

Of Cavemen, Cows And Currency

"Man has had a love affair with the cow since time immemorial. The history of the cow is the history of man," said an Iowa State University animal science professor.

Richard Willham weaves a tale of conquest and triumph, of pestilence and disaster, of struggle and change, in relating the story of the cow.

The saga begins in the earliest caves of man, where spectacular drawings of bovine animals bear witness to early man's familiarity and fascination with the ancestors of today's cattle.

Man began to follow the herds, attaching to the bovine beasts far greater importance than ever their immense practical value warranted.

The cow became man's god—as demonstrated by the idols of gold which were molded into the form of a calf. Man attached tremendous religious significance to the cow's horns, and developed intricate fertility rites centered on the beast.

The cow was much more than simply a source of meat. Actually, meat was relatively low on the list uses of the animal. The cow was important

because of its milk, its blood, its utility as a beast of burden, and (as mentioned before) its religious significance. It was only consumed for meat after its other uses were exhausted.

Cattle have been as currency for thousands of years. The word *pecuniary* comes from the Latin *pecunia* (money), which in turn finds its roots in the Latin *pecus*, which means cow.

The word *fee* evolved from the Old English *feoh*, which meant cattle. *Feoh* is similar to the Old High German *fihu*, which also meant cattle.

When the Aryans overran India, the Indians sought to keep their cattle alive—knowing full well that a family could live off a live cow for far longer than they could live from the meat of a slaughtered cow. Eventually, the Indians considered the cow a sacred animal which should not be killed under any circumstances—an idea which became part of their religion.

The first significant event in the cow's journey across the seas to the New World was probably the conquest of Spain by Africa's Moors. As the Moors swarmed over the Iberian Peninsula, they brought with them their ranching lifestyle.

The horses that migrated across the

Strait of Gibraltar at that time enabled the herding of the Spanish livestock—which consisted mostly of sheep, but included some cattle. The cattle that were turned out into Mexico and the American Southwest by the Spaniards who sought gold across the Atlantic in the 1500s were descended from these Spanish herds.

The emphasis on cattle spread through Europe during the succeeding periods of conquest and the rise of nationalism. Cattle became such a part of the lifestyle that the barons of England and western Europe were often termed the "butter gentry" because of the reliance of their economy upon livestock.

With the invention of the ard—a large plow with which to turn the heavy soils—the social fabric of western Europe was changed. To pull the ard, eight oxen or cattle were needed. This meant that cooperation between nine peasants was needed to successfully till the land—one would own the ard, and eight others would supply their family beast.

Cultivated strips fanned out from the villages as spokes of a wheel. The strips were as long as an ox could walk before needing rest.

The industrial revolution which

dawned in Britain during the late 1700s created profound changes in the relationship between man and cow. It was at this time that conditions combined to cause the development of the first beef breeds.

The English adopted the horse collar invented in China, thus freeing the cow from its beast of burden role, as horses were now able to perform pulling chores.

The mechanization of the industrial revolution created a quick, efficient means of harvesting a forage crop to feed the cattle.

Perhaps most importantly, the migration to the cities which occurred at that time created a market for farm products—including beef—which had not existed previously.

The American expansion westward provided unbounded opportunity. The combination of plentiful land and bountiful feed sources brought the Golden Age of the cattle industry. The descendants of the beasts of burden brought by the pilgrims, and the Spanish legacy of roaming herds of Longhorns, both flourished on the North American plains—supplanting the great American buffalo in the process.

The dominant influence of the

railroads created boom towns out of cross roads. Abilene, Kansas was bought lock, stock, and barrel by Joseph McCoy so it could serve as the railhead through which he could fulfill his incredible 1867 boast of being able to ship 4,000,000 head of cattle to Chicago in two years.

His boast was realized as he convinced cattlemen to drive their herds from Texas to Abilene to receive double the price offered in Texas. In this way, the language gained the phrase "The Real McCoy" (a boaster who delivers what is promised). Abilene became part of American folklore, and the essential American hero arrived on the scene—the trail-driving cowboy.

The romantic tradition of the American cowboy arose from only a 20-year span—as barbed wire, a series of devastating winters, and a decline in prices in the late 1880s sounded the deathknell of the Longhorn trail drive.

The emphasis of American cattlemen then shifted to the purebred beef cattle, which had emigrated from England. The importance placed on show animals caused the breeds to become increasingly smaller in stature, as breeders tried for the compactness valued highly at that time

in the show ring.

However, with the advent of dwarfism, careful scientific study of breeding increased. The scientific era of beef cattle began with the 1960s, helped along by the boom of commercial feedlots in the Southwest which applied an economic yardstick to all facets of cattle breeding.

The importing of European breeds in the late 1960s created a new reservoir of genetic characteristics from which breeders could draw.

The 1970s have seen increasing emphasis upon performance testing and scientific improvement of the species. The impending 1980s promise even further development.

Willham said that man and cow have become dependent upon each other. "The history of man and cow have become inextricably interwoven," he said. "We have reached the point where probably neither could now survive without the other." 