The Logic of Livestock: An Historical Geography of Cattle Ranching in Colombia, 1850-1950

by

Shawn Kenneth Van Ausdal

B.A. (University of California, Berkeley) 1991
M.A. (University of California, Berkeley) 2001

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Geography

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Michael Johns, Chair
Professor Michael Watts
Professor Margaret Chowning

Fall 2009
The Logic of Livestock: An Historical Geography of Cattle Ranching in Colombia, 1850-1950

©

by Shawn Kenneth Van Ausdal
Abstract

The Logic of Livestock: An Historical Geography of Cattle Ranching in Colombia, 1850-1950

by

Shawn Kenneth Van Ausdal

Doctor of Philosophy in Geography

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Michael Johns, Chair

This dissertation examines a significant yet little understood economic activity in modern Colombian history: cattle ranching. The importance of cattle stems from their role in the settlement of the country’s lowlands, the conflicts around property rights, and the proportion of capital dedicated to ranching. Because scholars have paid it little heed, most reproduce a common misconception about the logic of livestock: that it was principally driven by a range of ulterior motives – from satisfying cultural status to a source of political power; and from establishing territorial control to either a speculative investment or a hedge against risk – rather than the search for profits. This study questions these deeply-entrenched views. I challenge the notion that cattle were an easy way to make territorial claims and argue that ranching was fundamentally a business endeavor. As a result, the colonization of the Colombian lowlands and the transformation of its forests, the territorial monopolization of much of the country, and the dominance of ranching need to be understood in light of the difficulty yet ultimate success of growing grass in the lowland tropics and the advantages of raising cattle
over other forms of land use. This dissertation, therefore, contributes to a deeper understanding of the practices, rationales, and challenges to Colombian ranching over a key century of expansion (1850-1950).

Based on a range of primary sources, including the correspondence of Pedro Nel Ospina & Compañia, an important ranching operation in northern Colombia, this historical geography is organized thematically. Each of the six chapters examines a different facet of ranching: the transformation of the Colombia’s lowland forests; the territorial origins of cattle estates and the development of property markets; the sweaty work and social relations of stock raising; the beef commodity chain and the economic logic of ranching; the slow yet difficult improvements to productivity; and the power and the politics of ranching.

Chair, Dissertation Committee

Date
# Table of Contents

**List of Maps** .................................................................................................................. ii
**List of Tables** .................................................................................................................. iii
**List of Figures** .................................................................................................................. iv
**List of Archive Abbreviations** ....................................................................................... v
**Glossary of Foreign Words** ............................................................................................ vi
**Acknowledgements** ........................................................................................................ ix

**Chapter One**
**Introduction: From Forest to Pasture** .......................................................................... 1

**Chapter Two**
**The Origins of the Cattle Estate** .................................................................................... 47

**Chapter Three**
**Ranchers, Cowboys, and Peons: The Work and Social Relations of Ranching** .......... 156

**Chapter Four**
**The Economics of Ranching** ........................................................................................ 271

**Chapter Five**
**Productivity and the ‘Natural’ Limits of Tropical Ranching** ....................................... 370

**Chapter Six**
**Some Concluding Thoughts on the Politics of Ranching** ............................................ 433

**Works Cited** .................................................................................................................. 454
LIST OF MAPS
1.1. Colombian departmental boundaries and topography...............................15
1.2. Regions of Colombia.................................................................................16
1.3. Natural savannas of Colombia.................................................................17
1.4. The expansion of ranching in Antioquia....................................................23
1.5. The expansion of ranching in Cundinamarca..........................................24
1.6. The expansion of ranching in Old Bolívar................................................25
1.7. The changing regional concentration of the national cattle herd
   (c. 1850-1960)...............................................................................................30
2.1. Old Bolívar..................................................................................................48
2.2. Indian resguardos in Old Bolívar during the nineteenth century..............86
2.3. Villages in Old Bolívar with ejidos during the nineteenth century...........111
2.4. The distribution of public land grants in Old Bolívar (1850-1931)............121
4.1. The ranching properties of Pedro Nel Ospina & Compañía....................283
4.2. Cattle trails from Old Bolívar to Antioquia.............................................327
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1.</td>
<td>The changing geography of cattle herds (c.1850-1960)</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.</td>
<td>The growth of cattle populations (c.1850-1996)</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.</td>
<td>The land transactions of José Miguel Espitia (1843-1898)</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.</td>
<td>The land tenure structure in parts of Old Bolívar (1868)</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.</td>
<td>The land tenure structure in Old Bolívar (1960)</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.</td>
<td>The land tenure structure in self-reported cattle ranches, Córdoba (1959)</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.</td>
<td>The Cáceres properties of Ospina Hermanos (1884-1905)</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.</td>
<td>The properties of Pedro Nel Ospina &amp; Cía. (1907-1927)</td>
<td>284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.</td>
<td>Cattle market reports by Pedro Nel Ospina &amp; Cía. (1914-1928)</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.</td>
<td>The inheritance of Pedro Nel Ospina’s children (1928)</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5.</td>
<td>Cattle purchases by ranches Corinto and Marta Magdalena (1922-1947)</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.</td>
<td>Corn production costs in Córdoba and Bolívar (1955)</td>
<td>369</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.</td>
<td>Average carcass weights of Colombian steer by area (c.1760 to c.1960)</td>
<td>385</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.</td>
<td>Slaughter yields (c.1910 to c.1950)</td>
<td>385</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.</td>
<td>Calving rates (1860 to 1960)</td>
<td>387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.</td>
<td>Mortality rate estimates (1940-1999)</td>
<td>390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5.</td>
<td>Ranching Productivity, Colombia in Comparative Perspective (late 1950s)</td>
<td>408</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

4.1. Cattle prices (1905-1970) ................................................................. 303
4.2. Colombian cattle exports (1834-1950) ........................................... 305
4.3. Meat consumption in Colombia (1850-1950) ................................. 315
4.4. The share of the Medellín cattle fair in terms of total consumption
       in Antioquia (1888-1950) ............................................................. 334
5.1. Effective calving rate, Hacienda Marta Magdalena and national
       average (1915-1996) ................................................................. 388
5.2. Mortality rates on Hacienda Marta Magdalena (1913-1940) ............. 389
5.3. Average age of steer at slaughter, Hacienda Marta Magdalena
       and national average (1915-1996) ............................................. 392
5.4. Beef production rate (1915-1996) .................................................. 394
LIST OF ARCHIVE ABBREVIATIONS

APNOyC     Archive of Pedro Nel Ospina & Compañía, in FAES
FAES       Fundación Antioqueña de Estudios Sociales, Medellín
AGPNO      Archive of General Pedro Nel Ospina, in FAES
APNOJr.    Archive of Pedro Nel Ospina Jr., in FAES
ABOV       Archive of Bernardo Ospina, in FAES
AFVJ       Archive of the Family Vásquez Jaramillo, in FAES
AOH        Archive of the Ospina Hermanos, in FAES
ACER       Archive of Carlos E. Restrepo, University of Antioquia, Medellín
AOFB       Archive of Orlando Fals Borda, Banco de la República, Montería
AC         Archive of Congress, Archivo General de la Nación, Bogotá
AHC        Archivo Histórico de Cartagena, Cartagena
ANM        Archivo Notarial de Montería, Montería
ANA        Archivo Notarial de Ayapel, Ayapel
PRO        Public Records Office, London
NARA       National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.
Glossary of Foreign Words

Avanzado: A worker paid wages in advance; in the Sinú Valley, typically referred to seasonal, migrant workers (often of indigenous decent) with short-term labor contracts.

Baldío: Public land.

Caballería: Unit of land measure dating from the colonial period; in the Caribbean coastal region, it was divided into 50 fanegadas and was equivalent to approximately 419 hectares.

Ciénaga: Seasonal floodplain.

Colono: Peasant colonizer or pioneer settler.

Compañía (Cía): Company.

Corralero: Ranch worker who cared for and milked cows.

Costeño con cuernas: Local breed of cattle from the Caribbean coastal region.

Criollo: Creole, or local rather than European or improved breed.

Ejido: Village communal land.

Fanegada: Unit of land measure equivalent to about 8.4 hectares.

Ganadería: Cattle raising or ranching.

Ganadero: Cattle raiser or rancher.

Hacendado: Landed estate owner.

Hacienda: Landed estate.

Hato: Colonial-era designation for a cattle operation.

Latifundio: Large landed estate.

Latifundista: Large landed estate owner.
| **Lazo** | lasso. |
| **Legua** | league; equivalent to about 4.2 kilometers in the Caribbean coastal region through the end of the nineteenth century, then standardized at 5 kilometers. |
| **Levante** | stage of cattle raising between breeding and fattening. |
| **Llanero** | person or thing from the Llanos region of Colombia. |
| **Mancomunidad** | communally-owned private property. |
| **Matrícula** | the registration of a labor contract in the Caribbean coastal region. |
| **Matriculado** | a worker with a registered labor contract. |
| **Mayordomo** | landed estate manager. |
| **Mejoras** | improvements made to ‘raw’ land. |
| **Mocho** | horse trained in cattle work. |
| **Mozo** | worker. |
| **Nuche** | bot or warble fly. |
| **Peón** | worker. |
| **Peso** | unit of currency. |
| **Posesión** | property rights in a *mancomunidad*; also refers to untitled property rights to *mejoras* and surrounding areas in public lands. |
| **Real** | unit of currency dating from the colonial period; typically eight *reales* were equivalent to one *peso*. |
| **Resguardo** | communally-owned land of an Indian community. |
Romosinuano: breed of cattle developed in the Sinú Valley in the early-twentieth century.

Sabana: savanna.

Sabanero: person or thing from a savanna region.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The debts one racks up writing a dissertation are impressive. While it is impossible to thank everyone who helped me with this project, I do want to acknowledge a number of people by name. First and foremost, I want to thank Claudia Leal for her intellectual and moral support. Her encouragement and patience allowed me to keep plugging away.

Various people were instrumental in helping me get the project off the ground. Magdalena León, with typical enthusiasm, helped me test the waters of viability with long lists of initial contacts. Francisco Leal, Marco Palacios, Orlando Fals Borda, Jorge Orlando Melo, Mary Roldán, Absolón Machado, Alvaro Tirado, and Fidel Cuellar gave me additional guidance and contacts. In particular, I want to acknowledge the assistance provided by the scholars who, through their own work, paved the way for my own reexamination of ranching in Colombia: Eduardo Posada Carbó for his encouragement; Adolfo Meisel for his enthusiasm and generosity; Gloria Isabel Ocampo for her openhandedness; Joaquín Viloria for the lengthy chats and contacts; and María Teresa Ripoll for her encouragement and allowing me to copy the stack of articles on ranching that she had collected.

I also want to thank Alberto Flórez for organizing the collaborative research project on the history and politics of meat consumption in Colombia. He and the other participants – Stefania Gallini, Ingrid Bolívar, and Luis Guillermo (Brigitte) Baptiste – created a stimulating forum and generously shared research material gathered from scattered archives and libraries.
The staff at the numerous archives and libraries where I gathered research material were also very helpful. In particular, I want to thank Jorge Yepes for orienting me around FAES and extending its hours. Alonso Pacheco made working in the Archivo Histórico de Córdoba more comfortable and productive. In addition, I am grateful to Julio Arias for the long weeks he spent helping me gather research material in Medellín and for making the trips there more enjoyable. More thanks go to Juan Ignacio Arboleda for diligently collecting material from the Archivo General de la Nación and scouring the *Gaceta de Bolívar* for data on ranching, property markets, and land conflicts. Adriana Castañeda and Jason McGraw also helped out by showing me around the Archivo General and keeping a look out for cattle references.

Additionally, I am indebted to Lino Torregroza, José Dominguez, Silvio Javier Guzman, and Diana Silva for taking me around Montería, helping me set up meetings with local ranchers, and for their overall hospitality. Juan Carrulla, Rodolfo Zambrano, Roger Serpa, Miguel Valverde, Alfredo García, Ximena Rueda, and Diana Ojeda generously helped me locate primary sources, contact local ranchers, and provided me with research material. I also want to thank the long list of academics, ranchers, and others who provided me with information and told me stories about ranching and ranching families: Víctor Negrete, Arturo Vega, Silvio Guzmán, Jaime Dereix, Carlos Pardo García, Manuel Charris, doña Paulina Mejía de Castro, Carlos Suárez, Jaime Tobón, Juan Manuel Ospina, Martín Bermúdez, María Christina Villareal.

UC Berkeley provided a stimulating environment for study. I am particularly grateful to my dissertation committee for their support and patience. I thank Michael Johns for his encouragement and guidance. His emphasis on finding good dope to tell
a cleanly-written story was a helpful beacon. Michael Watts introduced me to the world of agrarian studies. His critical eye and theoretical emphasis guided me along the way. And I thank Margaret Chowning for helping me better understand the subtleties of Latin American history and for her encouraging and constructive comments. I also want to thank Carol Page, Dan Plumlee, Nat Vonnegut, Delores Dillard, and the rest of the staff of the Geography Department for all their help over the years.

Dissertation research was funded by the generous support of the Fulbright Program and the Institute for International Studies, at UC Berkeley, which granted me a John L. Simpson Memorial Research Fellowship. I also want to acknowledge Colciencias, in Colombia, which, by funding Alberto Flórez’s collaborative research project on the history of meat consumption, financed various trips to the FAES archives in Medellín. I also want to express my gratitude to Carl Langebaek and the History Department at the Universidad de los Andes for their patience as I put the finishing touches on this dissertation.

Finally, to Laurie, Karl, and Jerry, thanks for all the support and guidance over the years. To Hilda, Arthur, and Lucille, I am grateful for your radical spark. And to Siena, who appeared at the tail end of this project, thanks for giving me the drive to finally finish.
In 1913, an exasperated Marco A. Salazar proclaimed that he was “willing to make any sacrifice” to dissolve his partnership with Pedro Nel Ospina.\(^1\) Salazar and Ospina had worked together for a number of years acquiring land, developing pastures, and raising cattle in the still largely forested lowlands of northern Antioquia and southern Old Bolívar.\(^2\) Only the year before they had legalized their partnership, intending it to last ten years.\(^3\) But with bankers breathing down their necks and their ranches hemorrhaging cash, relations between the pair had grown tense. Salazar, who managed their network of estates, explained that “our great effort to develop pastures on our haciendas in Cáceres…has required more time than anticipated.”\(^4\) “Every year we spend a fortune and the interest is killing us.”\(^5\) Salazar instructed the managers of their ranches to economize as much as possible. From Hacienda Tarazá, Juan Villa wrote back: “in order to keep ahead of the weeds and be able to economize later on, it is necessary to spend a good deal of money [now].”\(^6\) Salazar understood the predicament, responding: “I have tried to show [Ospina] that [steeply cutting costs] would be to renounce the coronation of all our work so far and resign ourselves to lose

---

\(^1\) Archive of Pedro Nel Ospina & Compañía [APNOyC], [Book] 160, f461.
\(^2\) The department of ‘Old’ Bolívar, to which I refer in this article, was divided in three in the 1950s and 1960s: Córdoba (where Ospina and Salazar’s operations were located), Sucre, and Bolívar (see Map 1.1 and 1.2).
\(^4\) APNOyC, 200, f84.
\(^5\) APNOyC, 160, f386.
an enormous sum of money and energy, which this labor represents and only we can truly appreciate.” To Ospina, he warned: “later on [do not] blame me for not having maintained our business organization and defended the markets that we have already established and for which sacrifices have already been made…. Remember how much we struggled in the first years of our business….” At the root of their problems was the high cost and labor of converting lowland forests into pasture.

The difficulties faced by Salazar and Ospina were not isolated events. Between 1850 and 1950, cattle were instrumental to a dramatic transformation of much of the Colombian countryside. Grass replaced trees to become the dominant vegetation cover and crop. Herds multiplied, driving the colonization of new lands and altering the geography of stock raising. Conflicts erupted as ranchers privatized large areas of public and communal lands in the rush to create pastures or claim lands in the name of cattle. And in this process, ranching become the largest economic activity in the country, peripheral regions were drawn into an incipient national economy, and Colombians decidedly turned into a nation of beef eaters.

What drove this expansion? How did it occur? And what were its consequences? There are a couple reasons why it is important to ask such basic questions. The first is simply that there is remarkably little scholarship on ranching in Colombia. While scholars who have studied the historical development of Colombia often make passing reference to stock raising, there have been very few detailed studies of the sector, especially before 1950. This is all the more surprising given the

7 APNOyC, 210, f189.
8 APNOyC, 180, f135.
weight and influence of ranching on the economy, its role in fomenting an unequal land tenure structure, and its environmental impact.

Second, despite the paucity of research, there is a widespread view that ranchers did not primarily raise cattle to sell for beef, as one might expect, but to satisfy a range of ulterior interests. This is the paradox of ranching in Colombia as well as in much of Latin America. Because numerous scholars have considered ranching to be “largely unproductive,” they have sought its underlying logic elsewhere. “It is the other things that cattle do besides grow meat that make them of singular fascination,” asserts geographer Susana Hecht. For many, therefore, ranching has been a means to an end much more than an end in itself: to monopolize land, dispossess peasants, control labor, speculate, hoard wealth, capture rents, and acquire status. Colombian historian Luis Jair Gómez, for example, argues that territorial occupation, rather than production, “[ha]s clearly been the main function of cattle ranching well into the twentieth century.”

The implications of this supposed paradox are profound. At least in the case of Colombia, it suggests that the most important form of land use and environmental change, and the single largest recipient of capital investment and the country’s most valuable product, did not have an underlying productive rationale. A large segment of the economy, therefore, was oriented toward the pursuit of extra-economic gain and the political power needed to perpetuate it. This view of ranching coincides with a common view of traditional landed elites in Latin America who relied on political

---

rather than economic means to extract profits.\textsuperscript{12} In fact, in a theoretical model on the sources of agrarian revolution, Jeffrey Paige contends that the “continued existence of the landed upper class…depends…on political restrictions on the workings of the markets in land, labor, and capital” because, “[i]f the structure of agricultural organization were determined by economic factors alone, the landed estates…would be replaced by small holdings or plantations.”\textsuperscript{13} In a study of the cattle estate in the department of Sucre, Colombian political scientist, Alejandro Reyes, underlined this virtuous but requisite circle: “The development of the hacienda has produced, alongside the concentration of economic power, a concentration of political power, which in turn reinforces the former.”\textsuperscript{14} In other words, the paradox of ranching supports the notion that economic forces had little influence over the formation of the Colombian countryside; that the state was merely an extension of the landed elites; and that change or efforts to modernize were nearly impossible at least until the mid-twentieth century.

This vision of ranching has also contributed to frequent condemnations of the activity. Back in 1926, social critic Alejandro López warned that cattle raising was “tied to most of [Colombia’s] problems, hampering…its economic development and generating new problems.”\textsuperscript{15} More recently, Colombian economist and historian, Salomón Kalmanovitz, proclaimed that the expansion of “cattle ranching and the few landed elites who controlled it have constituted large historical calamities for the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[12] Paige (1975), p. 17. See also de Janvry (1981); Feder (1975).
\item[13] Paige (1975), pp. 17 and 16.
\end{footnotes}
peasantry and the development of the country’s productive forces.”\textsuperscript{16} And in 1999, the Minister of Agriculture and Development, Cecilia López, stated: “It is no secret in Colombia that cattle ranching has been tied...to the problems of land concentration, associated with different forms of violence, [used] to explain rural poverty, and accused of [fomenting] the poor use of natural resources and the deterioration of [others] like water and...biodiversity.”\textsuperscript{17}

By contrast, I argue that it has been the productive potential and logic of ranching, rather than its absence, that made cattle so significant to the history and development of Colombia. This does not mean that the various alternative rationales for ranching that scholars have identified are without merit. But, by themselves, they do not satisfactorily explain the expansion of ranching into Colombian forests between 1850 and 1950. In particular, they do not adequately account for the cost and effort of converting tropical forests into pasture, such as those assumed by Ospina and Salazar. In other words, the supposed paradox of ranching rests on a false premise. Foremost, ranchers raised cattle to sell them for beef. Rather than displace the underlying productive and economic logic of ranching, the alternative motivations tended to reinforce it.

This study examines the expansion of cattle ranching in Colombia between 1850 and 1950, with a particular focus on the Caribbean coastal department of Old Bolívar. It is an effort to understand the logic behind ranching in order to explain how and why it expanded as well as reflect on some of the consequences. As opposed to

\textsuperscript{16} Kalmanovitz (1978), 103.
\textsuperscript{17} López (1999), p. 5.
assuming the logic of ranching from outside, my approach is to try to capture it from the perspective of ranchers themselves. I also focus on the work, technology, and environmental conditions of ranching in order to rethink many of the common stereotypes about ranchers. In particular, I underline the profit motives behind ranching; the significance of factor markets, however incomplete and uneven they were; the halting but important steps at modernization; and a state that was not merely the puppet of ranching interests. Furthermore, ranching was often more a reflection of the problems frequently attributed to it rather than their direct cause. In the end, to understand the spatial dominance of cattle ranching in Colombia, and probably around Latin America more generally, we have to pay more attention to its productive logic.

In this chapter, I first outline the major geographical shift in ranching between 1850 and 1950 as ranchers expanded from the country’s natural savannas into its forests. The environmental significance of this transformation should be obvious. But the need to form pastures out of the forest had a series of consequences that, as we shall see, shaped the character of ranching and pushes us to understand it in new ways. While this long history of ranching-related deforestation might be peculiar to Colombia, I also frame it within a larger Latin American context. In the second section, I focus on the historiography of ranching and ranchers. My principal focus is Colombia, but I also show how the interpretation of the activity there is part of a broader view common to much of Latin America. In the last section, I provide an overview of the dissertation and explain my period and geographic focus.
CLEARING THE WOODS FOR CATTLE

“There is no open range [in Old Bolívar]. The country is heavily wooded with first and second growth of hardwoods…. All pastures are cleared lands…” (P. L. Bell, 1919).18

The expansion of ranching in Colombia since the mid-nineteenth century has largely been a story of transforming the country’s lowland forests into “a colossal green lake” of grass.19 Until the 1850s, ranchers had largely been confined to relatively limited areas of natural grasses. But by pushing into the forest, and moving from natural grasslands to ‘artificial’ or planted pastures, ranchers helped to reshape the country. They radically transformed the Colombian landscape, substituting fields of frequently African grasses for the woodlands that once dominated. Their new pastures spurred the growth rate of cattle herds, which surpassed that of the human population from the 1850s to about 1920. And ranchers rearranged the geography of stock raising in Colombia, pushing its center into the once-forested lowlands. In this process, Old Bolivar became the most important cattle-producing department in the country. While the link between cattle and deforestation in Latin America is well known, for many it is one that began, principally, in the 1950s. In Colombia, however, it dates back to the mid-nineteenth century.

This section sketches the expansion of Colombian ranching into the forest. It is divided into two parts. In the first, I briefly discuss the historiography of cattle-related deforestation in Latin America, putting the Colombian case in a larger regional context. Then I describe the forest-to-pasture transformation in three areas of

Colombia starting in the mid-nineteenth century. I note the growth of cattle herds between the 1850s and 1950s, underlining the shifting geography of ranching. And I summarize the intensification of forest conversion since the 1950s, showing how it is the continuation of earlier processes rather than anything radically new.

**Hoofprints on the Forest**\(^{20}\)

In 1976, geographer James Parsons warned that “[s]ubstantial parts of Central America and Panama have undergone a dramatic change of aspect in recent years, the result of accelerated forest clearing and enormous expansion in the area of artificial or planted pasture (repasto). At times it seems that the isthmus is on the way to becoming one big stock ranch.”\(^ {21}\) Between 1950 and 1983, the total area of land dedicated to pasture in Central America tripled, much of it at the expense of primary forests.\(^ {22}\) The cattle boom was not limited to Central America, however. Since 1961, Latin America has had the fastest growing cattle herd in the world, and its forests have suffered the consequences.\(^ {23}\) While the expansion of cattle ranching into lowland tropical forests since the 1950s has rightly garnered considerable attention, it has also resulted in a certain degree of historic myopia.

For many, the incursion of cattle into lowland forests is primarily a recent phenomenon. Richard Houghton and colleagues, for example, assume “that ranching

---

\(^{20}\) Taken from Shane (1986).


\(^{23}\) FAOSTAT (2006); Hecht and Cockburn (1989); Downing et al. (1992); Fearnside (2005); Tucker (2000); Shane (1986); Walker (2008).
[in Latin America since 1850] has generally been in natural grasslands, and that deforestation for additional pasture land has not contributed significantly to the increase in pastures until recently.”

Likewise, in Richard Tucker’s sweeping account of U.S.-fostered degradation in the tropics, “rainforest clearances for cattle production began only in the 1950s.” Before this, he suggests that a few small ranches were scattered about lowland forests, but for the most part ranchers kept to natural grasslands on higher and drier ground. Until the mid-twentieth century, “the biotic complexities of rainforest ecosystems were an effective barrier against commercial ranching.” Ranchers needed an “infusion of intercontinental science” – in the way of appropriate grasses, protection against disease (both human and animal) – as well as capital and robust international demand before they could convert these forests into pasture.

There is no doubt that the 1950s were a watershed for Latin American ranching. But its dramatic expansion since then has blinkered otherwise perceptive scholars to the fact that the conversion of lowland forest into pasture is actually part of longer story. To be fair, these authors emphasize the movement into humid forests while the earlier history of pasture formation largely occurred in dry tropical forests. But the very novelty of the shift seems to have prevented much appreciation of the prior impact that cattle raising had on the region’s forests more generally. Invariably, the “omnipresent cow” only became an actor in the second half of the twentieth

---

27 Ibid., p. 303.
For Tucker, the environmental consequences of ranching before 1950 were limited to rangeland degradation, vegetation change, erosion, and desertification; deforestation was not an issue. Thus, he seems to imagine that the diffusion of African grasses in Colombia prior to 1950 occurred only at the expense of natural grasslands when in fact they had mostly replaced forest. Likewise, Douglass Shane assumes that cattle were restricted to Colombia’s highland regions until the mid-twentieth century. By this time, however, well over half the national herd grazed on lowland pastures, much of which had been cleared out of the forest.

Various scholars have paid attention to the environmental consequences of ranching in Latin America prior to the 1950s. The great population explosion in the early colonial period has generated the most interest and controversy. The main environmental question has been to what degree livestock populations degraded existing rangelands. By contrast, the environmental history of cattle ranching between the early-seventeenth century and the mid-twentieth century has been less studied. For those who have examined this period, much of the focus has also been on natural grasslands. There has been some attention to the push of ranchers into the forest prior to 1950. By and large, however, it is a neglected topic.

---

31 Crosby (1972); Melville (1994); Butzer and Butzer (1993); Sluyter (2002); Aguilar-Robledo (2001); Endfield and O’Hara, (1999).
32 Crosby (1972); Wilcox (1992; 2004); Dean (1995).
33 Edelman (1992); Gordon (1957); Parsons (1967, 1972); Parsons and Bowen (1966); Dean (1995). Some biologists have also called attention to the massive clearing of dry tropical forests in Latin America, although the causes (including cattle) and periodization remain vague (Janzen, 1988; Murphy and Lugo, 1986; Toledo, 1992).
It is possible that the link between cattle and deforestation prior to 1950 was not so prominent outside of Colombia. In the 1930s, the great natural savannas of Venezuela, the Llanos, still contained some three-quarters of the national herd.\textsuperscript{34} In Mexico, the extensive grasslands of the north might have also reduced the impulse to push into the forest. Likewise, the Cerrado and northern edge of the Pampas might have served a similar function in Brazil. In the area of the Atlantic Forest, environmental historian Warren Dean suggests that ranchers mostly formed pastures out of abandoned farmland that they consolidated in the wake of an expanding agrarian frontier.\textsuperscript{35}

Nonetheless, there are indications from around Latin America that the link between cattle and deforestation in Colombia prior to 1950 was not an anomaly. In Brazil, Dean also found that some ranchers formed pastures directly out of primal forest.\textsuperscript{36} Historian Pedro Bracamonte y Sosa addresses the mid-nineteenth-century expansion of cattle into northern Yucatan forests.\textsuperscript{37} Parsons found evidence that the spread of guinea grass in Guatemala and southern Mexico from the mid-nineteenth century led to the establishment of extensive areas of new pasture.\textsuperscript{38} Tucker even cites a mid-nineteenth-century traveler to suggest that “[l]arge areas of pasture were gradually cleared in the rolling lands around Lake Nicaragua and Lake Managua.”\textsuperscript{39} Anthropologist Marc Edelman has an important discussion of the role of timber extraction between 1880 and 1930 as a precursor to the expansion of ranching in Costa

\textsuperscript{34} Carvallo (1985).
\textsuperscript{35} Dean (1995).
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Parsons (1972).
\textsuperscript{39} Tucker (2000), p. 287; see also Parsons (1989).
Rica’s Guanacaste province.\textsuperscript{40} Similarly, geographer Carolyn Hall notes the conversion of forest to pasture in central Costa Rica during the 1870s.\textsuperscript{41} Miguel Aguilar-Robledo and Sergio Guevara suggest that the introduction of new pasture grasses, breeds, and fencing in the late-nineteenth century led ranchers to start advancing against forests in Mexico.\textsuperscript{42} Additionally, Hubert Cochet, Elena Lazos Chavero, and Eric Léonard provide intriguing indications of an historical relation between cattle and Mexican forests through long cycles of shifting agriculture.\textsuperscript{43} These hints, and the Colombian case to which I now turn, suggest that the link between cattle ranching and deforestation prior to the 1950s was perhaps more significant than often imagined.

\textit{The Conquest of the Colombian Lowlands}

The initial biological success of cattle and other European livestock in the early colonial period has sometimes created the false impression that “cattle swarmed over the continent, filling and altering every available ecological niche.”\textsuperscript{44} While cattle did adapt to a wide variety of environments, they did not multiply with the same fecundity everywhere. By the mid-nineteenth century, there were probably only a little more than 1.5 million head of cattle in Colombia, or some 25 percent less than the

\textsuperscript{40} Edelman (1992).
\textsuperscript{41} Hall (1977-1978).
\textsuperscript{42} Aguilar-Robledo (2001) and Guevara (2001).
\textsuperscript{43} Cochet (2001), Lazos Chavero (2001), and Léonard (2001).
\textsuperscript{44} Rifkin (1993), p. 49. See also Duncan Barreta and Markoff (1978).
human population. Cattle inhabited a wide range of conditions, from cold, cloud-soaked páramos to the arid Guajira peninsula. Overall, however, herds were rather circumscribed geographically: four centers of production – the altiplano of Cundinamarca and Boyacá, the upper Magdalena River Valley, the upper Cauca River Valley, and inland portions of the Caribbean coast – contained roughly two-thirds of the national herd (see Map 1.3; Table 1.1).

Estimates of cattle populations before 1960 are not very reliable, making it hard to trace their evolution. Nonetheless, we have a decent estimate for the mid-nineteenth century from the Comisión Corográfica, which calculated a cattle population of about 1.38 million (Codazzi and Domínguez, 1996). This estimate, however, did not include the areas of Ipiales, Pasto and the Caribbean coast. While the former two areas probably did not have much cattle, the coast surely did. It is probably safe to estimate a cattle population for the coast of some 250,000, giving us a total of around 1.5 million head. My estimate for the northern coastal plains is based on a mid-eighteenth-century census and other reports, and assuming a fairly slow growth rate (Dorta, 1962; Sourdis, 1996; Julián, 1951). For more detailed notes, see below. Obviously, the figure of somewhat more than 1.5 million head is just a rough guess.

In the 1760s, Arévalo undertook a cattle census in the Province of Cartagena, estimating a total of 82,400 head (Dorta, 1962, pp. 346-351). He did not include numerous small herds own by scattered peasant households, or the areas around Ayapel and Mompox. It is probably safe to estimate, therefore, some 85,000 head for this province. Arévalo also did not include the Province of Santa Marta in his survey. Here, there appear to have been a number of herds close to the coast, and a large number of cattle in the Cesar River Valley, though their numbers were still limited by the continuing presence of Chimila Indians. Antonio Julián (1951 [1787]), who seems a little prone to exaggeration, suggested that three residents of Mompox owned 66,000 to 68,000 head in the area from Riohacha to Valledupar to Tamelameque. Adelaida Sourdis (1996, p. 47) notes that a report on contraband in this region stated that local residents, not including absentee ranchers from Mompox or Cartagena, owned 56,000 head. It is possible, therefore, that the Province of Santa Marta also had something on the order of 85,000 head of cattle. Ernesto H. Jaramillo (1993, p. 170), notes that in 1605, some 70,000 head of feral cattle were supposed to have inhabited the Cesar River Valley. This would give a total for the coast around 1770 of 170,000 head. Given the potentially sharp declines due to the wars of independence and other hostilities, and the economic stagnation of the early decades of the Republic, it is likely that the cattle population would have grown to at least 250,000 head by 1850.
Table 1.1. The changing geography of cattle herds (c.1850-1960).\textsuperscript{46}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Department or Region</th>
<th>(Percent of the National Herd)</th>
<th>Growth Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>c. 1850</td>
<td>1960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antioquia and the Caribbean Coast</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coast</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Greater Antioquia</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Cordillera</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cundinamarca</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boyacá</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Santanders</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper River Valleys</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Magdalena</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cauca</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Llanos</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Meta</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Casanare</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textit{Coast:} Old Bolívar & Old Magdalena (Magdalena, Cesar, Guajira)

\textit{Greater Antioquia:} Antioquia, Caldas, Risaralda, and Quindío

\textit{Upper Magdalena River Valley:} Tolima and Huila

\textit{Upper Cauca River Valley:} Valle del Cauca, Cauca, Nariño

\textsuperscript{46} Sources: Codazzi (1996; 1957); DANE (1964).
Map 1.1. Colombian departmental boundaries and topography
Map 1.2. Regions of Colombia
Map 1.3. Natural savannas of Colombia

What these four centers had in common were relatively large areas of grass. In the upper Magdalena and Cauca river valleys, climatic and edaphic factors created natural savannas that alternated with areas of dry tropical forest.\textsuperscript{47} In the interior of the northern coastal plains, soil conditions, a prior history of indigenous forest clearance, and annual flooding created a series of seasonal and semi-seasonal savannas that formed the cradle of cattle ranching in this region.\textsuperscript{48} Much of these coastal lowlands, however, were covered by dry tropical forest, which become increasingly humid, dense, and tall toward the west and south as the average annual rainfall increased and the severity of the summer drought decreased.\textsuperscript{49} The one center of cattle raising that was not based on natural grasslands was the altiplano of Cundinamarca and Boyacá. In this region of flat alluvial valleys and rolling hills, the indigenous population – the largest in the country at the time of conquest – had cleared much of the original forest cover for agriculture.\textsuperscript{50} The Spanish later converted a good deal of this land into pasture.

Cattle also grazed on other grasslands scattered about the country. The most important of these were the Llanos Orientales, Colombia’s portion of the great Orinoco savannas east of the Andes. This region contained a sizeable herd but, contrary to expectation, it remained rather marginal nationally until the 1930s.\textsuperscript{51} There were also a number of smaller but regionally significant areas of natural savannas as

\textsuperscript{47} Hernández and Sánchez (1994); Serra (1994).
\textsuperscript{48} Sarmiento (1994); Hernández and Sánchez (1994); Cavelier et al. (1998); Fals Borda (1979); Striffler (1994); Julián (1951).
\textsuperscript{49} Hernández and Sánchez (1994); Gordon (1957).
\textsuperscript{50} Hernández and Sánchez (1994).
\textsuperscript{51} García (2003); Rausch (1993).
well as sporadic grass-covered hill tops that served to graze livestock. Stock owners in other highland areas, such as Nariño, transformed the farmland of indigenous communities into pasture. Cattle were also integrated into a cycle of shifting agriculture. Let loose in recently harvested fields, they grazed crop stubble and early colonizing grasses until the woody growth crowded out their forage. Repeatedly farming and weeding a plot could also promote the spread of natural grasses to form more permanent pastures. And some cattle owners used fire to push back the forest edge. Nonetheless, through the mid-nineteenth century, most cattle in Colombia grazed on ‘natural’ savannas.

Around 1850, however, this inherited geography began to change: the cattle industry entered a period of more rapid growth, much of which occurred at the expense of lowland forests. The initial impulse behind this expansion was the mid-century tobacco boom, as we will see in chapter four. After years of stagnation, the demand for land, labor, and goods jumped dramatically. In the early 1850s, the price of beef doubled and that of hides quadrupled; wages rose 200 to 300 percent; and increasing numbers of laborers began to eat beef. In response to growing demand, and with the added impulse of the recent introduction of two African pasture grasses – pará (Brachiaria mutica) and guinea (Panicum maximum) – old and new ranchers

---

52 Parsons (1968); Yepes (2001); Camacho Roldán (1973); Rivas (1983).  
53 Calero (1997).  
54 Ospina Vásquez (1974); Powles (1863).  
55 Parsons (1968); Valenzuela (1942).  
56 Hernández and Sánchez (1994); Cavelier et al. (1998); Gordon (1957).  
57 Camacho Roldán (1946); Safford (1966); Nieto Arteta (1996).
from around the country began to clear forested land to plant grass and raise or fatten cattle.\(^{58}\)

To give a sense of the expansion of ranching into the forest, I turn to three examples from around Colombia. In Antioquia, as in much of the country, the area of actual settlement through the colonial period was quite restricted. In 1808, José Manuel Restrepo thought that less than 15 percent of the province was inhabited, while the rest was covered by “ancient forests, huge trees…and thick vegetation.”\(^ {59}\) He also estimated that there were only some 18,000 head of cattle in the entire province. A couple decades before, colonial officials had promoted raising goats – to address the high cost of meat, milk, and hides – because of the lack of forage for cattle.\(^ {60}\) It was only in the 1840s, though, that this situation started to change. With fortunes from the Jamaican import trade, a group of merchants from Medellín acquired vast properties in the “rough and wild jungle” along the Cauca River, in southwestern Antioquia, and began attracting land-poor peasants from the densely populated highlands with offers of land in exchange for clearing forests and planting pastures, often of the newly introduced African grasses.\(^ {61}\) The profitability of these ranches, on which they fattened cattle trailed in from the Cauca Valley, encouraged other merchants to invest in the region. Where there were five cattle haciendas in 1851, sixteen years later there were 67.\(^ {62}\) The transformation of this forested region into “a sea of green” pastures helped spark the dramatic growth of the cattle population: by

\(^{60}\) Visadias and Pardo (1979).  
\(^{62}\) Vélez (2002); Brew (2000).
1875 there were said to be 360,000 head in the department.\textsuperscript{63} At the turn of the century, ranchers in the relatively narrow Cauca River Valley had enough pastures to fatten 60,000 head of cattle.\textsuperscript{64} Around this time, ranchers began to push into other lowland regions as well. Salazar and Ospina represented one wave moving down into the humid forests of northern Antioquia to access coastal herds as a new source of supply. Others grabbed and cleared land in the Nus River Valley, following the new railway line down to the Magdalena River and tapping into coastal stocks via a different route. By the late 1920s, over half of the cattle consumed in Antioquia grazed on pastures cleared out of these humid, lowland forests to the east (see Map 1.4).\textsuperscript{65}

Medardo Rivas wrote of a similar process in Cundinamarca (see Map 1.5). He recalled looking over the edge of the Sabana de Bogotá in the early 1840s onto the economically stagnant slopes, dropping down to the Magdalena River, that were still largely blanketed by dry tropical forest. Rivas documented the ‘heroic’ efforts of his generation of entrepreneurs who turned their backs on the comforts of the capital to venture into this sparsely populated region and pull it, and the country, out of economic depression: “We are going to tell the story of those titans who felled the ancient forests that covered these regions until recently, of those who brought agriculture, wealth and civilization…..”\textsuperscript{66} The main enterprise, he said, was “to clear the forest to plant pasture or tobacco.”\textsuperscript{67} Rivas wrote partially from first-hand experience. He, too, sought his fortune in cattle, leaving the following description of

\textsuperscript{63} Vélez (2002), p. 91; Brew (2000).
\textsuperscript{64} López and Rodríguez (1914), pp. 133-134.
\textsuperscript{65} Monsalve (1927).
how he cleared the forest to plant new African pasture grasses along the Magdalena River near Guataquí.

To turn [my property] into one large pasture, I sent for workers from Manizales; and…two hundred Antioqueños showed up with their women, children, and dogs…. They established their camp in the freshest place of the property; they divided themselves into work crews, under the direction of captains with whom I made contracts to clear the forest at $25 per cuadra; and armed with calabozos or forest knives, they started to clear; and they devoured the forest as if charmed. The gigantic cumulaos, guayacanes, and hobos doubled in front of them…. In three months, the entire forest had disappeared; in six months, they harvested 1000 cargas [50 metric tons] of corn; in a year, the pasture of Lurá had formed, with space to fatten 500 head of cattle…. The Antioqueños, having fulfilled their commitments with me…went to Lérida, contracted by other hacendados.68

When Rivas looked back on this region at the end of the century, he felt obvious pride but also some remorse: “Those who worked in the lowlands, clearing the forest and burning it, we worked wildly, destroying an immense wealth of timber that today is in short supply…. Besides, we destroyed the beauty and richness of these tropical regions that before were so pretty and today have been turned into immense sad and melancholy areas of grass.”69

68 Ibid., pp. 210-211.
69 Ibid., p. 87.
Map 1.4. The expansion of ranching in Antioquia
Map 1.5. The expansion of ranching in Cundinamarca

Map 1.6. The expansion of ranching in Old Bolivar
Forests also still covered much of the sparsely populated Caribbean coast in the mid-nineteenth century. Mollien described the region as “magnificent for those who love wild and disorderly nature. All the land is covered by very tall trees and luxurious vegetation…. Little has the hand of man cultivated in these vast extensions.”

Louis Striffler, the French adventurer who arrived in the Sinú Valley in the 1840s, recalled how Montería – today a ranching capital – marked the limits of settlement. “Thick forests” stretched to the south and west, blanketed the low-lying lands between the Sinú and San Jorge rivers, and even covered substantial areas of the Sabanas de Bolívar.

