appearing product than some other meats, and people associate lean meats with leanness of their own bodies.
3. The farm population, which generally eats less beef than the average urban person, has decreased.
4. The quality of beef has become more standardized by the Federal Grading Service.
5. The average age of market cattle has decreased, thereby improving the product.
6. There has been an increase in the carcass desirability of today's beef cattle through genetic improvement and improved methods of feeding and management.

Can beef consumption per person be increased in the future? There are several indications that the per capita beef consumption can, and probably will, increase if the quality and the efficiency of production is increased or at least maintained. Certainly

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with the expected population explosion in the U.S., the industry must expand and improve the efficiency of producing beef.

Future Challenges of the Beef Breeder

What about the future of our industry?

Many improvements have been made in the production of beef. Most of these improvements have been made through better management and feeding practices. Conformation of beef animals has also improved (according to present ideals).

But have we really done a good job of increasing the efficiency of our beef animals?

Eighty years ago there was very little grain to feed and easy fleshing, easy keeping cattle were at a premium. Now a surplus of grain in the Corn Belt contributes to over-finishing of cattle. Now there is need to search for heavy muscled cattle with more frame and scale which can utilize more grain without increasing the proportion of fat to lean.

Certainly large differences exist among beef cattle in their ability to grow rapidly and efficiently and still produce carcasses with a high proportion of muscle. Research has shown that gainability, feed efficiency and carcass desirability are highly heritable. This means that these very important beef traits depend to a large extent on the genetic ability of the brood cows and bulls. This also means that we can improve these traits through careful selection of our breeding stock.

Improvement is necessary for each beef producer if he is to effectively meet his competition. Improvement practices such as performance testing, carcass evaluation, and using the right kind of herd sires can appreciably increase the net profits of commercial and purebred beef breeders. Sound selection of breeding stock can also enhance the position of the entire beef industry.

The beef breeder who diligently seeks consistent and correct goals will be an important and profitable part of the beef industry in the future.

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