

Corriente History 101 by Mel Gnatkowski

What are the origins of these cattle that we call Corriente? In trying to answer that question, I borrowed a copy of John Rouse's book *The Criollo: Spanish Cattle in the Americas* (University of Oklahoma Press: Norman). This book is worth reading and is the main source for this article.

Criollo is a generic term for native cattle in Latin America. They are cattle of the land and are not related to any modern breeds. John Rouse became interested in Criollo cattle while gathering information on his three volume work, *World Cattle*. He encountered Jersey-colored cattle in Central and South America that were not related to the Jersey breed. While I am grateful that Jersey-colored cattle prompted him to do the research of *The Criollo*, the drawback to his work is that many of the photographs in the book are of this type of cow. Even though I had hoped to see more of a variety of cattle in the pictures, his text and historical research on the Criollo are thorough and informative.

The origins of Criollo cattle go back to tenth century Castile. As the Spanish gradually drove the Moors south, out of the Iberian Peninsula, they brought livestock to the vast plains of Andalusia. First sheep, then cattle prospered there. Some cattle herds were as large as 1,000 to 1,500 head. A pattern of there management and ranching began to develop in the thirteenth century that ultimately would be carried to the New World, centuries later. Men on horseback, the use of a rope, the roundup, and branding all began here. While information is sketchy, the Andalusian cattle appear to be native cattle. There is no evidence that they were influenced by Moorish cattle from Africa. Descriptions of Spanish cattle are scarce until the middle of the nineteenth century. The best guess is that the cattle shipped to the New World resembled types of old Spanish cattle found in Andalusia today: the Retinto (a red or tan colored animal, sometimes almost brown), the Black Andalusian (a solid black), the Berrenda (a white with black points), and possibly a few Cacereno (a pure white). These types of cattle formed the basis for the Criollo in the Americas.

The De Lidia, the fighting cattle of Spain are excluded. The cattle the Spanish used in settling the Americas were for draft animals, meat, milk, and hides. The De Lidia, known for their aggressive nature, were bred for bull baiting and later bull fighting. These cattle were raised in isolation, separate from cattle for domestic use. The first noted shipment of fighting cattle was in 1552, when 12 pairs of bulls and cows were shipped to Mexico. This was well after cattle were established in Mexico. In 1540, Coronado traveled into what would become the United States, taking with him 500 head of cattle. By the time the De Lidia arrived, the herds in Mexico numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Even if they were crossed, their genetic impact would have been nil. Any similarity of the fighting cattle and Criollo is best explained by their common ancestry in Spain.

John Rouse made a detailed search of the cargo manifests for Spanish ships sailing for the Americas. The first cattle arrived in the New World in November, 1493, with Christopher Columbus on his second voyage. Columbus had been made Admiral of the Ocean Sea and Governor of the Indies. His task was to colonize the land he had claimed for the Spanish crown. The seventeen ships with him carried everything needed to become self-sufficient, including cattle. Because of the small size of the ships, the number of animals must have been limited. Not only would the ship have carried the cattle, it would have had to carry all of the food and water necessary for the journey. From Spain to the Canary Islands was a voyage of 900 miles, taking four to eight days. From the Canaries to the East Indies was 2,500

miles, taking an average of sixty days. Columbus' second voyage took a record 22 days, from the Canary Islands to Hispaniola. Other crossings were not so fortunate and the death loss must have been high.

While there is no description of how the cattle were transported and unloaded, they must have been handled like horses. Once on board, the animals would have spent the entire voyage suspended in a sling to keep them from being hurt by the roll of the ship. An average ship could carry about 100 tons of cargo. To reduce weight, bred heifers and young bulls were normally transported overseas. On a bare maintenance diet, each animal would require at least three times its own weight in feed and water for a 60 day trip.