Starting around 1850, ranchers began to “invade the immense jungles of the south,” beyond the San Jorge River and up the Sinú Valley. Here, too, the introduction of African grasses was instrumental: “The first trials with artificial grasses for the rainy season were so successful that all the stock raisers hurried to adopt the reform. They cleared the virgin forests around the seasonal flood plains (ciénagas) and…planted the grass.”

In 1917, Robert B. Cunninghame Graham remarked how the “greater portion of the country was originally covered with virgin forest, which [had] been cleared and burnt to make cattle pastures.” Ranchers had already settled “fairly thickly” along the banks of the Sinú River, “with cattle pastures stretching out on both sides,” for 170 miles inland from its mouth in the Gulf of

71 Striffler (1994).
72 Striffler (1980; 1995), Gordon (1957). For the Sabana de Bolívar, see notary records in the Archive of Orlando Fals Borda [AOFB], [Folder:] Notaria de Sincelejo.
Morrosquilla.\textsuperscript{76} Thick forests, however, still stretched another 40 miles south to the foot of the central cordillera in Antioquia and covered much of the land to the west of the Sinú River. These, he thought, “could also be cleared and converted into cattle farms.”\textsuperscript{77} By the early 1940s, it was estimated that there were four million hectares of ‘artificial’ or planted pasture in the department of Old Bolívar.\textsuperscript{78} While this figure is undoubtedly high, geographer LeRoy Gordon confirms the extent to which much of this once forested area had been converted into pasture by mid-century.\textsuperscript{79} He also notes how people who been known as ‘forest folk’ (montañeros) in Striffler’s day had become ‘savanna folk’ (sabaneros).\textsuperscript{80} And there was a good deal of concern, by this time, about the impact of this deforestation on the region’s climate (see Map 1.6).\textsuperscript{81}

By 1960, the cattle herd in Colombia had grown to over ten million head (see Table 1.2).\textsuperscript{82} Cattle and pasture land had multiplied all over, but the area of greatest growth was in previously forested lowlands, particularly on the Caribbean coast and in Greater Antioquia.\textsuperscript{83} While the highland herd of Cundinamarca and Boyacá had grown by less than three times over the preceding century, Antioquia’s had jumped by fifteen. Already at the start of the twentieth century, industry observers estimated that Old Bolívar had become the center of cattle ranching in the country.\textsuperscript{84} By the mid-

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{78} Contraloría (1942), p. 299.
\textsuperscript{79} Gordon (1957).
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., p. 62.
\textsuperscript{81} Dimas (1999).
\textsuperscript{82} DANE (1964).
\textsuperscript{83} Greater Antioquia includes the contemporary departments of Antioquia, Caldas, Risaralda, and Quindio.
\textsuperscript{84} Ministerio de Hacienda (1917); Colombian Information Bureau (1915); Archive of Congress [AC], 1915, Volume 6, Leyes Autografos 76-89, no. 69, Law 82 of 1915 (Nov. 30),
twentieth century, the northern coastal plains had roughly doubled their share of the national herd and, together with Greater Antioquia, they contained over half of the country’s cattle. By contrast, the share of the national herd in the older centers of ranching (outside of the coast) had dropped by over 50 percent (see Table 1.1; Map 1.7). What these changes represent is the shift in the forage base from ‘natural’ savannas to pastures largely cleared out of lowland forests. In 1960, the total area of pastureland (outside of the Llanos) was about ten million hectares. It is hard to judge just how much forest had been cleared to form them since there are no estimates of the total area in ‘natural’ pasture for the mid-nineteenth century. Nonetheless, Greater Antioquia, which had limited forage resources through the first half of the nineteenth century, now had 1.7 million hectares of grass. Since 1960, the pace of forest-to-pasture conversion has picked up. Over the last 50 years the amount of pastureland in Colombia has probably doubled, with a significant push into new areas of humid forest: the Amazon basin, the piedmont of the Llanos, and the Pacific lowlands. Still, the bulk of the expansion has occurred in the traditional core of the country, continuing the push into the forest that began, in earnest, a century-and-a-half ago.

“Por la cual se fomenta el establecimiento de carnicerías y refrigeradores Packing House…,” Second report, Manuel Dávila Flórez, f355.
85 DANE (1964).
86 DANE (1964).
87 Since 1960, the area in pasture has jumped from some 15 to 20 million hectares to about 40 million (DANE, 1964; Kalmanovitz, 1972; Etter et al., 2006). Not all of this growth occurred at the expense of the forest; a good deal took place in the Llanos, which now accounts for almost one-third of total pastureland (Etter et al., 2006). Nonetheless, the spreading landscape of grass has replaced millions of hectares of forest. Almost five million hectares of the Amazon basin (Caquetá and Putumayo), the Pacific lowlands, and the Catatumbo are now in pasture, some 12 percent of the total (Etter et al., 2006). The piedmont of the Llanos has also experienced heavy deforestation since the 1940s (Viña and Cavelier, 1998). The area of largest growth, however, has been in the traditional core of the country. Here, the area in
Table 1.2. The growth of cattle populations (c. 1850-1996).\footnote{Codazzi (1996; 1957); Kalmanovitz (1989); Kalmanovitz et al. (1999); DANE (1996).}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Cattle Population (millions)</th>
<th>Ratio of Cattle to People</th>
<th>Average Annual Growth Rate</th>
<th>Growth Rate Period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>c. 1850</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1 to 1.4</td>
<td>1% (estimate)</td>
<td>1800-1850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>1 to 0.8</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>c. 1850-1918</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>1 to 1</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1918-1938</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>1 to 1.1</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1938-1950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>1 to 1.4</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1950-1996</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

pasture has also roughly doubled since 1960 to about 22.5 million hectares (DANE, 1964; Kalmanovitz, 1972; Etter et al., 2006). Much of this expansion has occurred in the forests of the middle Magdalena River Valley (the Magdalena Medio), the upper Sinú and San Jorge river valleys, Urubá, and the lower Cauca River Valley.
Map 1.7. The changing regional concentration of the national cattle herd (c. 1850-1960)
The historic expansion of ranching into the Colombian lowlands is often seen as the product of factors that have little to do with the raising and selling of cattle. Gómez, for instance considers that ranching is best characterized by its “immaculate unproductive tradition.” This idea is not unique to Colombia. Because researchers have often assumed that the productive side of ranching is tenuous at best, they have tried to explain its ubiquity and persistence throughout much of Latin America by focusing on various other logics.

One explanation underlines the prestige-value of ranching. Again according to Gómez, deeply-rooted “social values…did not permit [elites from] looking at land as a source of wealth, but as a symbol of social power and a guarantee of [social] position.” Thus, the cult status of land ownership provided a good deal of the impulse for the expansion of ranching starting in the mid-nineteenth century. Scholars have pointed to prestige as a driving force behind cattle raising throughout Latin America. Douglass Shane, for example, claims that “[t]he ‘Cult of the Bull’ is a social factor which, to many Latins, is at least as important as the economic aspects

---

89 This phrase comes from Hecht (1993). My critique builds on the revisionist work pioneered in Colombia by historian Eduardo Posada Carbó and anthropologist Gloria Isabel Ocampo, and subsequently developed by Adolfo Meisel, Joaquín Viloria and María Teresa Ripoll. It should also be mentioned that there has been a significant third perspective on ranching in which industry representatives, government officials, development agencies and others take a pragmatically critical but nonetheless optimistic view of the economic potential of cattle raising. For an account of these perspectives, see Van Ausdal (2008a).
91 Ibid., p. 51.
92 Yepes (2001).
of cattle ranching.”94 And Parsons underlined its far-reaching consequences: “Cattle raising is a prestigious activity in Latin America, it is part of the culture. It is not necessarily desirable from an economic point of view, and the reason for this is that the way of life has a real impact on the environment.”95

Another rationale that scholars have noted is the “hoarding” function of livestock. In this view, as described by Robert Williams for Central America, the “purpose of owning cattle [before the 1950s] was not so much for turning a quick profit as for serving as a store of wealth. The possibility of selling an animal for beef at some point in its career supported it as a worthy investment of hoarding, but the central focus was not on this final step in the animal’s life….[Cattle] buyers did not intend to drive their purchases to a distant slaughter house but made each acquisition more as a time deposit to be drawn on at some occasion in the uncertain future.”96 Related to this is the notion that land, and by extension cattle, are safe places to protect capital from more volatile pursuits, such as commerce, or the ravages of inflation. As early as 1905, ex-U.S. minister to Colombia, William Scruggs, noted that elites from Bogotá invested in very expensive estates near the capital that only earned them a fraction of the interest they would have received by putting their money in a bank. “This anomalous state of affairs is easily accounted for when it is remembered that rich lands near the national capital offer about the only safe investment in a country where local and general ‘revolutions’ are so frequent, and where the large cities afford about the only educational and social advantages. Hence the price of farm lands near

94 Shane (1985), pp. 9-10
95 AOFB, Parsons, Entrevista con Alejandro Reyes (Estudios Sociales no. 1, 1986).
96 Williams (1986), p. 83. See also Hecht (1993); Tucker (2000); Grandia (2007).
the city ranges from one to three hundred dollars per acre, and can rarely be had at those prices.”97

Undoubtedly, however, the overriding explanation for the expansion of ranching in Colombia, and around Latin America, is “traditional function of livestock as a means of acquiring large areas [of land].”98 “For four centuries,” writes Tucker of Latin America generally, “cattle were a crucial component of settlement…especially on forest frontiers,…establishing landlords’ ownership claims.”99 As noted above, Gómez considers this to be the “main function” of ranching in Colombia.100 Likewise, Colombian historian Oscar Almario suggests that “[c]attle were…a prolongation and affirmation of seignorial power, over vast areas that needed to be preserved, at all cost, in few hands. Extensive cattle raising guaranteed what titles…or property boundaries…did not. This was the social function of cattle ranching [:]…spatial control.”101 Thus, in the words of Kalmanovitz, the “landed elites’ conquest of the lowlands…[was made] possible through ranching…[and] the extensive settlement of large parts of the country with near wild cattle.”102

Additionally, many scholars have agreed with Ernest Feder that the landed elite’s use of “the cattle industry [as] an effective mechanism to monopolize agrarian resources” has underwritten much of their political power.103 “Plainly speaking,” write

---

97 Scruggs (1905), p. 85.
103 Feder (1975), p. 78.
Solon Barraclough and Arthur Domike, “ownership or control of land is power.”\textsuperscript{104} And as “cattle replaced people,” continues Colombian historian, Fabio Yepes, “the large landowners accumulated political and territorial power.”\textsuperscript{105} One of the classic arguments in Colombian historiography is that, in a country with a large agrarian frontier, “the monopoly of available land was the only way to control labor.”\textsuperscript{106} Territorial monopolization was thus a conscious effort to gain leverage over the peasantry in a sparsely populated country. The artificial scarcity it created not only helped form a dependent labor force (aided by debt and coercion) but also kept wages in check, pushed up rents, and generally increased land values.\textsuperscript{107} Furthermore, according to Kalmanovitz, the peons of cattle estates served as “voting-booth fodder in electoral disputes, or cannon fodder in the civil wars, investing landed elites with local and national political power.”\textsuperscript{108} Thus, by dominating the peasantry, landed elites ensured that the state remained their “appendage.”\textsuperscript{109}

In turn, this land-cattle-power nexus, “not profits from beef production,” enabled ranchers to benefit economically.\textsuperscript{110} In fact, many scholars underscore how “marginally profitable” ranching has been.\textsuperscript{111} According to Hecht, the “[f]ormation and management of pastures is quite expensive, pastures are not usually sustainable,

\begin{thebibliography}{11}
\bibitem{104} Barraclough and Domike (1966), p. 398.
\bibitem{106} Reyes (1978), p. 4. See also LeGrand (1986); McGreevy (1971).
\bibitem{107} Kalmanovitz (1989), 131.
\bibitem{108} Kalmanovitz (1989), 131.
\bibitem{110} Nations, (1992), p. 194.
\end{thebibliography}
and the value of the final animal product often does not repay the investment costs.”

Many consider, therefore, that ranching profits stem from extra-economic sources rather than an ability to compete for resources on normally-functioning markets. Their monopoly control of land, for example, allowed ranchers to squeeze a desperate peasantry. Their power and political influence enabled them to accumulate by dispossession. “The history of the coastal cattle hacienda [in Colombia],” Reyes remarks, “has been a process of accumulating wealth represented by cattle and land planted in pasture whose original source of production has been the labor of peasants expelled from their land….”

Land speculation, rather than production, has also been a key source of gain. According to Edelman, “unproductive [cattle] latifundios were frequently used primarily as collateral for obtaining liquid capital” to invest in more lucrative sectors. Furthermore, ranchers benefited from a “heavy subsidy from nature.” In some cases, this subsidy has come from extracting the value stored in tropical forests, either as timber or fertilizing ash. Others simply note that ranching profits stem more from the ability of grass to tap the energy of the sun, and of cattle to grow and multiply on their own, than the investment of capital and the organization of production. This idea underlines the recurring insistence about the ease of ranching, that native pastures “survived with little care,” and that creole cattle herds “effectively

113 Negrete (1981); Feder (1975); de Janvry (1981).
114 Williams (1986); Grandia (2007); Foweraker (1981).
manage themselves.” Finally, the influence that ranchers have had on the state has also permitted them to capture a range of “enormous state subsidies.”

Within this perspective, Colombian ranchers were rich, powerful, and repressive. The predominant image of the cattle hacienda is of a sprawling estate stocked with thousands of animals. Yepes, for example, believes that such latifundios, a number with over 60,000 head, characterized the industry on the coast during the first half of the twentieth century. Cattle raising is also thought to be an activity generally limited to the wealthy. Reyes assumes that ranchers did not have to worry about peasants using cattle to claim land because “they generally lack cattle with which to occupy it.” Rural sociologist T. Lynn Smith considers that ranchers were, socially, economically and politically, “by far the most important group in Colombia.” They maintained their position (at least regionally) by maintaining tight control over local and state power, limiting social mobility, coercive social relations and violence. The strength of the cattle latifundio in Sucre, Reyes argues, is based on “a long history of class dominion, concentration of power, and the creation of closed

---

122 Hecht (1985), p. 672; Hecht (1993); Parsons (1976); Shane (1986); Williams (1986); Fearnside (2005); Edelman (1992); Kaimowitz (1996); Tucker (2000); Grandia (2007); see also de Janvry (1981), p. 111; Feder (1975). More recently, however, there is growing recognition that while these subsidies were critical for an important group of ranchers in the Amazon, many others did not receive them or to the same extent. Likewise, even though many of these subsidies had dried up by the mid-1990s, the expansion of ranching into the Amazon has continued (Hecht, 1993; Faminow, 1997; Fearnside 2005; Mattos and Uhl, 1994; Walker, 2008).
castes of landed elites, always in usufruct of state power, with the law, judges, and force of the government in their favor.”

This view also ties ranching to the irrational use of resources and stunted economic growth. From the late-nineteenth century, critics complained that the expansion of ranching displaced farmers, causing food shortages and inflation. Lauchlin Currie, the development economist who arrived in Colombia with the World Bank around 1950, was appalled to find that ranchers, by monopolizing more fertile and better located lands, forced peasant food producers to marginal hillsides or out to the frontier. He and others noted how this raised the costs of food production by lowering its productivity and increasing transportation costs. The concentration of land in unproductive ranches also deprived much land from better use, prevented the development of an independent peasantry, and exacerbated the problems of minifundio. Additionally, for Kalmanovitz, “the methods of violent subjugation of the direct producers [by ranchers and landlords] made the adoption of better techniques in production difficult and even undesirable; their absentee management of the land, and the social and political barbarism that they constantly reproduced, was and still is an

---

127 Reyes (1978), p. 112. Though to this he also adds the fragmentation of the peasantry, maintained through varying forms of clientelism, and a high dose of paternalism.
129 World Bank (1950).
130 It also caused a significant amount of erosion. For example, Smith (1967, pp. 62-63) writes: “For four hundred years this process has continued, with few if any substantial interruptions, until today most of the land best suited for agriculture are given over to grazing purposes, while the attempt of hundred of thousands of Indian and mestizo families to extract a living by cultivating the steep slopes of the hillsides is largely responsible for the terrific amount of soil erosion which besets the country.” The traditional historiography of ranching in Colombia has, however, only peripherally dealt with the processes and consequences of cattle-related deforestation. Yepes (2001) is an exception to this. For a broad perspective of the theme, see Parsons (1988).
objective barrier to the development of the forces of production in the countryside.”\textsuperscript{131} Inside the hacienda, uncertain land tenure, contractual limitations, coercive social relations and the inefficient distribution of labor between the hacienda and peasant plots all prevented the adoption of better techniques. Therefore, by retarding the development of markets in land and labor, and increasing the costs of food production, cattle ranchers (and landed elites in general) effectively taxed the nascent industrial bourgeoisie, slowing the progress of the economy.\textsuperscript{132} And a mass of impoverished rural workers, largely disconnected from the market, did little to stimulate a domestic market for manufactured goods. Although an incipient bourgeoisie would begin to challenge the power of the landed elite in the 1920s, Absalón Machado and others note that Colombia never had a bourgeois revolution; only in the 1950s did the country begin to adopt the so-called Junker path of capitalist agrarian development.\textsuperscript{133} Cattle ranchers, according to Gómez, were at the forefront of the fight against social and land reforms from the 1930s.\textsuperscript{134} And Kalmanovitz says that despite the important changes since the 1950s, much remains the same: the old barbarism, the violent disputes for land, and the landlord-state alliance.\textsuperscript{135}

**PLAN OF ATTACK**

This study examines the historical geography of cattle ranching in Colombia between 1850 and 1950. On the one hand, it attempts to fill in a large historiographic

\textsuperscript{131} Kalmanovitz (1989), p. 131.  
\textsuperscript{132} Machado (1981); Bejerano (1975).  
\textsuperscript{133} Machado (1981); Moncayo (1986).  
\textsuperscript{134} Gómez (1987).  
\textsuperscript{135} Kalmanovitz (1978), p. 105.
lacuna: the near absence of detailed studies on one of the most important and widespread activities in the country. On the other hand, its larger aim is to reinterpret the driving force behind ranching and why it has been such a ubiquitous and persistent part of the Colombian countryside. Rather than explaining cattle raising in terms of an anomaly or the continuation of pre-capitalist social and economic relations, I underline the importance of coming to terms with its productive and economic logic. Ranchers were neither strictly rational actors nor consummate profit maximizers. They also sought a variety of non-productive ways of extracting proceeds from cattle and acquiring a range of other benefits. But the underlying logic of ranching was to raise and sell livestock for a profit. This becomes clear, in the Colombian case, when the costs of pasture formation are compared with the unimproved value of land: the indirect and other economic benefits from ranching could not, by themselves, recoup the initial investment that was required if the aim was not also to raise cattle for sale. The large numbers of cattle that ranchers bought also forced them to pay close attention to their margins. While stock raising could not always compete with more profitable sectors, it was generally sufficiently attractive to attract great quantities of capital. And it was the economic viability of ranching, often in addition to other indirect or potential benefits, that best explains the significant expansion of cattle ranching in Colombia between 1850 and 1950.

Acknowledging the productive basis of ranching, in turn, pushes us to rethink the historic development of Colombia in a number of ways. Scholars frequently date the transition to capitalism in the countryside, for example, to the 1930s or the 1950s. In terms of agriculture, these dates have relevance. But they do not in terms of cattle
ranching. While I would not call late-nineteenth century ranchers capitalists, they shared a number of prerequisite characteristics. Of course, rural society generally was even less transformed by the incipient capitalist relations in the countryside. These would start to become prominent in the mid-twentieth century. But one can see the seeds of this transition among ranchers starting in the mid-nineteenth century. Likewise, markets for land, labor, and credit were problematic, uneven, and riddled with imperfections. But they were more developed than is often imagined and important to the expansion to ranching. Although ranchers expanded their territorial base by force and trickery, they also did so by economic means. It is without question that, in terms of land use, peasant agriculture was much more productive than raising cattle. But ranching may well have been more profitable over the long term and quite resistant to displacement before the introduction of mechanized agriculture in the 1930s and its wider diffusion staring in the 1950s. Additionally, the frequently-cited purpose of territorial monopolization via cattle, to control the labor force in a sparsely-settled country, was often not very effective. And the political power that ranchers were supposed to exercise needs to be understood much more contextually.

This study covers the period 1850 to 1950. It begins with the initiation of a long-term process of expansion that eventually shifted the geography of ranching and transformed much of the country. The mid-nineteenth century also marked the moment when new ranching technologies began to arrive, particularly a pair of grasses of African origin. It ends around 1950, the point at which most studies of the sector begin and the date they generally suggest marks the beginning of the modernization of Colombian ranching. As I show, however, there were important reforms and
productivity improvements prior to 1950. In fact, the modernization of ranching is better seen in terms of slow but progressive change that initiated back in the mid-nineteenth century.

The geographic focus of this study centers on the department of Old Bolívar, on the Caribbean coastal plains. One reason for paying particular attention to this region is that Old Bolívar became the center of ranching in Colombia during this period. It was also the department that was most closely tied to export markets and the failed attempt to establish a meat-packing plant in the 1920s. Furthermore, with no highland regions, its ranchers could not easily import European cattle breeds to upgrade their stock. In this way, the department was representative of the environmental challenges faced by most ranchers throughout Colombia.

But the decision to focus on Old Bolívar was also a function of the best archival sources for cattle ranching that are currently available in Colombia: those of the Ospina family located in the Fundación Antioqueño de Estudios Sociales, in Medellín. Luis Ospina Vásquez, one of Pedro Nel Ospina’s sons, was an amateur but prominent economic historian. He collected many of his extended family’s commercial records and some personal correspondence in this important private archive. For the history of ranching, there are two primary sets of records in the archive. The first is that of Hacienda Marta Magdalena, a large estate along the Sinú River south of Montería (Old Bolívar). It started out in the late-nineteenth century as a pair of French- and Belgian-owned cacao estates that were fused and then bought by a number of Antioqueño families in 1913. By the 1930s, the Ospina family had become

its sole owner. Anthropologist Gloria Isabel Ocampo recently published a study of this estate based on these records deposited in this archive.\textsuperscript{137} In some sections, especially Chapter 3, I rely heavily on the rich, primary sources she provides in her excellent book to complement my own archival work. The other records, which I examined, are those of Pedro Nel Ospina & Compañía [Cía.]. Starting in the 1880s, Pedro Nel Ospina and his brothers started to develop cattle estates in the lowlands of northern Antioquia. Pedro Nel Ospina later continued with this project on his own, founding a large series of estates in these forested lowlands and those of Old Bolívar. My focus on Old Bolívar, therefore, stems partly from the best primary sources I could find to understand the logic and operation of a ranching enterprise from within. These records, which include accounting information and the company’s internal correspondence (mostly between company managers and those of the individual estates), last from 1912 to 1927. They are complemented by similar records, though less complete, from one of Ospina’s sons, Pedro Nel Jr., and his son-in-law and nephew, Bernardo Ospina.

My study, however, is not solely an account of Ospina’s company. I also rely on a variety of other sources to piece together a larger account of the history and character of ranching in Old Bolivar, and to some extent Colombia more generally, over this century. Furthermore, I also skip around some geographically. Ranching in Old Bolívar was closely tied to the Antioqueño market, so I follow cattle south from Old Bolívar to the fattening pastures and slaughter houses in Antioquia. This was also the primary purpose of Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. I also periodically draw on examples

\textsuperscript{137} Ocampo (2007).
from elsewhere in Colombia to illustrate and substantiate my account. The general scarcity of primary data on ranching in Colombia make it necessary to cast a wide net.

Finally, I organized this study thematically rather than chronologically. There were two reasons for this. First, the scarcity of data on ranching makes it difficult to sustain a chronological approach; there would have been too many gaps in the story. Second, and more important, the history of ranching between 1850 and 1950 was one of slow change. While there were events that highlight certain features of ranching, and some critical moments for the industry at large, it is not a story that is defined by clear shifts or breaks. For this reason, I decided to focus on thematic elements in order to try and build a general picture of ranching. This also seemed to be a more manageable way to deal with a long historical period. While I do note changes that occurred in the industry, they get downplayed within in the larger effort to capture the defining features of ranching. The topics of the following chapters are: land, labor, economics, productivity, and politics.

Chapter two explores how ranchers acquired the land they needed to expand their operations. Standard accounts of the history of property rights in Old Bolívar suggest a process of increasing, often coercive, consolidation. While both consolidation and coercion did occur, there was no straightforward movement towards an increasingly unequal land tenure structure. Private properties, which appear to have been more significant than accounts emphasizing the settlement of public lands would suggest, underwent a good deal of fragmentation and subsequent reconsolidation. Ranchers appropriated significant parts of what were communal lands as they also pushed for their privatization. Similarly, they formally and informally appropriated
much of the large areas of public lands in Old Bolívar. While they forcibly
dispossessed peasants from their land, this was not the principal way by which
ranchers acquired land. Inheritance, frontier settlement, and land markets were more
important. Even where they did displace peasants, land markets helped mediate
evictions, giving them a degree of legitimacy.

Chapter three examines the work and social relations of ranching. The idea that
ranching has very low labor demands needs to be modified somewhat with regard to
Old Bolívar. Although ranchers did not need large numbers of cowboys, they did
require sizable groups of laborers to clear forests, plant pastures, and remove weeds.
Despite the supposed territorial monopolization by ranchers and landed elites, they did
not manage to block access to land to most peasants until well into the twentieth
century. The demand for workers, and their relative scarcity, led to some abuses. But
the coercive labor relations often imagined in Old Bolívar are better interpreted as a
reflection of ranchers trying to assert their authority in labor markets over which they
had weak control. Continued access to land for the peasantry undermined the coercive
power of wages and enabled seasonal workers to demand pay advances. While wage
labor was critical to the expansion of ranching in Old Bolívar – other arrangements
such as land-for-pasture schemes appear to have developed rather late – a widespread,
rural landless labor force only developed in the 1940s.

Chapter four, which looks at economic issues, address the logic of ranching
more directly. It first analyzes the organization and strategies of one particular
ranching enterprise, Pedro Nel Ospina & Cia., underlying its quest for efficiency and
profitability. I then sketch out the beef commodity chain to show how, in the process
of growing, transporting, and fattening cattle, they frequently changed ownership. Buying cattle, I argue, prevented many ranchers from a ‘hoarding’ approach to their operations. Likewise, the high cost of developing pastures out of the forest, compared to the cost of undeveloped land, discouraged them from using cattle to claim land if what they really wanted was land. It was the prospects of earning profits by raising and selling cattle that motivated most ranchers. But there were also a range of other rationales that provided additional incentives, including those underlined by scholars who see ranching as an economic anomaly. Lastly, I reflect on the mixed economic legacy of ranching. While it was not necessarily the calamity supposed by many, ranching was not a propitious path towards economic development.

In chapter five I examine the changing productivity of ranching and its limits. Contrary to the notion that ranching was general stagnant before 1950, I show how there was a slow but important process of productivity improvements between 1850 and 1950. These gains, however, were insufficient to make Colombian ranching competitive in international beef markets, and the efforts to develop an export-oriented meat-packing industry in the 1920s failed as a result. While much of the blame for this failure fell on ranchers themselves, I point out how there were serious environmental obstacles, in addition to social and political ones, that prevented them from developing a viable export beef industry.

Lastly, chapter six challenges the view that ranchers were the most powerful social group in the country. Nationally, their influence was circumscribed by other interest groups, and they had trouble obtaining favorable legislation from the government. Their power was much greater at the local level, where the state was
often ineffective at exercising its authority. Here too, however, ranchers also
confronted a more resolute peasantry than they would have liked, and periodically
uncooperative state. Rather than simply assume that ranchers were powerful, we need
to examine the larger political and social networks in which ranchers were enmeshed.
CHAPTER TWO

THE ORIGINS OF THE CATTLE ESTATE

In 1925, José Eustacio Rivera, celebrated author of *La Vorágine*, presided over a commission charged with investigating the land claims of Hacienda Corinto, a sprawling cattle estate owned by Pedro Nel Ospina, then president of Colombia. Among other things, the commission instructed the municipal judge and municipal advocate (*personero*) of Ayapel (Old Bolívar), where the hacienda was located, to inquire into the possible forced expulsion of various peasant colonizers (*colonos*) from the public lands to which Ospina hoped to acquire title (see Map 2.1). Ospina had founded Hacienda Corinto by fusing various farms and ranches that his company purchased from colonos who had begun settling in the area at the start of the twentieth century with pastures that he had cleared directly out of the forest. Based on the total area exploited, Ospina estimated that he could lay claim to some 18,000 hectares of public land in the region. The judge and municipal advocate interviewed various people from the region regarding the estate, including two peasants who had established farms on land later claimed by the president. From these testimonies, it is evident that while Ospina’s company did not forcibly evict any of the *colonos* families living on the land it claimed, the pressure it applied allowed it to buy most of them out, and some rather cheaply.¹

commission in the Ospina archives does allow us to ascertain who organized it or under what auspices. By the early 1920s, Pedro Nel Ospina’s son, Pedro Nel Ospina Jr., owned 30 percent of the estate.
The land claims of Hacienda Corinto exemplify several important aspects about the formation of cattle estates in Old Bolívar, and wide areas of the Colombian lowlands more generally. For one, the settlement of large areas of public land was critical to the expansion of the cattle industry between 1850 and 1950. Over the first couple decades of the twentieth century, Ospina and the other colonizers transformed the forests that became Hacienda Corinto into pastures for over 3,200 head of cattle destined for market in Medellín.  

Their efforts were part of a broader movement by which the forested public lands of southern Old Bolívar became leading ranching districts in the department that, by the early-twentieth century, had become the most important cattle producer in the country.

The appropriation of vast extensions of public land by ranchers also enclosed much of the agrarian frontier. Ospina’s application for the title to 18,000 hectares was based on the practice of granting settlers four times the area under production. Many other ranchers also obtained large stretches of the public domain in this way, or by redeeming territorial bonds. The effect was to extend the landed elite’s control over wide areas of the sparsely-settled lowlands. This monopolization, often via cattle, was pivotal to the evolution of Colombia’s land tenure structure. Even after several hundred years of colonial occupation, the crown had granted only limited property rights in land outside of the relatively restricted zones of Spanish settlement. Because so much land remained in the public domain, the distinguished historian, Germán Colmenares, concluded that “[t]he agrarian problem in Colombia does not stem from a

---

2 APNOyC, Cáceres, f749.
3 APNOyC, 232, f148.
supposed ‘colonial inheritance’ but the opening of new agrarian frontiers over the
course of the nineteenth century.”

Additionally, the Corinto case points to the role of intimidation in the
consolidation of cattle estates and the monopolization of landholding. The simple
announcement that Ospina was going to apply for title to all the land surrounding their
farms convinced many other colonos to sell their properties. By restricting their ability
to continue clearing more forested land, through fences and pressure from municipal
authorities, Ospina’s company was able to buy some of their farms quite cheaply. The
settlement of the country’s agrarian frontier was full of similar conflicts between
peasants, who often first cleared the forest, and entrepreneurs or speculators who
appeared later, waving titles granted by the state, to claim property rights over the land
that the former had started to develop. While the law required that such settlers be
indemnified for the improvements they had made to the land, out on the frontier they
frequently only received an ultimatum: pay rent or get out. Such coercion did not
occur just on the frontier. According to sociologist Orlando Fals Borda, “tricks,
coercion, extortion, deceit, and death” permeated the history of land struggles
throughout Old Bolívar.

But for all their significance, neither the biased distribution of public land nor
the violent consolidation of property rights can, by themselves, account for the
expansion of cattle ranching, the formation of cattle estates, and the monopolization of
landholding in Old Bolívar. First, the colonial legacy, not just the adjudication of

---

4 Colmenares (1987), p. 44. See also LeGrand (1986).
5 LeGrand (1986), pp. 56-68. See also López (1927).
public land, also played a decisive role in the land tenure structure that developed by the mid-twentieth century. Because the Spanish crown granted property rights over considerably more land in Old Bolívar than the republican state would later alienate from the public domain, we need to pay closer attention to the evolution of these colonial properties. In contrast to a common depiction of the relentless concentration of land ownership in Old Bolívar, privately-held estates frequently underwent a process of considerable fragmentation among growing groups of co-owners. While there was also a countervailing process of consolidation, the distribution of private property rights was considerably more unequal in the 1850s than it was a century later. Ironically, though, as nineteenth-century liberal discourse railed against corporate forms of land tenure, most private property inherited from the colonial period evolved into this new type of communally-owned private property, called *mancomunidades* or *proindivos*.

By contrast, by the first decades of the twentieth century, ranchers had appropriated much of the communal lands of the Indian communities (*resguardos*) and Hispanic villages (*ejidos*) that had existed in Old Bolívar. While at times the state assisted this process by pushing to privatize corporately-held lands, it often neither acted quickly nor decisively. In fact, for some time after the national government had removed the remaining protections over communal lands, legislators in Old Bolívar continued to prop them up locally. Instead of a top-down process, much of the gradual alienation of communally-held properties was rooted in the development of a kind of ‘informal’ property rights based on use-rights and improvements made to the land (*mejoras*). While people who used the commons of their communities did not own the
land they worked, they could sell the improvements they had made to the land, such as permanent crops, pastures, or clearings. The general widespread acceptance of such property rights, distinct from claims over the land itself, led to the de facto privatization of many ostensibly communal lands.

Second, land markets also acted as an important counter-weight to unmediated usurpation. There is no doubt that dispossession was important, but historian Catherine LeGrand’s claim that it was the “dominant tendency” is probably too strong. For all the forced enclosure of peasants’ fields that occurred, there was a considerable degree of buying and selling farms as well. Land markets, of course, were not immune from coercion. Unfortunately, it is hard to ascertain just how important such coercion was, partly because these transactions went even more unnoticed than many of the evictions. Nonetheless, it is my sense that while the numerous references to dispossession in the historical record and oral histories has rightly caused scholars to draw attention to this aspect of the expansion of cattle ranching and the settlement of the agrarian frontier, they have also overshadowed a less violent side to this history. Manuel D. Gil, one of the peasants who sold his farm to Ospina’s company, defiantly said that “if they didn’t give him what he asked for, he wouldn’t sell.” The words were not necessarily empty rhetoric since another colono, Martín Angulo, sold one of his properties inside Hacienda Corinto but not another. Scholars, such as LeGrand, who emphasize a widespread enclosure movement also acknowledge that peasants sometimes did successfully defend their interests, and that

---

8 APNOyC, C 1925: Comisión Investigadora, testimony of Rafael Vejarano, May 30, 1925.
“landlords surely bought up the colonos’ improvements [and that] a few colonos probably made a business of opening frontier lands, selling the clearings either to entrepreneurs or other settlers, and moving on.”\(^9\) But they consider that, overall, such land sales were unimportant: “in the majority of the cases…colonos lost out” to violent dispossessions, LeGrand suggests.\(^10\) I argue, however, that these land sales were more significant than generally realized.

Underlying the development of land markets was the widely recognized, though informal, system of property rights mentioned above. This system, which permeated all forms of land tenure – private properties, communal land, and the public domain – was based on the tacit recognition that the investment of capital and labor in a piece of land conferred property rights in the improvements made. These rights often led to the de facto privatization of land even where the state did not grant formal title to it.\(^11\) Contrary to the claim that peasants and ranchers or land entrepreneurs had “opposing definitions of property right” – between rights based on occupation and exploitation and those backed by a piece of paper issued by a government ministry – I suggest that most residents of Old Bolívar had a shared understanding of them.\(^12\) Obviously, this did not stop many elites from running roughshod over such rights. In fact, their informal nature facilitated the dispossessions and other abuses. But it was

\(^{9}\) LeGrand (1986), p. 78.
\(^{10}\) LeGrand (1986), p. 78.
\(^{11}\) It is in this sense that it was an informal system, though it complemented rather than competed with the formal, state-backed system of property rights. The separation between these systems of property rights was not always so clear, however, since state policies backed the informal system as well. People who developed farms on public land claimed property rights based on national laws (71 of 1874 and 48 of 1882) that recognized squatter’s rights. See below for further discussion. For an explicit statement of this assumption, see ANM, 1915, no. 132.
the tacit recognition of and respect for this informal system of property rights that helps explain why so many ranchers, not just peasants, did not bother to get land titles from the state. It might also help to explain why Old Bolivar – supposedly the site of the most widespread and violent dispossessions in the country – did not follow the national pattern in which such land struggles became the foci of violence in the 1950s. Although there were frequent conflicts between peasants and ranchers over land in Old Bolívar, they did not always dominate. Instead, the existing system of property rights and land markets may have worked sufficiently well to endow the process of land concentration a modicum of legitimacy.

Additionally, this informal system of property rights facilitated the development of the region and the settlement of the frontier where the state’s ability to promote land markets was weak. In other words, this informal system made the system of property rights and land markets more fluid than they otherwise could have been; and they gave colonos, both large and small, enough confidence to settle the frontier in the general absence of a formal, state-backed system of property rights. Unfortunately, the very informality of this system also contributed to the dispossession and usurpation that also occurred throughout the department.

Cattle ranching is, by its very nature, an extensive activity. Land, and often lots of it, are a necessary part of most ranching operations. Therefore, the manner in which ranchers obtain access to land is key to understanding the evolution of the industry and the politics of agrarian development. This chapter explores how ranchers in Old Bolívar formed their cattle estates over an expansionary period of the cattle industry, the evolution of land tenure regimes and the distribution of property rights, and some
of the struggles surrounding this process. I first examine the way ranchers formed cattle estates out of the fragmentation and reconsolidation of colonial-era private properties. Then I discuss the privatization and appropriation of communal lands by ranchers. The next section explores the settlement and monopolization of public lands. And I conclude with some reflections on the evolution of the land tenure structure over the period from 1850 to 1960 and the role of coercion in the expansion of cattle ranching and the concentration of property rights.

**The Great Estate**

**ColonialContinuities**

In 1867, legislators in Old Bolívar implemented a rural land tax to help fund public education in the state.\(^{13}\) They decided that the owners of all properties of at least one-sixteenth of a *caballería*, about 26 hectares, would pay the pro-rated amount of $3 *pesos* per *caballería*, or less than one *centavo* per hectare.\(^{14}\) To assess the tax,

---

\(^{13}\)*Gaceta de Bolívar*, April 5, 1868, no. 552, p. 5: Registro de las personas obligadas al pago del impuesto agrario.

\(^{14}\)The actual amount was 0.72 centavos per hectare, or 18.75 centavos per 26 hectares (see *Gaceta de Bolívar*, Feb. 2, 1868, no. 568, p. 4). The common land measures in Old Bolívar in the nineteenth century and even into the twentieth century were the *caballería*, the *fanegada*, the *almúd*, and the *vara*. In 1868, the equivalencies were: 1 *caballería* = 50 *fanegadas*; 1 *fanegada* = 12 *almúdes*; and 1 *almúd* = 100 square *varas*. Since the *vara castellana*, the unit of measure used in Old Bolívar, was defined as the equivalent of .8359 meters (in Spain in 1852), theoretically a *caballería* was equivalent to about 419 hectares, the *fanegada* to 8.4 hectares, and the *almúd* to 0.7 hectare (see AHC, Archivo Notarial, Feb. 11, 1909, no. 30; and Gobernación, Asamblea, 1894-1924, no. 9: Ordenaza adicional y reformatoria de los leyes de policia vigentes). By the early-twentieth century, the government appears to have revived an old unit of measure – the *cabulla* – in an effort to standardize weights and measures. It defined the *cabulla* as 100 meters (opposed to 100 varas castellanas, which it measured in the late-eighteenth century), so square *cabulla* was equivalent to one hectare (AHC, Gobernación, Asamblea, 1894-1924, no. 9: Ordenaza adicional y reformatoria de los leyes…, artículo 87).
they complied a list of all properties in the state with at least 26 hectares and their owners. As with all nineteenth-century attempts to collect statistics, these tax registers undoubtedly have omissions and errors. Additionally, the *Gaceta de Bolívar*, the official state newspaper, only published the lists for about half of the districts in the state.\(^{15}\) Such problems notwithstanding, this cadastral survey provides the best available picture of the distribution of private property in Old Bolívar in the mid-nineteenth century.

One of the striking aspects highlighted by these lists are the continuities from the colonial period, both in terms of the distribution of property and who owned it. First, it is remarkable how few properties there were. The available tax rolls list just 706 properties over 26 hectares, all together totaling almost one million hectares. Since the state did not distribute any public lands in Bolívar prior to 1868, these properties must have originated in colonial-era land grants. It is also doubtful that there were many properties under 26 hectares: the crown, while sometimes profligate with regard to the size of land grants, did not readily distribute private property rights in land; and the effort and costs of applying for the title to such small properties likely

---

By 1920, the *fanegada* measured eight *cabullas* and the *caballería* measured 400 hectares (see AHC, Archico Notarial, Jan. 3, 1920, no. 3; April 28, 1925, no. 159; Jan. 13, 1950, no. 14; March 13, 1950, no. 99). In other words, property measures had shrunk by 4.5 percent. It is not clear what the implications of these revisions were in terms of property boundaries. They do not appear to have generated much conflict, though, perhaps because ultimately property boundaries were based on natural landmarks rather than abstract measurements. For the opposite case, that of widespread enclosures through a process of growing property measures, see Edleman’s (1992, p. 62) account of early-twentieth century Costa Rica.\(^\)\(^{15}\)

\(^{15}\) Some provinces, such as Mompox and Magangué are almost entirely missing. The other provinces have various districts missing. Only the province of Corozal is complete. The lists I have are from the *Gaceta de Bolívar*: April 5, 1868, no. 552, pp. 5-6; April 19, 1868, no. 554, p. 6; April 26, 1868, no. 555, p. 6; May 10, 1868, no. 557, pp. 5-7; July 19, 1868, no. 567, pp. 1-3; July 26, 1868, no. 568, p. 3-4; Aug. 16, 1868, no. 572, pp. 5-6.
would not have been worthwhile. If we assume a roughly similar number of properties in the unlisted districts, we can estimate that there were probably no more than 1,500 properties in Old Bolívar for an adult population of about 170,000. On the one hand, the high concentration of landed property did not necessarily put the some 60,000 farmers in the department completely at the mercy of the landed elite. The existence of village ejidos, Indian resguardos, and the possibility of squatting of both public and private lands, probably made it easier to gain access to land at this time than a century later. On the other hand, however, the concentration of private landholding was even greater than the small number of properties suggests because of their varied sizes and the ownership of multiple estates. In the district of Cartagena, for example, just 12 people owned two-thirds of the 59 properties listed. In Sincé, Gabriel Oliver owned 25 percent of the properties and about two-thirds of the land, some 41,500 hectares. Three families from Montería – the de Lora, Cabrales, and Berrocal – controlled approximately 75 percent of the privately-held land in the district, over 63,000 hectares. And Ovejas, Morroa, Colosó, among other districts, were entirely under the dominion of just one or two people. Almost 50 years after Independence, the distribution of private property remained extremely limited and unequal.

Second, a considerable number of the important landed families in 1868 had inherited their properties from colonial forbearers. Two of the most famous cattle

---

16 Oficina de Estadística Nacional (1875), p. 23. Population and occupational data are from the 1871 census.
17 These were Fernando Blanco and Matías González with 3,352 and 13,825 hectares, respectively, in Ovejas; José Antonio Cásas with 3,561 hectares in Morroa; and Francisco de B. Romero with 14,244 hectares in Colosó. From Gaceta de Bolívar: May 10, 1868, no. 557, p. 5 (Cartagena); April 19, 1868, no. 554, p. 6 (Sincé, Ovejas, Morroa); July 2, 1868 no. 568, p. 3 (Colosó); Aug. 16, 1868, no. 572, p. 5-6 (Montería).
haciendas in Old Bolivar in the first decades of the twentieth century, for example, had each remained within the family that owned them in the eighteenth century. Hacienda Berástegui, which originated in a grant outside of Ciénaga de Oro to the Spaniard Tomás Gómez de Barragán in 1734, was ‘modernized’ over the second half the nineteenth century by the Burgos siblings, his great grandchildren. They introduced an important new pasture grass (pará or *Brachiara mutica*), drained swamplands, expanded the area in pasture, bought surrounding properties, among other improvements. By 1882, the hacienda had a stocking capacity of 14,000 head of cattle.

And in 1917, when Robert B. Cunninghame Graham, the Scottish author and adventurer sent by the English government to investigate the Colombian cattle industry, proclaimed that it was one of the finest cattle estates in Old Bolívar, the hacienda was still owned by the same politically-important family.18

In similar fashion, Hacienda Santa Bárbara de Coveñas, in Sotomayor family since the eighteenth century, provided the foundation from which Julián Patrón Iriarte became one of the largest ranchers in Bolívar in the early twentieth century. In 1868, this roughly 10,000-hectare property located along the Gulf of Morrosquillo was owned by José María and Salomé Sotomayor, Luis Felipe Patrón Sotomayor, and Francisco Iriarte. When Julián Patrón inherited a share in the estate from his father in the late nineteenth century, he had been sailing back and forth from Old Bolívar to Colón, Panama, trading local foodstuffs for soap, sugar, kerosene, and coffee. He initially started collecting the coconuts that littered the property’s coastline, selling the

---

18 Burgos Puche (1965); Posada Carbó (1986); Fals Borda (1976); Cunninghame Graham (1920).
dried kernels in Panama to produce oil. With the profits, however, he invested in cattle. From his base in Santa Bárbara de Coveñas, Julián Patrón built up a cattle empire, eventually buying most of the land along the Gulf of Morrosquillo. At his height, Patrón was one of the richest men in Bolívar, running some 40,000 head of cattle on his extensive properties. He was also one of the four Colombian ranchers to join forces with the New York-based International Products Company in the late 1910s to build the first meat-packing plant in Colombia.  

Numerous other prominent landed-cum-ranching families also exercised economic and political power based on properties acquired during the colonial period. Francisco Javier Tovío, whom Louis Striffler called the “monarch of Tacascuán,” inherited a good deal of the approximately 13,000 hectares of land he owned around San Benito Abad in 1868 from his father, a colonial official and landowner. The de Lora family from Montería derived its preeminent position from the 37,000-odd hectares of land that the crown granted Nicolás J. de Lora at the end of the eighteenth century. And in 1868, the Olmos, Pérez, Vergara, Badel, and de la Ossa families, also descendents of colonial bureaucrats and local elites, together controlled over one-third of the land in the province of Corozal. A hundred years later, they were still

---

19 Moré Sierra (2003). In 1899, Patrón and his father formed a commercial partnership with a capital value of $120,000 (Viloria, 2001, pp. 21-22). Even with the inflation at the start of the War of One Thousand Days, this was an impressive figure. The ‘self-made’ elements in Moré’s story are probably somewhat apocryphal.
22 Gaceta de Bolívar, July 19, 1868, no. 567, pp. 1-2. For the colonial roots of the Pérez family, see AOFB, Corozal.Chinú.Colosó, Corozal Notary Record, Oct. 5, 1906, no. 119. For the De la Ossa family, see Fals Borda (2002b), pp. 141A-145A.
among the ten largest landowning and ranching families in the present-day department of Sucre. What these continuities show is the enduring stamp that the colonial period left on landed elites and the structure of land tenure into the nineteenth century and beyond.

**Republican Changes**

Despite this continuity and concentration, the 1868 cadastral records also capture shifts within the make up of the landed elite. Between the end of the colonial period and the middle of the nineteenth century, new groups of landowners had begun to emerge. One important source of change, particularly around Cartagena, was the arrival of foreign merchants who either married into traditional landowning families or purchased estates themselves. For example, Maria Nicolasa Granados, the great-granddaughter of an important eighteenth-century Spanish merchant-turned-landowner, sequentially married the Scottish merchant Donald Stevenson and then the Irish merchant Thomas R. Cowan. In 1868, the heirs of the latter marriage owned some 24,000 hectares. Other foreigners who acquired land around Cartagena include the Catalan merchant Pedro Macía Doménech (over 15,000 hectares), the Andalusian druggist Manuel Román y Picón (over 3,300 hectares), and British consul James Druce (around 3,800 hectares). Over the second half of the nineteenth century, numerous foreign merchants also flocked to the area around El Carmen, which had become the center of tobacco production in Old Bolívar. While the profits were in the

---

24 Gaceta de Bolívar, May 10, 1868, no. 557, p. 5.
export of tobacco leaf or general commerce, a number of them also accumulated land through loan defaults or by buying property to diversify into ranching: the Italians Antonio Volpe and Salvador Frieri; the Gomes-Casseres family from Curaçao; Germans Adolfo Held and Müller, Siefken & Co.; and French-American Elie Mathieu.\(^\text{25}\) Various Colombian merchants from other regions of the country, such as the Pizarro family, also settled in the tobacco zone and, with commercial success, became important landowners and ranchers in Old Bolivar.\(^\text{26}\) Likewise, Sirio-Lebanese immigrants, who started arriving in Colombia in the 1880s, also frequently invested in land and cattle following the success of their commercial enterprises. The Jattin and Fayad families, who started to raise cattle in the early-twentieth century, were still important ranchers in 1959, each owning various haciendas totaling about 5,000 hectares and 2,000 hectares respectively. By 1959, Colombians of Sirio-Lebanese descent had become a significant component of the ranching elite in those areas where

\(^{25}\) For the tobacco economy and commercial rise of the Sabanas region of Old Bolivar, see Fals Borda (2002c, pp. 72-111) and Viloria (1999; 2001). Harrison (1969, pp. 249-250) says that, unlike in the Ambalema region of the upper Magdalena River Valley, peasants were not depended on landowners in Old Bolivar where they borrowed money from tobacco merchants to cover their production costs. Also see Ocampo (1984) and Sierra (1971). For the ranching interests of foreign tobacco merchants, Volpe and Frieri, see Meisel and Viloria (1999), pp. 31 and 51. For Gomes-Cassares, see AOFB, Notaria de Sincelejo, Nov. 17, 1870, no. 11; Oct. 9, 1871, no. 14; Feb. 10, 1873, no. 9; Gaceta de Bolivar, May 14, 1871, no. 746: Índice…Cartagena, Feb. 4, 1870, no. 14; Diario de Bolivar, March 22, 1882, no. 2786: Índice…Sincelejo, Jan. 27, 1881, no. 5. For Held, see Meisel and Viloria (1999) p. 45. For Müller Siefken & Cia, see AOFB, Notaria de Sincelejo, Jan. 29, 1886 no. 5; Diario de Bolivar, March 22, 1882, no. 2786: Índice…Sincelejo: May 14, 1881, no. 23; and May 17, 1881, no. 24; Diario de Bolivar, March 23, 1882, no. 2787: Índice…Sincelejo: June 28, 1881, no. 34. For Mathieu, see Diario de Bolivar Aug. 30, 1878, no. 1877, p. 1069.

they most heavily settled: in Cereté they owned 64 percent of the ranching properties listed in a ranching directory, and 30 percent in both Sahagún and Lorica.27

Rising locals also entered into the ranks of the landed elite.28 Manuel Marcelino Núñez Jr., who owned two estates in the district of Cartagena in 1868, and bought the property of Trementino near Tolú in 1870, reaped the benefits of such social ascent. His father had entered the militia of Cartagena at the age of 14 where he became the personal servant of the military governor who, upon his death, left the young Núñez with some capital and credit that he used to start his career as a successful merchant.29 In Sincelejo, Sebastián Romero Acosta was another merchant-turned-landowner. Originally from Sincé, Romero got his start selling garlic and onions in the early-nineteenth century.30 He was part of a rising generation of hardworking and frugal local merchants who diversified into a range of activities, including buying land and cattle. Striffler derisively said that the “avariciousness of the [hacendado] from these savannas is well-known: they spend little and work constantly.”31 Although Romero considered himself primarily a merchant, in 1868 he owned a 6,500-hectare cattle estate in the district of Corozal, the property Macayepo

28 Significant military figures among the ‘patriots’ also probably entered the landed elites when they were given the estates of royalists who died, fled, or had properties confiscated during the wars of Independence.
29 Gaceta de Bolívar May 10, 1868, no. 537, p. 5; Gaceta de Bolívar, June 4, 1871, no. 749: Indice… Cartagena, March 15, 1870, no. 33; Ripoll (2006).
30 While this occupation is sometimes used to suggest Romero’s humble roots, more than likely it signifies that he was at least from a modest background. Garlic was often brought in from the rather distant Ocaña, in the present-day department of Santander del Norte, requiring some capital and connections to undertake the trade. In 1878, his brother Francisco, as well as various other Romeros and Acostas in Sincé were also modest merchants or ranchers (Diario de Bolívar, May 19, 1878, no. 1889, p. 1123).
31 Striffler (1995), p. 88; see also pp. 49, 73.
in Tolú, and shared 25,000 hectares in San Marcos with various other ranching families.\(^{32}\) Manuel Támara, the son of a rich peasant who moved to Sincelejo in the early-nineteenth century to become a small merchant, was also part of that rising generation. Like Romero, he built up a small commercial empire, started lending money, married into local landed families, entered politics, and diversified into land and cattle. His son, Adolfo, initially sold tobacco in Colosó where he also ran a small store, did accounting, and trained horses. After the death of his father and older brother, Adolfo returned to Sincelejo where turned the family estates into one of the larger ranching operations in the area.\(^{33}\)

Running parallel to the rising fortunes of new elites was the economic decline of older ones. Prodigality was one source of social descent. According to Striffler, Luis Jarava, “the last king of San Marcos,” was the grandson of a poor peasant who built a fortune with the help of the capital his father had made. His profligate sons, however, “slowly progressed toward complete ruin,” losing their land and cattle to money lenders from Sincelejo and Corozal.\(^{34}\) Years later, the sons and grandsons of Julián Patrón would also lose the immense fortune left to them: one of them ended up begging for money to buy rum and another drove a rural taxi between Coveñas and Tolú.\(^{35}\)


\(^{34}\) Striffler (1995), p. 95. Some of the Jarava family managed to hold on to their land and cattle, however: Manuel María Jarava had ten caballerías in Sincé (Gaceta de Bolívar, April 19, 1868, no. 554); and Julián Jarava owned six caballerías in Chinú (Gaceta de Bolívar, May 10, 1868, no. 557).

The most spectacular shift in wealth and power of the first half of the nineteenth century, however, was the decline of the ranching nobility that controlled much of the cattle industry during the previous century. When Antonio de Arévalo surveyed the cattle herds around Cartagena and in the Sabanas-San Jorge region of Old Bolivar in 1766, just three people or families controlled over one-third of the 82,400 head counted.\(^{36}\) They also controlled vast properties that monopolized much of the land along the San Jorge River, a key area for summer grazing. Just three out of the eight properties they owned along this stretch of river totaled almost 100,000 hectares.\(^{37}\) Juan de Anaya, who owned the fifth largest herd in the region, had to go the back side of the Indian resguardo of Jegua, south of the San Jorge River, in order to find fresh pasturage during the dry summer season.\(^{38}\) The wars of Independence struck a mortal blow to most of these noble families and their properties. Plundered by patriot armies and local ranchers, abandoned for years, invaded by outsiders, and threatened with expropriation, their estates lost much of their former value.\(^{39}\) Their heirs, failing to successfully re-establish cattle operations, sold off many of these properties to eager local elites-cum-ranchers in the decades following Independence.

Some of the largest land owners of the mid-nineteenth century, therefore, acquired a good deal of their property in this reorganization of landed power following

\(^{36}\) Dorta (1962); Fals Borda (1979); Ripoll (2006) p. 20. These nobles were the heirs of Juan Bautista de Mier y Guerra, the first Marquee of Santa Coa; María Micalea de Lanz, niece of the Count of Santa Cruz y de la Torre; and Joseph Fernando de Mier y Guerra, whose descendants established the Marquisate of Torre Hoyos.  
\(^{37}\) They did not monopolize the entire region since various other people also raised much smaller herds there. The largest other cattle herd along the San Jorge River mentioned in the 1766 census was the 3,000 head owned by Josef de Hoyos, a Spaniard from Mompox, in the Hato de Algarobo.  
\(^{38}\) Fals Borda (2002b), p. 70a; Dorta (1962).  

64
Independence. Gabriel A. Oliver bought the 33,000-hectare Hato de San Luis from the heirs of the Marquisate of Torre Hoyos in 1842. Antonio Rodríguez de la Torre bought San Juan Bautista de Zispataca from the same family five years later, reselling it to Francisco Javier Tovio, Francisco Flórez Olmos, and Pedro J. Badel. And the 60 caballerías that Sebastian Romero owned with various other families from Corozal was likely part of the 118 caballerías of María Micaela de Lanz’s Hato de San Marcos. The decline of this old nobility gave local elites, often from Corozal or Sincelejo in the center of the Sabanas de Bolívar, the opportunity to expand their territorial control and power, and gain access to prime summer grazing lands in the seasonal flood plains (ciénagas) along the San Jorge River.

The Fragmentation of Colonial-Era Properties

In addition to changing ownership, one of the most important developments with regard to landed property was its growing fragmentation. The entailed estate was the exception to the rule during the colonial period, so this was probably not a new phenomenon. But fragmentation appears to have increased significantly starting in the mid-nineteenth century. The typical pattern was to subdivide ownership, either by sale or inheritance, into varying percentage shares of the original estate. While the co-owners of one of these private properties – called mancomunidades – sometimes opted

---

40 AOFB, San Benito Abad 1773: Papeles del Dr. José J. Corales (archivo particular), April 19, 1982: Hato de San Luis, Cartagena Notary, 1873, no. 4.
41 Ripoll (2006); Fals Borda (2002b); Gaceta de Bolívar, May 5, 1872, no. 810: Indice…Corozal, Aug. 4, 1871, no. 23.
42 Ripoll (2006); Gaceta de Bolívar July 19, 1868, no. 567; OFB, Notaria de Sincelejo, vol. 1865-1866, Dec. 21, 1866, no. 10.
to formally parcel their estate, the practice was uncommon, at least fairly well into the twentieth century. I will explore why this was the case below. This division by shares, rather than redrawing new boundaries, probably hastened the process of fragmentation because of its ease. It also facilitated the reconfiguration of landholding and landowners, and expansion of cattle ranching.

Some of this fragmentation occurred as groups of people joined forces to buy a property that they could not or did not want to acquire individually. Many of the ranching properties of the coastal nobility passed into the hands of local elites through such joint purchases: the approximately 25,000 hectares that Sebastian Romero bought in San Marcos with five others, for example.43 Such partnerships were not only used to facilitate the purchase of immense properties. In 1853, seven people – Damien and Manuel J. Pérez, Bonifacio Ortega, Sebastian Polo, Francisca de P. Prieto, Reyes Arteaga, and José Y. Corrales – bought the 3,3400-hectare Hacienda del Trementino in the district of Tolú.44 And Josefa Gómez de Jiménez sold San José de Palo Grande, an almost 4,400-hectare property near Cartagena, to 50 people in 1870.45 Not all such joint acquisitions were made by large groups. In conjunction with Gabriel Chica, Damien Pérez bought almost 900 hectares from his sister-in-law and nephews in

43 The precise manner in which Romero and others acquired this property is not clear. By 1868, he shared ownership with Josefa Pérez, Isidro Eraso, María de la A. Vergara de Jarava, eight members of the Vivero family, and three members of the Verdugo family (AOFB, Notaria de Sincelejo, vol. 1865-66, Dec. 21 1866, no. 10; Gaceta de Bolivar, July 19, 1868, no. 567, p. 1). In the late-eighteenth century, de Lanz sold this property to Juan Pedro de Arraiz, a Spanish merchant. His heirs later sold it to another Spanish merchant, Félix de Palas, who fled to Jamaica during the wars of Independence. He he died there, leaving his estate in Colombia to his wife and daughter who had stayed behind in Cartagena (Ripoll, 2006, pp. 24-26).
44 AOFB, San Benito Abad 1773, Títulos de Trementino.
45 Gaceta de Bolivar, June 4, 1871, no. 749, pp. 88-90: indice…Cartagena, April 5, 1870, no.40.
1865. Furthermore, sometimes these jointly-owned properties could be quite small: in 1868, Manuel Flóres, Dámaso Muñoz, Nicolás Villanueva, Hipólita Hoyos, Concepción Peña, Felicia Pacheco, and Jesús Peña shared a little over 50 hectares in Ciénaga de Oro.

The history of José Miguel Espitia’s land dealings in the Sinú Valley during the second half of the nineteenth century further exemplify the prevalence of such cooperative purchases and their fragmentary effects. After inheriting some property from his father in 1843, Espitia slowly expanded his cattle ranching operations over the next 30 years, buying seven different properties with a total of 31 other people, and becoming one of the wealthier residents of Lorica. Then, in 1878, he started to sell off some of his properties, making five transactions to over 15 people before he died in 1900 (see Table 2.1). Thus, over Espitia’s lifetime, ownership in the properties he shared jumped from 10 people to at least 50.

Such joint purchases served a number of purposes. First, they allowed people to buy land that were too large for them to buy alone. In this way, it made it easier for more people – generally people of at least modest means – to acquire property rights in land. Second, they enabled Espitia to progressively acquire additional land as his operations grew. And third, they also allowed Espitia to gain access to land in different areas. This kind of geographic diversification was important in a region where pasture resources were highly seasonal and served as a hedge against climatic

---

46 AOFB, San Bernardo del Viento, Testimonio de la escritura de compromiso celebrado entre los SS Gabriel Chica y Damien Pérez con la Señora Juliana Gusmán de Pérez, sus ocho legítimos hijos.
47 Gaceta de Bolívar, July 26, 1868, no. 568, p. 4.
48 Diario de Bolívar, May 10, 1878, p. 1102.
risks. It could have also allowed him to start dedicating lands of varying qualities for different uses, such as breeding, raising, and fattening.

Table 2.1. The Land Transactions of José Miguel Espitia (1843-1898)\(^{49}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Size or Share</th>
<th>No. of Partners</th>
<th>Property (Location)</th>
<th>Name of Seller/Buyers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1843</td>
<td>Inherits</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Siblings</td>
<td>Guamal &amp; Valle (Lorica)</td>
<td>Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1846</td>
<td>Buys</td>
<td>1,257 ha.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Campano (Lorica)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>Buys</td>
<td>1,257 ha.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>(San Pelayo)</td>
<td>José Antonio Cásas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1853</td>
<td>Buys</td>
<td>1,257 ha.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Zapalería de Bugre</td>
<td>José Casiano Niéves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1857</td>
<td>Owns</td>
<td>47 pesos, 5 reales</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>La Majagua (San Pelayo)</td>
<td>Owns with Pabla Garcés de Petro and others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Buys</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Echacuri &amp; La Poza (Lorica)</td>
<td>Bernabé González</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1869</td>
<td>Buys</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Sabana Nueva &amp; la Majagua</td>
<td>María Eujenia García</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1871</td>
<td>Buys</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Sabana Nueva &amp; la Majagua</td>
<td>Eduardo Galeano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1873</td>
<td>Buys</td>
<td>half the island</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Island of San Pablo</td>
<td>Leandro Martínez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1878</td>
<td>Sells</td>
<td>12 pesos</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Hato &amp; Cacaugual</td>
<td>Benito, Sinforosa, Martina &amp; Jose de la Asuncion Durango, Pablo Arrieta, &amp; Vicente Gutierrez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>Sells</td>
<td>210 ha.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Hato &amp; Cacaugual</td>
<td>Marcelino, José Joaquin, José de Dios &amp; Juan B. López, &amp; Francisco E. Durango</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td>Sells</td>
<td>52 ha.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Echacuri &amp; La Poza</td>
<td>A. Montalvo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896</td>
<td>Sells</td>
<td>210 ha.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Zapalería de Bugre</td>
<td>José Manuel &amp; Eduardo Soto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1898</td>
<td>Sells</td>
<td>20 pesos</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Zapalería de Bugre</td>
<td>José Angel Petro &amp; others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{49}\) ANM, March 12, 1915, no. 69.
Inheritance patterns were an even greater force driving the fragmentation of colonial properties. The laws governing inheritance in Colombia continued the colonial tradition of equal shares.\textsuperscript{50} When a couple married, they each retained separate ownership of the assets they held prior to the marriage. They also separately maintained any inheritance they subsequently received. Even though a wife needed her husband’s permission to buy and sell property, there was no legal discrimination in her right to own it. The assets that a couple accumulated during their marriage, however, were common property. When a spouse died, the survivor received his or her half of these jointly-owned assets – technically not an inheritance – and their children evenly split the remaining half irregardless of gender or age. While the law allowed up to 20 percent of an estate to be awarded discretionally, it prohibited primogeniture and favoritism.\textsuperscript{51} Because large families were common, evenly-divided inheritances could quickly erode a family’s landed patrimony. For example, three caballerías of land, or 1,257 hectares, divided among eight siblings over two generations, by no means an uncommon occurrence, would leave each grandchild with less than 20 hectares.

The division of the estate of José Nicolás de Lora, one of the largest landowners in the Sinú Valley at the end of the end of the colonial period, exemplifies how such inheritance patterns unevenly fragmented land ownership. While the entire estate initially passed on to his son, Francisco José Lora Fernández, by 1913, 43 grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Francisco José Lora owned varying shares of

\textsuperscript{50} Deere and León (2005).
\textsuperscript{51} Such discretional wills do not appear to have been common, at least in the Montería area.
the 89 caballerías of land, or over 37,000 hectares, that his father received from the king of Spain around Montería. The share that each heir received depended on the number of siblings in each generation of their line of descent. Eusebio J. Pineda, the only son of Lorenza Rosa del Toro Lora – in turn only one of two children of Ana María Lora Olascoaga, daughter of Francisco José Lora – inherited a total of 2,580 hectares in the eight properties of the original estate. By contrast, his cousin, General Manuel Prisciliano Cabrales Lora, who had nine siblings, and whose father was one of seven, only received only 71 hectares. Furthermore, the General’s share in five of the eight properties of the inheritance ranged from eight-tenths of a hectare to three hectares. If it were not for the 30 percent of the estate that he charged to cover his expenses and labor to formally distribute the shares of the inheritance, Prisciliano Cabrales would have had a much harder time becoming a leading cattle rancher and entrepreneur in the region.\footnote{ANM, Dec. 20, 1913, no. 459. Cabrales was, for example, the largest shareholder in the Compañía de Petroleo y Carbón de Sinú y Sabanas (ANM, May 19, 1915, no. 133).}

More often than not, the heirs of an estate received a percentage share of the larger, undivided property rather than specific amounts of land. Sometimes these divisions were based on monetary units (see Table 2.1). Subdivided ownership rights were also frequently based on a fraction share of the entire property. For example, Pedro J. Badel bought one-sixth of the lands of Zispataca in 1849 from Antonio Rodríguez de la Torre. His son, José Paulino Badel, inherited these rights, and left them, in turn, to his eight children, each of whom received the 1/48 share of the original property. One of his children, Isabel, then left her five children each with
Likewise, Francisco Flórez Olmos, who owned half of the rights to Zispataca, left his wife, Sandiego Vergara de Olmos, one-third of his share, or 1/6 of the entire property, and his five children split the remaining two-thirds, each receiving 1/15 share. Over the second half of the nineteenth century, his daughter, Encarnación, bought up various shares in the property. By 1892, she owned the rights to $1/6 + 2/15 + 1/16 + 11/180 + 1/240 + 1/360$ of the original property, showing the different rates with which inheritances fractured ownership in the estate.\footnote{AOFB, Caimito, Archivo familiar de Luis Arturo García, Nov. 25, 1976.}

The notarized records of land sales also give evidence of this growing fragmentation. In the district of Sincelejo, for example, the number of such records tripled between 1874 and 1893. In Lorica, they jumped over five-fold, from around 50 to over 250, between the 1880s and 1910.\footnote{Sincelejo: Diario de Bolívar, Feb. 11, 1875, no. 1056; Registro de Bolívar, Jan. 10, 1895, no. 1215. The data for Lorica in the 1880s in from Diario de Bolívar, March 10, 1882, no. 2776; Feb. 15, 1884, no. 3312; Feb. 16, 1884, no. 3313; Registro de Bolívar, June 30, 1887, no. 435. The 1910 data is just for the region of Montería, which had already separated from Lorica: ANM, 1910. By 1925, the notary records from Montería had risen to around 500 per year.}

Some of the growth in land sales was likely due to increased economic activity and rising land values. But a good deal also probably resulted from growing numbers of land owners selling increasingly smaller properties. In various years of the 1870s and 1880s, about one-third of the properties that exchanged hands in Lorica, and around half in Chinú and Ciénaga de Oro, sold for under $50 pesos.\footnote{Gaceta de Bolívar: Jan. 15, 1871, no. 729; March 12, 1872, no. 737; May 26, 1872, no. 813; Aug. 7, 1872, no. 819. Diario de Bolívar, Jan. 23, 1875, no. 1041; Feb. 6, 1876, no. 1052; March 2, 1878, no. 1370; May 15, 1878, no. 1888; June 13, 1878, no. 1905; June 19, 1878, no. 1908; March 7, 1882, no. 2773; March 10, 1882, no. 2776. : Jan. 26, 1884, no. 3296; Feb 16, 1884, no. 3313. Registro de Bolívar, June 30, 1887, no. 435.}

At the frequently cited value of $4 pesos per \textit{fanegada} (8 to 8.4 hectares) of land during these years, such sales represented properties no larger than
around 100 hectares. For the sake of comparison, in the early 1870s, $50 bought the salted meat of two small steer, 60 bushels of corn, or two months of labor in the tobacco zone of El Carmen.\textsuperscript{56} By the first quarter of the twentieth century, 69 percent of the properties sold in the district of Montería in 1908, and 52 percent in 1925, were no larger than 50 hectares.\textsuperscript{57}

This fragmentation, by inheritance or jointly-purchased land, had a number of important effects. For one, it helped to erode the extreme land tenure inequality of the mid-nineteenth century. In 1868, properties of at least eight *caballerías* (about 3,350 hectares) – 11 percent of the total listed in the cadastral survey – controlled 51 percent of privately-held land. By 1960, properties with at least 2,500 hectares – 0.1 percent of the total – covered nine percent of rural land.\textsuperscript{58} The increasing fragmentation also stimulated land markets. An inheritance of multiple small properties, such as the three hectares or less Prisciliano Cabrales received in five different properties, created an incentive to sell. Furthermore, not everyone who received an inheritance in land wanted to keep it. Some, presumably, were not interested or capable of earning a living from the land. Others sold to raise capital for some other business or when they left the area. Third, the development of property markets eased the reconfiguration of

\textsuperscript{56} Land prices are from notary records published in the Gaceta de Bolívar, Diario de Bolívar, and the Registro de Bolívar. Price equivalents from AOFB, Magangué, Precios corrientes, Mompós, July 7, 1873. Corn calculated at 800 ears to the *fanega* (AOFB, Agricultura, pp. 19-20, Maíz); and 90,000 kernels per bushel, with an average of 800 kernels per ear, and 112.5 ears per bushel. During the tobacco boom in the El Carmen area, market wages were 80 centavos per day in 1862, substantially more than the state-mandated wages of 30 centavos per day for mandatory but paid labor (*servicio subsidiado*) on public works projects (Gaceta de Bolívar, Nov. 23, 1862, no. 239). In the Sabanas region in the early 1870s, cattle sold for $25-30 pesos (Oficina de Estadística Nacional, 1875, p. 157).

\textsuperscript{57} This is for properties where the size was listed. Because not all the properties sold included the size in the notary records, the data is skewed toward smaller properties.

landownership, making it easier for ranchers to buy and sell land to better meet the needs of their cattle operations. Additionally, the fragmentation of properties enabled smaller landowners, or even people without private property rights, to acquire land and expand their holdings. This contributed to a fair amount of social mobility among the landowning class and increased the overall number of landowners.\textsuperscript{59} Lastly, the increase in the number of landowners encouraged the expansion of cattle ranching as new owners built up herds and cleared additional land to increase pasturage.\textsuperscript{60}

\textit{The Reconsolidation of Colonial-Era Properties}

Parallel to the subdivision of estates in Old Bolívar were efforts to counteract it. The frequent intermarriage among landed elites, even within the same family, slowed the disintegration of family patrimonies.\textsuperscript{61} It was also not uncommon for one sibling to buy the inheritance rights of the others.\textsuperscript{62} Although the purpose of such purchases was not necessarily to prevent the subdivision of the estate, it had a similar effect. Likewise, both unrelated co-owners of a larger property, and non-co-owners, frequently purchased the inheritance rights of various siblings.\textsuperscript{63} For example, in the

\textsuperscript{59} The number of cattle ranchers grew from 2,176 in 1871 to over 16,000 in 1960 (Oficina de Estadística Nacional, 1875, p. 23; DANE, 1964, p. 14).
\textsuperscript{60} Can see this in notary records of land sales: increasing number of pastures and declining references to forested land.
\textsuperscript{62} Diario de Bolívar, May 15, 1878, no. 1888: Indice…Ciénaga de Oro, nos. 1, 14, 16; Diario de Bolívar, June 13, 1878, no. 1905: Indice…Lorica, no. 20.
\textsuperscript{63} Diario de Bolívar, March 7, 1882, no. 2773: Indice…Ciénaga de Oro, no. 8; Diario de Bolívar, March 23, 1882, no. 2787: Indice…Sincelejo, no. 39; Registro de Bolívar, Feb. 28, 1887, no. 398: Indice…Ciénaga de Oro, no. 9; Registro de Bolívar, June 30, 1887, no. 435, no. 4.
1890s, General José María Vivero, who married Juana Olmos Vergara, a co-owner of San Juan Bautista de Zispataca, bought up numerous rights in this old noble property from his mother-in-law, Sandiego Vergara, his sister-in-law, Encarnación Olmos Vergara, as well various rights from the Badel family: 1/240 shares each from Amalia and Manuel Antonio Pérez Badel, the 1/48 share that Eusebio Badel left his children, and the 1/15 share that Eusebio Badel had bought from Vicente Olmos Vergara, the brother of Juana and Encarnación. By the time he died, José María Vivero had accumulated about 43 percent of the original estate. Purchases like these helped to slow the subdivision of the large colonial estates.

Successful ranchers and merchants also slowly built large estates, partly reversing the process of fragmentation. For example, Arturo García Hernández founded Hacienda Santo Domingo, one of the classic cattle estates in Old Bolívar, by further reconsolidating the property of San Juan Bautista de Zispataca. García, the son of a middling merchant from Sampués, started out selling soap in San Benito Abad. There he befriended Joaquín Tovío, heir of a large portion of Zispataca, and began to raise cattle. At the beginning of the twentieth century, García began to buy up shares in this old noble estate. Over the next 40 years, he made 37 purchases of various sizes to reconsolidate almost two-thirds of the original property. The largest portion he acquired in the auction of General José María Vivero’s estate in 1919. Directly from the Tovío family, which owned a third of the property in the nineteenth century, García purchased around ten percent of the original area. The rest he accumulated

---

64 AOFB, Caimito, Archivo familiar de Luis Arturo García, Nov. 25, 1976.
from a variety of different people who had purchased shares in the property over the years.  

Similarly, in the 1910s, investors from the United States purchased most of the shares in Tierras de Loba, an enormous colonial property southwest of Mompos. This estate originated in a land grant of 200 *caballerías*, or almost 84,000 hectares, in 1637 to Diego Ortiz Nieto, the mayor of Mompos who successfully organized various expeditions against nearby maroon communities. By the mid-eighteenth century, José Fernando de Mier y Guerra, whose descendents formed the Marquisate de Torre Hoyos, owned the property. The heirs of the second Marquesa, María Josefa Isabel de Hoyos, who died in 1848, were able to keep most of the property in the family for another two generations. This made it easier for first Joel Ricks and W. L. Snow, representatives of the Chicago-based Magdalena Livestock and Lumber Company, and later the Mormon industrialist Jesse Knight and Joseph J. Cannon, who formed the American Colombian Corporation in 1917, to acquire over 90 percent of the rights to the estate. In both of the above cases, the large size of the original land grant and limited fragmentation facilitated the reconsolidation of large colonial properties. Where fragmentation had made considerable progress, the task of forming large, contiguous properties was harder and slower. García only acquired a small portion of the land he used to form Hacienda Santo Domingo from the numerous smaller purchases he made.

---

A considerable amount of such consolidation also occurred on a smaller scale. In addition to the progressive acquisitions by José Miguel Espitia, noted above, the estate left by Elias Sánchez in 1908 demonstrates the gradual expansion of ranching properties. By the time he died, Sánchez had accumulated about 2,360 hectares of land in two mancomunidades through 21 different purchases made between 1874 and 1906. While he acquired half of his estate in four early purchases, the rest he obtained over the next 30 years in small lots of about 30 to 100 hectares.\footnote{ANM, Testamento de Elias Sánchez, between Nov. 22-29, 1913, and nos. 414-427.} In similar fashion, between 1915 and 1920, José Saul del Toro amassed 524 hectares by purchasing the land or use rights from six different people, before selling the combined property to Justino Espeleta. Del Toro bought one farm from someone who had developed an area of public lands 13 years earlier. He obtained another one from the heir of the person who had bought it, in 1899, from Dolores Berrocal de Martínez, member of a prominent landowning family in the Montería area.\footnote{ANM, Feb. 23, 1920, no. 123.}

While this process of land consolidation did not depend on contiguous expansion, landowners frequently bought neighboring properties when the opportunity arose. From a sample of land sales taken roughly every five to ten years from notary records in the district of Montería between 1908 and 1950, about one-third of the transactions involved a neighbor buying an adjacent property.\footnote{From a sample of 353 sales where the ownership of adjacent property could be determined. The percentage where neighboring landowners were the purchasers ranged from 17 percent in 1940 to 41 percent in 1930. In four out of seven years, the percentage ranged between 33 and 37 percent. The years sampled were 1908-1909 (n = 74); 1913 & 1915 (48); 1920 (40); 1925 (94); 1930 (46); 1940 (24); 1950 (27).} The notary records sometimes indicate that these buyers were medium or large landowners extending the
boundaries of their estates by purchasing small neighboring farms. In 1915, for instance, María Cervanda Galarcio and her two sons sold 26 hectares of forested land in Retiro de los Indios, in the district of Cereté, to Jerónimo Guerra, who had bought up the pastures on three sides of their property. That same year, the Buelvas family bought the land in between two haciendas they owned, Magdalena and Patio Bonito, from Francisco Marrugo, who had acquired the property in three purchases over the previous three years.

Ranchers and others who expanded their landholdings through such purchases, both large and small, helped to slow down, and in some cases reverse, the fragmentation of these colonial properties. Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine whether there were periods in which either fragmentation or consolidation predominated. Scattered notary records suggest that, during the second half of the nineteenth century, the owners of many of the large colonial estates sold off significant portions of their landholdings to rising medium and even small ranchers. By contrast, many of the well-known cattle haciendas of the Sinú Valley started to emerge during the first decades of the twentieth century. Yet some of the most important landed families of Old Bolívar consolidated their economic and political power by expanding their territorial control over the second half of the nineteenth century. And quite a few of these landed fortunes dissipated in the hands of second-...

71 ANM, April 9, 1915, no. 92. The spelling of her name is unclear.  
72 ANM, May 26, 1915, no. 143.  
73 For the de Lora family, see ANM: Feb 18, 1908, no. 31; March 9, 1908, no. 53; April 29, 1909, no. 84; Sept. 13, 1908, no. 175; July 10, 1909, no. 159. For the Pérez and Hernández Pérez families, see Diario de Bolívar, Jan. 22, 11875, no. 1040: Indice…Corozal, nos. 3, 16, 19, 20, 34; Diario de Bolívar, March 11, 1876, no. 1378: Indice…Corozal, p. 178. For the Tovío family, see Fals Borda (2002b, pp. 143b-144b).  
and third-generation heirs over the first half of the twentieth century. The ups and downs of the cattle economy likely played some role in the relative balance between fragmentation and consolidation. The fortunes made during boom years, such as the exports to Cuba at the turn of the twentieth century, enabled a number of ranchers, such as Julián Patrón, to greatly expand their landholdings. And economic crises periodically forced a number of important ranchers in Old Bolívar, such as Priciliano Cabrales, Manuel del Cristo Torres, and Pedro Herazo to sell the estates they had developed. Periods of economic expansion, especially as the better public lands became increasingly scarce, also raised land values, which encouraged greater fragmentation; and crises often allowed more solvent ranchers to take advantage of others’ misfortunes rather than necessarily lead to fragmentation. In other words, it is hard to identify a clear chronology to the movement of property in Old Bolívar. Over the long run, however, landholding became increasingly fragmented. Despite this change, though, the land tenure structure in 1960 remained highly unequal because of the size of the original grants was often quite large, their monopolization by relatively few people, and through the reconsolidation of large properties over the intervening century.

75 Examples of rising families: the García, Támara, Martínez, Martelo; and subsequent decline: Patrón, Tovío, Romero, Flórez, Herazo, Torres, Ramos (Fals Borda, 2002b, pp. 146B-162B; 2002c, pp. 1001-101; Moré Sierra, 2003; Ripoll, 1999; Viloria, 2001).
76 Moré Sierra (2003); Ripoll (1999).
77 Sociedad Mendoza y Grandet y Cía: ANM, March 13, 1925, no. 94; AOFB, Caimito, Adán Martínez Cuadrado, March 12, 1976.
78 For subdivision, see Montes and Sierra (1959). Martelo’s buy out of bankrupt Herazo: AOFB, Caimito, Adán Martínez Cuadrado, March 12, 1976.
Before discussing other forms of land tenure, it is worth saying a few words about the mancomunidades and, in particular, why they persisted for so long. One reason why co-owners did not often formally subdivide their properties was the cost and trouble of doing so. The land had to be surveyed and mapped, boundary markers (mojones) established, witnesses produced to corroborate ownership and boundary claims, and the proceedings authenticated by a judge. The cost of these and the other bureaucratic procedures was an important obstacle to peasants wishing to apply for title to public land. The internal subdivision of the mancomunidades, especially ones with many co-owners, would have significantly increased these costs. While the potential benefits of formal subdivision might have made justified the expense for large landowners, for co-owners with a small stake in the property, it may have been too great.

For many co-owners, even large ones, communal use and management may have also worked reasonably well. Regulated access appears to have been common, especially where co-owners shared natural or seasonal savannas.\(^7^9\) The 14 co-owners of the “La Negra” in Tetón, for instance, agreed that each share in the property gave its owner the right to pasture up to 300 head of cattle.\(^8^0\) Furthermore, large communally-owned properties had the potential advantage of offering a variety of resources, such as different grazing grounds and sources of water, that divided

\(^7^9\) The law backed stocking limits in mancomunidades, though it does not specify how such limits were established. Gaceta de Bolívar, Nov. 28, 1867, no. 527, Código de policía, artículo 164.

\(^8^0\) Diario de Bolívar, March 11, 1876, no. 1378, pp. 179-180.
properties might not have. There was the additional problem of how to subdivide the property. While shares in mancomunidades had generally recognized values, formally dividing a property could entail assigning a variety of values to different parcels based on variations in land quality. Some parcels might also end up without access to water or good rangeland, making them virtually worthless. The prospect of such a potentially complex and contentious process might have discouraged co-owners from subdividing.

As mentioned above, the communal ownership of land did not foreclose the possibility of obtaining quasi-private rights within the property. Many co-owners developed such privatized rights by making improvements (mejoras) to the land, such as forest clearings (fallow fields), permanent crops (tree crops, sugarcane, planted pasture), and infrastructure (fencing, buildings, etc.). These improvements, which conferred possession rights (derechos de posesión), did not become the property of the community as a whole but were retained by the person who made them. And they could be sold, inherited, mortgaged, or rented. While these possessions were separate from property rights to the underlying land, they were usually sold along with a share of the land in the mancomunidad where they were located. For example, in 1908, Manuel S. Grandet sold his land rights in the property Currayado to Francisco Garcés along with all the improvements he had made: an area planted in pará grass, rubber, coconut and cacao trees, a grove of plantains, a house, and a living fence.