Spanish cattle had been brought to the Canary Islands fifteen years before Columbus' voyage. Both the Spanish ports and those of the Canary Islands served as sources of cattle for the Americas. As colonization progressed, requests for cattle also included that they originate from the Canaries. This reduced the time at seas and improved the condition of the animals arriving in the New World.

Soon after arriving in 1494, Columbus realized that the colony's survival depended on cattle. He made an urgent request to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella for cattle and beast of burden for food and work. The colony on Hispaniola struggled to survive during its first decade. As the island was settled, cattlemen would occupy a villa and establish their herd in the surrounding open range. Open range management developed similar to cattle raising on the Andalusian plains. The lush land proved ideal and the cattle multiplied.

By 1512, the cattle numbers on Hispaniola had reached an excess and they were being killed for their hides. Although records are incomplete until 1529, it is unlikely that they continued to bring cattle over the Atlantic with an abundance of cattle on Hispaniola. From 1529 to 1599, records are abundant, and there is no record of cattle being crossed from Spain or the Canaries except for the above mentioned fighting cattle in 1552. The cattle, which in the next two centuries were to spread from Oregon to the tip of South America, originated from a gene pool of cattle brought across in the first couple of decades of Spanish settlement.

The Casa de Contraction was established in 1503 to direct all commerce and shipping, especially in the East Indies. The Casa began a pattern of exporting cattle from Hispaniola to the nearby islands in order to establish new herds and settlements. Cattle and Spanish conquest were linked together. Spanish expansion never moved at a pace greater than the expansion of their cattle herds. They brought cattle to Jamaica and Puerto Rico (1509), then to Cuba (1511), to Panama (1510), to Mexico (1521), to South America (1524), to Florida (1565), and to all contiguous lands the Spanish controlled. Spanish cattle were well established by the time the English brought their first cattle to North American in 1608. The numbers of Spanish cattle were astounding. In 1783, Buenos Aires alone shipped 1,400,000 hides to Europe--all from cattle that had spread from the first herd established on Hispaniola.

In Mexico, ranches and cattle multiplied and spread throughout the country. By 1539, wild cattle had reached the present U.S-Mexico border. Large herds abounded. In 1586, one herd was numbered at 130,000 head with 33,000 calves branded that year. On the open range of Mexico's central plateau, bulls were left uncastrated and natural selection created a type of cattle that adapted to the country. Until the last half of the 19th century, the cattle of Mexico were descendants of the first cattle brought in by Spanish Conquistadores.

They remained pure until 1884, when Zebu cattle were imported into Mexico and crossing began with the Criollo; European beef breeds soon followed. Most of the Criollo cattle disappeared from the country with only a few being found in isolated pockets. Today, a few can be found in the desert state of Sonora, the Baja California and the mountains of Durango and Chihuahua. Some milking Criollos are found in Southern Mexico.

The forces of natural selection and/or selective breeding have created diverse types of cattle from the small group of cattle brought to Hispaniola. While we are mainly interested in the Criollo cattle from North-Central Mexico called Rodeo Cattle or Corriente, many other breeds of cattle originated from the Spanish cattle. Those familiar to us in the United States that are direct descendants are the Florida Scrub (or Cracker) and the Louisiana Swamp cattle. The Texas Longhorn is also descended from Spanish cattle but with a minor influence from the early American cattle. While Criollo cattle share a common ancestry, the centuries of natural selection and/or selective breeding have resulted in genetic diversity. In Baja California, Chinampo cows weigh 600 to 700 pounds in good flesh and bulls average 100 pounds or more. These desert cattle are night grazers, browsing mainly on shrubs and have a lower metabolic rate. In contrast the Cuban Criollo cow weighs 1,200 pounds and bulls several hundred pounds more. Horns can vary from the massive horns of the Longhorn to the Romo Sinuano of Colombia, the only polled Criollo breed. Mexican Rodeo cattle developed under the forces of natural selection. These cattle are small, agile, hardy and have a good disposition—ideally suited for the sport of rodeo. From them, come the cattle we in the United States call *Corriente*!