---

81 AOFB, Amariz Mompox, Pepe Amaris Maya to Mariano Amaris Maya, Dec. 9, 1913.
82 ANM, 1908, no. 9: Fco de Ollas sold Fco Ramos a “posesión” composed of fallow fields (rastrojo) in San Carlos.
83 ANM, Feb. 23, 1908, no. 39.
Sometimes, however, the owner of a posesión sold his or her rights without the corresponding land rights. In 1908, José María Caneo sold his cacao and fruit trees in Currayado to Francisco Garcés, who owned the land that Caneo had developed. The development of these privatized rights within the mancomunidades probably lowered the pressure to formally subdivide them by enabling co-owners to invest in land improvements and by removing obstacles that hindered the operation of land and credit markets.

The development of these possession rights often led to the effective division of many communally-owned private properties. When Nicanor Gonzáles sold 100 hectares of land rights in the mancomunidad Negrete y Hamaca to José María Romero in 1908, he “declared that since the co-owners in this communal property have, to date, neither been adjudicated the part that belongs to them nor the area of their posesión…the area [of the property] that the buyer should take possession of can neither be given nor determined.” In other words, Romero bought land rights only and it was up to him to find some unclaimed portion of the communal property to work. As co-owners developed increasing areas of land within these properties, less ‘communal’ land remained. This can be seen, for instance, by the fact that, in notary records, the geographic location of these possessions were increasingly noted by neighboring possessions rather than natural boundaries. There was less need to

---

84 AMN, Jan. 25, 1908, no. 18.
85 AMN, Sept. 15, 1908, no. 183.
86 There are also records of posesión sales in which undeveloped land was also sold. Such claims may have resulted from general land claims, on a first-come, first-serve basis, to a rough estimate of the area that a particular share in the mancomunidad entitled its owner to. Alternatively, there may have been tacit understanding that settlers within the communal property should try and claim lands in such a way that they all had room to grow without
formally subdivide the communal property when a good deal of the land within it was already effectively private.

The effective privatization of the mancomunidades was also a source of conflict. Disputes arose when co-owners claimed more than their ‘fair’ share or encroached into areas claimed by other co-owners. For example, it took the heirs of José Miguel Espitia, mentioned above, 14 years to finalize the inheritance proceedings of his estate as they unsuccessfully tried to reassert their claims to land that Espitia had accumulated but other co-owners had occupied.87 Conflicts also developed when some co-owners tried to privatize particular areas or resources, like water and summer grazing lands, on which many of them relied. Some communities took measures to prevent such disputes. In the statutes of their partnership, the co-owners of “La Negra,” mentioned above, prohibited the planting of permanent crops in order to prevent this kind of effective privatization.88 But in many mancomunidades, especially by the mid-twentieth century when there often seems to have been an imbalance of power between numerous small owners and a few large ranchers, the latter extended their claims over communal lands, particularly by fencing in areas of the ciénagas to monopolize these key summer grazing lands.89

Furthermore, private property rights within the mancomunidades could sometimes be uncertain. While presumably the law would back the private ownership encroaching on each other. Co-owners may have also claimed the areas that they intended to develop in the future as their own. As we will see below, the legislation regarding the settlement of public lands was based on the idea of granting rights for a larger area than actually developed to provide room for future growth.

87 ANM, March 12, 1915, no. 69.
88 Diario de Bolívar, March 11, 1876, no. 1378, pp. 179-180.
89 Reyes (1978), pp. 74-75.
rights of shares in a mancomunidad, it is not clear that its jurisdiction always extended, at least effectively, to the distribution of claims within communal properties. Theoretically, the law backed improvement-property rights even where the title was not held, such as by settlers on public lands and by tenants on private property. Even though it was not always effectively enforced, the law did hinder nineteenth-century landed elites in the Cauca Valley from reclaiming land planted in cacao trees by tenant farms because the value of these improvements were too great.\(^9^0\) Similarly, it prompted the owners of large coffee estates in western Cundinamarca during the 1920s and 1930s to try and prevent tenant farmers from planting coffee trees on their plots lest they lose effective control over this land because evicting them was financially unviable.\(^9^1\) What was often at stake in the mancomunidades, however, was not the enforcement of such improvement-property rights but preventing the effective privatization of communal resources and unjustifiably large land grabs. Conflicts such as these were probably a significant motivation to formerly divide a property. But given that the push would likely have had to come from the larger ranchers, it is possible that many of them were reluctant to parcel the estate because of the advantages that they obtained within the mancomunidad by virtue of their preeminent position. A number of these properties ultimately appear to have been forcibly enclosed by larger ranchers during the 1940s and 1950s.\(^9^2\)

In sum, much of the land that served as the foundation for the formation and spread of cattle estates in Old Bolívar between 1850 and 1950 emerged out of the

---

\(^9^0\) Taussig (1977).  
\(^9^2\) Reyes (1978) p. 72-75.
process of fragmentation and reconsolidation of colonial-era land grants. The
development of land markets that recognized the internal divisions within large
properties, and the development of property rights in land improvements, facilitated
both processes. As increasing numbers of co-owners intensified the exploitation of
these properties, ‘internal’ forests gave way to expanding pastures and cattle herds.
Despite the fragmentation of their ownership, however, these properties contributed
importantly to the unequal land tenure structure of the mid-twentieth century.

**CORPORATE PROPERTIES**

The other important legacy from the colonial period, in terms of landed
property, was the continued existence Indian resguardos and village ejidos.93 Pressure
on these forms of corporate land tenure came from two sources. On the one hand,
Liberal discourse criticized communal properties for limiting the operation of free
markets in land and discouraging the entrepreneurial spirit. On the other hand,
ranchers coveted greater access to the considerable areas of land under this form of
tenure in order to expand their landholdings and pastures. The pressure on communal
lands did not begin in the mid-nineteenth century, but most resguardos and ejidos were
still largely intact at this time. Over the following half century or so, ranchers

93 In addition, there was a third form of corporate land tenure that I will not address here: the
so-called ‘dead hand’ properties owned by the Church. While many of these properties were
urban, rural estates also figured among the lists of disentailed church properties. A number of
the rising ranching elite were probably able to acquire new lands relatively cheaply through
such auctions. I do not address such lands here for two reasons. First, for lack of information.
But second, while perhaps acquired at a discount, which could have been a stimulus to the
expansion of the ranching economy, many of these estates where already ranching properties
and they did not differ significantly from the other private properties inherited from the
colonial period.
succeeded in appropriating much of this once communally-held land. However, the view that these forms of corporate land tenure quickly disappeared in the wake of the mid-century Liberal reforms underestimates just how drawn-out the process was. Ironically, as the communal ownership of private property expanded during this period, communal land tenure largely disappeared.

**Indian Resguardos**

Over the second half of the nineteenth century, the number of resguardos in Old Bolívar dropped from twenty-six to seven (see Map 2.2). Ranchers were the principal instigators as well as beneficiaries of their dissolution. The process, however, was not the quick result of their division and sale following the rise of radical Liberalism in the mid-nineteenth century, such as that which apparently characterized the demise of resguardos in Cundinamarca. As in the southern part of the country, though with less fortitude, many inhabitants of the indigenous communities of Old Bolívar struggled against mounting odds to retain control of their communal land. Various forces, however, – including racial mixing and the decline of indigenous populations, legal and extra-legal appropriation, and privatization – eroded their territorial hold.

---

94 Solano and Flórez (2007).
95 McGreevy (1971, p. 126), for example, claimed that following the removal of “the last defense of communal ownership [by the act of June 22, 1850]…there came a swift alienation of Indian lands in all areas except the south of the country.” For the South, see Sanders (2004), Rappaport (1990).
Map 2.2. Indian resguardos in Old Bolívar during the nineteenth century

Legend
- Town
- Resguardo
- Ciénaga
- Department border

Resguardos were communal land grants by the Spanish crown to Indian communities (*pueblos de indios*). On the one hand, they were an effort by the crown to better control dispersed Indian communities, whose population had dropped precipitously in the decades following conquest, as well as claim much of their former territory. On the other, the resguardos were also intended to provide these communities with a means of sustenance and a degree of independence from local elites. This independence, which also included the authority to manage their own internal affairs, was partly a way to redress the abuses committed during the initial decades after conquest and an attempt by the crown to constrain the rising power of colonial elites who, from the late sixteenth century, had begun to acquire property rights in land. To protect the Indian communities from losing control over their land, individuals only held use rights while land rights were vested in the entire community. The crown also tried to prohibit non-Indians from settling on and using resguardo land. In practice, however, the physical separation of Indians and non-Indians was not well-enforced and a good deal of residential and racial mixing occurred. Already by the mid-eighteenth century, the growth of the racially-mixed (*mestizo*) and white population renting land inside many resguardos put pressure on colonial authorities to dissolve them and redistribute the land.

While this kind of pressure on resguardos existed in Old Bolívar during the colonial period, most Indian communities survived and continued to control sizeable areas of land through the mid-nineteenth century. It is hard to estimate the total area

---

96 Herrera (2002).
occupied by the resguardos. Theoretically, these communal lands extended one league around the church at the center of the Indian village. But even in the mid-nineteenth century there was confusion whether this meant a circular area with a diameter of one or two leagues. 99 Others interpreted this area as a square rather than a circle. The problem of calculating the size of resguardos is further complicated by the relative, rather than absolute, units of measure used during the colonial period, and their changing values over the nineteenth century. A league measured the distance that a man could walk in one hour. It varied, therefore, by the nature of the terrain. In the Caribbean lowlands of Colombia, a league appears to have been equivalent of almost 4.2 kilometers. 100 Therefore, while the ‘ideal’ size of a resguardo was about 5,500 hectares, this ideal could have varied between a little under 1,400 hectares (a circle with a radius of 2.1 kilometers) to a little over 7,000 hectares (a square measuring 8.4 kilometers per side). 101 Further complicating any effort at estimating the total land base of Indian communities was the apparently frequent variation between this supposed ideal and the area of actual resguardos. Part of the discrepancy was rooted in resguardo boundaries that were based on natural landmarks rather than simply abstract measures. Additionally, a number of resguardos appear to have been granted

99 Gaceta de Bolívar, March 27, 1864, no. 304: Consulta del gobernador de la provincia de Nieto.
100 Solano and Flórez (2007) state that a league was the equivalent of 4.2 kilometers during the colonial period. See also Archivo Notarial de Ayapel, re-issue of the title to lands purchased by Juan Pedro de Arrea and the communal lands of Ayapel in 1780, folio 05757467. In this document, a league is stated to measure 5,000 varas castellanas, or 4.179.5 kilometers (see footnote 14, chapter 2). By the end of the nineteenth century, the government had standardized it as 5 kilometers (AHC, Gobernación, Asamblea, 1894-1924, no. 9: Ordenanza adicional y reformatoria de los leyes…). For regional and historical variations of weights and measures, see Páez Courvel (1940).
101 The resguardo in Cereté, for instance, measured 18 caballerías or a little more than 7,500 hectares (
significantly more land than the ideal legua around their church. Fals Borda, for example, estimates that the resguardo of Jegua covered some 60,000 hectares; he suggests that the resguardo of Guazo was also quite extensive. In the 1970s, government officials calculated that the original area of the resguardo of San Andrés, the combination of three Indian communities, was 56,000 hectares. Since there appears to have been 26 resguardos in the mid-nineteenth century, together they probably occupied anywhere from 180,000 to 300,000 hectares.

Republican officials initially wanted to do away with the resguardos as one of the colonial institutions that held back the development of the country. Communal lands discouraged individual enterprise while private property, José Ignacio de Márquez and many others argued, “is the greatest inducement to rural industry.” Nonetheless, although officials thought that parceling resguardo land would benefit members of the Indian communities in the long run, they recognized that the process needed to proceed slowly to prevent the Indians from quickly losing their property due to ignorance or the cunning of their Hispanic neighbors. Therefore, while authorities pushed to disband the resguardos over the first half of the nineteenth century, they also

102 Fals Borda (2002b), pp. 52B-54B.
103 AOFB, San Andres Resguardo Indígena, Trazado en el terreno del resguardo de San Andrés. The resguardo of San Andrés was the fusion of three pueblo de indios: San Andrés, Chimú, and Pinchirroy (Moreno de Angel, 1993, p. 139).
104 For a list, see Solano and Flórez (2007, p. 96). San Sebastian de Urubá is missing from their list. The rough estimates are as follows: 22*1,400 ha. (or 22*7,000) + 150,000 ha. for San Andrés, Jegua, Cereeté, and Guazo. Even more significant than the total area occupied by resguardos, however, was their location. As we will see, they existed mostly in the core area of Old Bolívar that was settled during the colonial period where, it appears, the crown had distributed much of the land to either individuals, Indian communities or villages. Since there were no vast areas of public lands into which ranchers could expand in this part of the department, much of the pressure fell on the resguardos and ejidos.
105 José Ignacio de Márquez (1831) quoted in Curry (1981), Ch. 4.
established transitionary periods, between 10 and 20 years, in which the new landowners could not sell their parcels.\textsuperscript{106}

The desire of local elites to divide Indian communal land varied regionally. While elites from the Eastern cordillera and Antioquia dissolved various resguardos during the 1830s and 1840s, officials from Popayán as well as Cartagena were reluctant to disband them. After José Hilario López turned resguardo policy over to provincial legislatures in 1850, and removed the time restrictions on selling divided property, Cundinamarca’s Assembly ordered the immediate division of those that remained. While historian Glen Curry argues that the privatization of the resguardos did not immediately lead to their alienation by local elites, many of the disbanded Indian communities do appear to have lost their land, whether initially to other Indians or eventually to their Hispanic neighbors.\textsuperscript{107} Contemporary observers frequently noted how the new landowners converted former farmland into pasture.\textsuperscript{108} Historians have generally noted that the one exception to this mid-century push to divide the remaining resguardos occurred in the southern part of the country where Indian resistance was stronger and local elites were more divided politically.\textsuperscript{109}

However, officials in Old Bolivar did not push for the quick dissolution of the region’s Indian communities either.\textsuperscript{110} In 1861, M. Verbel, governor of the province of

\textsuperscript{106} Safford and Palacios (2002), pp. 184-186; Safford (1991); Curry (1981), Ch. 4; Solano and Flórez (2007).
\textsuperscript{107} Curry (1981); Bushnell (1993), p. 106.
\textsuperscript{110} For evidence of the persistence of resguardos in Old Bolivar, see Solano and Flórez (2007); Fals Borda (2002b); Diario de Bolivar, July 22, 1884, no. 3392, pp. 453-454.
Sincelejo, complained that the State had largely ignored the Indian question, leading to clashes of authority between the leaders of Indian communities and the municipal councils of the districts where they were located.\textsuperscript{111} Two years later, the president of the Old Bolívar, Juan José Nieto, promulgated a law designed to protect the resguardos from usurpation. Something of an anomaly during this period of fervent Liberalism, Nieto considered that the state should be an active arbiter for social justice. “The primordial objective of the Government,” he said, “is to protect the weak from the strong…thus obtaining a balance between all members of a society. To abandon an unfortunate group, allowing a few to appropriate the only piece of land that the conquerors…of these people left them with would be an injustice that cannot be justified by the Constitution.”\textsuperscript{112} Nieto ordered provincial governors to make copies of resguardo land titles, reconstructing them from oral testimony where necessary. He also instructed them to verify whether any resguardo land had been usurped: the law nullified any contract that had deprived the communities of control over their land.

While the measure did not prohibit non-Indians from settling on the resguardos, it did prevent them from gaining free access to its land by becoming residents.\textsuperscript{113} Instead,

\footnotesize
Informé…Desdelejo; Registro de Bolívar, Sept. 10, 1894, no. 1180, p. 292: Memorial y Resolución; AOFB, Magangué, Se acabaron los indios de Guazo (1899). The resguardos for which I have not found information are those in the province of Cartagena (Timiriguaco or Villanueva, Turbaco, and Turbana), El Carmen (Tetón and Zambrano), Magangué (Tacaloa, Talaigua, Menchinquejo, and Chillon) and Morroa and Sincé in the province of Sincelejo. \textsuperscript{111} Gaceta de Bolívar, Nov. 17, 1861, no. 186, p. 3: Informe…Desdelejo. \textsuperscript{112} Gaceta de Bolívar, April 3, 1864, no. 305, p. 3: Informe que el Presidente Constitucional del Estado.
\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{113} Republican laws had long since rejected the colonial efforts to maintain Indian communities separate from the wider Hispanic society. See the 1811 law from the Junto de Gobierno de Cartagena, which stimulated mestizaje by enticing non-Indians to marry and settle in Indian communities, in which case they would not be charged rent for the use of resguardo lands, while non-Indians who settled in these communities but did not marry an Indian would be charged rent (Solano and Flórez, 2007).
the law established a fee schedule for the rental of any land beyond the community’s immediate needs.  

Many non-Indians viewed this law with “disgust” and “repugnance.” Nieto himself recognized that there was “widespread upheaval against the resguardos.” Provincial governors reported that there were two arguments against the resguardos in circulation. One centered on the supposed decline of Indian populations, in part because of racial mixing: having “lost their ability to effectively utilize…the resguardos,” the land should be divided up among all the residents of the area. The more common criticism rested on Liberal discourse: “that the Indians, having the same rights as all other Colombians, should lose the special rights granted to them by the King of Spain.” The governor of Lorica province counteracted that these land rights were no more a special privilege than the far more numerous private properties that also originated in grants from the crown. But he and other governors also hinted at their disapproval of the law. They stalled its application, worried about conflicts with non-Indians who had obtained property rights inside the resguardos, and suggested that non-Indian residents, at the very least, should be exempt from paying rent to use the land. One governor argued, likely in Machiavellian fashion, that the municipal

114 Gaceta de Bolivar, Aug. 9, 1863, no. 276, pp. 2-4: Decreto de 10 de octubre de 1863.
115 Gaceta de Bolivar, May 29, 1864, no. 313: Informe…Lorica…; and Informe…Barranquilla.
116 Gaceta de Bolivar, April 3, 1864, no. 305, p. 3: Informe que el Presidente Constituicional del Estado.
117 Gaceta de Bolivar, May 29, 1864, no. 313: Informe…Barranquilla.
118 Gaceta de Bolivar, May 29, 1864, no. 313: Informe…Lorica…; and Informe…Barranquilla. Gaceta de Bolivar, March 27, 1864, no. 304: Consulta del gobernador de la provincia de Nieto.
councils should assume control of the resguardos since they were the most capable of protecting them from usurpation.\textsuperscript{119}

In 1864, disgruntled Liberals rebelled against the Nieto government, forcing the ageing \textit{caudillo} out of office. Some historians suggest that the shift in political power reflected the rising strength of ranchers and merchants connected to the boom in tobacco exports.\textsuperscript{120} What role Nieto’s protection of the resguardos played in the uprising is still not entirely clear, however. In the following years, the government’s interest in protecting the resguardos did weaken. In 1868, the state legislature gave the district of Soledad control over the resguardo of Malambo despite the long-standing land disputes between them.\textsuperscript{121} Francisco de J. Palacio, governor of the province of Barranquilla from 1876 to 1878 and member of an important ranching family near Tubará, successfully pushed to privatize this resguardo as cattle exports to Cuba increased the demand for pastureland.\textsuperscript{122} Faced with a growing number of disputes between Indian communities and their Hispanic neighbors, the executive branch absolved itself of authority and sent the cases to the courts rather than intervene directly.\textsuperscript{123} By 1889, the government had rescinded all former restrictions on the sale

\textsuperscript{119} Gaceta de Bolívar, March 27, 1864, no. 304: Consulta del gobernador de la provincia de Nieto; Gaceta de Bolívar, May 29, 1864, no. 313: Informe…Lorica…; and Informe…Barranquilla.
\textsuperscript{120} Fals Borda (2002a); Solano & Flórez (2007).
\textsuperscript{121} Solano and Flórez (2007), pp. 112-113. In 1864, however, the governor of the province of Barranquilla noted that until 1863 the district of Malambo had been in the lands of Domingo Olivares (Gaceta de Bolívar, May 29, 1864, no. 313: Informe…Barranquilla).
\textsuperscript{122} Solano & Flórez (2007), pp. 105-106. In 1886, the government auctioned off some of the land of this former resguardo (Solano & Flórez, 2007, p. 106, note 31).
\textsuperscript{123} Diario de Bolívar, July 15, 1875, no. 1182, p. 631-632: Memorial de los indígenas de Guazo; Diario de Bolívar, July 22, 1875, no. 1188, p. 656: Reclamación sobre un denuncio de tierras baldías; Solano and Flórez (2007), pp. 111-113.
Government officials, however, were not entirely antithetical toward the resguardos; and the state’s role in their division was mixed. In 1877, for example, a legislative commission, organized to examine the merits of a law that proposed to dissolve the remaining resguardos, concluded that the property rights of the Indian communities were legitimate and that any attack on their communal land would be illegal. Some officials, such as the governor of Sincelejo province, also retained an older sense of responsibility toward the Indian communities. In 1884, he stated that it was the government’s duty to help the Indian communities retain their property rights. The courts and public officials also periodically confirmed their land titles. Granted, their defense of the resguardos was neither enthusiastic nor unanimous: by the turn of the twentieth century, most resguardos had legally or effectively ceased to exist. Yet those that remained, and the slow, piecemeal division of the rest, underline the lack of urgency on the part of the government. Unfortunately, the history of how most Indian communities lost their communal land is yet to be written. It appears, though, that while the state did push to dissolve some resguardos, for the most part

126 Diario de Bolívar, July 22, 1884, no. 3392, p. 454: Informe...Sincelejo.
their demise resulted from a series of local actions by private actors: the appropriation of resguardo land; its de facto privatization; and claiming resguardo land as unoccupied public land.

While the usurpation of resguardo land did not begin in the mid-nineteenth century, the pressure by outsiders to gain greater access began to mount at this time.\textsuperscript{128} For years, non-Indians had settled in Indian communities and used their communal land.\textsuperscript{129} This did not always generate conflict. For instance, the Cárcamo family settled in the Indian community of Jegua without much controversy and later became a tenacious defender against the subsequent usurpations by ranchers from the Sabanas region.\textsuperscript{130} But with rising populations, and particularly following the mid-century economic recovery led by tobacco exports, the demand for land increased. From the late 1850s, non-Indians began to stream into the resguardo of Colosó to plant tobacco, for example.\textsuperscript{131} Similar invasions occurred elsewhere as non-Indians tried to access or appropriate communal land. Many of these settlers viewed the resguardos as an anachronistic privilege that needed to be revoked. Not only did these communities use only a portion of their land, they claimed, but there was no longer any need to prohibit its alienation since the government had rescinded the former restrictions on where Indians could live. Thus, some began to claim the right to use resguardo land as residents of the community; others bought property rights, despite the prohibitions;

\begin{footnotes}
\item[128] Fals Borda (2002b), pp. 59A-60A.
\item[129] In 1811, for example, authorities in Cartagena promoted racial mixing by exempting non-Indians from paying rent to use communal land if they married a member of the Indian community (see Solano and Flórez, 2007).
\item[130] The Cárcamo family, who settled in Jegua but also rose to its defense, is one example (Fals Borda, 2002b).
\item[131] Diario de Bolívar, Oct. 2 1884, no. 3221.
\end{footnotes}
and still others, such as Severo Támara in San Andrés, seized resguardo land by extending the boundaries of their neighboring properties inside its borders. By 1878, the income tax rolls of many of these (formerly) Indian communities – such as Cereté, San Andrés, Toulviejo, Yatí, Talaigua, Turbana, Galapa, Malambo – were dominated by ranchers. It was the threat that non-Indians would soon overrun the resguardos that led Nieto to attempt to halt, and even reverse, the process. His defense of the resguardos did, in at least some cases, lead to the reconfirmation of land titles and force non-Indians to rent the land they used. The respite was brief, however, and the invasions picked up again following the fall of the Nieto government. By 1884, the governor of Sincelejo province reported that Colosó was no longer an Indian community and that its communal land had been usurped by the people who had introduced tobacco and commerce. The leaders of the two other pueblos de indios in the province, Sampués and Toulviejo, made symbolic gestures of retaining control over their community’s land, but ranchers had occupied the bulk of it, pushing the Indians to the margins. A decade later, the Indians of San Sebastian de Urubá, near the mouth of the Sinú River, complained about the “individuals who have entered our Resguardo – against our wishes – to clear land in order to establish permanent farms, appropriating considerable areas and thus reducing the space available to the Indians of the community.”

---

132 Diario de Bolívar, Feb. 11, 1875, no. 1056, p. 1310: Indice…Sincelejo, no. 38. See also Melchor Saénz in Tetón in 1840 (Diario de Bolívar, Sept. 24, 1884, no. 3214).
133 Diario de Bolívar: April 30, 1878, no. 1877, p. 1070, 1072; May 1, 1878, no. 1878, p. 1075; May 2, 1878, no. 1880, p. 1080; May 10, 1878, no. 1885, p. 1102; May 17, 1878, no. 1889, p. 1120; Sept. 19, 1878, no. 1975, p. 1466-1467.
134 Diario de Bolívar, July 22, 1884, no. 3392, pp. 453-454: Informe…Sincelejo.
135 Diario de Bolívar Sept. 10, 1884, no. 1180, p. 292: Memorial y resolución.
resisted the attempts by ranchers Maxuel M. Martelo and Vicente Arteaga (who set fire to their crops before offering to buy them out) to push them off their land.\footnote{AOFB, Resguardos, Lorica notary record, Sept. 6, 1881, no. 35; AOFB, San Andrés Resguardo Indígena, Resguardo de San Nicolás de Bari, Despojos por Vicente Arteaga.}

A second method by which ranchers and other elites acquired resguardo land was by claiming the land was vacant. Some did this by professing that the area they wanted was part of the public domain. In 1868, Manuel A. Pineda, a rancher and politician who had inherited land appropriated from within the resguardo of Jegua during the eighteenth century, applied to the national government for title to over 7,000 hectares in the vicinity of his property that he insisted was part of the public domain.\footnote{Fals Borda (2002b), pp. 100-101; Ministerio de Agricultura y Comercio (1922), p. 63; AOFB, Jegua, Diario Oficial (Bogotá), Jan. 27, 1872, p. 612; Diario Oficial (Bogotá), June 2, 1875, p. 2898.} Pineda had to fight off two attempts to block his application. One was a failed effort by four other prominent ranchers to be granted title to these lands for themselves: Pineda had applied first.\footnote{Gaceta de Bolívar, April 25, 1869, no. 621: Memorials of Manuel A. Pineda, Felipe Pérez Sierra, and Mariano Diago.} The second was the protest by the residents of Jegua that the land Pineda claimed was part of their resguardo and not part of the public domain. Despite an initial ruling in their favor by the judge of Chinú, the national government awarded these lands to Pineda in the early 1870s, which he occupied with the armed support of the state.\footnote{Fals Borda (2002b), pp. 101, 107.} Pineda’s successful acquisition led other savanna ranchers to invade other portions of Jegua. They were aided by the 1874 decree from the rancher-mayor of nearby San Benito Abad, Francisco de la Ossa.
Martelo, that the municipal council would assume authority of the resguardo.\footnote{Presumably it started authorizing the occupation of the resguardo by ranchers. Fals Borda (2002b), p. 101.} By the end of the century, over 200 ranchers occupied much of the former resguardo where they pastured some 180,000 head of cattle in the dry summer months.\footnote{AOFB, Jegua, Terrazgos en el resguardo (letter from Cárcamo to P. Feliz, Sept. 13, 1897).}

The other method was to claim that the Indian community had effectively ceased to exist and then request land formerly of the resguardo that had reverted back to the public domain. While the Indians of Guazo successfully frustrated Rafael Mendoza from claiming part of their resguardo as public lands in 1875, in 1899 Manuel García Gordón tried to occupy it by arguing that the community of Guazo had ceased to exist: only three men lived there and its council was composed of “blacks with tightly curled hair and whites with blond hair” who had lived outside of Guazo for the last 30 years.\footnote{AOFB, Magangué, Se acabaron los indios de Guazo (1899).} The government officials who investigated the case found only four natives of Guazo living there and proclaimed the community unviable. They also suggested, however, that as the natives of Guazo had declined or moved away, powerful locals had taken it over, using the façade of a community to gain control over its immense lands and prevent other elites and settlers from gaining access.\footnote{Report from governor of the province of Carmen that Guamo, as well as Yucal and especially Barranca, was almost entirely abandoned, as residents had moved to Panama, partially as a consequence of the damage caused by locusts (Diario de Bolívar, July 10, 1884, no. 3396, pp. 468-470).} In view of this situation, the government declared the resguardo extinct: the nearby village of Retiro annexed those areas that fell under its jurisdiction as part of its
communal land (ejido); the rest became part of the public domain, which García could presumably occupy.  

Indian communities reacted against these attacks on their communal land in a variety of ways. Many turned to the courts to defend their property rights and appealed to government officials for assistance. Sometimes judges ruled in their favor and officials supported their land rights: the state did not always conspire against Indian communities. But these decisions were also frequently overturned on appeal, ignored by local authorities, or ineffective. Law suits were also lengthy and costly affairs that Indian communities often found hard to sustain and in which they depended on the resoluteness of outside assistance. And rulings based on technicalities in the law frustrated their efforts. The best documented struggle by an Indian community to retain control of its land in Old Bolívar is that of Jegua. Although the community failed to prevent Pineda and then others from usurping their land, they sought its restitution for another 60 years. Finally, in a 1922 case protesting further displacements by a rancher, the Superior Court of Cartagena recognized the community’s property rights. Unfortunately, although verdict was upheld by the Supreme Court, its practical effect was meaningless: the community could neither reclaim the land it had lost nor charge the occupiers rent.

Various Indian communities also took proactive steps to defend their land rights. Between the 1860s and 1880s, numerous communities reconfirmed their

---

144 AOFB, Magangué, Se acabaron los indios de Guazo (1899). For efforts to defend against claims that lands were baldíos, see Diario de Bolívar, July 15, 1875, no. 1182, pp. 631-632: Memorial de los indígenas de Guazo; and July 22, 1875, no. 1188, p. 656: Reclamación sobre un denuncio de tierras baldías.

property rights to communal lands by making and publicizing notarized copies of the
titles. They also performed symbolic acts of ownership over their land. Some of these
were inoffensive, in the eyes of their non-Indian neighbors. In Toluviejo, the governor
of Sincelejo wrote that “the Indians carryout a simulacrum of an election of their
community council (pequeño cabildo)…and make excursions to the forested areas to
collect insignificant sums from those who, occupying their land, want to recognize
their rights.”\textsuperscript{146} Others were more threatening, however. Some Indian communities
annually walked the perimeter of their resguardos, clearing the path that marked its
boundary. But in these operations, in which, the governor of Sincelejo continued,
“they are no less intelligent than non-Indian landowners, they commit abuses and
overstep their authority by randomly opening paths between private properties or
farms, claiming not only the radius of one league that belongs to them but many
leagues of public lands that belong to the nation.”\textsuperscript{147} According to the governor of
Sincelejo, the Indians of San Andrés “enter their [neighbors’] properties in groups of
considerable size, armed with all kinds of weapons, clearing the land, and threatening
anyone who tried to stop with death….”\textsuperscript{148} While the community of San Andrés was
justified to claim land beyond the “official” league because of the extensive area
originally granted to them – although the some 240,000 hectares they supposedly
claimed was exaggerated – they and others probably mimicked the techniques of their
non-Indian neighbors, well aware that property rights were often rooted the ability to
enforce a claim rather than an underlying title.

\textsuperscript{146} Diario de Bolívar, July 22, 1884, no. 3392, pp. 3-4: Informe…Sincelejo. My emphasis.
\textsuperscript{147} Diario de Bolívar, July 22, 1884, no. 3392, pp. 3-4: Informe…Sincelejo.
\textsuperscript{148} Diario de Bolívar, Aug 7, 1875, no. 1203, p. 715.
Some also took furtive actions, part of a repertoire of everyday acts of resistance that are often more annoying than effective. Striffler wrote bemusedly about how the Indians of Jegua “steal all the cattle they can sell,” but take great pains to not touch any cow stuck in the mud and left to die by its owner who had crossed the San Jorge River and invaded their resguardo with the rest of his herd in search of summer pastures. “Perhaps it is in this way,” he continued sarcastically, “that the Indian of Jegua tries to avenge himself on the savanna [ranchers] who use his land despite the fortune bestowed by the King of Spain.” Similarly, in 1869, members of the largest landowning family in Montería, the de Lora, protested that although the Indians of Cereté had stolen and slaughtered cattle for years at various public salt licks, “today, the audacity, the daring, and the cynicism of these perpetrators have no limits, as if they act with complete confidence and the guarantee of impunity.” This cattle rustling, they said, was the result of “certain unjustifiable tolerance by local authorities and those from the provincial capital” who, despite having received numerous complaints, never took efficacious measures to resolve the problem.

These actions provoked various responses. In their efforts to reconfirm resguardo boundaries, even when Indian communities had the backing of departmental officials, local officials sometimes refused to hand over copies of the land titles. M. R. Pareja, an official charged with gathering information on the properties of Guamo, Yucal, Zambrano and Tetón, complained that local authorities were most

---

150 Gaceta de Bolívar, July 25, 1869, no. 636: Memorial de varios vecinos del distrito de Montería.
uncooperative: “it is in none of their interests to clarify” these property rights.\textsuperscript{151} When government officials physically marked resguardo boundaries, they were sometimes attacked by neighboring communities. In 1873, the mayor of Pinillos led a mob armed with lances, rifles, and machetes into the neighboring district of Guazo where they took as prisoners the judge, his secretary, the representative of the Indian community, and one other who were confirming the boundaries of the resguardo.\textsuperscript{152} Neighboring property owners also complained about the land claims made by Indian communities. In 1878, the governor of Magangué had to calm the fury of Padilla residents, who had long farmed land in the jurisdiction of Talaigua, an Indian community, when its authorities started to charge rent for the use of their land.\textsuperscript{153} Land disputes between the Indians of San Andrés and residents of Palmito left a couple of the latter dead. If any Indians died during these clashes or reprisals, they were not reported. Ranchers, however, did use public and private force to remove Indians who refused to vacate land that they claimed by virtue of purchase or public land grant.

Another, more insidious way in which Indian communities lost control of their land was through its de facto privatization. The problem was that they could not prevent non-Indians from using their resguardos. Even officials sympathetic to their plight, such as Nieto, separated the community’s title to communal land from its right to regulate access to it. While only Indians could use the resguardos rent-free, under Nieto’s scheme, anybody else who settled in these communities could rent the land

\textsuperscript{151} Diario de Bolívar, Sept. 24, 1884, no. 3214, p. 849: Terrenos de los distritos.
\textsuperscript{152} Gaceta de Bolívar, Oct 25, 1873, no. 873, p. 143-145: Informes…Carmen, Magangué y Chinú.
\textsuperscript{153} Diario de Bolívar, Aug. 1, 1878, no. 1934 pp. 1301-1302: Informe…Magangué.
they wanted.\textsuperscript{154} Renting excess land also provided the communities a source of revenue. Earlier in the century, these rentals may have been a voluntary way for the community to support its religious activities.\textsuperscript{155} By the Nieto administration, Indian communities were required to use this rental income to pay for their schools.\textsuperscript{156} As municipal governments started to take control of resguardo land, they may have rented out even larger areas under the pretext of raising revenue to pay for government services and other improvements.\textsuperscript{157} In 1871, for example, the municipal procurator (\textit{procurador}) of San Andrés rented out part of the resguardo to various important ranchers and politicians, such as Ramón Santo Domingo and Manuel Amador Fierro, governors of Old Bolívar for most of the period between 1864 and 1872, and Manuel A. Pineda, mentioned above.\textsuperscript{158} Such land rentals often resulted in its effective privatization because of the improvements made: their outright appropriation was not always necessary. As mentioned above, these improvements, such as developing pastures, gave them effective control over that land, which they could sell, rent, mortgage, and leave to their heirs. It was for this reason that the community of San Sebastián de Urubá was so concerned about the people who had invaded their

\textsuperscript{154} The resguardos, therefore, fell in between notions of private property (even when communally owned), in which owners could regulate access, and the communal land of villages to which any resident had free access (outsiders had to pay rent). It’s not clear if this division between Indian and non-Indian residents of these communities persisted after Nieto’s fall from power.

\textsuperscript{155} Diario de Bolívar, July 22, 1884, no. 3392, p. 453: Informe…Sincelejo; Fals Borda (2002), p. 65B.

\textsuperscript{156} Gaceta de Bolívar, Aug. 9, 1863, no. 276, pp. 1-2: Lei sobre administración y aplicación del producto de los resguardos de indígenas.

\textsuperscript{157} Resguardos that remained at the start of the twentieth century were subject to attempts by local elites to wrest control of their lands – for cattle ranching or petroleum exploration – following the passage of various laws that allowed municipal governments to take over their management. The first was law 55 of 1905. This was repeated by law 19 of 1927 (AOFB, Jegua, Archivo personal de D. Gabriel Guerra Cárcamo, June, 1982).

\textsuperscript{158} Gaceta de Bolívar, Aug. 7, 1872, no. 819: Indice…Chinú, Dec. 6, 1871, no. 28.
resguardo. While it asked departmental authorities to help them collect rent from individuals who farmed resguardo land, it implored them to remove “those who have occupied it with pastures and permanent farms; [and] prevent them from clearing more forest to plant grass.”  

Part of the problem was a question of space; but they were also clearly concerned about the way that pastures and permanent farms effectively privatized use-rights. Thus, by settling, renting, and developing resguardo land, as well as purchasing and foreclosing on improvements ‘owned’ by Indians themselves, outsiders initiated a process effective privatization and alienation.

Notary records give evidence of this process as well as hint at the consolidation of ‘properties’ within the resguardos. In 1870, for example, Neftalí Gomes-Casseres, the merchant from Curaçao who had settled in Colosó, bought a pasture from Juan Barrios, and three years later, acquired the possession rights to a small, neighboring farm (with pasture, plantain, palm trees, and forested land) from Damiana Muñoz,

---

159 Registro de Bolívar, Sept. 10, 1894, no. 1180, p. 289: Memorial y resolución.
160 Samuel Martelo took advantage of the 1916 flood to buy land cheaply in Jegua (Fals Borda, 2002b, p. 123). Due to a plague of locusts in the early twentieth century, Indians from Tuchín sold land and moved elsewhere (AOFB, San Andrés Resguardo Indígena, Datos generales Tuchín (Capi Fermín), Aug. 10, 1984). Other ranchers tried to push Indians off their lands by burning their crops and then offering to buy them out (AOFB, San Andrés Resguardo Indígena, Resguardo de San Nicolás de Bari, Despojos de Vicente Arteaga). Thus, natural or planned disasters forced some Indians to sell their land. Other Indians probably took advantage of increasing land values, selling out and moving to the frontier where they could acquire much more land (AOFB, San Andrés Resguardo Indígena, Haciendas dentro del resguardo (Roque Roldán), May, 1977). Also, as the available land inside the resguardos declined because of the process of consolidation and growing populations, and land effectively all claimed, inheritances also probably became increasingly fragmented, forcing some to sell out to family, neighbors or large landowners, and move to the frontier or become a tenant on a cattle estate. For Indians from Toluviejo losing their land to elites by selling derechos de posesión, see AOFB, San Andrés Resguardo Indígena, Historia del fin de los resguardos de San Andrés de Sotavento y Toluviejo, Feb. 12, 1977. For peasants and Indians pushed out of the Sabanas region to become frontier colonos, see Fals Borda (2002c) and Ocampo (1988).
whose husband had started to develop it in 1843.\textsuperscript{161} With the expansion of pastures, it became increasingly hard for Indians to buy such property rights within their communities: their cost was too high, and they generally wanted land covered in forest rather than grass to farm. The growing importance of cattle raising in the resguardos also generated conflicts between ranchers and farmers. Although there was presumably some effort to keep these activities separate, as in village ejido land, such regulations were not always enforced, pushing Indians farmers to the margins of the resguardos.\textsuperscript{162} While state officials, either local or from Cartagena, may have eventually pushed through the formal division of the resguardos, much of the land by then was probably already effectively privatized and in the hands of non-Indians.

\textit{Village Ejidos}

Ranchers also expanded their cattle operations in the communal lands of villages. Unfortunately, almost nothing has been written about the division and dissolution of these ejidos. As with the resguardos, the mid-century Liberal reforms did not lead to their rapid partition in Old Bolívar. The Nieto administration

\textsuperscript{161} AOFB, Notaria de Sincelejo, Nov. 17, 1870, no. 11; Feb. 10, 1873, no. 9. For other land transactions within resguardos, see Diario de Bolívar, Jan. 23, 1875, no. 1041: Índice…Chinú, Jan. 30, 1874, no. 10; Registro de Bolívar, Jan. 10, 1895, no. 1215: Índice…Sincelejo, Jan. 27, 1893, no. 9; Feb. 18, 1893, no. 18; Feb. 20, 1893, no. 19; Diario de Bolívar, March 7, 1882, no. 2773: no. 22.

\textsuperscript{162} Pushed to margins: Diario de Bolívar, July 22, 1884, no. 3392: Informe…Sincelejo. Ejido regulations: Gaceta de Bolívar, Nov. 28, 1867, no. 527: [Código de] Policía rural. Conflicts within ejidos and resguardos: Gaceta de Bolívar, May 29, 1870, no. 659, p. 189: Nota que se indica a los ciudadanos…soliciten la cession de ciertos terrenos; Diario de Bolívar, Aug. 7, 1878, no. 1939, pp. 1322-1323: Informe…Sabanalarga; Diario de Bolívar, Aug. 13, 1878, no. 1944, p. 1347: Informe…Lorica; Diario de Bolívar, July 22, 1884, no. 3392: Informe…Sincelejo.
strengthened and expanded this form of land tenure. After his fall, subsequent
governments did not move quickly to privatize these communal lands. Some even
expanded over the following decades. Nonetheless, while there may have been less
prejudice against ejidos than the resguardos, they too slowly disappeared over the late-
nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century. Undermined by state-
led privatization, usurpation, and de facto privatization, few village communal lands
remained by the 1950s.

The tradition of communally-owned village land extends far back into Spanish
legal and political traditions. The Spanish brought the practice of granting such
collective land rights to the New World. Often divided between farmland, grazing
areas, and forest reserves, this land was intended to provide village residents with a
means to support themselves and access to important resources, such as firewood and
building materials. In Old Bolívar, the territorial re-organization carried out by
Bourbon officials from the mid- to late-eighteenth century, to congregate a dispersed
population in new and re-founded villages, greatly extended the number and total area
of these ejidos.163 Various “magnates” opposed the establishment of such villages and
their communal lands. According to Antonio de la Torre y Miranda, who founded
Montería in 1777, local elites “tried to demolish [the village] and make its residents
pay them rent for the property rights that they imagined they had lost in an area where
they had no cattle, farm, or settlement with which to make the land productive.”164

163 Moreno de Angel (1993); Fals Borda (2002c); Herrera (2002); Helg (2004).
164 Cited in Moreno de Angel (1993), p. 161. For more on the foundation of these villages, see
Fals Borda (2002c) and (1977). By contrast, Aline Helg (2004) considers the main
consequence of these town foundations was an expansion of elite landholding and a greater
grip over local villagers, who lost access to land. This might have been true in some cases, but
While the establishment of these communal lands did not amount to a radical land reform, it probably did give villagers a degree of independence and consolidated their collective land rights into the second half of the nineteenth century.  

As with the Indian resguardo, each ejido theoretically measured one league around the church at the village center. Again, this meant that they each measured about 5,500 hectares, assuming a league was equivalent to 4.2 kilometers and the area was circular. Not all of the communal lands of villagers were the same size, however. For one, there were discrepancies between the theoretical size and the established boundaries of particular ejidos. The communal lands of Ayapel, for instance, measured close to 9,000 hectares.  

Some villages, such as Pasacaballos, Arroyogrande, and Mahates, had developed on private property and had to purchase land on which to establish a commons. These were frequently smaller than the ‘ideal’ ejido. A few towns, such as San Marcos, did not have any communal land.  

These issues make it hard to estimate the total land base occupied by ejidos. However, if we estimate that there were at least 61 villages and towns with an ideal-sized

---

Unfortunately she does not provide any evidence for the assertion. Similarly, Reyes argues that although there was a movement by reformist viceroy at this time to institute a form of land reform, landed elites succeeded in convincing the king to abstain from making any reforms. Fals Borda (2002c) p. 64B-65B.

While the communal lands of Ayapel measured 1,747 hectares, the town acquired close to 7,000 more hectares from the crown in 1780 (see ANA, re-issue of the title to lands purchased by Juan Pedro de Arraiz and the communal lands of Ayapel in 1780, folio 05757467). Also see Tovar (1987), p. 36.

Gaceta de Bolívar, May 10, 1868, no. 557, p. 5; Gaceta de Bolívar, May 29, 18709, no. 689, p. 189: Nota que se indica…ciertos terrenos; Diario de Bolívar, Sept. 26, 1884, no. 3216, p. 858: Terrenos de los distritos.

commons of one league around the church, the total area might have been around 335,000 hectares (see Map 2.3).\textsuperscript{169}

Mid-nineteenth-century Liberal discourse did not disparage the corporate land tenure held by villages to the degree it did Indian resguardos and the ‘dead hand’ of Church properties. Law 3 of 1863, promulgated by General Nieto, expanded their numbers, establishing ejidos for villages founded on private property. Municipal councils were instructed, however, to indemnify the property owners of expropriated land through direct taxes established to raise funds for this purpose.\textsuperscript{170} Subsequent administrations were not particularly interested in pushing through the division and sale of ejido lands either. Law 18 of 1877, for instance, provided for public lands to be granted to villages that needed additional land.\textsuperscript{171} A number of municipal governments both confirmed and expanded their village commons over the second half of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{172} Officials in Sahagún, for example, bought 2,754 hectares of land in 1874 from 11 residents who had been adjudicated this area of public land the year before by the national government.\textsuperscript{173} In other cases, such as that of Guazo and Retiro

\textsuperscript{169} Bourbon officials founded or re-founded 56 villages in Old Bolívar during this period. In addition to these, I added Cartagena, Mompos, Tolú, Ayapel, and Caimito. For a map of these villages, see Herrera (2002), p. 112. For a list of those founded by Antonio de la Torre y Miranda, see Moreno de Angel (1993) and Fals Borda (2002c), pp. 59B-60B. Of course, the potential variation in this estimate is enormous: from around 85,000 hectares (61 villages with 1,400 hectares each) to almost 430,000 hectares (61 villages with 7,000 hectares each).

\textsuperscript{170} Gaceta de Bolívar, May 29, 1864, no. 313: Barranquilla.

\textsuperscript{171} Registro de Bolívar, Jan. 29, 1891, no. 803.

\textsuperscript{172} Sahagun, 9 caballerías: Registro de Bolívar, Aug 7, 1892, no. 819: Indice…Chinú, Oct 21, 1871, no. 20. Ayapel: Diario de Bolívar, June 23, 1875, no. 1041: Indice…Chinú, July 29, 1874, no. 34.

\textsuperscript{173} Diario de Bolívar, June 23, 1875, no. 1041: Indice…Chinú, Jan. 14, 1874, no. 3. See also lands that Lorica bought in 1853 and 1870: Diario de Bolívar, Sept. 22, 1884, no. 3213, pp. 847-848: Terrenos de los distritos. Arroyo Grande bought 8 caballerías of private land in
mentioned above, when departmental authorities placed a district they deemed unviable under the jurisdiction of a larger neighbor, they also transferred its communal land.  

There were probably various reasons for this more accepting attitude toward village common land. One may have been that those who pushed to dissolve the resguardos already had some access to village land, so there was less pressure to divide it up. Residents of a village could freely use its communal land, provided they abided by the regulations established by departmental and local officials. These lands included areas for livestock as well as farming. Another reason, undoubtedly, was the negative view of Indians as lazy, poor, and resistant to greater integration into the national society. Furthermore, it may have been that the resguardos were less utilized and, therefore, more easily appropriated; or it was just politically harder to displace villagers than Indians. In any case, while references to frustration with resguardo policy appeared in official government publications with some frequency in the second half of the nineteenth century, there was much more silence about policies regarding village lands.

Nonetheless, over time a number of forces slowly enclosed village common lands. First, various ranchers and other landed elites tried to directly appropriate sections of these commons. In some cases, this was done by disputing the boundary of

1779, which it had re-surveyed in 1869: Diario de Bolívar, Sept. 26, 1883, no. 3216, p. 858: Terrenos de los distritos.
174 AOFB, Magangué, Se acabaron los indios de Guazo (1899). For a similar case in Yatí, see Diario de Bolívar, Oct. 7, 1889, no. 664, p. 318: Suspensión de una resolución sobre tierras baldías.
175 Gaceta de Bolívar, Nov. 28, 1867, no. 527: [Código de] Policía rural.
village lands to claim parts of it as private property. Others claimed part of the village commons as public lands. The governor of Sincelejo province reported how one group of residents of Tolú claimed that the area known as “Ciénaga de Leche” were public lands while another group, which included the municipal council, protested that they belonged to the district.¹⁷⁶

Second, Law 71 of 1916 gave municipal councils the authority to sell off part of their commons in order to raise funds for public works projects.¹⁷⁷ Seven years later, the district of Arjona took advantage of this authority to sell some communal property that, it argued, did not generate much revenue for the municipality through rents. Officials wanted to use the proceeds to repair street lighting and the streets and plaza, establish an aqueduct, and finish building the cemetery.¹⁷⁸ Even before the passage of this law, it appears that similar land sales occurred. In 1898, Arjona had already sold two-fifths of the rights to “Tigre” and “San Luis,” which it wanted to sell off completely some 25 years later.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ Diario de Bolívar, Aug. 21, 1876, no. 1509, p. 531: Informe…Sincelejo. See also AGN, Baldíos, Tomo 25, p. 41: Morales, Bodega Central; and Tomo 28, p. 372-380: Sucre.
¹⁷⁷ Article 13 of Law 71 of 1916, which reformed Law 4 of the Regimen político y municipal (AHC, Gobernación, Justicia, 1905-1933, p. 27: Acuerdo No. 7 Por el cual se dispone la venta de unos terrenos y se la da inversión a su producto. Consejo Municipal de Arjona, Nov. 25, 1923).
¹⁷⁸ AHC, Gobernación, Justicia, 1905-1933, p. 27: Acuerdo No. 7 Por el cual se dispone la venta de unos terrenos y se la da inversión a su producto. Consejo Municipal de Arjona, Nov. 25, 1923. For the sale of communal lands in Tacasaluma in 1920, see AOFB, Magangué, Notaría de Magangué, May 16, 1920, no. 99.
¹⁷⁹ AHC, Gobernación, Justicia, 1905-1933, p. 27: Acuerdo No. 7 Por el cual se dispone la venta de unos terrenos y se la da inversión a su producto. Consejo Municipal de Arjona, Nov. 25, 1923; AHC, Gobernación, Municipios & Distritos, 1897-1904, p. 16: Nicolás Herrera to Gobernador, June 27, 1899.
Map 2.3. Villages in Old Bolívar with ejidos during the nineteenth century
Lastly, corporate land tenure by villages was possibly most eroded by internal processes of privatization. Some of this was state-led, with the parceling of village land among residents. For example, by 1874, the district of Santa Catalina appears to have already divided at least part of its lands.\textsuperscript{180} Rather than a centrally-conceived policy, though, the push to formally divide the commons of particular villages seems to have come from local officials. Limited information and apparent controversy about such divisions makes it difficult to assess their overall significance. It is possible, however, that the more common and insidious form of division occurred as a result of the de facto privatization of communal lands by residents or even outsiders. Village residents who needed agricultural or range land had free access to the their commons. Once granted permission by the municipal council to occupy an unused area, they retained use-rights to it for as long as they wished. Once they stopped using it, however, the land reverted back the village commons and another resident could ask to farm that area.\textsuperscript{181} While some land reverted back to the village in this manner, many farmers and ranchers made permanent improvements to that land. As in other forms of land tenure, these permanent crops, pastures, and infrastructure gave them additional rights over this supposedly communal land: they could sell, rent, mortgage, and pass on their improvement rights, ostensibly giving their owners private property rights to the land. Presumably for this reason the regulations regarding common land prohibited the establishment of permanent improvements within 1,250 meters of the village.\textsuperscript{182}

\textsuperscript{180} Diario de Bolívar, Jan 18 1875, no. 1036: Indice...Cartagena, May 22, 1874, no. 129.
\textsuperscript{181} Gaceta de Bolívar, Nov. 28, 1867, no. 527: [Código de] Policía rural.
\textsuperscript{182} Gaceta de Bolívar, Nov. 28, 1867, no. 527: [Código de] Policía rural, artículo 146. For concerns by officials about this process, see AHC, Gobernación, Municipios & Distritos, 1897-1904, p. 16: Artículo 297 of Ordinaza 52 of 1892.
Notary records give more evidence of this form of de facto privatization than any other kind. In 1909, for example, David Saab, who defaulted on a loan of 181,000 German marks that he had borrowed from Adolfo Held & Cía., lost various properties in the Montería area, including a small pasture of pará grass, bought in 1901 from Pedro Cabrales, and half a 96-hectare pasture, both located in the town’s ejidos.\(^\text{183}\) The sales records of such “possessions” (posesiones or use rights without land rights), in which their location was indicated by reference to other possessions, suggest that a good deal of village common lands had been privatized in this sort of de facto process well before any formal division occurred. The surprising silence in the sources, at least those readily available or that have survived, make it difficult to be certain just what happened to village lands and how much controversy their privatization generated. It is possible, however, that the process was less contentious than might be expected because officials eventually parceled out village land that had already effectively privatized.\(^\text{184}\) Furthermore, this process of de facto privatization, and the probable subsequent consolidation of properties, such as pastures, within the village commons, could well have increased the pressure on remaining village lands, leading both to efforts to secure additional lands as well as the fragmentation of inherited plots and

\(^{183}\) ANM, May 28, 1909, no. 114. See also, Gaceta de Bolívar, Feb. 12 1871, no. 733: Indice…Carmen, nos. 10, 14; Gaceta de Bolívar, April 21 1872, no. 808: Indice…Carmen, no. 24; AOFB, Notaría de Sincelejo, June 17, 1871, no. 12; AOFB, Magangué, Notaría de Magangué, March 17, 1920, no. 71.

\(^{184}\) Ejidos may have also persisted longer, at least in name, than most resguardos because there was less pressure to push through the formal division of land that was already considered to be equivalent to private property.
forcing land-poor villagers to become resident tenants on nearby estates or to head out to the public lands of the agrarian frontier.\footnote{Running out of land in Ciénaga de Oro: Diario de Bolívar, Sept. 22, 1884, no. 3213, p. 847: Terrenos de los distritos. In Sahagún, see Diario de Bolívar, Jan. 23, 1875, no. 1041: Indice…Chinú, Jan. 14, 1874, no. 3.}

In sum, the communal lands of Indian communities and villages followed a similar process of division and disintegration over the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century. They did not undergo a quick process of division following the Liberal reforms of the mid-nineteenth century, but instead were initially protected, and in the case of the ejidos, even expanded. Nonetheless, a combination of efforts to appropriate these lands (more so with the case of resguardos than ejidos), their formal division and sale, and de facto processes of privatization eventually led to their disappearance. Some, for perhaps local reasons, managed to hang on, the ejidos generally longer than the resguardos, at least formally. While considerable portions of these formerly communal lands may have provided the foundation for the thousands of tiny farms that had emerged by the mid-twentieth century, much of these lands ended up in the hands of cattle ranchers.

**Public Lands**

While corporate and private properties inherited from the colonial period were essential to the growth of cattle ranching in Old Bolívar between 1850 and 1950, the department would not have become the country’s most important center of production if it were not for its extensive public lands. Through the mid-nineteenth century, a
good deal of Old Bolivar remained unsettled. In 1890, officials estimated that there were still almost four million hectares of public lands, or *baldíos*, out of the approximately 6.5 million hectares of land in the department.\(^{186}\) The expansion of cattle estates in Old Bolivar took two forms, therefore: the internal settlement of properties inherited from the colonial period and the outward colonization of new territory.\(^{187}\) Although the agrarian frontier also initially served as a source of forest products, and as a safety valve for increasingly land-short peasant communities, most of it ended up as pasture. The monopolization of frontier lands by ranchers and other elites, either through state grants or de facto land claims, reproduced the biased distribution of property rights inherited from the colonial period in other parts of the department. The appropriation of peasant farms aided the expansion of ranching and further exacerbated the inequitable land tenure structure. But for all the coercion that did exist, there was also a significant amount of recognition for settlers’ property rights; and ‘informal’ land markets, even though they reflected the obvious inequalities between peasants and ranchers, probably mediated much more of the consolidation of peasant frontier settlement than naked violence.

In her pioneering study of frontier colonization in Colombia, Catherine LeGrand identifies two government attitudes toward the distribution of public land: to generate revenue, which predominated through 1870, and to foster development, which subsequently rose to the fore.\(^{188}\) Faced with debt, a bloated military, and anemic

\(^{186}\) Palau (1908), p. 68.
\(^{187}\) See Tovar (1980) for a similar description of agrarian expansion during the eighteenth century.
\(^{188}\) These two attitudes toward the distribution of public lands were not mutually exclusive. In the first period, the state used land to stimulate development, such as the famed land grants to
economic growth, for its first 50 years the republican government labored under a
precarious fiscal situation.\textsuperscript{189} Even after the mid-century economic revival,
government revenues initially declined because the income from reduced customs
rates did not make up for the losses of suppressed colonial-era taxes and monopolies.
During these years, the government relied on bonds and scrip backed by the vast
crown lands it had inherited to raise capital, finance public work projects, and pay war
veterans. Only in the 1870s did the combination of economic expansion and increased
import tariffs begin to raise more revenue for the government, prompting it to shift its
fiscal attitude toward public land to one focused on generating economic growth.\textsuperscript{190}
With the successful export of tropical commodities, politicians were also more
inclined to freely distribute public land to people who settled and developed it. In
1874, Congress passed a law that enabled such settlers to acquire the title to the land
they occupied and exploited without having to redeem government territorial bonds.

After 1874, there were two ways to acquire title to public land. The older
method was to purchase territorial bonds on the secondary market and redeem them
with the national government for a specific area and amount of land. Between the
early 1870s and the early 1920s, the price of these bonds varied between 25 and 35
cents (\textit{centavos}) per hectare in Bogotá and Medellín.\textsuperscript{191} Much of the expense of
acquiring public land, however, was in the fees associated with the application

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{189} LeGrand (1986), pp. 10-14; Deas (1982).
\textsuperscript{191} LeGrand (1986), p. 40.
\end{flushright}
process, demonstrating that the land was part of the public domain and unclaimed, the
cost of bringing government officials to inspect the land, and paying a surveyor to map
and mark the boundaries.\textsuperscript{192} Perhaps more daunting than the final cost was the
bureaucratic maze that applicants had to navigate in order to process their property
claims. Nonetheless, many of the largest tracts of public land that the government
adjudicated were obtained in this manner.

The second method was to apply for the title to an area of public land through
what was known as cultivator’s rights. By virtue of the 1874 law, anyone who
established permanent crops or pastures in the public domain could request the
adjudication of the land they occupied plus an adjacent portion of undeveloped land.\textsuperscript{193}
The idea was to encourage entrepreneurs – generally imagined as people with capital
who employed laborers – to develop frontier regions. But the government also began
to acknowledge the important role that peasants played in the colonization process and
it passed laws to protect them from dispossession. The state considered settlers who
cleared and occupied public lands to be “possessors in good faith” even if they had not
applied for legal title to the land; and it prohibited the adjudication of property rights
in areas where there were pre-existing settlers.\textsuperscript{194} Despite its intentions, however, the
state unevenly enforced these stipulations, and ranchers and other large applicants for
public land titles frequently ignored them. Furthermore, although land in the public

\textsuperscript{193} This seems to have varied. At the end of the nineteenth century, \textit{baldíos} applicants were
required to develop either one-third or one-half of the land if farmed, or two-thirds of the land
if grazed, within 10 years. In the 1910s, it seems the law adjudicated an undeveloped area
three times the size of that already exploited. Theoretically, grantees had a fixed amount of
time to develop the rest of their properties or the land would revert back to the public domain.
In practice, however, this provision was rarely enforced.
\textsuperscript{194} Law 48 of 1882, quoted in LeGrand (1986), p. 15.
domain was ostensibly free, the number of related expenses and bureaucratic hurdles put land titles beyond the reach of most peasants. The surveyor’s fee alone, for a parcel less than 50 hectares, often exceeded the value of the land. 195 Innumerable delays due to faulty applications, poor communications, and bureaucratic inefficiency and corruption also meant that there was no guarantee that applications would be granted. 196 Only in 1917 did the state streamline the process, eliminating the need to pay some fees and survey properties smaller than 20 hectares. 197

Therefore, despite some desire to promote a yeoman peasantry, the distribution of public land had the opposite effect. 198 Ultimately unwilling to subsidize the effective distribution of many small parcels, the state extended the power and territorial hold of the landed elite into frontier regions through large grants. Only four percent of the almost 3.3 million hectares of public lands adjudicated between 1827 and 1931 were smaller than 100 hectares; and only five percent more went to recently founded towns in Antioquia through which peasant settlers obtained land and property titles. 199 Additionally, the state lost several more million hectares of the public domain to illegal usurpations by large landowners. 200 Legislators attempted to limit the ownership of large, contiguous properties, establishing a 5,000-hectare limit per grant in 1882, and reducing it to 2,500 hectares in 1912. They also instituted a ten-year development clause after which any unexploited land would revert to the public

198 There was a long-standing criticism, dating back to the late colonial period, against the uneven distribution of land in the country and the unproductive use of many large properties. During the Liberal hegemony in the 1860s and 1870s, these critiques became more frequent.
domain. But these limits, along with ineffectual enforcement, neither overturned nor stopped the overall concentration of property on the agrarian frontier. By the 1920s, when officials manifested growing concern over the rapidly dwindling areas of public lands, the concentration of ownership, and growing conflicts with peasant settlers over land rights, it was often too late. Fiscal limits, low land values, the profligate distribution of public land, and the tacit acceptance of an ‘informal’ land tenure system all conspired against the establishment of a propertied, smallholder class in much of the country, especially the lowlands.

In Old Bolívar, the national government distributed 382,610 hectares of public land in 268 grants between 1827 and 1931. It awarded the greatest number of grants between 1918 and 1931: 59 percent of all grants, accounting for 50 percent of the total land adjudicated. By contrast, 15 percent of grants occurred between 1870 and 1900 but amounted to 29 percent of the total area. Only one grant, for 264 hectares in Puerto Colombia (in the present-day department of Atlántico), occurred before 1870. The average size of public land grants fell by over half between the late-nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century, from 2,700 hectares to 1,200 hectares. Most land grants remained large despite some effort by the government to facilitate the adjudication of small parcels of public land to peasant settlers. Through 1922, it granted only 29 requests in plots of less than 50 hectares for a total of 578 hectares, or

---

two-tenths of one percent of the total land granted.\textsuperscript{203} The distribution public land, therefore, reinforced the land tenure inequality inherited from the colonial period.

As noted above, while public lands existed in much of Old Bolívar, the bulk were concentrated in the southern and western portions of the department. Mapping out public-land adjudications shows that two-thirds of them, almost 250,000 hectares, were concentrated in the Sinú Valley, the lands to the west of it, and those around Ayapel. The Mompós lowlands (\textit{Depresión Momposina}) – the San Jorge River Valley below Ayapel, the Mojana (between the San Jorge and the Cauca rivers), and the Magdalena River Valley around Mompós – accounted for 13 percent of \textit{baldío} grants. In Simití, in the far south, the government adjudicated another 15 percent. By contrast, the rest of the department – the Sabanas of Bolívar, the Montes de María, the area around Cartagena, and the present-day department of Atlántico – contributed only four percent of the total public lands adjudicated through 1931 (see Map 2.4). In other words, a rough arc divided the area of Old Bolívar settled principally during the colonial period from that still sparsely settled in the mid-nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{204}

\textsuperscript{203} Ministerio de Agricultura y Comercio (1922), pp. 63-66.

\textsuperscript{204} This geography of official land grants does not account for those potentially substantial areas appropriated from the public domain without a process of formal adjudication, however. It seems unlikely, for instance, that the area of the Montes de María would have been mostly privatized during the colonial period. There are also hints that public land existed in areas, such as the Sabanas de Bolívar, where the state granted almost no such land. Nonetheless, the paucity of adjudications in these areas suggest that the amount of public land that existed there was relatively limited. By the turn of the twentieth century, at least, municipal governments in many of those areas reported that, even if they had public lands half a century earlier, it had already been entirely appropriated. Therefore, the division between a “colonial” core and “new” areas of colonization in Old Bolívar does seem to holds. See AGN, Baldíos, vol. 32, pp. 107-116, 152-153; vol. 39, pp. 85, 92-109; vol. 40, pp. 2-8.
Map 2.4. The distribution of public land grants in Old Bolívar (1850-1931)

LeGrand (1986).
Although the state started to regularly adjudicate property rights in the late 1870s, ranchers had started to expand into the forested public lands around the department a quarter century earlier. Striffler, who arrived in the Sinú Valley in the early 1840s, recalled how Montería had marked the limits of settlement. The upper Sinú River, south of Montería, “was then completely uninhabited,” except for a few, semi-nomadic Indian communities.205 Thick and tall forests dominated the landscape all the way to the border with Antioquia. In the following decade, ranchers began pushing into the forests south of Montería, clearing them to plant pasture where there was none before.206 In 1865, for example, the rancher Miguel Vega started developing pastures some 15 kilometers south of Montería.207 In the following decades, increasing numbers of ranchers from Montería and elsewhere, such as Francisco J. de Lora, Rudensindo Sánchez, Juan Negrete, and Domingo Vergara, started to develop cattle operations and request title to land along the Sinú River and its tributaries as far south as Tierra Alta.208

205 Despite this claim, there appear to have been a few scattered villages (caseríos) south of Montería, such as Morroquiel and Jaraquiel, inhabited by Indians and maybe some Hispanics. It is not clear, however, whether these belonged to the semi-nomadic Indian communities, or whether they were settled principally in the following few decades (AHC, Gobernación (Manuscritos), Provincias, 1864-1915, no. 37, p. 53: Diego García, Jan 14, 1890; Registro de Bolívar, Oct. 24, 1889, no. 669, p. 339: Solicitudes sobre adjudicación (Rafael Milanes Céspedes); Registro de Bolívar, Nov. 25, 1889, no. 678, p. 377: Solicitud del señor H. C. Emery).


207 Gaceta de Bolívar, Jan. 16, 1870, no. 668: Otro memorial relativo al mismo denuncio.

208 Other early settlers of public lands south of Montería include the retail merchant, Manuel N. Martínez O.; the illiterate retail merchant and landlord (proprietario), Nicolás Salgado, in Tucurá (Gaceta de Bolivar, Dec. 23, 1869, no. 663, p. 517); the illiterate peasants, Agustín Solera and Ciríaco Pastrana, 400 hectares, near Misiguay (Gaceta de Bolivar, Jan. 16, 1870, no. 668); Luis Courtney Sliger, American manager of the George D. Emery Co. logging operations in the area, 5,000 hectares around Ciénaga Bentancú (Registro de Bolivar, Sept. 16, 1889, no. 658, p. 295); Feliz Hernández (Hacienda Barú); Manuel Esteban León (Hacienda...
Cacao and forest products drove the early colonization of the upper Sinú Valley in addition to cattle. As early as 1860, French immigrant Alberto Lacharme had started to develop a cacao plantation in Misiguay, 15 kilometers south of Montería. When retail merchant Martín García applied for title to 6,500 hectares of public lands some 75 kilometers south of Montería in 1890, he said that he had planted, since 1880, 2,000 hectares with 8,000 cacao trees, plantain and rubber trees, and pasture. By 1893, there were about 350,000 cacao trees planted in 30 properties, many of which were developed on public land south of Montería. The largest effort was likely that of the Frenchman, Augusto Dangaud, Colombian representative of the firm A.L. Boiteau & Cie., a wine and cognac producer from the Bordeaux region. In 1882, they formed, with other French capitalists, the Sociedad del Cacaotal Marta Magdalena with 300,000 French francs of capital to plant 100,000 cacao trees. Dangaud acquired 6,000 hectares of public land along the Sinú River south of Montería and started clearing the land to plant cacao. Although the beans found some favor in the Paris market, the French effort struggled with low yields and administrative problems. As the economic losses mounted, the company gradually transformed its cacao plantations into pastures. In 1897, they fused their operations with Société Agricole du Sinú, a neighboring Franco-Belgian company founded by Georges and Louis Werbrughes, who had acquired 5,000 hectares of baldíos in 1883 also to plant cacao. The new company, Société Française du Río Sinú, planed to produce rum and export timber under the direction of the French brothers Octavio and León Dereix. While it never

---


Exbrayat (1971).
produced rum, the company did extract hardwoods and raise some cattle. In 1912, after a conflict with the Colombian government over forestry concessions it had been awarded, the French company sold their properties to a group of ranchers from Antioquia.  

Logging and other forest products were also critical to the early development of the Montería region. From the colonial period, residents of the Sinú Valley ventured into the nearby forests during the dry season, when there was little agricultural work, to harvest honey, beeswax, resin, dyewoods, game, manatee, and lumber. As international demand for a variety of forest products increased starting in the mid-nineteenth century, the region began to attract more capital and labor.  

In the 1870s, Luís Lacharme, Alberto’s brother, logged mahogany and cedar in the area around Ciénaga Betancí and exported the raw timber to France. He also brought lawsuits against people who were “fraudulently extracting rubber, ipecac root, and timber” from his “property.” American rubber merchants had set up a buying station in Ayapel in the 1850s, creating a boom that lasted for a couple decades but was undermined by the practice of felling rubber trees to speed the collection of sap. Rubber collection also extended into the Sinú Valley where various settlers started planting rubber trees. The largest plantation in the region was said to be that developed by Horace C. Coleman, an American protestant missionary, on public lands outside of

---

211 Parsons (1952); Fals Borda (2002c); Berrocal Hoyos (1980).
212 Diario de Bolívar, April 29, 1878, no. 1876, p. 1067: Indice…Cartagena, Dec. 6, 1877, no. 217.
San Carlos. But it was the arrival of the George D. Emery Company in 1883 that did much to clear the way for the subsequent colonization of the upper and western Sinú Valley. This Boston-based logging company with far-flung interests in the American tropics acquired the rights to log large areas of public land south and west of Montería. By 1908, it was exporting between two and two-and-a-half million board feet of timber, mostly cedar. Other foreign investors, such as the Philadelphia-based S.B. Vrooman Company, joined the long list of local elites who also participated in the logging boom. Many locals applied for their own logging concessions, often measuring 5,000 hectares. Others accumulated capital working with the foreign loggers, or profiting from the economic boom that the increased activity generated. Between 1882 and 1912, the population of Montería jumped over four-fold, from 4,542 to 21,570.

The logging, extraction, and other activities cleared the way for the further expansion of cattle ranching in the region. The arrival of the above-mentioned foreign companies in the early 1880s sparked a land grab in the region. In 1883, the government handed out 11 grants, most of which were relatively modest, ranging from

---

215 For information on the logging operations of George D. Emery Company elsewhere in Latin America, see Tucker (2000); Gismondi and Mouat (2009).
219 Dirección General de los Censos (1883); Gaceta Departamental [Bolívar], Aug. 13, 1912, no. 604, p. 790.
423 to 1,496 hectares. Between 1884 and 1895, however, there was a wave of extensive public-land claims filed, often as large as 5,000 hectares. Many of the famous cattle haciendas of the Montería region arose out of these and subsequent adjudications. Additionally, the inflow and accumulation of capital gave many local elites the resources to initiate or expand their pastures. The logging operations also opened up trails to new regions that, once cleared of the valuable timber, both peasant and rancher (sometimes the ex-logging overseers) started to claim and clear for agriculture and, above all, grass. By 1912, officials estimated that the municipality of Montería had the largest cattle herd in Old Bolivar.

As local and some foreign ranchers pushed the agrarian frontier further south, large Antioqueño ranchers were moving north to tap into coastal cattle stocks for their own expanding market. In the mid-nineteenth century, Julián Vásquez, one of the preeminent import merchants from Medellín, acquired vast areas of public land around Valdivia, in northern Antioquia. He then financed the construction of the “Fatherly Trail” (Camino Padrero) between the Antioqueño border and Ayapel in order to trail cattle south to the region’s mining districts. From the late-nineteenth century, other

---

220 Actual adjudications: Manuel M. Jiménez (3,238 hectares), A. L. Gualia & Cia (6,000), Manuel F. Cabrales (4,999), Pablo Durán (two grants for 9,869), Juan Gómez (4,702), David Mercado (2,300), Rafael Panzani (5,000), and Rafael Peña (4,999) (Ministerio de Agricultura y Comercio, 1922, pp.63-64). In addition, various others applied, but do not seem to have been formally awarded property rights. Nonetheless, many of these may have been ‘informally’ appropriated without the state’s official sanction. This is what appeared to have happened with the property requested by Martín García: although he never officially received title (by 1922), he was known as one of the pioneering colonizers of the upper Sinú (Exbrayat, 1971).

221 Berrocal Hoyos (1980), pp. 67-68; Parsons (1952); Fals Borda (2002c), pp. 113A-115A, 122A-123A.


Antioqueño entrepreneur-ranchers, such as Pedro Nel Ospina and Marco A. Salazar, also developed pastures on public land in northern Antioquia to trail coastal cattle all the way to Medellín. By the 1910s, they began extending their reach further north, colonizing land in southern Old Bolívar and acquiring property and titles to public land around Montería and beyond. Two key purchases mark the start of this process: Marta Magdalena, the ex-cacao estate-turned-ranch south of Montería, in 1912, noted above; and Mundo Nuevo, along the shores of Ciénaga Betancí, which local rancher Carlos Durango sold to the Echavarría family, leading textile industrialists from Medellín, in 1919. Various Antioqueños and other entrepreneurs from the Colombian interior also participated heavily in another land rush that occurred west of the Sinú River between 1914 and 1918 in expectation of the development of the first meat packing plant in Colombia on the Caribbean coast. In this region, the government adjudicated almost 53,000 hectares in 25 grants. In the following decades, increasing amounts of capital and ranchers flowed into the agrarian frontier of southern Old Bolívar from Antioquia, consolidating clearings and developing pastures directly out of the forest.

Various factors drove ranchers to colonize the agrarian frontier. One obvious reason was the opportunity it offered for expansion. While the public domain was not initially necessary to the overall growth of cattle herds in Old Bolívar, it was important for numerous individual ranchers with limited access to private estates or communal

---

225 Ministerio de Agricultura y Comercio (1922), pp. 64-65.
land or who wanted to stake out large, contiguous properties. Although the colonial-era properties were by no means fully stocked as ranchers started moving to the frontier, they were fragmented by multiple claims and individually-developed portions. It may have been easier, therefore, to claim an extensive area of public land than try to consolidate a large number of shares in a mancomunidad. According to Striffler, “the cause of this movement [to the frontier were] the pastures, since it is the cattle raisers from the Sabanas who move ever further into the forests in order to reduce the conflicts between themselves.”

Cost considerations also probably encouraged ranchers to settle on the public domain. Since many colonial-era properties were also forested, requiring the formation of pastures before stocking with cattle, it may have made economic sense to claim land to develop rather than spend scarce capital up front. There was also a speculative aspect to this land rush. Some people who obtained titles to public land turned around and sold off portions of their new properties. Manuel A. Pineda appears to have profited in this way from his successful bid to grab control over large territories that other ranchers also wanted. Between 1872 and 1878, he acquired title to almost 20,000 hectares of land, mostly along the San Jorge River but also south of Montería, that he subsequently began to subdivide and sell.

Others probably staked out large claims on the expectation of rising land values, or at least the possibility of using ‘excess’ land as a way to raise capital in the future by selling, renting, or mortgaging it.

---

But there was also a productive aspect to these land grabs. Ranchers explored forested baldíos for long stretches, looking for good cattle land not just large areas to claim. Pedro Nel Ospina noted that his cattle operations near Cáceres, along the lower Cauca River, had two advantages: their “strategic position for the business of importing cattle” to Antioquia and the quality of the land they were able to claim early on when hardly anyone was living in the region. The over 10,000 hectares of land in these haciendas is “all first-class and flat land, which was always our aim when we filed land claims and colonized areas…. Land of this class, that is also well-watered, is not abundant in the area and to obtain them in an appreciable extension, one would already have to head out to remote regions where the costs of development are very expensive due to the scarcity of resources, and the haciendas, once developed, would be less profitable and not as valuable.” Additionally, with the introduction of the new African pasture grass pará in the mid-nineteenth century, many of the low-lying, forested lands south and west of the Sabanas became even more desirable. According to Stiffler: “The first trials with these artificial grasses for the rainy season were so successful that all the stockmen hurried to adopt the changes.” Lastly, the push into

---

229 AOFB, Pijiño, Técnica de ocupación de baldíos (colonización temprano), región de Pijiño, March 11, 1978. For a romanticized version of the exploration of public lands by ranchers, see Berrocal Hoyos (1980), pp. 122-123.
230 AGPNO, Folder 95, Memorando sobre el grupo de propiedades pertenecientes a Pedro Nel Ospina, p. 2.
231 APNOyC, 170, f467. Four years later, in 1918, Salazar remarked that to obtain title to a large area of public land “one has to go to the Canalete or San Juan rivers, west of the Sinú valley, to find extensions that would allow the unification of a 10,000-hectare, or larger, lot with sufficient water and of good quality”: APNOyC, 232, f148.
232 Striffler (1995), p. 103. They found that the new pastures were much better than the poor native grasses of the Sabanas, on which animals lost weight in summer, and slow to reproduce.
the southern forests were also part of an effort to better connect the productive zones of Old Bolívar with Antioquia, the most important market for its cattle.233

The ranchers who settled the public land of the agrarian frontier also ran into many peasant colonos. Peasants moved to the frontier for many of the same reasons as ranchers. The frontier offered space to claim relatively large lots, at least initially, such as the 300- to almost 500-hectare farms claimed by some of the early peasant-colonizers of the Aguasvivas area, west of the Sinú Valley.234 While most peasants who moved to the frontier did not claim nearly so much land, it was more abundant and cheaper than where they had emigrated from. The search for good quality land also drove peasant colonization. Francisco Calle, one of the early colonizers of Puerto Libertador, recalled how he “had heard how good the land there was and [that] it had to be true due to the quantity of colonos who were arriving from all over.”235 Similarly, many peasants from the Sabanas region, contracted by ranchers starting in the 1850s to clear the forests and plant pastures in the ciénagas around Flores, south of the San Jorge River, ended up staying in the area. The abundance of fish in the region, which enabled them to eat animal protein without slaughtering their own animals, was one enticement.236 The search for forest products familiarized peasants with the qualities of different frontier zones, and the trails cleared to extract them opened up previously inaccessible regions.237 Others fled deep into the forest to escape the ravages of civil war and forced recruitment, the destruction periodically wrought by

234 AOFB, Aguasvivas Canalete, Relato de Sr. Elesto Gómez (1973); and Tuchín de Aguasvivas (Alberto Montes).
237 AOFB, Cereté Carillo Ciénaga de Oro, Bongamella, July 29, 1984.
locusts, or the long arm of the law.\textsuperscript{238} But many peasants were forced to the frontier by the increasing land scarcity due to the growth of ranching in the older areas of settlement and the appropriation of communal lands. In the 1880s, for example, Striffler noted that, in the Sabanas region “the situation of the farmer is progressively getting worse due to the expansion of pastures filled with cattle that, let loose in the middle of the forests, destroy the crops [planted there].”\textsuperscript{239} Similarly, the small-scale rancher who colonized the “virgin forests around [Ciénaga] Arcial” on the San Jorge River, had fled the “persecutions” and “the rapaciousness of the landowners” of the Sinú Valley.\textsuperscript{240}

A good deal of the expansion of ranching on the agrarian frontier occurred at expense of peasant colonizers. By usurping and cheaply buying peasant farms, ranchers also benefited from the labor that colonos had already invested in clearing the forest as well as planting a good deal grass.\textsuperscript{241} Additionally, since the state allowed people who occupied public land to request title to up to four times the area they exploited, ranchers also used these peasant clearings to increase the amount of land they could claim. The classic form of such frontier conflicts occurred when a rancher or other land entrepreneur showed up in an area settled by peasants waving land titles granted by the state (or fake ones) and demanding that the colonos either pay rent or

\textsuperscript{239} Striffler (1995), p. 93.
\textsuperscript{240} Striffler (1995), p. 108. For more on this, see Fals Borda (2002c); Fals Borda (1976); Negrete (1981).
\textsuperscript{241} Some scholars, such as Reyes (1978, p. 97), argue that the expansion of cattle ranching in Old Bolívar depended on such usurpations.
leave. The formal protest by settlers in La Mojana region of Old Bolívar in 1917 exemplify such frontier land conflicts:

We inform you opportunely of the fact that our land is to be granted to a large entrepreneur because it has and may well happen again that individuals who acquire enormous grants of land, so large that they could not possibly cultivate them in a lifetime, not only deprive the poor cultivators of the natural use of the mother earth, but also deceive the government in their grant applications, making it appear that the land is vacant when, in fact, it is completely populated and exploited; and afterwards come the violent evictions, the abuses, and the subsequent dispossessions and disregard of all rights in accordance with that Law by which the powerful always impose their wills over the weak. The consequences, if our observations are neither heard nor attended, will not escape your Excellency. For these reasons, we implore justice.242

As mentioned above, there were laws designed to prevent peasants from being dispossessed in this manner: grantees had to respect the use-rights of prior settlers on the property they obtained from the state, or they had to buy the improvements already made. The laws were undoubtedly well known. In a 1925-letter to the Amagá Railway Company, which was investigating the land situation in southern Bolívar, Pedro Nel Ospina Jr. wrote matter-of-factly that much of the land along Sinú River all the way to Tucurá had already been adjudicated. However, “the occupants upstream from Tucurá do not have properties of much value, and in case of filing a claim for a large area, one could buy them out in order to obtain land along the river.”243 But the numerous complaints by peasants faced with eviction shows that many ranchers did not take

\[243\] APNOyC, 350, ff335-336.
much stock in the law and that state officials did not always enforce it.\textsuperscript{244} In 1935, Antolín Díaz, the investigative journalist with penchant for sensationalism, described the relentless consolidation of landholding on the agrarian frontier in Old Bolívar in the following manner:

As the caste of exploiters expands, extending its domains, those victims of ignorance are forced to abandon the land close to the centers of consumption. And they have to move further and further into the forest…. They are the vanguard. They establish the trails, clear the forest, plant pasture grasses, plant crops, giving their lives to the vortex of the tropics. When they have already opened the first cracks through which sunlight slips in, the fortunate ones of the caste appropriate everything. But they – the “forest folk” (\textit{montunos}) – continue to advance toward the unlivable.\textsuperscript{245}

It is important to keep in mind, however, that the expansion of ranching on the agrarian frontier did not depend principally on the appropriation of peasant clearings. The land that ranchers appropriated was not always “completely populated,” and they often had to organize much of the work of pasture formation themselves. Pedro Nel Ospina’s company, for example, spent more money developing its own pastures in Hacienda Corinto than it bought from colonos, and it did nearly all such work on its cattle estates near Cáceres.\textsuperscript{246} Additionally, Bernardo Ospina, who managed Hacienda Corinto in the early 1920s, explained to Pedro Nel Ospina that the colonos’ properties

\textsuperscript{244} Striffler (1995), p. 93: “the public lands are being appropriated not in order to cultivate them but to speculate. Thus, the worker that sees a piece of uncultivated land that seems good to farm, deceives himself greatly if he believes that all he has to do is clear it, since a landowner soon shows up who prevents him from continuing or imposes intolerable conditions.”

\textsuperscript{245} Díaz (1935), p. 90.

\textsuperscript{246} APNOyC, 170, f354.
that they wanted to buy were “hardly productive.” Two of them, “while large and planted in grass are in terrible shape…and will require considerable expense until they are fixed up well [enough]…to produce something; the other [properties] are fallow fields [of secondary-growth forest] and a bit of grass but in small quantities and unusable because they are too far from ranch headquarters.”

Ospina’s company was not alone in its use of wage labor to develop pastures. In the Sinú Valley, for example, the owners of Hacienda Marta Magdalena annually employed hundreds workers to convert some 10,000 hectares of forest into pasture between 1915 and 1950. And Striffler suggested that ranchers used wage labor from the beginning of their push into coastal forests in the mid-nineteenth century. It is difficult to determine just how widespread the use of wage labor for such work was. But Salazar’s complaint in 1915 about rising wages in Old Bolívar due to the high demand for workers on expanding cattle estates suggests that it was more significant than is commonly recognized.

Much of the consolidation of landholding on the agrarian frontier was also not fundamentally the result of coercion, contrary to the common perception. Scholars, such as Fals Borda, have rightfully drawn our attention to the multitude of extra-legal ways that ranchers and other land entrepreneurs appropriated peasant plots – “through false accounts, adding on zeros [to debts,] …robbing property titles, bribing authorities, getting [peasants] drunk, betting on cockfights or card games, violent threats, and hiring hit men.”

---

247 APNOyC, HC, f182.
250 APNOyC, 200, f452. For doubt about such labor arrangements, see Reyes (1978), p. 102.
from the evidence underlining their importance and a sharp sense of historical injustice. But it has also obscured the less contemptible aspects of frontier colonization. In her examination of the correspondence sent to the government ministry in charge of distributing public lands, LeGrand counted 90 different conflicts in Old Bolívar through 1931. More than likely, there were many more incidents of eviction than those that made it into the government files. It is also hard to know just how many people were affected by such evictions: no doubt they numbered in the thousands. Still, LeGrand found 90 cases of conflict out of 267 land grants. Confrontations in a third of the properties adjudicated is an incredibly high number; but that also means that in two-thirds of the grants there may not have been any conflicts. Additionally, from rough projections of the amount of existing baldíos in both 1890 and 1926, we can estimate that frontier settlers unofficially ‘privatized’ about one million hectares (or more) of the public domain during this period, or some three times the official adjudications. The ratio of conflicts per area-privatized probably drops as a result. Although coercion was endemic to frontier regions, can we really conclude that it was the “dominant tendency?”

252 The claim that dispossession was the dominant tendency on the frontier seems to come partly from the nature of the sources generally examined: petitions from peasants about dispossession and politicized historical reconstructions supporting peasant land claims. See LeGrand (1986); Fals Borda (1976, 1977, 1979, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c).

253 Old Bolívar, however, had the highest rate of conflicts reported in the country, so it cannot be said that its residents had difficulty petitioning the government (LeGrand, 1986, pp. 185-204).

254 LeGrand (1986, p. 184) does not provide information on the specific conflicts, so we do not know how many people these involved. Based on her national survey, however, 56 percent of the petitions had between 5 and 24 signatures, and other 25 percent had between 25 and 49. She suggests that these figures probably underestimate the total number of families affected. In petitions that state the number of people affected, 37 percent say between 10 and 99; 31 percent, between 100 and 499; and 15 percent between 1000 and 2999. These figures, she says, are likely inflated.
Paralleling the conflicts, notary records also indicate the sale of a considerable number of farms developed on public land. In a 20-month sample from Montería between 1920 and 1950, 39 percent of all transactions were for such farms (112 out of 288 total land sales). They were particularly strong during the 1920s when they accounted for 52 percent of all property sales. These figures also do not account for the potentially numerous transactions that were never recorded in front of the public notary. Extrapolating the rate of sales per month of farms developed on public lands for the entire 30-year period, we could estimate that there were close to 2,000 officially-recorded land sales. While not a staggering amount, it is from just one municipality in half the time period analyzed by LeGrand. Land markets, in other words, were also an integral part of frontier colonization.

The problem with this sort of data, however, is that it hides any underlying coercion. One way to discern possible cases of coercion is to look for below-market sale prices of rural properties. Unfortunately, they are extremely difficult to identity because of the variations in land quality, type and extent of improvements, size, access, and location. Land prices vary widely with no discernable tendency for smaller properties to sell for less per hectare than large ones. Curiously, some of the most frequent cases of this proxy for coercion occur when members of the largest landed families sold off portions of their holdings. A bias toward land purchases by medium and large ranchers or neighbors is another possible proxy for the incidence of coercion. In the first case, from an examination of last names and number of properties purchased, it is possible to estimate that between a quarter and half of baldio farms
sold were purchased by medium and large ranchers.\textsuperscript{255} That means that half to three-quarters of these farms may well have been purchased by small farmers and landowners or other peasants. In the second case, only 23 percent of these transactions involved the owner of a neighboring property. While such land sales did contribute to the concentration of property rights over time, the process was not as relentless as often depicted. I will return to these questions in the following section. These crude calculations suggest, though, that a good deal land transactions occurred on the frontier; and that dispossession, while significant, was not the only force driving the development of the region.

Peasants, especially those settling the frontier, sold land for a variety of reasons besides looking down the barrel of a gun. Various kinds of emergencies, such as sickness or natural disasters, could force colonos to sell all or part of their farms. Land shortages, or the lack of fallow land, might also force peasants to sell. Debts were an additional mechanism for land consolidation. Others used land claims on the frontier as a kind of savings bank, selling land to raise cash and to profit from the labor of clearing the forest. Still others might sell land toward the end of their life, or to move somewhere else where there was better land or opportunities.\textsuperscript{256}

The story of Rogelio Beltrán and Alberto Montes, who colonized Tuchín de Aguasvivas, west of the Sinú Valley, around 1935, exemplifies a number of these

\textsuperscript{255} This estimate is based on recognizing the names of well-known ranchers and their family members, and from people who bought multiple properties. It is probably an under-enumeration, though.

\textsuperscript{256} For the difficulties of frontier colonization, see Molano (1994) and Zamasc (1986). For an account of differentiation and lifecycles among the Colombian peasantry, see Reinhardt (1988).
tendencies. Beltrán, an Indian from San Andrés, Montes, and a few other colonos settled a relatively large area of *baldíos* in Tuchín, each establishing their “marks” to claim rather large possessions that they started to clear of forest and plant in corn, yucca, yam (*ñame*), rice, and coffee. As other peasant families arrived in the area, they sold them small lots in what became the small settlement of Tuchín. After several years, ranchers from the Sinú Valley also started buying land that these colonos had cleared of forest (*mejoras* or *puestos*). Alberto Montes, who had claimed 300 hectares, sold one lot to a Diego García, another 80 hectares to Mariano Pineda, divided up more among his sons, and sold the rest to Sergio Buelvas (who periodically got Montes drunk) and Julio Badel, a government official from Montería. Likewise, Beltrán sold plots to ranchers Antonio Lozano and his son Primitivo, who slowly bought up *mejoras* in the region to establish a 900-hectare estate. One of Beltran’s sons convinced his father to sell the rest of his land in Tuchín and move with him to La Plata, Antioquia, where the farming opportunities were supposedly superb. After a couple of years, however, Beltrán was abandoned by his son and apparently lost all his money. He returned to Tuchín, where he spent two years working for Diego Castillo before the Torres family gave him eight hectares of land to work. He farmed that land for three years before running out of forested land, which was necessary to produce a good crop. He sold that land and bought a couple more hectares that abutted *baldíos*. But because he did not have any money to buy rice seed, Beltrán borrowed some from Primitivo Lozano. Unfortunately, the weather that year was terrible, and Beltrán lost
his rice harvest and was forced to sell his land to cover the debt. He ended up working on the cattle estate of Julio Badel.257

Underlying these sales, as well as frontier colonization more generally, was an informal system of property rights based on the recognition of land claims and improvements. The state encouraged the colonization of the frontier in this informal manner by recognizing squatter’s rights on public land. But what it had intended only to be an initial stage of settlement ended up being the foundation of the most widespread system of property rights. While the state adjudicated some 380,000 hectares of public land through 1931, individuals had effectively privatized over a million more hectares. That most peasants did not apply for title to their frontier farms is understandable, given the cost and effort of doing so. After the state made it easier and cheaper to apply for land titles, many more did obtain them. Still, their numbers were still just a fraction of those who settled the frontier. Curiously, however, many of the ranchers who developed pastures on the agrarian frontier did not attempt to obtain title to the land they occupied either. One such case is that of the colono-ranchers who eventually sold their pastures to Ospina after it was made known that his company was applying for title to an enormous area that would effectively enclose much of the land around their properties and limiting their future growth. (The shock of this announcement led one of them to threaten the managers of Hacienda Corinto.258) The extent of such unofficial properties, and their frequent sale, suggests that this system

257 AOFB, Aguasvivas Canalete, Relato de Rogelio Beltrán; and Tuchín de Aguasvivas. The chronology was hard to make out in the case of Beltrán, but this does not affect the kinds of problems he faced.
258 APNOyC, c 1920-1921, f209.
of property rights had a considerable degree of acceptance. In fact, state officials complained that these transactions, especially those recorded with a public notary, had become an unofficial substitute for land titles.\textsuperscript{259} In 1922, the Minister of Agriculture and Commerce noted that “often individuals occupy public land, and for this very fact and without having acquired title to the property, they transfer it [to someone else] as if it were their own, not recognizing the State as owner and taking away its rights.”\textsuperscript{260} LeGrand suggests that the cost and bureaucratic delays of applying for land grants encouraged entrepreneurs to directly usurp land from the public domain rather than seek official title to it.\textsuperscript{261} Some titled landowners also greatly expanded their properties by illegally increasing the size recorded in notarized sales.\textsuperscript{262} But most ranchers and peasants settled much of the public domain in this way probably because of its ease and customary practice. Even though there were plenty of abuses of this system, in part because of its unofficial and non-codified character, they generally assumed that their informal property rights would be recognized by others. When they were

\textsuperscript{259} LeGrand (1986, p. 53) notes that only in 1926 did the state “specify the legal criteria by which public lands were to be distinguished from private properties. During the nineteenth century, local judges had customarily accepted bills of sale or wills as legal proof of property, so long as such documents showed possession for at least thirty years.”

\textsuperscript{260} Ministerio de Agricultura y Comercio (1922), p. vii.

\textsuperscript{261} LeGrand (1986), p. 51.

\textsuperscript{262} For example, in the department of Magdalena, officials found that a grant of 780 hectares of public lands in the 1830s had, when first sold, grown to 7,800 hectares, and then to 34,000 hectares. Such exaggerated claims became a point of contention in the land struggles of the 1920s and 1930s, especially after the Supreme Court ruled that estate owners could lose their lands if they could not produce a copy of the original titles proving that they were the legitimate owner of all they claimed. The land reform of 1936, resolved this issue by taking it off the table. A common interpretation of Law 200 of 1936, which regulated the land reform, is that it was founded on a cynical compromise: landed elites went along with a limited reform in exchange for removing the requirement that they substantiate their property rights with copies of the original titles (see LeGrand, 1986).
threatened with eviction, their outrage was so visceral partly because they did not expect it to happen.

In sum, public lands were critical to the expansion of cattle ranching in Old Bolívar because there was so much of them. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, ranchers began to push into the department’s extensive forests, especially in the south and west. The distribution of large land grants by the state to ranchers and land entrepreneurs helped to extend the inequitable distribution of property rights in the rest of the department to these frontier regions. But most of the privatization of the public domain in Old Bolívar took place through its de facto occupation and the tacit acceptance of an informal system of property rights. Conflicts and the dispossession of colonos by ranchers frequently occurred in both official and unofficial systems. The expansion of the ranching industry, however, neither depended on such enclosures nor were they necessarily the principal cause of the consolidation of landholding on the agrarian frontier.

**Land Consolidation and Conflict**

In 1960, the land tenure structure in Old Bolívar was highly inequitable and dominated by cattle ranches. Cattle estates with at least 500 hectares, just a little more than three percent of all livestock operations, controlled 46 percent of the land dedicated to livestock. By contrast, seventy percent of all farms, those with ten hectares or less, were squeezed onto just five percent of the land base.\(^{263}\) There were

local variations to this land tenure structure. Properties in places such as Ciénaga de Oro or Sahagún, for example, were more divided for a variety of historic, geographic, and social reasons.\textsuperscript{264} Over all, however, there was a good deal of consistency throughout the department. In fact, it appears to have made little difference whether the land tenure structure in a sub-region was largely the product of the colonization of public land during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, or whether it emerged out of property rights distributed primarily during the colonial period (see Tables 2.2 – 2.4).\textsuperscript{265}

Table 2.2. The land tenure structure in parts of Old Bolívar (1868).\textsuperscript{266}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of property (hectares)</th>
<th>% of number of properties (n = 594)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-50 [1/8 caballería]</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-100 [1/8-1/4 caballería]</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101-200 [1/4-1/2caballería]</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>201-400 [1/2-1 caballería]</td>
<td>17% [4% of the total]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>401-1600 [1-4 caballería]</td>
<td>26% [17% of total]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1601-3200 [4-8 caballería]</td>
<td>11% [18% of total]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3200+ [8+ caballería]</td>
<td>11% [51% of total area]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{264} Extrapolated from Directorio Ganadero de Córdoba (Montes and Sierra, 1959). The historical roots of these landholding patterns can be seen in the 1868 property census (see footnote 15, Chapter 2).

\textsuperscript{265} Since almost 60 percent of the public land grants in Old Bolívar occurred in the Montería region, in the present-day department of Córdoba, it is possible use to census figures from this department as a rough proxy for what happened in areas dominated by the settlement of public lands, and use the departments of Sucre and Bolívar as rough proxies for areas where the land tenure structure was fundamentally established during the colonial period. Unfortunately, the difficulty of finding data on the land tenure structure at the municipal level requires working at this somewhat clumsy scale of analysis.

\textsuperscript{266} Gaceta de Bolívar, 1868 (see footnote 15, Chapter 2).
Table 2.3. The land tenure structure in Old Bolívar (1960)\textsuperscript{267}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Farm Size (ha)</th>
<th>All Farms %</th>
<th>% Area</th>
<th>Livestock Farms %</th>
<th>% Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-10</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>0.82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 - 50</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-100</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100-200</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>201-500</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>501-1000</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1001-2500</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2500+</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.4. The land tenure structure in self-reported cattle ranches, Córdoba (1959)\textsuperscript{268}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Farm Size (ha)</th>
<th>% properties (n=3,414)</th>
<th>% total area (559,333 ha)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 50</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-100</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101-200</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>201-500</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>501-1000</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1001-2500</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2500+</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Surprisingly, however, the distribution of private property in the mid-twentieth century was less biased than it was a century earlier. In 1868, as mentioned above, 11 percent of the properties for which we have information measured at least 3,200 hectares and controlled 51 percent of the privately-held land.\textsuperscript{269} By contrast, in 1960, properties over 2,500 hectares, 0.1 percent of the total, covered nine percent of rural land. This outcome was largely the result of the long-term fragmentation of large,

\textsuperscript{267} DANE (1964).
\textsuperscript{268} Montes and Sierra (1959).
\textsuperscript{269} See footnote 15, Chapter 2.
colonial-era properties since the mid-nineteenth century. Even though a few families still owned a large percentage of the land in Old Bolivar in 1960, the slope of the pyramid was not as steep.

While this relative decline in concentration held little consolation to the thousands of land-poor peasant families, it does have some implications for how we understand the process of historical development in Old Bolivar. For one, it emphasizes the importance of the colonial inheritance for a large portion of the department. Contrary to the claims that the contemporary land tenure structure was largely the product of the colonization of public land in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, for at least half of the department this was not primarily the case. Second, the process of fragmentation that Albert Hirschman identified as starting to change the land tenure structure in the 1950s had roots, in Old Bolivar, stretching back to the mid-nineteenth century.270 Such changes, even if they did not result in radical reconfigurations of the social order, were nonetheless important.271 The fragmentation of properties both enabled and was a source of social mobility. There were important limits on upward mobility as well brakes on downward spirals. But the view of Old Bolivar as presided over by “closed landed castes,” as suggested by Reyes, is too strong.272 There were important changes in the make up of ranching elites on top of the continuity that also existed. Third, this fragmentation also undermined the existence of most latifundios. Some did exist, but estates with over 2,500 hectares

270 Hirshmann (1963), Ch. 2.
271 It also dispels a previously common view that emphasized the unchanging land tenure structure in Latin American societies from the sixteenth century to the 1950s. For an example, see Paige (1975, p. 124): “much of rural Peru changed little from the time of Spanish conquest until the second half of the twentieth century.”
272 Reyes (1978).
controlled just nine percent of the land: a significant amount for the few families who
owned such extensive properties, but they did not predominate. Cattle ranches with
500 to 2,500 hectares controlled about one-third of the land in the department.
Compared to a five-hectare peasant farm, anything over 500 hectares seems enormous,
but this does not necessarily mean such properties were latifundios. In fact, most
ranches in Old Bolívar were small to medium-sized operations, with landholdings that
ranged between 50 and 500 hectares: they controlled 46 percent of ranch land.
While some rich peasant-ranchers fell into this category, for the most part there was an
important gulf between rancher and peasant. Nonetheless, Old Bolívar was not
dominated by sweeping estates, the end product of a relentless process of
consolidation towards ever larger properties.

Ironically, however, as landed property became less stratified, gaining access
to land became more difficult. In the mid-nineteenth century, communal and public
land provided many peasants with a source of land. While private properties were
large, they were also difficult to control, facilitating squatting. By the mid-twentieth

---

273 Compared to sweeping estates in Argentina, Mexico, or the U.S. West, Colombian ranches
were generally on the smaller side, a point noted by various U.S. observers. For example,
USDA official Kathryn Wylie (1942, p. 119) wrote that “The land in the Bolívar area is
divided into many small ranches…. Most producers have 100 head or less” (see also Van
Ausdal, 2008b). This was partly a function of stocking capacity, however. In northern Mexico
and the western United States, the low carrying capacity of the range meant that medium-sized
ranching operations were often controlled vastly more land than the largest Colombian estates.
A better way to compare ranching operations, therefore, is by the number of head they owned
rather than the size of their landholdings. Furthermore, not all the largest estates were
necessarily the most inefficient and wasteful. Rather than just define a latifundio by its size, a
better way is by how effectively it used its land. The characterization of smallish ranches,
however, is based on a comparison with U.S. ranchers – for whom a 100 head signified a
small operation – rather than with the bulk of the Colombian peasantry.
275 For an example of rich peasant, with 300 head of cattle, see de Friedemann (1987), p. 97.
276 We should also note the process of fragmentation among small properties, which lead to a
more bifurcated land tenure structure, as well as the consolidation of minifundios.
century, population growth, the increased control over private properties (from their fragmentation, the spreading cattle economy, improved infrastructure, and greater state power), and the privatization of communal lands and much accessible public land meant that the inequalities of landownership were felt much more strongly.

To what degree did coercion play in the reconfiguration of landownership, the settlement of the frontier, and the formation of land-monopolizing cattle estates? The common view is that it was key. Reyes argues that the dispossession of the peasantry from its land was at the very heart of the expansion and accumulation of coastal cattle estates. According to Salomón Kalmanovitz, the forced enclosures in Old Bolívar were “vaster…and harsher than in the rest of the Republic.” Regarding village ejidos, Fals Borda maintains that “the latifundistas and other rich Liberals and Conservatives progressively appropriated the common land of towns in all parts, illegally and by force.” Similarly, he describes the expansion of cattle haciendas into public lands as “lawless and violent.” Even back in the 1930s, Díaz wrote that the peasants of the Sinú Valley “were dispossessed of their land; they were dispossessed of their animals; and they were dispossessed of their own labor. All the large estates [labanzas] of the Sinú have this same origin.”

While dispossession was a recurring problem in the expansion of cattle ranching throughout the department of Old Bolívar, the assumption that it was the “dominant tendency” needs to be reconsidered. First, as noted above, many cattle

---

279 Fals Borda (1976), pp. 41-42.
280 Fals Borda (2002c), p. 69A.
281 Díaz (1935), p. 89.
estates formed in the wake of fragmenting colonial-era properties. While there were episodes of enclosures within these mancomunidades by large ranchers, especially during the 1940s and 1950s, most cattle estates based in these properties were not generally founded on the reconsolidation of peasant plots. Instead, they often arose out of the whittling away of older, more extensive landholdings. For example, much of the land that Elias J. Sánchez purchased to form his estate was acquired from members of the largest landowning families in the district in lots that ranged from 17 to 200 hectares: the de Hoyos, de Lora, Cabrales, and Pérez.  

Second, although ranchers appropriated large areas of the communal lands that still existed in the department in the mid-nineteenth century, a good deal of their control arose out of the processes of de facto privatization described above. Trying to maintain a clear distinction between coercion and effective privatization is often futile. For example, despite the regulations to prevent such conflicts, roaming cattle sometimes pushed farmers further afield, allowing ranchers to occupy and “privatize” more land. Nonetheless, the process did not rely principally on forced enclosures. De facto privatization was perhaps even more insidious in that it partly ‘naturalized’ the process of land concentration and potentially generated greater resignation than moral outrage. That there are hardly any references to the division of village ejidos is telling.

Third, out on the frontier, ranchers did not just grab land out from under peasant settlers; they also occupied unclaimed land and developed it themselves. Just

282 ANM, testamento de Elias Sánchez, between Nov. 22-Nov. 29, 1913, and between nos. 414-427. Sánchez bought 200 hectares each from Miguel de Hoyos and Nicolás J. de Lora; 17.5 hectares from Domingo Lora de Corcho; 106 hectares from Eduardo Lora; 400 hectares from Ignacio Cabrales; 138 hectares from Manuel Cabrales; and 39.5 hectares from Ana María Pérez.
how their often extensive land claims were made known and enforced is not entirely clear. Stringing up fences was one obvious and well-used way, even if it was neither cheap nor entirely secure. For example, in 1907-letter to President Rafael Reyes, J. García Carbonell wrote: “here in Bolivar, or more specifically Magangué, the use of barbed wire is creating many problems for the future. Here the expansion of private property is in direct proportion to the ability of each person to acquire more and more barbed wire. Individuals are enclosing great quantities of land…”

Some land owners filed applications for public land grants and, even if they were never officially adjudicated these lands, they may have used the application to back their claims. Before Pedro Nel Ospina had officially obtained the title to Hacienda Corinto, Bernardo Ospina complained that “it is very difficult to keep a close eye on all the borders of the property since the boundaries on [one side] are about 4 leagues from [ranch headquarters] and when the manager learns about what has happened over there it is already too late because [colonos] have already [planted crops].”

Thus, the Ospinas considered Corinto to be their property before it was officially adjudicated; but enforcing their claims was not that simple. Many frontier conflicts might well have been this kind of clashing claims over undeveloped and untitled land rather than just evictions from existing farms. While there were probably many more conflicts during the early years of settlement, notary records suggest, albeit from a potentially biased perspective, that by a certain point a good degree of order was established regarding property boundaries. While there were frequent conflicts on the frontier, its settlement

284 APNOyC, Cáceres, f182-183.
was not all a lawless free-for-all: there was also probably a good of respect by peasants of the large land claims of ranchers, undoubtedly under-girded by public or private force.

Fourth, there are cases in which one does not find coercion where it would be expected, suggesting that it might not have been so widespread or facile. On the one hand, peasants did not always succumb to pressures to leave or sell their land. Francisco Calle recalled how the representative of the supposed owner of the Terrenos de Uré, an approximately 300,000-hectare land and mining claim from the colonial period, tried to force the newly established residents of Puerto Libertador “to sell him their farms [mejoras] or sign a tenancy contract. Nobody signed or sold.”

That peasants sometimes had greater-than-expected flexibility in deciding who to sell to can be surmised by the slower-than-expected process of land consolidation with respect to land purchases by neighbors. As mentioned above, in my sample from the notary records of Montería, neighbors with abutting properties on at least two sides only made about a quarter of the purchases. Sometimes, the owners of small farms completely surrounded by a large neighbor sold to someone else. It is also not uncommon to find cases in which a small landowner partially surrounded by a larger

---

285 Negrete and Gavito (1985), p. 34, emphasis mine. In 1944, the state declared the Terrenos de Uré to be public lands.
286 ANM, May 18, 1915, no. 131. See also April 1, 1925, no. 122. For example, in 1915, Andrés A. Burgos G., sold land a piece of land planted in pará, and fenced in barbed wire, in Chuchurubí, in the district of Cereté to Manuel Francisco Salcedo even though Julio Espinoa owned all the land surrounding it. In 1909, General M. Priciliano Cabrales sold a small piece of land planted in cacao, rubber trees and plantains, also in the Vuelta de los Cacaos, to Evaristo Calonge, whose estate, Sobre las Olas, surrounded the property on three sides. On occasion, the buyer was not the person with property surrounding the plot up for sale on two or three sides, but someone else.
one sells part of his or her property to the neighbor but not all of it. There might have been pressure to sell in these cases, but only assuming that it makes sense to use violence to appropriate part of a property and leave the owner with some. Furthermore, there are also cases in which small properties existed within larger ones for rather long periods of time. Although the surrounding landowner generally bought them out, the fact that they persisted for so long is itself indicative of the less coercive side of land consolidation in Old Bolívar.

On the other hand, the process of evicting peasants does not always appear to have been that straightforward. For example, in 1903, Octavio and Leon Dereix, two large landowners living in Montería, bought some land from Bernarda Dias. Five years later they were still having trouble getting the seller’s son, Juan Gutierrez, to vacate the property. After a lawyer they hired to resolve the case failed to evict Gutierrez, the Dereix brothers re-sold the property to a neighboring landowner, Paulino Romero. In the notary record of the sale, they stated that the buyer was informed of all the problems they had with Gutierrez and that Romero was responsible

---

287 In 17 percent of the sales to a buyer with property on two sides, in my sample, the seller only sold a portion of their property. ANM, Oct. 9, 1915, no. 350. See also Pablo García’s partial lands sales in 1920: ANM, June 22, 1925, no. 238. Similarly, in 1913, Pablo García sold property he had bought in 1909 in the Vuelta de los Cacaos, along the Sinú River south of Montería, to León y Octavio Dereix, who owned the land to one side and to the rear of García’s land. García, though, retained land on the other side of the lot he sold. In the Buelvas-Murruga sale, things were somewhat more complex. For example, the Gómez brothers, who sold Marruga two of the properties he resold to the Buelvas family, continued to own land adjacent to the property Marruga sold.

288 LeGrand (1986, p. 120) recognized that: “Even with the backing of regional authorities, the hacendados found it difficult to clear their estates of squatters.” For this reason, she continues (120): “The landlords threw grass seed and loosed cattle in the squatters’ fields, confiscated their produce on the way to market, cut bridges, and blocked water sources and market roads. In the course of evictions, they burned colonos’ huts, pulled down their fences, and destroyed their crops.” For difficulty the national government had evicting squatters from an estate it bought to turn into a tropical agriculture school, see Ministerio de Agricultura y Comercio (1916, p. 36; 1917, pp. 9-14; 1918, pp. 42-45).
for dealing with him. While it is quite possible that Romero used more direct means to evict Gutierrezes, it is striking that the Dereix apparently never dared to.\footnote{ANM, Feb. 7, 1908, no. 25 and Oct. 24, 1908, no. 208.} Bernardo Ospina, manager of Hacienda Corinto, complained to his uncle-cum-father-in-law, Pedro Nel Ospina, about the trouble he had negotiating with the colonos on their estate. Arranging to buy them out “would be quite manageable if the authorities were sufficiently active and provided quick and sufficient support, but just the opposite happens.”\footnote{APNOyC, Cáceres, ff182-183.} The fact that it was not necessarily that easy to evict colonos is also evident from Marco A. Salazar’s instructions to the manager of Hacienda Marta Magdalena in the Sinú Valley: “You must keep constant watch to make sure that the occupants of the hacienda fulfill their contracted obligations to date and BY NO MEANS ALLOW ANY NEW OCCUPANTS TO ENTER.”\footnote{APNOyC, 200, ff206-207. Emphasis in original.} Likewise, a 1922-description of Pedro Nel Ospina’s cattle estates, written with the hope of attracting foreign capital, emphasized that the properties in the region around Cáceres “are all perfectly indemnified, and there is not a single section in litigation.”\footnote{APNOyC, c 1917-1936: Memorandum of the farms of Cáceres property of Pedro Nel Ospina & Company, Feb 1, 1922.} The lack of problems with colonos on these estates was a definite plus.

Let me be clear: forced enclosures were important to the formation of cattle estates and the monopolization of landholding in Old Bolívar. When conflict occurred, although peasants sometime successfully resisted, more often than not they lost out. The above cases could indeed be the exception to the rule. My impression is, however, that coercion was not as determinant as often suggested. More attention, therefore,
needs to be paid to other reasons that led to the consolidation of landholding and the spread of cattle ranching besides coerced dispossession. For one, land markets, though far from perfect, mediated a good deal of shifting farm ownership. As mentioned above, peasants sold land for a variety of reasons in addition to coercion. Especially out on the frontier, the difficulty of shipping goods to market was a particular problem that often made selling their farms or improvements one of the few ways that colonos could acquire cash and profit from the labor they had invested in the land.

Additionally, there were a number of advantages to cattle ranching that could give it a competitive advantage over peasant agriculture: economies of scale, the relatively long periods over which the costs of pasture formation were depreciated, products that walked themselves to market, and a form of production that was more resilient than agriculture to the vagaries of climate and price swings. I will discuss both of these issues in later chapters. For the time being, my point is that there was greater economic logic to cattle ranching than scholars have generally recognized. And to better understand why cattle ranching has so dominated Old Bolívar (and much of Latin America), its productive character has to be taken into account. In fact, the emphasis on dispossession in the formation and expansion of cattle estates often emerges out of a pejorative misunderstanding of cattle ranching itself: because it is not an economically-productive activity, cattle estates can only expand through coercive means. Furthermore, contra a similar idea that landed elites and ranchers cannot compete economically with neighboring peasants, and so have to take political and extra-legal measures to restrict land markets lest they lose control of their territorial base, in Old Bolívar land markets helped drive its expansion.
It is also important to recognize the ways in which the informal system of property rights in Old Bolívar contributed to the concentration of property rights. First, this system provided the grease that allowed land markets to function much more smoothly than they otherwise would have been able to. Although there were sometimes complaints about problems with the mancomunidades, for example, the general acceptance of unofficial ‘internal’ property rights enabled co-owners to sell, rent, subdivide, inherit, and mortgage their shares almost as if they were private property. Given the inability or unresponsiveness of the state to adequately address the changes that were occurring on the ground, this informal system filled in a significant need. It also promoted the effective privatization of much communal and public land, thereby both directly and indirectly (via land markets) fomenting the concentration of property rights. This de facto privatization also caused the state to lose control over much of the public domain and its ability to shape land holding patterns in frontier regions. By the time it was interested in addressing the problem of land monopolization and more actively extending property rights to peasant colonos, it was often too late; or rather, the State was not up to the political challenge of reasserting its control over usurped territory: after a brief effort from the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s, it backed down. Third, the very informality of property rights facilitated the disposessions that did occur. This can be seen with the enclosures in various mancomunidades in the 1940s and 1950s, the appropriation of communal lands, and out on the frontier. Although the law supposedly recognized the property rights of

---

improvements made to the land as well, in the end these did not have the same power to defend property claims as land titles.\footnote{Land titles, in the face of well-connected adversaries, were not always the ultimate defense either.}

Ironically, at the same time that this system of informal property rights promoted the concentration of land holding in Old Bolivar, it might have also helped generate an important degree of legitimacy in the department. The point I have tried to make is that the formation of cattle estates, the division of communal lands, and the settlement of the frontier were not driven only or even primarily by coercion and violence. There is no doubt that land conflicts were frequent, but I also suspect that there was sufficient respect for these unofficial property rights so as to constitute an important counterpoint or even antidote. Without the degree of order that they provided, there probably would have been much more conflict and violence. And even when peasants were pushed off their land or they did not receive what they considered to be a fair price for their farm, the sale of their informal property rights probably helped to mollify a good deal of their anger. This sort of resigned acceptance can be seen in the testimony of one of the colonos that Pedro Nel Ospina’s company bought out in Hacienda Corinto. Martín Angulo told the commission investigating peasant evictions from the hacienda that “most colonos sold their farms to Corinto, and it is understood that they were willing, each receiving fair values except him, who sold his somewhat cheaply because they threatened to surround him with fences and leave him isolated [and] without room to work[;] \textit{but even undervalued he was paid….}”\footnote{APNOyC, c 1925, Comisión Investigadora, May 30, 1925, Martín Angulo.}
In sum, cattle estates and the monopolization of land holding in Old Bolívar had multiple origins. In a large part of the department, colonial-era properties were critical. Although many of the private estates fragmented into smaller holdings, because the process was uneven, and through the successful reconsolidation by expanding cattle estates, the process did not go that far. Additionally, the appropriation by ranchers of a good deal of the communal lands that existed in the department exacerbated the inequitable distribution of property rights. Where the public domain was important, the large scale enclosures by ranchers and other land entrepreneurs, through official state grants, de facto occupation, and usurping peasant farms, reproduced the land skewed land tenure structure that existed in the rest of the department. Tricks, coercion, and violence were staples in the formation of cattle estates. But, as I have argued here, all the attention on this side of the expansion of cattle ranching has caused us to lose sight of an equally significant part of the story: the way that informal property rights and land markets mediated a good deal of the process of land consolidation. Not all cattle estates were the product of the aggressive seizure of peasant land. In some cases, peasants sold their properties without large landowners threatening them. In others, the expansion of cattle estates depended more on the de facto privatization of communal or public land. Quite often, the coercive and the ‘voluntary’ aspects of this process merged when ranchers pressured peasants to sell them their farms. Even in these cases, such land sales helped to mollify the discontent at the same time that they buttressed the informal system of property rights that facilitated land usurpations.
Chapter Three

Ranchers, Cowboys, and Peons: The Work and Social Relations of Ranching

In 1866, Manuel A. Pineda, the rancher-cum-land speculator who initiated the mid-nineteenth-century assault on the resguardo of Jegua (see chapter two), criticized the proposal by fellow departmental legislators to replace the traditional meat-consumption tax with a direct levy on livestock production. In his defense of the status quo, Pineda countered the argument, used to help justify the change, that ranching was an easy endeavor in which nature did the bulk of the work: “it is an error to believe that cattle are produced without the careful assistance of their owner and without subjecting him to hard work.”¹ As opposed to the “calm and sedentary” nature of commerce or distilling, the other two activities that bore the brunt of the department’s tax burden, the “[t]ough, daily labors, a face exposed to the tropical sun, [and] the surrounding wild nature [made] the life of a cowboy full of anxieties, dangers, and privations.”²

Pineda lost his fight. The reigning Liberal preference for direct taxation was likely the decisive factor. But it is telling that he framed his argument in terms of the trials and tribulations of stock raising. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, enough people apparently considered ranching to be a rent-seeking activity that Pineda chose to underline its productive character rather than, for example, the feasibility of

¹ Pineda (1866), p. 1.
² Ibid.
collecting the new tax. The critique was not an isolated incident. Through the early-twentieth century, some considered ranching to represent a lower stage of economic development than agriculture. After Argentina proved that livestock exports could generate substantial wealth, the problem became the “immaculate unproductive tradition” of the country’s ranchers, who “appropriate natural rents that they do not reinvest in modernizing their farms,” rather than ranching itself. The perception that ranching in tropical Latin America has “depend[ed] on a heavy subsidy from nature” continues to this day. It is also present in the numerous claims that criollo cattle herds “effectively manage themselves,” that they “reproduce spontaneously,” and that grass was essentially “free.” One consequence of this view has been the frequent neglect or dismissal of the actual work involved in raising cattle. In this chapter, therefore, I examine the labor and social relations of ranching.

The chapter is divided into four sections. In the first, I discuss the cattle-related work performed by cowboys. Much of the time, cattle grazed peacefully on their own. But cowboys often did watch over them, if from a distance. They also provided intermittent care, moved the cattle between pastures, particularly summer and winter grazing grounds, and periodically rounded-up the herd for corral work. Inside the corrals, they branded, castrated, cured, and classified cattle. Some also milked the

---

3 In fact, the state’s inability to adequately charge cattle producers forced them to revert to the old consumption tax on beef and pork and collected at municipally-regulated slaughter houses. Even this tax was generally farmed out until the beginning of the twentieth century.
4 Hettner (1976), vol. VIII, Ch. 4; Garcia (1915).
cows. Curiously, while cowboys from Old Bolívar had considerable regional prestige, they did not enter the national imagination. The classic cowboy figure in Colombia hailed from the Llanos even though there were many more in Old Bolívar. The reason, I suggest, is that most ranch work actually involved growing grass rather than herding cattle.

The second section examines pasture work. While there were some natural grasslands in Old Bolívar, the big expansion of ranching, which started in the mid-nineteenth century, depended largely on converting forest to pasture. In fact, it is possible to think of many ranchers as grass farmers who used cattle to convert their crop into a marketable commodity. There was, therefore, more to ranching than just culling spontaneously-multiplying herds. Still, it was not more difficult than most agricultural production. And in some respects it was easier and less risky.

The third section focuses on ranch management. Many scholars have assumed that the relative ease of ranching encouraged absentee ownership and that this was a fundamental source of its low productivity. While there may be some truth to this view, it also likely exaggerates the lack of oversight by ranchers. In Old Bolívar, the standard image of an urban-oriented and indifferent landed elite fails to capture the degree to which ranchers paid attention to their cattle. Their reliance on ranch managers to oversee daily operations did not mean that ranchers were uninterested or could not administer their estates remotely.

---

8 See Smith (1967); Hettner (1976), vol. IV, Ch. 10.
Lastly, wages, debt, and land mediated the social relations of ranching.

Because the process of primitive accumulation was slow and uneven, peasants retained varying degrees of independence through the mid-twentieth century. Land-for-grass exchanges, which some suggest was the primary means by which ranchers expanded their operations, was a relatively late development. To retain a core, semi-permanent labor force, ranchers did frequently grant access to land. These tenants, however, frequently received wages for their work rather than owing labor rent. The provision of land also absolved ranchers from maintaining these workers through their wages and rations alone. Ranchers hired additional temporary or seasonal workers from nearby communities or through labor contractors from more distant ones. To obtain workers, they were frequently obliged to advance wages. In this case, however, ranchers did not convert debt into the coercive mechanism found in other parts of Latin America. Some, in fact, repeatedly failed in their effort to abolish the practice. The lighter and more flexible labor demands of ranching, compared to agriculture, likely lowered the pressure to rely on harsh, extra-economic measures. More coercive labor recruiting and retention was also limited by a weak and sometimes unwilling state. Therefore, while wages were key to ranching since the mid-nineteenth century, full-blown capitalist social relations developed slowly.
CATTLE WORK

Range work

Colombian ranchers managed their cattle in the southern Spanish tradition of the open range that spread around the Americas. Even where grass was planted and fenced, cattle spent their lives grazing under the open sky. Like the cowboy who watched over them, they had to withstand the strong tropical sun, driving rain, and abundance of pests. For shelter, they sought out the low brush where savanna merged into forest or the wide branches of a ceiba, bongo (*Cavanillesia platanifolia*), or campano (*Samanea saman*) tree left standing in the middle of a large pasture. At night, only those brood cows destined to be milked the following morning, and some peasant-owned cattle, might sleep in a corral or a small, adjacent pasture (*huerta*). Their diet was principally grass, complemented by spontaneously-growing legumes, and sometimes the fallen fruit of various trees. Supplemental forage, even hay or silage, was unheard of for beef cattle. Ranchers rarely even supplied their milk cows with freshly-cut grass. Water sources were mostly natural: rivers, creeks, and seasonal marshes. Breeding, even where there was some selection, was primarily left up to the bulls. Cows calved year-round in open pasture. And cowboys tended to show up late to check on the new offspring.

---

9 Bishko (1952); Jordon (1993).
11 González Cortina (1940), p. 60; Rodriguez Rosas (1936b); Hamilton (1993), p. 50.
13 Colombian Information Bureau (1915); PRO, Board of Trade 11.10, “Report for Garnham Roper: On the cattle resources of the Republic of Colombia,” R.B. Cunninghame Graham, March 1, 1917;
This style of management required hardy cattle. Such range practices and the natural adaptation of animals introduced during the early colonial period produced a number of types that survived well in the varying tropical conditions. In Old Bolívar, the most prominent type became known as the *costeño con cuernas* (CCC). Like other cattle in the tropics, a relatively small stature and long extremities helped dissipate heat by increasing the surface area of their bodies in relation to their mass. The development of globular fat deposits, rather than the continuous layer of subcutaneous fat common to European breeds, also facilitated the escape of body heat made worse by the effort required to digest coarse, tropical grasses. Its smooth coat helped reflect solar radiation and its thick hide provided some resistance to pests and the diseases they transmitted. Long legs and tough hooves enabled the CCC to walk considerable distances between summer and winter feeding grounds, between forage and water, and to market. It did not grow quickly, and its small loins and long neck were not ideal qualities in a beef animal. But it did not demand a high-quality diet and could quickly regain weight lost during the dry season.\(^{14}\)

While their hardiness enabled herds to survive largely on their own, the image of half-wild cattle hunted more than raised is often exaggerated.\(^{15}\) The poor-quality

---

14 Navarro (1935), p. 17-23. For problems adapting to the tropics, see Payne (1990), pp. 11-23, 100, 285; Bonsma (1955a, 1955b). The heat produced by chewing cud enable cattle to survive extremely cold temperatures. If their food supply runs out, however, they will freeze to death before dying of starvation (Young and Sparks, 1985). This adaptation is counter-productive in the tropics where one of the major environmental problems is excess heat.

natural savannas of the Llanos Orientales did require extensive range lands that made it hard to provide cattle with frequent care. There, many herds may not have had much human contact between the annual or bi-annual round-ups.\textsuperscript{16} Ranchers in the rest of the country, however, typically paid greater attention to their cattle. While many may have periodically left their cattle “completely unattended,” Pineda’s portrait of the cowboy watching over a herd and moving it between savanna, \textit{ciénaga}, and pasture is probably closer to the truth.\textsuperscript{17} Striffler, for instance, noted the cowboys following the animals in their charge on the vast \textit{ciénaga}-turned-savannas of the San Jorge River during the dry summer months.\textsuperscript{18} By law, ranchers could leave their cattle unattended in fenced pastures as well as those areas where the system of ‘\textit{soltura}’ was customarily practiced and upheld by municipal authorities.\textsuperscript{19} The legal definition of ‘\textit{soltura}’, however, also demonstrates that cowboys frequently did keep watch over herds: “it is understood as the system of keeping equines (\textit{bestias}) and cattle loose in unfenced land, without the need for pastors to constantly watch over them \textit{as occurs in the savannas and flood plains (playones)}.”\textsuperscript{20}

While watching over the herds was not labor intensive, there were tasks to perform. Out on the range, cowboys occasionally provided care to injured or sick

\textsuperscript{16} Hettner (1976), vol. V, Ch. 4; García Bustamante (2003).
\textsuperscript{17} Vergara (1878), p. 1334.
\textsuperscript{18} Striffler (1995), p. 47.
\textsuperscript{19} Gaceta de Bolívar, Nov. 28, 1867, no. 527: Código de Policía, Artículo 150.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., my emphasis. Repeated remarks about the relative docility of the cattle of Old Bolivar also point to fairly frequent contact between cowboys and cattle (PRO, Board of Trade 11.10, “Report for Garnham Roper: On the cattle resources of the Republic of Colombia,” R.B. Cunninghame Graham, March 1, 1917; Bell (1919), p. 25; NARA, RG 166, 1904-1939, Colombia, “Cattle industry in Colombia,” William Boaz, Dec. 18, 1925). See also the account of the rancher José A. Villreal, who started grazing his cattle on the island of Cachira, near Mahates, “to save on the expense of cowboys, corraleros, etc.” (Registro de Bolívar, April 9, 1888, no. 515, p. 112: Ratificación de una resolución).
animals. In particular, they needed to attend to newborn calves whose navels frequently became infested with maggots. Cowboys also periodically provided salt to their cattle. Industry observers complained that the amounts and frequency were rarely sufficient, but it was a recurring part of the job. Some drove their animals to public salt licks.\textsuperscript{21} Others supplied purchased salt directly to pasturing animals, either filling long troughs or dissolving it in a source of water.\textsuperscript{22} Bernardo Ospina insisted that his cowboys “in no way stop giving salt because it discredits the name of the hacienda.”\textsuperscript{23} Even in the Llanos, some ranchers scattered large chunks of rock salt, extracted from local salt pans, in the vicinity of their cattle so they could lick them at will.\textsuperscript{24} Much of what they did, though, was keep an eye out for problems: rustling and predation; outbreaks of disease and pests; localized flooding in winter or out-of-control fires in summer. In communal pastures, they might ensure that no one surpassed their stocking rights and that non-authorized animals did not graze freely. Their presence also kept the cattle used to people.\textsuperscript{25}

Rounding-up cattle to put in corrals, to trail to new grazing grounds, or to separate for market was the most labor-demanding part of range work. It was the moment when cowboys proved their skills, earned the esteem of their peers and bosses, and gathered material for future storytelling.\textsuperscript{26} Ranchers with private pastures

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{21} Gaceta de Bolivar, July 25, 1869, no. 636: Memorial de varios vecinos del distrito de Montería.
\textsuperscript{22} Ocampo (2007), p. 108.
\textsuperscript{23} APNOyC, Cáceres, f812.
\textsuperscript{24} Hettner (1976), vol. V, Ch. 4.
\textsuperscript{25} NARA, RG 166, 1904-1939, Colombia, “Cattle raising in the Cartagena consular district,” Lester Schnare, Dec. 19, 1924.
\textsuperscript{26} Rivas (1983), Ch. 12.
\end{flushleft}
might have to hire extra hands for these *rodeos*. Where cattle were grazed communally, the law and custom demanded that roundups be done in unison. In this case, cowboys from different operations worked together to round-up the cattle and separate them out by brand. If not all cattle owners could agree on a date, the largest ones could make the decision. But the latter had to inform the others when the rodeo would take place so they could attend or send someone to make sure that no one else claimed some of their animals.

Two accounts of mid-nineteenth-century rodeos, one from the upper Magdalena River Valley and the other from the Cauca Valley, probably give a good idea of what they involved. The cowboys hired by Medardo Rivas started showing up at half-past five in the afternoon at his pasture along the Magdalena River. They greeted each other, loosely tying their small, agile horses, called *mochos*, to a trunk so they were on hand at first light. They also came equipped with a long, iron-tipped lance (*garrocha*) and lasso (*rejo*) tied to their saddle. The cowboys sat down around a large campfire where a cook and her two sisters grilled plantains and made an enormous pot of stew (*sancocho*) out of more green plantains and dried beef (*tasajo*). They ate at seven, washing down the meal with watery hot chocolate served in a dried gourd (*totuma*). After dinner, some of the cowboys sang *bambucos*, but most gathered around to tell ranch stories (*cuentos de rancho*): “amorous adventures, told in free and spicy language, of fabulous deeds of bulls and cowboys” that become increasingly exaggerated as the night wore on. At daybreak, the noise and commotion of shouting

---

28 Gaceta de Bolivar, Nov. 28, 1867, no. 527, p. 2: Código de Policía, Articulo 164, 165.
cowboys, mounted steeds, and jingling spurs reminded Rivas of the excitement of an annual fair.\textsuperscript{29}

Isaac Holton, who participated in a rodeo in the Cauca Valley, paid close attention to the saddle and rigging. The saddle used for cattle work was high-pommeled and heavy, the frame made of iron and wood. On better ones, soft-leather side jockeys (\textit{cojinetes}), often padded and sometimes embroidered with silk, covered the couple of layers of hard leather stretched over and attached to the frame with rawhide. Reed mats, rugs, or even folded sacks served as a saddle blanket. The girth, made of twisted rawhide, attached the saddle to the horse by passing back-and-forth between the rings on either side, drawing tight, and tying it off with a special knot. The best stirrups were made of brass or wood in the form of a slipper, but wooden, ring-style stirrups were also common. In some cases, a stick of wood “suspended from the saddle by forked thong” served the purpose. In addition to a crupper, tied under the horse’s tail to prevent the saddle from sliding forward, cowboy saddles also had “an \textit{arretranca} [breast strap] to enable the horse to hold back without straining the girth.”\textsuperscript{30} The stirrup leathers were imported, but Caucanos would not trust, Holton said, their “formidable” bits to be made abroad.\textsuperscript{31} The reins, attached to the bit by chain, and the headstall were also made of twisted or braided rawhide. Supposedly strong enough to resist half-a-ton of strain, the reins came together and then split again into two long thongs used as a whip or to tie off the horse.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{29} Rivas (1983), Ch. 12.
\textsuperscript{30} Holton (1857), p. 425.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., p. 424.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., pp. 424-425.
Cowboys did not tend to have special outfits. A few might pull on leather chaps (*zamarras*); a better-off rancher perhaps wearing a pair made out of jaguar hide. Most just wore the cotton pants, cut three-quarters length or rolled up to keep them from the mud, common to the lowlands. Some had loosely flowing shirts, while others wore nothing but a light, cotton poncho (*ruana*). Sandals (*alpargatas*), often just leather soles strapped on with rawhide thongs, did what they could to protect the feet. Some cowboys went barefoot, strapping on huge spurs to their naked heels. Coarse straw hats gave some protection from the hot sun.\(^{33}\)

Mounted and ready for the day’s work, the cowboys set off toward the pasture or savanna where the cattle grazed. Holton’s crew, coming upon the group they wanted, circled widely to try and slip between them and a forest thicket. After making sure their saddles were tight, the leader gave the signal to charge: “The head of the column dashes forward at a gallop, and soon a line of some 30 horsemen, at distances from 3 to 10 rods apart, extends between the herd and their wonted refuge.”\(^{34}\) While the cattle started to proceed in the desired direction:

Suddenly a cow…breaks our line at full gallop for the thicket. Two horsemen start in pursuit, and she soon finds a noose about her head. When she has run the length the guasca [lasso] permits, her head can go no farther, and her body is unwilling to stop. She falls, and is not disposed to rise. One vaquero approaches, carefully keeping out of the circle of which the tightened guasca is the radius and his companion the centre. Whirling the end of his own guasca round and round suddenly, he brings it down like a slung-shot upon the poor rebel, and she starts to her feet. Still she will not move one step. He raises his

---

\(^{33}\) Ibid., pp. 425-426; Rivas (1983), Ch. 12.

\(^{34}\) Holton (1857), p. 427.
foot, and drags his cruel spur along her back. She darts forward, and the horse
of her leader, the moment he feels the guasca slacken, starts on, keeping one
eye upon the movements of the cow. After zigzagging and floundering a while,
she waxes wroth, and assumes the aggressive upon her leader. Now she finds
the other lazo about her horns, and each horseman keeps her from reaching the
other.35

Rivas’ cowboys took a more boisterous approach. Entering the pasture, they
fanned out, ridding up to the tops of hills where they called the cattle with long shouts.
Surprised, the cattle first started running aimlessly. But soon they began to form small
groups that slowly joined each other to form one large herd descending toward the
bottom lands. Still shouting, the cowboys surrounded and progressively tightened the
herd. When a bull tried to escape, they cut in front of it and shouted to redirect it back
into the group. The calves that fell by the wayside often had to be roped:

Nothing is more admirable than to see these cowboys, with a thick, stiff, and
heavy lasso 16 yards long, and with a six-yard noose that they can barely
swing above their heads, ride behind a small calf in the middle of the [tall]
grass, throw the lasso, and shortly after see the calf tied to one end and the
other wrapped around the horn of the saddle, and the mocho backing up to
return the deserter to the general quarters.36

Rodeo work could be dangerous but, according to Holton, “both horse and
rider enjoy the sport highly.”37 The recently-formed pastures of the Magdalena River
Valley spread over rough hills strewn with partially-burnt trunks and were covered by

36 Rivas (1983), Ch. 12.
tall-growing pará and guinea grass that made it difficult to see the dangers lurking underneath. Riders largely relied on their horses’ instinct to sense danger. When that failed, they depended on their own toughness and bravado. Holton painted the following portrait of the physical dangers that cowboys faced: “He is riding at full gallop, and his horse put his foot into a deep hole covered in grass. He comes to the ground as from a railroad car. He picks up his guasca, and, if his cow has not got clear, off he starts again in the chase. His girth breaks when he has a bull tied to the pommel of his saddle. He manages to escape unharmed.” 38 After driving the cattle into the corral, the cowboys returned to camp “to relate, interrupting each other, the risks they ran and the feats they accomplished, each attributing the success of the rodeo to himself.” 39

As the seasons changed, ranchers moved their cattle between alternative feeding grounds. In Old Bolívar, the key moments in the annual cycle were the beginning of the dry season (December) and the beginning of the rainy season (April). In summer, the grasses and natural water sources of the savannas and higher lands dried up as the low-lying flood plains and ciénagas slowly drained to reveal large expanses of fresh natural pasturage close to water. Cowboys trailed herds into these semi-seasonal savannas before they were completely dry, the cattle often slogging through the mud to reach the corral and other primitive housing that recently had been completely covered by water. 40 As the land dried, Sabana ranchers moved their families and workers to the ciénagas for the duration of the summer. Living conditions

38 Ibid., pp. 429-430.
39 Rivas (1983), Ch. 12.
there were far from comfortable. But the food was abundant and varied, which more than made up for the simple living quarters, dirt floors, crude furniture, and constant exposure. As the rains returned at the end of March and the summer grazing grounds began to flood, ranchers and cowboys rounded up the cattle again and moved them back to higher ground. This transhumance did not always require going great distances. In the Sinú Valley, some large ranches stretched across both kinds of land. Other ranchers lived close to the interface between savanna and ciénaga. But many ranchers shared this “nomadic” life. Even in the 1950s, half of the cattle in San Marcos, along the San Jorge River, had to be moved to higher ground as the annual flood waters reduced the forage base. Most ranchers from the Sabanas de Bolívar owned both savanna and ciénaga properties. Numerous ranchers from the Sinú Valley even moved their animals to the low-lying lands south of the San Jorge River every summer. Elsewhere in the country, a similar seasonal transhumance between savanna or pasture and flood plain, or in some cases even forest, marked the ranching calendar.

Moving cattle between summer and winter grazing grounds was thus one of the important tasks of the cowboy. Given the amount of work, ranchers would often have to hire additional help or use workers assigned to other tasks. The labor demands were high because ranchers tended to move their cattle in relatively small groups of a hundred or two hundred head. To prepare cattle for the journey, ranchers tried to put

---

42 Ibid.
43 Randell (1953).
44 Lugari (1935), p. 615; Arquez (1993); Randell (1953).
them on good pasture and provide them with salt. Sometimes they shoed the calves with leather booties to minimize damage to their hooves during the trail drives. When a group of cattle was ready to leave, they were tallied and handed over to a trail boss (capataz or jefe de viaje). The accompanying cowboys packed their rations – usually plantains, yucca, salted beef, salted cheese, and raw sugar – and set out in the positions the capataz assigned them. The guide (guía) took the lead where he determined the route and where to place men at particularly troublesome spots. Four to six white guide-oxen – trained, accustomed to the journey, and easy to see both day and night – walked at the head of the herd. Several other cowboys rode along side, keeping the group moving and close together. The trail boss and other more experienced cowboys took up the rear, making sure stragglers did not get left behind. The start of the trip was the most delicate since the cattle had yet to be trail broken and the risks of a stampede were greater. The guide lulled the herd with cattle-driving songs and the cowboys kept them tightly grouped. In the early stages, several cowboys counted the herd every five to ten kilometers. As the animals became calmer, the recounts were spaced further apart. The trail crew stopped at well-recognized places along the way, often small pastures rented for this purpose, to let the cattle to rest, drink and eat, and to count them again. When there was good moonlight, some drove their cattle at night to take advantage of the cooler temperatures. Otherwise, they left early in the morning and rested during the mid-day heat.45

45 Arquez (1993), pp. 224-225; AOFB, Jegua, Sabanas y ciénagas del departamento de Sucre, Salvador Vargas. Arquez says that the mineralized salt was mixed with Methylene blue as a preventative in case cattle ate poisonous plants in unfamiliar pastures along the way.
Even though these trail drives were relatively short, some two to five days, problems occurred with some frequency. Sore hooves or other physical ailments prevented some cattle from finishing the journey. Others fell sick from eating poisonous plants. Custom dictated that the trail crew could leave these animals without prior notice in any ranch along the way, even breaking a fence if they were far from the entrance. Someone from their outfit would come by later to collect them and pay for the pasture time and any damages. If an animal died en route, the trail boss sold the animal as quickly as possible to any nearby settlement or ranch. When the crew realized that they had lost an animal, several cowboys went back to search for it in the most likely spots since the previous tally. If they failed to find it, the rancher would have other trail crews keep an eye out and give ranchers in the area a description of the animal and brand. Cowboys dealt with animals that continually deviated from the herd or risked sending it into a stampede by tying them to the guide-oxen, who compelled the troublemakers to follow their lead.\(^{46}\)

These guide-oxen played another key role at one of the most critical moments on the journey: the river crossings. The cowboys led their cattle to one of the traditional passes across the important rivers and sloughs (caños). There they separated them into small groups, fenced and put them into a line where there were such facilities. With machetes, they cleared away any vegetation that might entangle the cattle and cause them to drown. Then, with a horse and rider in the lead, they drove a small lot into the water behind the guide-oxen, who could make five to six trips to bring the entire group across.

\(^{46}\) Arquez (1993), pp. 225-226
Riverbank communities earned extra income during the seasonal movements by aiding the cowboys to cross. Canoeists (varqueteros) took the cowboys’ clothes, saddles, supplies, as well as the calves to the other side. They also paddled along side the cattle to make sure they did not get swept downstream or try to swim upstream. Cattle that refused to enter the water had to be roped and pulled across one-by-one. The cowboys crossed swimming alongside their horses or holding on to their tails. It was not uncommon for a couple of head to drown during these crossings. Others sometimes got stuck in the mud, made worse as the crossing herds progressively turned the riverbanks into steep and slick mud pits.\textsuperscript{47} Striffler thought it was cruel and curious that nineteenth-century ranchers often left these animals to die a slow, miserable death.\textsuperscript{48}

\textit{Corral work}

With the cattle in the corral, cowboys got off their horses to perform a variety of tasks. In 1919, Bell, noted that, “there being no open range, and as the cattle are always kept in small pastures, they are tame, gentle, and easily handled.\textsuperscript{49} The Scottish adventurer Robert Cunninghame Graham, who investigated the cattle industry in Old Bolivar for the English government, also stressed the relative docility of the cattle. While cowboys from other ranching regions in the Americas with which he was

\textsuperscript{47} Arquez (1993), p. 228; AOFB, Jegua, Condiciones de vida y trabajo en fincas y en la pesca, Rafael Martínez, March 5, 1982; AOFB, Caimito, Ganadería y Comunidad de Cispataca; AOFB, Jegua, Sabanas y ciénagas del departamento de Sucre, Salvador Vargas; AOFB, San Jorge, Transporte de Ganado por agua, March 19, 1978.


\textsuperscript{49} Bell (1919), p. 25.
familiar had to separate and rope corralled animals from horseback, in Old Bolívar a couple of men could accomplish this on foot.\textsuperscript{50}

Branding and other ways of marking property was a key task. Holton saw cowboys going over the herd: “What calf has not his ear-mark? What youngster of two months has not his little brand on his cheek? What yearling not branded for life on his side?”\textsuperscript{51} With the fire burning and the branding irons hot, they began roping and toppling unmarked animals: “A lazo on his head, another on his heels,” lariats pulled tight and down they went.\textsuperscript{52} They kept some grease on hand in case blisters formed.\textsuperscript{53} From the mid-nineteenth-century, the law required ranchers to register their brands with the local police or face fines.\textsuperscript{54} Later, the police began collecting even more detailed information – such as sale brands and the location of ranchers’ pastures and corrals – to better identify potentially stolen cattle. Most ranchers likely complied with these requirements because it was in their self-interest. In fact, some industry observers complained about excessive branding: the confusing array that marked changing ownership, altered brands, and ranchers on communal lands quickly branding unmarked cattle before their ownership could be determined.\textsuperscript{55} But what they most criticized was the practice of branding cattle high on their legs or torsos, which, though easy to see, lowered hide values. Since cattle hides were a significant export, where ranchers branded their animals was of some national concern. In 1933, the

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{50} PRO, Board of Trade 11.10, “Report for Garnham Roper: On the cattle resources of the Republic of Colombia,” R.B. Cunninghame Graham, March 1, 1917.
\textsuperscript{51} Holton (1857), p. 429.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{53} Almanaque Creditario (1947), p. 37.
\textsuperscript{54} Gaceta de Bolívar, no. 17, Dec. 22, 1857, 5.
\textsuperscript{55} AHC, Gobernación, Asamblea, 1894-1924, Ordenanza adicional y reformatoria de los leyes de policia vigentes en el departamento; Sarasti (1934), p. 384.
\end{flushleft}
government finally started to regulate where ranchers could brand their cattle, though it appears that enforcement only began in 1941.\footnote{NARA, RG 166, 1920-1941, Colombia, “Careless branding of cattle is regulated by recent law,” A.R. Randolph, Nov. 13, 1940; Sarasti (1934), pp. 383-384. The original decrees were 1372 and 1608 of 1933.}

In the corral, cowboys also treated injured animals. To wounds from fighting, insects, birds, or some other source, they applied a commercial salve like creolina (a coal-tar-based disinfectant), lard, or some other kind of folk remedy. If not treated quickly, the wounds would invariably fill with maggots that first had to be removed. For the “calf with a sack of morbid growth” that Holton saw, “a spatula of wood is whittled out with a machete; fifty maggots of all sizes are dislodged from the cavity, and it is filled with the first dry, soft, absorbent substance at hand.”\footnote{Holton (1857), p. 429.} This was a common task to perform on the poorly-healed navels of calves, which then had to be cauterized followed by the application of a greasy ointment. For a pair of cattle with bad throat tumors, the manager of an hacienda owned by Pedro Nel Ospina had them punctured in various places, cauterized with hot tweezers, and slathered with a combination of very hot tallow, lard, soap, and a folk-medicinal plant oil. Unfortunately, the treatment did not help.\footnote{APNOyC, CR 1915-1916, June 17, 1916.}

Removing external parasites, such as ticks, lice, and the larvae of biting flies, was another time-consuming responsibility. Traditionally, cowboys pulled them off by hand or tried to suffocate them by applying a thick unguent such as palm fruit (corozo) butter, raw petroleum, hog lard mixed with sulfur, alligator lard, tree gourd (totumo)
pulp, chewed tobacco, or a commercial product like Veterina. In 1937, a farm journal recommended applying a mix of Venetan (a Bayer product), a cheap fat, and used motor oil to the swollen sacks of pus that the larvae of the bot fly (Dermatobia hominis) and warble fly (Hipoderma bovis), commonly known as nuche, produced under the skin. One rancher from Tolima found that he could rid his cattle of ticks by putting a mixture of three ounces of Glauber’s salt, three ounces of regular salt, and a tablespoon of powdered sulfur in their mouths and passing it with water. Along with burning pastures, such remedies helped limit infestations but they did not effectively combat the parasites, which caused considerable problems for the industry. In 1958, the FAO estimated that ectoparasitic-related losses amounted to almost twelve percent of the total annual value of livestock production. To promote the practice of dipping cattle in arsenic solutions to combat ticks in the 1930s and 1940s, government officials endlessly stressed the damage they caused: substantial blood loss retarded fattening by up to 20 percent, reduced milk production an estimated 25 to 42 percent, slowed development, weakened cattle, and spread disease.

Ranchers began to combat ticks by chemical means in the 1910s and the practice slowly spread over the following decades. Most ranchers who initially adopted these measures had workers rub their cattle with cloths or old fiber sacks dipped in an arsenic solution. While there is some mention of the risks to the animals from careless application, such as getting the solution in their eyes, the reports say

61 Pleston (1918a).
63 D’Orsonville (1931), pp. 6-12; Sarasti (1934), pp. 381-382; Castro (1937); Ospina (1939a; 1939e).
nothing about the threat to workers. Presumably their exposure was significant since a pair could only hand-bathe 50 cattle in a day. Early on, there was some reluctance to control ticks with chemicals because ranchers considered them too strong, expensive (especially given the wasteful nature of hand washing and the labor requirements), and even ineffective (possibly due to incomplete or too infrequent bathing). Additionally, fighting ticks and other parasites in this manner required that ranchers have private pastures with well-maintained fences to prevent their cattle from mingling with untreated animals. In Old Bolívar, numerous ranchers may also have felt that ticks did not pose significant a problem.

The practice of dipping cattle began to catch on following the good results shown by some large, progressive ranchers who built their own tanks. Officials recommended relatively inexpensive hand-pumps for up to 100 head of cattle, but immersion baths for larger herds due to their practicality and speed, more effective coverage, and more efficient use of the chemical solution. Still, the cost of constructing a tank and the recommended bi-weekly dipping discouraged their quick diffusion. Officials insisted that the per-head expense of the arsenic solution was negligible. But over the lifespan of a steer, which could easily last five years, frequent dipping could amount to five percent of its final sale price. It might also have doubled the labor costs of roundups had a rancher previously been content to undertake this

64 D’Orsonville (1932), p. 32; Ospina (1939a).
65 Plested (1918a); D’Orsonville (1932); Ospina (1939a).
66 D’Orsonville (1932), p. 32.
68 Anon. (1932a); D’Orsonville (1932); Gracia (1937); Ospina (1939a)
task on a monthly basis. Fatteners, therefore, tended to be early adopters while ranchers who bred and raised cattle sometimes preferred to rely on traditional methods of pasture management (burning, rotation, or avoidance) and hand removal.\(^6^9\) However, as the government subsidized construction costs, legally required ranchers with over 500 head to build their own tanks, established public tanks in strategic locations, and required dipping for inter-municipal transport, more and more ranchers adopted the practice. By the 1940s and 1950s, herding cattle single-file into the dipping tanks became a more common part of the cowboy’s workload.\(^7^0\)

In the corral, cowboys also identified the sick animals they missed in the pastures and treated those they could. Although Cunninghame Graham found the cattle of Old Bolívar to be remarkably healthy, various diseases periodically plagued them.\(^7^1\) Anthrax (*carbón bacteriano*), blackleg (*carbón sintomático*), Texas fever (*ranilla* or *piroplasmosis*), and anaplasmosis (*huequera* or *ranilla blanca*) were among the more significant ‘traditional’ diseases. Anthrax, a bacteriological disease that infects cattle who digest the long-lasting spores (*Bacillus anthracis*), causes high fever, the spleen to rupture, and internal bleeding. A rapidly-progressing disease, cattle

\(^{6^9}\) Ocampo (2007), pp. 93-94; D’Orsonville (1932); Ruiz Mesa (1952). The manager of Hacienda Marta Magdalena also noted that ticks were particularly bad along the Sinú River during the summer months, and instructed cowboys to water the cattle only in the ciénagas and the water holding tanks they had constructed (Ocampo, 2007, p. 110).

\(^{7^0}\) D’Orsonville (1932); Anon. (1932a); Duque (1934); García (1937); Ministerio de Agricultura y Comercio (1935b); Ospina (1939f); Gómez Rueda (1939), p. 18; Mejia (1941), p. 17; Gómez Rueda (1942), pp. 10-11. Still, the practice of dipping had not become standard even by 1950. Ruiz Mesa (1952, p. 8) reported that only a few ranchers had built them in the department of Magdalena.

sometimes died without showing symptoms: one vernacular name was lightning plague (*peste rayo*). In 1887, an outbreak in Old Bolívar caught the attention of the *New York Times* for the supposedly successful method that ranchers used to treat infected animals: “The animal must be properly bled by making an incision in the principal vein in the neck, and while the blood continues to exude the animal must be bathed with cold water, and a drench, consisting of four ounces of table salt and ten ounces of lime juice, must be administered, to be followed by a large quantity of water.” For complete recovery within a few days, a second bath had to be given several hours after the first and then again the following day along with a bucket of salt water to drink. Other treatments included: strong purgatives (Croton oil), iodouridine solutions, turpentine essence, and hypodermic injections of saline solution, mercuric chloride, and phenic acid.

Blackleg, caused by the ingestion of the bacteria *Clostridium chauvoei*, was also highly fatal. Symptoms included loss of appetite, depression, high fever, and gaseous swelling. It also evolved rapidly, with high mortality rates within a day or two and sometimes before the symptoms were visible. Some ranchers cut away tumors that appeared and washed the affected area with carbolic acid. In the 1930s, some also gave hypodermic injections of solutions designed to treat blackleg, but they only supposedly worked if the disease was caught early enough and was not a virulent

---

72 Santamaria (1879); Tavares (1920); Ospina (1939g).
73 Anon. (1887); see also Santamaria (1879).
74 Lleras (1906).
75 Ospina (1939g; 1939h); Tavares (1920); Eckeff (1937).
76 Ospina (1939g; 1939h).
strain. The solution, which had to be administered every 3 to 4 hours, was expensive, causing government officials recommend preventive measures over treatment.\(^77\)

By contrast, the other two ‘traditional’ diseases, Texas fever and anaplasmosis, were more endemic and not as fatal. Texas fever is caused by a protozoal parasite transmitted by *Boophilus* ticks.\(^78\) As in the nineteenth-century case involving cattle from Texas, animals from Old Bolívar and other lowland areas where the ticks were endemic developed resistance to the disease in their first months. These animals, however, became carriers of the disease and ticks attached to them could pass it on to cattle in highland areas where it was not endemic, causing many fatalities.\(^79\) When outbreaks occurred, highland ranchers tried to move their cattle to even higher elevations where they said the disease would pass, probably by killing off the host ticks.\(^80\) The disease could also reappear in resistant animals when their defenses were down, causing loss of appetite, fever, and severe anemia.\(^81\) In the late-nineteenth century, ranchers bled infected animals from the neck.\(^82\) In the 1920s, they provided them with shade to cool the fever, salt purgatives if they were constipated, and alcohol rubs and injections of alcohol and black coffee if they looked weak.\(^83\) By the late 1930s, they were also treating infected animals with Trypan Blue (azonaphthalene),

\(^77\) Ibid.
\(^78\) Ocampo (2007, p. 90) identifies the species of tick in the Sinú Valley as *Boophilus microplus*. The protazoan, originally called *Pyrosoma bigeminum*, was re-identified as two different species: *Babesia bigemina* and *Babesia bovis* (www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/TT/awt1.html).
\(^79\) Santamaría (1879); Carrasquilla (1899); García (1915).
\(^80\) Santamaría (1879).
\(^81\) Gracia (1937b); Ospina (1939e); Albornoz (1936a).
\(^82\) Santamaría (1879).
\(^83\) Tavares (1920).
the first specific drug against one of the responsible protozoa (*Babesia bigemina*), Trypaflavine (acriflavine), and even injections of quinine.\(^8^4\)

Anaplasmosis is an infectious disease that also destroys red blood cells and causes lack of appetite, weakness, constipation, and belabored breathing due to mucus build-up. It is caused by a parasite (*Anaplasma marginale*) found in the red blood cells of infected animals that is transmitted by insects such as ticks. Through the 1930s, however, many ranchers thought it was a kind of cold due to the mucus that caused pus to collect in the hollow part of the horns. They treated it by cutting open the horns to allow the pus to drain. Unfortunately, the considerable trauma caused by this operation reduced an animal’s defenses even more. While many cattle recovered from anaplasmosis, they also became immunized carriers that perpetuated the disease. In the 1930s, scientists confirmed the disease locally known as *huequera* (a reference to the hollow part of the horns) or *ranilla blanca* to be anaplasmosis. As with Texas fever, the principal solution was to combat its vector, ticks, through persistent chemical dipping. During this period, injections of arsenic-based solutions (cacodylate of soda or Anaplasmol) also became a more common way to treat infected animals.\(^8^5\)

There were various other diseases and parasites that taxed cattle herds, especially calves, but many of them do not appear to have had traditional cures. More

---

\(^8^5\) Ospina (1918), p. 344; Albornoz (1936a); Romero (1938); Marulanda (1939); Mejía (1943). Cacodylate of soda is “an organic compound yielding trivalent inorganic arsenic on metabolism in the body, similar in effects and toxicity to arsenic trioxide” (http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/sodium+cacodylate). Anaplasmol is a trademarked drug currently produced by the Colombian veterinary pharmaceutical company, Vicar. It is composed of cacodylate of soda, citric acid, and strychnine (http://www.vicar.com.co/index.swf). Arisil [Aerosil?] was also used, although it is not clear what this product was.
likely, ranchers considered the sick animals, reduced productivity, and losses to be a natural part of the cattle business. For example, bronchial and intestinal parasites caused mucous, coughs, breathing difficulty, loss of appetite, weight loss, and anemia. In 1958, the FAO estimated that internal parasites were responsible for 15 percent of all cattle losses. Calves also frequently suffered from intestinal diseases caused by coccidia parasites. While ranchers started to treat calves with various drugs in the 1940s, officials insisted that the best way to reduce calf mortality rates was through preventative measures: remove young animals from humid pastures, isolate sick animals, drain stagnant water, ‘sterilize’ pastures with iron sulfate, and provide calves with mineralized salts.

Starting in the 1910s, ranchers also began vaccinating their cattle against the most virulent diseases, anthrax and blackleg. Pasteur developed his anthrax vaccine in 1881. Twelve years later, there were calls for the Colombian government to produce it locally. While domestic production only began in 1918, some ranchers began administering imported vaccines to their animals at the turn of the century. By contrast, Frederico Lleras began manufacturing a vaccine against blackleg in his Bogotá laboratory in 1907. Some ranchers found that these vaccines gave promising results and treated their cost as a form of insurance. In 1915, Luis Puerta, the manager

---

86 Marulanda (1938), p. 11.
87 Herrán (1934), p. 324-336; Ministerio de Agricultura y Comercio (1935b), pp. 157-158; Roa Rosas (1936); Albornoz (1936b); Marulanda (1937); Gómez Rueda (1939); Mejía (1943); United Nations (1962), p. 21.
88 Marulanda (1936); Herrán (1934), p. 325; Ministerio de Agricultura y Comercio (1935b), pp. 157-158; Velásquez (1944).
89 Marulanda (1936); Gómez Rueda (1939); Mejía (1943); Cañón (1940).
90 Lleras (1906a, 1906b); Anon. (1906); del Corral (1918); Ocampo (2007); APNOyC, 160, Marco A. Salazar to Cesar Salazar, March 12, 1913; APNOyC, 200, f234, f447, f452
91 Lleras (1907).
of a cattle estate in northern Antioquia, said the loss of 6 out of 50 steer in a lot
passing through from an anthrax outbreak was a waste since they could have been sent
vaccinated.\textsuperscript{92} Additionally, in 1912, vaccinated steer earned a premium in the Medellín
market, providing a further incentive to adopt the practice.\textsuperscript{93}

Nonetheless, vaccinating also ran into some resistance. Apparently to save
money, the managers of Marta Magdalena found they could manage diseases by
evacuating pastures where they appeared. This practice allowed them to vaccinate
cattle only two weeks before they were shipped to market.\textsuperscript{94} A number of ranchers
also complained about their ineffectiveness.\textsuperscript{95} There may have been some truth to such
claims: in the above-mentioned case from northern Antioquia, a vaccinated animal
also died during the anthrax outbreak.\textsuperscript{96} But officials countered that ranchers too
frequently waited until an outbreak occurred before vaccinating, by which time it was
often too late. Other complaints stemmed from misdiagnoses. Expired and mishandled
vaccines were also a problem. Further frustrating ranchers who wanted to vaccinate
was the periodic scarcity of vaccines: the companies selling them did not always hold
enough stock and back orders took considerable time to arrive.\textsuperscript{97}

Still, the use of vaccines started to become relatively commonplace by the
1930s, thanks in part to the government requirement that ranchers moving cattle

\textsuperscript{92} APNOyC, CR-1915, Luis Puerta to Marco A. Salazar, Nov. 15, 1915.
\textsuperscript{93} APNOyC, 160, Marco A. Salazar to Roberto Salazar, Oct. 3, 1912.
\textsuperscript{94} Ocampo (2007), p. 111.
\textsuperscript{95} Virviescas (1931); Herrán (1934), p. 324, 342; Sanclamente (1935); Sociedad de
Agricultores del Valle del Cauca (1939).
\textsuperscript{96} APNOyC, CR-1915, Luis Puerta to Marco A. Salazar, Nov. 15, 1915. See also Ocampo
\textsuperscript{97} Lleras (1906b); Lleras (1907); Herrán (1934), p. 342; Ministerio de Agricultura y Comercio
(1935b), p. 156; Rojas (1938), p. 27; Sociedad de Agricultores del Valle del Cauca (1939);
Cañón (1943).
between municipalities provide authorities with a certificate that they had been vaccinated.\textsuperscript{98} Vaccinating cattle, therefore, became a common duty for cowboys during rodeo time. They inoculated calves against blackleg at two to three months, and reinforced the immunity two to three more times later on; they had to reapply the anthrax vaccine annually. By the 1950s, the increasing application of these vaccinations helped to reduce the losses caused by anthrax and blackleg.\textsuperscript{99} Another way ranchers helped to contain the spread of these diseases was by adopting better disposal practices. Instead of leaving infected corpses to rot in a pasture, or dumping them into a river or along a trail, ranchers increasingly abided by government recommendations to burn or bury them deeply under a layer of lime.\textsuperscript{100}

Unfortunately, as ranchers began to better control traditional diseases, an array of ‘new’ ones started to appear around the 1930s. Some of this proliferation was likely the result of better diagnoses. Through the 1920s, and even beyond, generic vernacular names, such as \textit{ranilla, peste, carbunosco, huequera}, lumped different diseases under the same name. Haemorrhagic septicaemia, for example, was sometimes confused with anthrax, anaplasmosis, and trypanosomiasis.\textsuperscript{101} A number of new diseases did arrive in Colombia during this time, though. Some of these arrived with pedigree

\textsuperscript{98} Sanclamente (1936); Oakley (1944), p. 36; Anon. (1937a); Gómez Rueda (1939), p. 18; Perlaza (1941); Mejía (1943); Ruiz Mesa (1952), p. 9. But Ruiz and Oakely also note that smaller ranchers tended to resist vaccinating, and that getting around the legal vaccination requirements was not difficult. Randell (1953, p. 46) found that blackleg was the most widespread disease in Colombia, though he does not venture to assess its relative importance in terms of losses. It is possible that the spread of ‘new’ diseases simply made the traditional ones less important by virtue of their own seriousness.


\textsuperscript{100} Lleras (1906a); Eckeff (1937); Ospina (1939e); Cañón (1940).

\textsuperscript{101} Lleras (1906b); Herrán (1933); Herrán (1934), p. 324; Sanclamente (1935); Ospina (1939e); Marulanda (1939), p. 14. An effective vaccine for this disease was only developed in 1939.
animals imported from Europe and the United States. For example, Bang’s Disease, which causes abortions and still births, reduced milk production, and sterility, appeared in the 1920s and spread quickly through the Sabana de Bogotá and then to other areas of the country. By the 1950s, this was one of the major threats facing the cattle industry. Others entered with Venezuelan cattle imports. This was the source of the most virulent disease during the second half of the twentieth century: foot and mouth (aftosa), which arrived in 1950.

In the corral, cowboys also castrated cattle. An old practice, castration served several purposes. Most importantly, it helped produce animals that yielded more and better quality meat, fattened better, and were easier to handle. This castration-induced tractability was also the reason for using oxen rather than bulls as draft labor. Additionally, castration enabled ranchers to improve their herds through better-controlled breeding.

Cowboys castrated male cattle in a number of ways. In the Sinú Valley, the traditional method was a sharp blow with a mallet, presumably to crush the testicles. The American vice-consul in Cartagena found this method “extremely cruel,” but it probably had the advantage of not leaving an open wound that could get infected or

---

102 Anon. (1943); Gómez Rueda (1942); Cañón (1943); Herrán (1934), p. 323-327. Other imported diseases from this period include trypanosomiasis (Ospina, 1939e) and peste boba (González Cortina, 1940).
103 Randell (1953); United Nations (1962).
104 Henríquez (1901); de la Torre (1918); Almanaque Creditario (1947); Daireaux (1944), pp. 301-302.
105 APNOyC, CR-1915-1916, Jesus Restrepo to Marco A. Salazar, July 11, 1915; Ocampo (2007). It is possible, however, that they crushed the ducts and blood vessels leading to the penis rather than the testicle. This is how the burdizzo or emasculator functions: it is a clamp designed to break blood vessels, which leads to shrinking and eventual loss.
infested with maggots.\textsuperscript{106} This was an important consideration when ranchers castrated mature cattle, which produced a sizable wound. In 1920, many ranchers still castrated their animals at the age of three.\textsuperscript{107} Antioqueño ranchers in Old Bolívar (and possibly others as well) also performed surgical castrations. In this case, cowboys either made a slit in the scrotum and excised the testicles, or simply cut it off with a knife or pincers.\textsuperscript{108} There was a preference to castrate cattle during a waning moon: the darker nights and more frequent rains supposedly helped keep the wound clean and heal better.\textsuperscript{109} Still, mortality rates from these operations could be quite high. In 1915, the manager of Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía.’s haciendas in the lower Cauca River Valley reported that, out of 21 bulls castrated, two had died: one had been done with a knife and the other by mallet.\textsuperscript{110} That same year, the manager of Hacienda Marta Magdalena started to use an imported machine, recommended by a U.S. veterinarian, to reduce their castration-related losses, which were sometimes as high as 15 percent. The machine, however, caused considerable swelling and managers were sometimes reluctant to use it.\textsuperscript{111}

From the turn of the twentieth century, government officials and other agricultural improvers pushed ranchers to castrate their animals while young. They

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid; see also Vargas Vergara (1909).
\textsuperscript{108} Ocampo (2007), pp. 111-113; Almanaque Creditario (1947). The latter method apparently drained and healed better when performed on calves but it may have been too traumatic for bulls (Potter 1921, p. 62).
\textsuperscript{110} APNOyC, CR-1915-1916, Jesus Restrepo to Marco A. Salazar, July 11, 1915.
\textsuperscript{111} Ocampo (2007), pp. 111-112.
tried to dispel beliefs that early castration impeded a steer from fully developing.\textsuperscript{112}

But given the relatively high mortality rate, many small breeders, rather than just being misguided or “lazy,” might have preferred to sell their animals intact and let the larger ranchers who raised and fattened them assume the risks of the procedure.\textsuperscript{113}

Bulls also convert feed into body mass more efficiently than steer, so breeders who postponed castrating might have benefited economically. Additionally, it is plausible that, by waiting, some breeders might have been better able to determine which males should be kept for breeding. Castrating calves rather than young bulls helps to produce higher quality meat, but since there were no market incentives for quality in Colombia, breeders felt little compulsion to take on the extra work and risk.\textsuperscript{114} Ultimately, some rancher along the production chain needed to castrate the bull before the quality of its meat declined (from an increasingly coarse texture and unpleasant smell and flavor) and it developed a heavier neck and shoulders at the expense of the more valuable hindquarters.\textsuperscript{115} Castrating bulls also helped to fatten them more and faster.

\textsuperscript{112} Vargas Vergara (1909); Archive of Luis López de Mesa [ALLM, Universidad de Antioquia], 82.1-82.3, ff 1-110: Cartilla popular Colombiana, no. 1, (Dirigida por la Redaccion de “Cultura,” suplemento de la “Revista de Instrucción Pública), julio 1918, Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional.
\textsuperscript{113} APNOyC, 232, f294.
\textsuperscript{114} Daireaux (1944), pp. 301-302; Taylor (1990), p. 292; Ledger (1990), p. 793. Bulls actually more efficient at converting feed into growth, and may weigh more than steer at the same stage of development. In steer castrated at a young age, however, the animals develop more fat than bone, the hips are wider, and the animal is rounder and meatier than leaner bulls. Tamer and easier to fatten than late-castrated bull (Daireaux, 1944, pp. 301-302). However, the advantage of late castration is that the animals grow larger more quickly; hide also thicker (Daireaux, 1944, pp. 301-302). Late castration in many tropical countries (i.e., four years) perhaps because no premium for meat quality, but get advantages of faster-growing and larger animals (Taylor 1990; Ledger, 1990). Spaying females encourages onset of fat deposition. For bulls, need to be slaughtered before ‘male’ qualities offset growth advantages: increasingly coarse texture of muscle, often objectionable small and flavor, and progressive development of heavy neck and shoulders versus hind quarters (Ledger, 1990, p. 793).
\textsuperscript{115} Ledger (1990), p. 793.
Nonetheless, at least some larger ranchers, who fattened steer they also bred, castrated early. Bernardo Ospina told his managers to start castrating from the age of two months since this produced “prettier” steer. Late castration was good for oxen, since their skeletal frame and muscles had more time to develop. But younger castration produced a lighter frame, wider hips and a rounder body, and encouraged fat deposition, all of which increased carcass yields in addition to improving meat quality. In addition, for ranchers who fattened animals they bred, early castration reduced the cost of animals who died from the procedure. By the 1950s, the pressures and arguments in favor of young castration had won out: between two and six months was commonplace, and some performed the operation on two- to four-week-old calves.

In the 1910s and 1920s, the practice of spaying female cattle also spread considerably. In 1925, local officials estimated that in the Montería area alone, ranchers had spayed some 20,000 cows. It appears that a Colombian vet, Ricardo de la Torre, developed the technique in the Eastern highlands beginning in 1895. After some experimentation, he claimed to have reduced the mortality rates for the procedure below that of steer. The benefits were cows that produced more milk, fattened better and more quickly, and received higher prices in the market. De la Torre also noted that it was a good way to remove less desirable cows from the breeding herd. He taught the technique to a number of other people who helped diffuse the

---

116 APNOyC, Cáceres, f249.
119 Randell (1953), p. 42.
120 Ministerio de Industrias (1925), p. xxxiii.
Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía., which began to adopt the procedure in the early 1920s, initially confronted high mortality rates. In one day of operating on 21 cows, three died. After some time, they figured out that the problem was mostly likely inexperience and poor hygiene. They subsequently perfected their technique so that losses were minimal: in 1924, Bernardo Ospina oversaw the operation of 400 cows in which only five died. While some used an instrument designed for the purpose, Pedro Nel Ospina Jr. found that it was just as easily done by hand, provided sanitary measures were taken. The easiest way, he wrote, was with the fingernails: after making the cut and taking out the ovary, severe all the ligaments by squeezing the thumb and forefinger together instead of putting it in the apparatus. Also, performing the operation on a slight slope, with the cows’ heads pointed downhill, moved their intestines forward so there was less chance of cutting them when making the incision. Although de la Torre and Pedro Nel Ospina Jr. preferred to operate on cows that had recently given birth, Bernardo Ospina thought it was better to do while they were still pregnant. While officials and improvers pushed ranchers to castrate male cattle, they tried to outlaw the practice in females, claiming it undermined the growth of the national herd.

Dehorning was another task that government officials and improvers encouraged ranchers to perform. Unlike castration, however, this was slow to catch on. Removing the horns from cattle prevented them from injuring each other,
especially when herded close together during rodeos, trail drives, boat and rail
transport, and in milking stalls and stockyards. Some ranchers removed the horns of
their cattle under the supposition that it made them develop and fatten better and
faster. The custom was to cut off the tips of the horns after the second year. This
practice, however, did not aid their development but caused significant trauma, risked
infection, and caused weight loss. Instead, it was recommended that dehorning be
performed while the animals were young. Foreigners thought that it be done between
two and five days after birth by rubbing a caustic potash on the horn buds for a minute
or two, and repeating two to four times. By contrast, the editors of the journal,
Ganadería de Bolívar, considered that this was too time consuming and risked getting
the solution in the animal’s eyes. A better method was to remove the incipient horn
‘button’ with a knife and then apply a caustic for 30 seconds or cauterize it with a hot
iron. This procedure could be performed with calves up to a month old. Others,
however, recommended earlier removal, which pushed the work out of the corral and
into the pastures.

Finally, once all the other work was done, cowboys might count and classify
the cattle. Ranchers were commonly criticized for keeping poor records. Even
sympathetic observers, such as the American vice-consul Kenneth Oakley, complained
that many did not even know how many cattle they had. Ranchers typically performed
a detailed inventory only at the end of the year. But some undoubtedly took advantage
of the periodic round-ups to keep closer tabs on their herds. Bernardo Ospina even

127 Rodríguez Rosas (1936a); Mullin (1938).
128 Mullin (1938).
129 Almanaque Creditario (1947).
instructed his cowboys to always carry pen and paper with them to the pastures to record any new births. A few of the larger ranchers Oakley interviewed also experimented with different kinds of accounting practices, trying to find the most appropriate way to follow the progress and profitability of their operations. Also surprising is the level of detail with which the Medellin-based Marco A. Salazar kept detailed track of his and Pedro Nel Ospina’s widespread and complex operations: even down to particular lots and sometimes individual animals. He relied on constant reports from his ranch managers, but these letters were only useful for someone who had an impressive capacity to remember and visualize the progression of cattle at a distance. While Salazar may have had a special aptitude for this, it also suggests that, for more hands-on ranchers, poor record keeping may not have implied a lack of unawareness about how their herds were doing. Some of their professed ignorance might also have stemmed from a reluctance to divulge information that they feared could lead to higher taxes. Thus, after tallying the cattle, cowboys sent them back to their pastures. It was common to separate cattle into breeding, growing (levante), and fattening herds. But many ranchers did not take much care to separate them much further, partly because this required more pastures, fencing, watering points, and work. However, a number of larger operations did separate their cattle into different lots by age, sex, breed, and destination. For instance, on Hacienda Marta Magdalena, the age-

---

130 See also Ojeda (2004), p. 41.
131 Oakley (1944). See also Díaz (1935); Meisel and Viloria (1999).
based divisions alone broke down as follows: 1 to 2.5 years; 3 to 3.5 years; 4 years; 4.5 years; 5 years; and 5-plus years.\footnote{132 Ocampo (2007), pp. 113-114.}

While roundups occurred year round, corral work varied by the season. Ranchers attempted to concentrate the work of branding, castrating, de-horning, and vaccinating when they had better pastures. For Hacienda Marta Magdalena, in the Sinú Valley, this meant the winter months of July through November.\footnote{133 Ibid, p. 253; Mullin (1938); See Randell (1953), p. 42 for year-round roundups.} Ranchers from the Sabanas region, however, might undertake these tasks during the summer months, from December to March, while their cattle grazed on the young grass of the ciénagas. Since ranchers did not limit the breeding season, calves were born year round. As a consequence, they had to decide, for calves born during the ‘wrong’ season, whether to operate while young or wait for better pastures but older animals.\footnote{134 Mullin (1938).} By contrast, counting and sorting cattle could be done at any time: choosing animals to fatten or sell and culling old and defective animals and cows with poor udders.\footnote{135 Randell (1953), p. 42.}

Sometimes there was also a seasonality to this. For instance, when forage was limited during the summer months, smaller breeders often faced pressure to sell their calves and other animals. Demand for cattle to fatten by ranchers without good summer pastures also decreased, and they might try to move their fat cattle to market before the dry summer heat parched their forage. Fatteners, however, also had to balance the risks that winter rains might make the journey to market difficult and more costly in terms of labor and losses. Care had to be provided year round, but disease, parasites
and other health problems also had their ebbs and flows. Calves were particularly vulnerable to parasitic infestations in the damp pastures.¹³⁶ Other diseases, such as blackleg, were more troublesome as forage stress affected some animals during the dry season.¹³⁷ Ticks were also worse in the dry summer months.¹³⁸

The frequency with which ranchers rounded-up their cattle is a proxy for the level of care they provided. Even well into the twentieth century, ranchers with very extensive operations, such as those of the Llanos or even parts of the Caribbean coastal plains, might only round-up their cattle for branding, castration, and culling once or twice a year.¹³⁹ Still, by mid-century, llanero cowboys searched for new-born calves to bring into a corral for a few weeks to prevent health problems, protect them from the elements, and to make sure they did not lose their mother. They also rounded-up cattle in manageable groups about once a week to give them salt and keep them used to people.¹⁴⁰ Elsewhere, including most of Old Bolívar, more frequent roundups appear to have been common by the early-twentieth century.¹⁴¹ Even in the mid-eighteenth century, Friar Juan de Santa Gertrudis noted that “[i]n [lowland] haciendas every month they bring the horses and mules (bestias) and cattle to the corral and count them; and where they have some abscess they open it with a knife

¹³⁶ Albornoz. (1936b); Roa (1936).
¹³⁷ Tavares (1920); Herrnán (1934), p. 330; Eckeff (1937).
¹³⁸ García (1915); Romero (1938).
¹⁴¹ For example, in 1921, Manuel Jiménez, who received 184 head of cattle from Martín Molina to pasture in partnership for a year, promised to provide detailed accounts of the changes in the herd every three months (Ojeda, 2004, p. 41). This implies that the roundups were at least this frequent.
and remove… maggots…and apply salt-less hog lard to the cut as a salve…”\textsuperscript{142}

Likewise, as early as 1823, Tomás C. Mosquera instructed José María Agredo, the manager of his \textit{latifundio} in the department of Cauca, to round-up and count his livestock every two weeks.\textsuperscript{143}

Another kind of corral work was more permanent: milking cows. While most ranchers in Old Bolívar primarily raised cattle for beef, many also milked at least some of their cows. Some ranchers, who were closer to urban markets, concentrated on dairy operations. Before the development of milk trucks that would pick up daily output at the ranch gate, the workers in charge of dairy tasks (\textit{corraleros}) would have to milk the cows between two and four in the morning in order to transport the milk to town, often by donkey, before the heat of the day began. Most ranchers, however, turned their milk into heavily-salted cheese (\textit{queso costeño}) and soured cream (\textit{suero}). Some milked just enough cows to supply the consumptions needs of their estates, which could be significant.\textsuperscript{144} Many also sold moderate amounts of this popular source of protein to local or regional markets and some to other regions, such the mining districts of northern Antioquia and the northern Pacific coast (Chocó).\textsuperscript{145} As land values rose, especially by the 1940s, many smaller breeders also found that they could survive only by emphasizing the milk production.\textsuperscript{146} In addition, milking also served

\textsuperscript{142} Serra (1994), p. 105.
\textsuperscript{143} Helguera (1970), p. 198.
\textsuperscript{144} In the 1950s, cattle-estate workers frequently given half-a-pound of cheese or soured cream (\textit{suero}) per day (AOFB, Cereté Sindicato Liga de Trabajadores, Fuerzas Militares de Colombia [Segunda Brigada, Batallion de Infantería no. 6, Cartagena], Sistemas de alimentación en la región de Sabanas, 1955). Between the 1920s and 1940s, Marta Magdalena gave its worker 1.5 pounds of cheese per day (Ocampo, 2007, p. 236).
\textsuperscript{145} Striffler (1995), pp.118, 121.
\textsuperscript{146} González Cortina (1940).
to tame the cattle. Striffler noted that poorer residents of nineteenth-century Ayapel who did not have any lactating cows would freely milk any others they could catch on the town’s communal savannas. Well-to-do ranchers “happily accepted this type of communism, because milk has little value, and the principal goal is to tame the cattle, which is always obtained in this manner.” Elsewhere, some ranchers gave neighboring peasants cows to raise in sharecropping arrangements (called partnerships or compañías) but also to keep them used to people.

Working as a corralero was demanding. It was not that handling cows was difficult or dangerous, but it had to be done everyday. At the end of the afternoon, the corraleros rounded-up the cows to be milked from a small pasture (huerta), if the ranch had one dedicated for this purpose, and locked them in a corral for the night. The next morning, often well before first light, they brought the cows one-by-one into the adjacent milking corral, where their calves slept, through a connecting door. With calf by their side, which was the standard method of milking cows (as opposed to early separation, common in more advanced dairies), the corraleros extracted about two liters of milk. Afterwards, they put them back to pasture along with their calves, which suckled from the one, un-milked teat. For their first months, calves accompanied their mothers throughout the day. But as they got older, the corraleros would separate them progressively earlier until they were weaned at about eight months. Among other suggestions, reformers pushed ranchers to establish a small, fenced field (manga) where the calves could sleep outside of the muddy milking

149 González Cortina (1940).
corrals, which they considered a dangerous source of infection. While cowboys doubled as corraleros in smaller operations, the position was often a specialized one in larger ones.\footnote{Arquez (1993); Ocampo (2007); AOFB. San Marcos. Guillermo Ortiz. Tobacco en Bolívar (1954), Notas adicionales a la grabación de hoy con la familia Martínez, Oct 29. 1977.}

Although corraleros handled cattle, they did not have the same prestige as cowboys, who were at the apex of the non-management hierarchy on cattle estates. Given the importance and value of their cattle, ranchers wanted skilled and reliable men looking after them. Not just anyone had the aptitude or gumption to became a cowboy. Most people could learn to brand cattle, treat their injuries, and even de-horn and castrate them. Identifying diseases took more practice. But handling cattle was another issue altogether. For one, it required a proficiency on horseback that was not obvious in a region where most people rode donkeys.\footnote{Ocampo (2007), p. 130.} It also demanded considerable skill roping animals. And cowboys had to know how to handle cattle: from singing to keep a herd calm to looking a mad bull in the eyes. Rounding-up cattle was rough and tumble work, and cowboys needed to be tough and brave. “Catching mean (bravo) cattle is not for all cowboys,” wrote the manager of Hacienda Corinto to explain why they were behind castrating cattle. But, he continued, “when some can’t, the rest fear for their jobs” and were out trying to bring in the remainders.\footnote{APNOyC, CR-1915, Jesús Restrepo to Marco A. Salazar, Jan. 5, 1915.} Because good cowboys were relatively scarce, and were entrusted with animals worth a lifetime of work, ranchers treated them favorably. They paid cowboys more than most other estate workers, and gave them various perks like a supply of horses, grazing rights,
and all the food they wanted.\textsuperscript{153} But it was not just their pay that made “cowboying…a life that most people liked.”\textsuperscript{154} After all, some other positions were equally or better paid but did not have the same prestige.\textsuperscript{155} Ocampo argues that the status of the cowboy came partly from the respect that peasants in Old Bolívar had for strength and valor as well as esoteric knowledge, which is what cattle work represented. But their position also stemmed from their relationship with hacienda management and estate owners. Ranchers “respect and trust them,” wrote Díaz.\textsuperscript{156} While such respect and proximity was significant in and of itself, they also enabled cowboys to mediate between peasants and landed elites. And finally, but not insignificantly, cowboys rode horses, a prerogative generally reserved for elites.

Despite his local prestige, the cowboy from Old Bolívar did not, curiously, enter the national imagination as an important regional figure. For most Colombians, the quintessential cowboy has long been from the Llanos even though Old Bolívar was the country’s most important cattle producer by at least the turn of the twentieth century. This paradox might partly be explained by the fact that there was not much else except cattle and cowboys in the Llanos; and its residents earned the country’s respect during the wars of Independence. But still, Old Bolívar had many more cowboys than the Llanos given its larger and more intensely worked herd. Why did the cowboy from Old Bolívar fail to transcend the recognition he found locally? The key to this broader ‘oversight’ stems, I suggest, from the fact that most ranching work in

\textsuperscript{153} Diaz (1935), p. 159; Ocampo (2007).
\textsuperscript{154} Ocampo (2007), p.129.
\textsuperscript{155} Ocampo (2007), p. 130.
\textsuperscript{156} Diaz (1935), p. 159.
Old Bolívar did not require the cowboy. Instead, as we will see in the following section, it was primarily composed of the less glamorous and less well-paid work of planting and maintaining pastures. Even locally, peasants proclaimed that the expansion of ranching was primarily due to the “blood and sweat” they shed clearing forests and planting grass. The cowboy, while critical to ranching, was superseded by the overwhelming number of workers farming grass. Additionally, cowboys tended to dismount at the gate of the ranch where they worked. As we will see in the following chapter, quietly driving small lots of cattle to inland markets by foot, with their supplies on their back, cowboys from Old Bolívar had less wherewithal to capture the national imagination: the cowboy without his horse is not quite a cowboy.

**Pasture Formation**

Most of the actual work on many ranches in Old Bolívar involved forming and maintaining pastures. While the department did have natural savannas that were important for cattle rearing, overall they were limited in area. Most of the department was covered by dry tropical forests, which became increasingly tall, dense, and humid moving west and south. To expand or initiate operations, many ranchers had to remove trees and plant grass. While they had slowly pushed back the forest edge during the colonial period, the big advance started in the mid-nineteenth century. Around 1850, ranchers started to clear the extensive “virgin forests” south of the San

---

157 Díaz (1935), p. 79.
Jorge River and south of Montería in the Sinú Valley. Even in the so-called Sabanas de Bolívar, substantial areas of forest disappeared over the late-nineteenth century and the early-twentieth century as ranchers expanded their stocking capacity and developed new estates. While pasture work in older ranching properties was generally not as intense as in newer ones, many ranchers were more preoccupied with growing grass than with raising cattle per se. The ratio between cowboys and pasture workers on several estates underlines the agricultural nature of ranching. Hacienda Marta Magdalena, for example, never had more than 16 to 20 cowboys to care for its 10,000 head of cattle. For pasture work, however, its managers contracted several hundred laborers annually. Similarly, in October and November, 1916, specifically pasture-related work consumed between 58 and 62 percent of all labor on the Sinú Valley estate, Boca de Betancí.

To form a new pasture, first the forest had to be cleared. Work typically began in July, toward the end of the short, secondary dry season (veranillo) between mid-June and mid-July, and continued through the end of the rainy season where possible. In the dry summer season, from December to March, work moved to the low-lying areas that were flooded during the winter. The first step was to organize a work crew to clear the underbrush by machete in a designated area, leaving only the large

---

159 AOFB, Notaria de Sincelejo: June 2, 1863, no. 24; Feb. 9, 1870, no. 9; Oct. 9, 1871, no. 14; vol. 1905, f168; Gaceta de Bolívar, Jan. 15, 1871, no. 729: Indice…Chinú, nos. 5, 15; Gaceta de Bolívar, May 5, 1872, no. 810: Indice…Corozal, nos. 29, 33, 34; Diario de Bolívar, Jan. 23, 1875, no. 1041: Indice…Chinú, nos. 7, 17, 21, 30, 35, 42, 43, 44; Diario de Bolívar, Feb. 11, 1875, no. 1956: Indice…Sincelejo, nos. 16, 30, 35; AOFB, Amariz Mompox, Hijuela de la Señora Ana Catalina Tovío de Armaris (1907).
160 Ocampo (2007), p. 120.
trees. Next, there were two methods of felling the standing timber. In what appears to have been the traditional method in Old Bolivar, workers set fire to the dried underbrush at the end of the dry season, “leaving the fire to knockdown the large trees.” Then workers might go through and cut down the remaining trees that were not to be preserved for shade or other use, such as the fire-resistant corozo palm (Acrocomia antioquensis) and palma de vino (Scheelea magalenica). In the second method, “axes are [first] used on the heavy timber, which is felled about waist height and not slashed or otherwise treated in any way. Fire is then employed to clear away the debris, the result being an extension of land more or less encumbered with large and small stumps and the large trunks of heavy trees, all partially burned.” Roberto Salazar, the Antioqueño manager of Marta Magdalena initially struggled to introduce this latter technique among the hacienda’s workers. The first method economized labor, employing fire to bring down or weaken the trees. In the second, the trees may have burned better, adding more fertilizing ash to the soil and giving the newly-planted grasses a head start over their weedy competitors. If true, the savings may have been realized when it came time to clear the pasture of weeds. By the mid-twentieth century, the second method appears to have become the most common.

---

165 It is also possible that the Antioqueños’ preference to fell trees before burning them was partially motivated by aesthetic criteria: they wanted their pastures to look “pretty.” This meant well-cleaned monocultures of grass without scattered tree trunks or even shade trees, which they erroneously thought slowed the growth of cattle by encouraging them to lounge around during the heat of the day instead of continually eating grass (Ocampo, 2007; González Cortina, 1940).
166 González Cortina (1940), p. 18.
In the Sinú Valley, there were also two methods of planting pastures by the 1940s. In the first, called *rozas* after the primary corn crop, workers initially cleared the underbrush and then felled the large trees by ax. With the first winter rains, toward the end of March, they planted pasture grass along with corn or rice. After workers harvested the crop in June, they burned the clearing, followed by another burning in December, at the start of the summer season. The pasture grasses then started to spread at the beginning of the next rainy season. With this method, it took over a year to develop a pasture. If a rancher, worker, or peasant opted to get several corn harvests out of the land before planting it in grass, it could take two or three years. In the second method, called *segunda* after the secondary corn crop, workers cut the brush at the end of winter (October-November), planted pasture grass, and felled the large trees. Then, at the end of summer (March), they burned the clearing and, with the beginning of the rains, the grass grew quickly. This second method developed a pasture in about half the time of the first and it allowed less time for weeds to grow. The first was preferred, however, because the corn or rice harvests helped to cover the expense of pasture development.167

Developing new pastures was a time-consuming and sweaty affair. Cleaning the underbrush by machete took some initial practice, but it was a skill in which all peasants of Old Bolívar excelled.168 Still, it generally took a man – for this was men’s work – four days to clean one hectare.169 The advantage of clearing underbrush was that the tall trees provided shade from the hot sun. Peasants considered felling large

---

167 Ibid.
trees to be hard work. Its semi-skilled, strenuous, and dangerous nature meant that ax-men (*hacheros*) received somewhat better pay than other estate workers, such as *corraleros.* In a good day, five experienced *hacheros* might clear a hectare of trees, chopping them at waist level. If the trees were particularly large, and the crew had to construct platforms to cut above their thick bases, the work was slower. *Hacheros* were a tough lot and not to be messed with. They also had a sense of pride in their work that sparked a certain rivalry with cowboys whom, working from horseback, they considered lazy.

The next step was to plant grass. Often, as mentioned above, there was an intermediate corn or rice crop, that helped cover expenses and loosen the soil. When workers planted the final corn crop, they also planted grass. If there was no corn crop, they tended to plant the grass at the end of winter and then burn the pasture at the end of summer; during the dry season, the ground became too hard to plant. Through the first decades of the twentieth century, ‘artificial’ pastures in the lowlands were limited to three main species of African grasses: pará (*Brachiaria mutica*), guinea (*Panicum maximum*), and yaraguá (*Melinis minutiflora*). Ranchers planted pará, a

---

171 Ibid., pp. 124-125.  
172 AOFB, Agricultura, Tareas agrícolas, f16; AOFB, San Marcos.Guillermo Ortiz.Tobaco en Bolívar (1954), Córdoba y Bolívar [interviews], Dec. 25-30, 1962 [my calculation]. However, the costs of pasture development elsewhere suggest that this work might have gone considerably slower. See Bell (1919), p. 22, 25 (my calculation: at 50¢ wages, need a total of 40 days); APNOyC, 1917-1936, Memorandum of the farms of Cáceres property of Pedro Nel Ospina, Feb. 1, 1922 (my calculations: at 50¢ in wages, need 50 total days of labor).  
174 Diaz (1935), pp. 52, 56.  
176 A fourth, yaraguá Uribe (*Hyparrhenia rufa*) spread moderately (Sierra, 1916; Nanclares, 1936; Rojas Maldando, 1938; Parsons, 1968). Additionally, a native grass, micay (*Axonopus*
stoloniferous grass that thrives in humid soil and resists moderate flooding, in low-lying land. Because it propagates by rhizomes rather than by seed, workers used sticks to bury vegetative sets about 25 to 30 centimeters long with three or four culms. Ranchers sometimes planted vegetative sets of guinea, a tall-growing bunch grass that requires well-drained, fertile soil. More commonly, they planted it by seed. If the seeds were abundant, the cheapest method was to scatter them over the cleared ground. Otherwise, workers buried them at specified intervals. Yaraguá, a thick-growing and highly competitive grass that grows well in humid and less fertile soils, was favored where weeds tended to invade guinea and pará pastures. Ranchers could also plant yaraguá by vegetative sets but they preferred to scatter its seed over recently burned ground since it required less labor. Typically, workers planted grasses at meter-long intervals, but where weeds posed a problem, such as in land recently used for crops, they would plant seeds or vegetative sets every half-meter so the pasture would ‘close’ more quickly and better resist competitive weeds.

As winter advanced, the grass grew quickly. Bell found that “Para grass grows extremely rapidly and soon covers the ground in every direction…. The grass forms into large bunches around and over all obstructions, such as trunks and stumps, entirely covering these in the first year.” Ranchers often used cattle to manage the progress of new pastures. Before the grass grew too high, they put some cattle on the

---

"micay) found supporters in temperate and cool areas (Restrepo, 1913; M.J.B., 1916; Sierra, 1916).  
177 González Cortina (1940), p. 20; Bell, 1919, p. 21; Ocampo (2007), p. 98.  
178 Sierra (1916); González Cortina (1940), p. 21.  
179 APNOyC, 210 f302; Nanclares (1936); González Cortina (1940), pp. 22-23. See also Vieira (1917); Plested (1918b); Flórez, (1926), p. 261; Uribe (1936).  
180 Bell (1919), p. 21."
new pasture in order to graze it down and encourage it to propagate vegetatively into a think, carpet-like covering. They also used cattle to thresh (trillar) the yaraguá and guinea seeds and bury them with their hooves. Likewise, for pará, the manager of Hacienda Corinto wrote that “it is indispensable that the cattle bury [it] so that it propagates better.”

The introduction of these African pasture grasses is frequently said to have contributed to the dramatic expansion of lowland ranching starting in the mid-nineteenth century. The characteristic that scholars have emphasized is their ability to out-compete weeds and prevent a recently-cleared patch of forest from regenerating. This notion principally comes from Rivas, who claimed guinea grass to be a “true miracle:”

Before, we cleared the forest, burned it and planted corn; and...when we harvested the crop the forest already competed for the land with the farmer, and returned to the way it was before. Now we scatter the mysterious seed at the same time the corn is planted, and when the ears are ready to harvest, a green pasture already thinly covers the ground....

Rivas’s observation coincides with the ecological attributes that scientists have observed for pará, guinea, and other African grasses introduced into tropical America. One of the characteristics of these grasses is their tendency to grow faster and produce

---

181 Vieira (1917); APNOyC, 200, f459; Ocampo (2007).
184 Fals Borda (1976, 2002); Kalmanovitz (1989); Ocampo (1984); LeGrand (1986); Arias (1999).
185 Rivas (1983), p. 36.
greater biomass than many natives. They do this by putting more of their energy into
growth, cycling soil nutrients more efficiently, using water more opportunistically, and
photosynthesizing at higher rates.\textsuperscript{186} Pará produces the majority of its biomass in
culms and stolons, allowing it to quickly form a dense, mat-like cover.\textsuperscript{187} Guinea
grows rapidly in dense bunches up to two or three meters tall and it responds better to
fertilization, such as that provided by a recently cleared and burned patch of forest,
than many native grasses.\textsuperscript{188} These characteristics suggest that pará and guinea could
form a closed canopy more quickly than native species as well as restrain weeds and
secondary forest growth more effectively.\textsuperscript{189} Furthermore, introduced African grasses
are generally more resilient to grazing and trampling – the product of their co-
evolutionary development with large herbivores, absent in tropical America since the
Pleistocene – helping them maintain their dense ground cover.\textsuperscript{190}

There has been a tendency, however, to assume that these attributes eliminated
much of the expense of pasture formation. Kalmanovitz, for example, contends that
these grasses “made possible” the “landed elite’s conquest of the lowlands...[since
they] were an effective means to stop the growth of tropical weeds and ensure the

\textsuperscript{186} Williams and Baruch (2000); Bilbao and Medina (1990); D’Antonio and Vitosek (1992).
Although fire was used to expand and create grasslands long before the arrival of Europeans
and African grasses, the introduction of these grasses may have increased its potency by
generating greater amounts of combustible material (D’Antonio and Vitosek, 1992; Baruch
and Bilbao, 1999).
\textsuperscript{187} Baruch (1994).
\textsuperscript{188} Williams and Baruch (2000).
\textsuperscript{189} Ecological studies of introduced grasses do not generally address their advantages over
native species in holding back secondary forest growth. The characteristics that allowed pará
and guinea (and subsequently other species) to better prevent clearings from returning to forest
have to be inferred from studies of the competitive advantages that allow them to invade
natural grasslands.
\textsuperscript{190} Parsons (1972); Garza (1978); Simoes and Baruch (1991); Williams and Baruch (2000).
extensive settlement of wide areas of the country with a quasi-wild type of cattle.”\footnote{Kalmanovitz (1989), p. 127.}

In a few cases, the often-noted invasive properties of these grasses may have facilitated the quasi-natural establishment of ‘artificial’ pastures.\footnote{Camacho Roldán (1973, p. 126), for example, noted that culms of pará grass, ripped from pastures along the upper Magdalena River during floods, had propagated spontaneously in downstream flood plains. Similarly, Dawe (1917, p. 75) noted naturalized savannas of guinea grass in the dry, Guajira peninsula.} For Costa Rica, Edelman notes that, “[g]iven the aggressive, invasive qualities of the African grasses, artificial pastures could be introduced by simply scattering seed in the underbrush.”\footnote{Edelman (1985, p. 166; see also 1992, p. 75). In Costa Rica, a longer dry season and less dense vegetation cover may have allowed these grasses to spread on their own.}

In most of Colombia, however, they did not spread with such apparent ease. By holding back the re-colonization of the forest and suffocating weedy growth better than native grasses, they probably made pasture development quicker, easier, and cheaper than it had been.\footnote{Rivas (1983); Burgos, (1965), p. 59.} But however miraculous these grasses were, they did not eliminate the labor and expense of pasture formation.\footnote{See Van Ausdal (2008d).}

‘Domesticating’ (domar) a pasture, or removing the competing weeds to ensure the grass became dominant, required considerably more work than many scholars have realized. Before they were fully formed, new pastures typically required two “expensive” rounds of cleaning unwanted weeds with a crew of workers armed with machetes.\footnote{APNOyC, 1917-1936, Memorandum of the farms of Cáceres property of Pedro Nel Ospina & Company, Feb. 1, 1922.} On Hacienda Marta Magdalena, this ‘domestication’ work required about three work-days (jornales) per hectare in the first round and then half that
amount some 16 months later. Some weeds were particularly troublesome.

Regarding a plant called guayabito, the manager of an hacienda along the lower Cauca River wrote: “you can’t imagine how difficult this work [of removing it] has been.”

Marco A. Salazar had to break the bad news, particularly how much it cost to remove, to Pedro Nel Ospina: “the new pastures demand very special attention, due to…the invasion of weeds like I’ve never seen before, of a little plant…that doesn’t die when cut, and we are removing it by the roots at a cost of $10 gold pesos per hectare, on average,” the equivalent of about a month’s worth of wages. On Marta Magdalena, golden leather or swamp ferns (matatigre or Acrostichum aureum) were such a problem that the manager tracked the cost of removing them in a dedicated account in the hacienda’s books; and he had a worker continually ride through the estate’s pastures to catch outbreaks of the weed before they spread. Ranchers sometimes tried to pull this and other problematic weeds, like espino (Pithecellobium lanceolatum), pico de lora (Pithecellobium hymeneaefolium), and zarzo de sangre, up the roots using spades (barras) rather than simply cut them off at the base with a machete, which was the common practice in Old Bolívar. Although more effective, it was not full proof and cost 10 times normal machete work; it was also not clear which method was more cost efficient in the long run. By 1939, they found that

---

197 Ocampa (2007), p. 55 [my calculation based on estimate of the area of the pasture Carreto: at 110 hectares, 341 jornales or days of labor were required for the first round and 143 for the second].
199 APNOyC, 200 f452.
201 Morales (1973).
dousing espino and zarzo de sangre with chemicals was fairly effective. Ranchers had also developed a range of techniques to combat other weeds. To remove taconales, they cut and burned them and then scattered the affected area with grass seed.\textsuperscript{203} Simply burning vendeagujales (Imperata contracta) worked fairly well.\textsuperscript{204} Similarly, ranchers cut gramalote (Paspalum fasciculatum), a tenacious but poorly productive natural grass, at the start of summer and later burned the litter, clearing a wide area around the piles to prevent the fire from spreading. Two or three rounds of burning were often required to get rid of this grass. To save money, Bernardo Ospina opted to fence off areas infested with gramalote to use as night corrals. Heavily stocking them with cattle at night was effective but it did not completely kill the grass either: workers still had to pull up young shoots before they grew too much.\textsuperscript{205}

Finally, new pastures often needed to be replanted. If the grass had grown well, only those areas where a pasture was still thin and workers had created bare patches by removing weeds would need replanting. Sometimes, however, it was necessary to re-burn and re-seed a pasture to give the grass a competitive edge. In this latter case, workers first pulled up weeds that had started to sprout about 10 days after burning. Then they fenced it off and replanted grass, perhaps with a corn crop as well to help defray costs.\textsuperscript{206} Finally, “with the rainfall and excessive heat, stumps and trunks of

\textsuperscript{203} Ocampo (2007), p. 100.  
\textsuperscript{204} Botanical name from: http://www.colombiasinhambre.com/imprimir.php?idb=130.  
\textsuperscript{205} APNOyC, Cáceres, f249.  
hardwood trees soon rot away and disappear in three to five years’ time, leaving the land perfectly clear for pasture.”207

Burning pastures served several purposes. It was the easiest way to remove the debris created by clearing a patch of forest. It also fertilized the land, giving the African grasses a boost, and helped to eradicate weeds.208 While reformers urged ranchers to avoid burning because of the damage it caused the soil, it was a necessary step in pasture formation.209 There was some recognition that, subsequently, cleaning pastures by hand made them more productive.210 Nonetheless, ranchers periodically burned pastures to remove weeds, clear out dried and dead grass, keep tick populations under control, or try to eradicate lingering pathogens that had caused disease outbreaks: every three to four years may have been typical.211 Because burning was significantly cheaper than weeding, smaller and less profitable operations frequently relied more on the match than the machete.212 Ranchers burned pastures and rangeland in the summer, after the dry heat turned grasses and the cleared vegetation into tinder. Díaz described seeing multiple fires, with flames up to 30 meters high, burning day and night: “The smoke, thick and black,…rises to the sky and eclipses the sun, which has turned red.”213 On natural grasslands, ranchers might have burned early in the

208 Ibid.
210 Parsons (1952).
212 Oakley (1944), p. 18.
summer, before the grass complete dried out, to help keep the fires from getting out of control.\textsuperscript{214} For new pastures cleared out of the forest, they often waited until the end of summer, giving time for the cleared vegetation and trees to dry out and burn better. Additionally, burning just before the rainy season was thought to prevent the land from drying out too much.\textsuperscript{215} It also appears to have been a kind of insurance policy, counting on the impending rains to help contain out-of-control fires. In the Sinú Valley, ranchers who intended to burn a pasture before March 19 had to notify their neighbors, who had the right to inspect the firebreaks cleared to contain the blaze. Afterwards, which is when peasants typically burned their fields, this was not required.\textsuperscript{216}

Overall, developing pastures required considerable effort and expense. In the early 1920s, Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. estimated that it cost about $25 pesos to convert one hectare of forest into pasture along the lower Cauca River.\textsuperscript{217} In terms of prevailing wages, this amounted to over 38 days of labor.\textsuperscript{218} As mentioned above, this was followed by two “expensive” rounds of weeding. And it took about two-and-a-

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{214} My supposition for this comes from Díaz (1935) who said that January was the month of burning.
\item\textsuperscript{215} APNOyC, 1921, f74; Oakley (1944), p. 18.
\item\textsuperscript{216} Ocampo (2007), p. 93.
\item\textsuperscript{217} APNOyC, 1917-1936, Feb. 1, 1922.
\item\textsuperscript{218} Prevailing wages from Hacienda Cuba were 40¢ for this type of work. An estimated 25¢ for rations needs to be added on top of the wage (APNOyC, 1920, f442, Pedro Nel Ospina Jr. to Bernardo Ospina, April 28, 1921). This estimate does not include the higher costs of work captains to oversee the work, as well as tools, grass seed, etc. Thus, 38 days is probably a high-end estimate. In the Patía Valley (department of Cauca), in 1923, the cost of planting yaragüá was estimated at $25 per hectare, and $50 per hectare for micacy. This was the equivalent of 50 and 100 days of labor at the wages of the ranch manger ($15 per month), which was probably at least two to three times that of regular workers (Anon., 1923, pp. 367-368.)
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
half years before the pasture was completely formed and ready to fully stock.  

Ospina and Salazar knew that developing cattle estates required large initial expenditures. Their hope was to quickly ‘domesticate’ the new pastures and then be able to reduce the annual maintenance costs to a minimum: “in order to keep ahead of the weeds and be able to economize later on, it is necessary to spend a good deal of money [now].”  

Bell noted that although it cost about $20 pesos to develop an hectare of pasture, long-term annual maintenance costs were only 50¢ per hectare.  

Unfortunately, it was frequently harder than expected to get ahead of the weeds. Salazar, who managed their network of estates, explained that “our great effort to develop pastures on our haciendas in Cáceres…has required more time than anticipated.” Unsustainable costs forced them to cut back on weeding. But this threatened to allow the forest to re-colonize the pastures they had already spent a lot of money clearing. Salazar complained: “I have tried to show [Ospina] that [steeply cutting costs] would be to renounce the coronation of all our work so far and resign ourselves to lose an enormous sum of money and energy, which this labor represents and only we can truly appreciate.”  

Nonetheless, in some pastures, they did have to give up entirely: the constant weeding cost more than the pasture produced.  

Surprisingly, quite a number of scholars have overlooked or downplayed the process of converting forest to pasture. For some, such as McGreevy, would-be ranchers only needed “the opportunity to gain possession of land” in order to raise

---

221 Bell (1919), p. 21.
222 APNOyC, 200, f84.
223 APNOyC, 210, f189.
cattle.\textsuperscript{224} That this land had to be cleared and planted in grass before it could be stocked with cattle does not seem to occur to him. For others, the forest-suppressing character of the new African grasses minimized the labor and cost of pasture formation.\textsuperscript{225} Yet even with these African grasses, pastures did not appear magically by scattering their seed in the underbrush.

Before a new pasture was ready to use, it also required a few installations. The most important of these was access to water. Ranchers tended to use natural sources of water, such as rivers, creeks, sloughs, and ciénagas.\textsuperscript{226} This was one explanation they gave for continuing to use large pastures: greater divisions might have left some without water and thus useless. Of course, ranchers could and did build watering holes. It was fairly common to further excavate natural depressions to store rain water or create a reservoir for a diverted creek. The managers of Marta Magdalena constructed a network of canals to distribute ciénaga-water to different pastures. They even installed a steam pump to draw water out of the Sinú River. Although industry observers suggested that wells could also be sunk with relative ease, few ranchers actually did so until the second half of the twentieth century. As one analyst noted, “it is difficult for the rancher to find someone who will do this kind of work, and if they do it is at prohibitive prices.”\textsuperscript{227} Instead, most large ranchers preferred to acquire summer grazing grounds, which also afforded better forage. And small ranchers

\textsuperscript{224} McGreevy (1971), p. 177.
\textsuperscript{225} Kalmanovitz (1989; Yepes (2001).
\textsuperscript{226} Ruiz Mesa (1952), p. 7; Ocampo (2007).
\textsuperscript{227} Ruiz Mesa (1952), p. 7.
without such access, and who would have benefited from wells, could rarely afford them.

Fencing, while not necessary, was useful. It gave ranchers better control over their cattle and allowed them regulate breeding and manage forage use. Ranchers also used fencing to control access, mark boundaries, and claim property rights. Before the widespread use of barbed wire fencing, patented in the United States in 1874, Colombian ranchers divided their properties and pastures in a variety of ways: natural barriers, deep ditches (zanjas), rammed earth or stone walls, wood or bamboo fences, and living plants. In Old Bolívar, ranchers frequently used the latter, particularly a thorny plant called chocorrón. However, collecting vegetative sets and planting them close together to create a new division was “very labor-intensive work.” The introduction of barbed wire, therefore, made the task of erecting fences much easier and cheaper. While the use of barbed-wire fencing diffused slowly on natural rangelands, where ranchers developed private pastures, often on communally-owned properties, they quickly adopted it. Still, we should not assume that the cost of constructing and maintaining barbed-wire fences was minimal.

Constructing a barbed-wire fence was fairly simple. The primary supplies required were posts, wire, staples, and a hammer. In Old Bolívar, ranchers frequently

---

231 Jiménez (1940); APNOyC, 232, f148.
planted trees, often just three feet apart, to serve as fence posts. This likely eliminated the most critical part of a free-standing fence: the corner posts, which needed to be well-braced to transfer the tension of the wires to the ground. In either case, fence stringers had to tie off the wire on one corner post, unroll it to the opposite corner, which they also tied off and pulled taught. Then they went back and hammered staples into the fence posts to attach the wire. If the 400-meter coils, which weighed 36 kilograms, were not long enough, they tied various coils together. Three-strand fences were typical, but in some cases ranchers used four-strands. Stringing wire caused frequent cuts on the hands and body as well as sore thumbs. Large estates, such as Marta Magdalena, might have dedicated fence workers (alambreros) to build and maintain fencing. But even where the division of labor was not as specialized, some ranchers tried to avoid sending their cowboys and corraleros to install fencing to avoid thumb injuries that would limit their capacity to rope or milk. Fencing also had to be periodically maintained. This was an annual task for ranchers from the Sabanas de Bolívar who returned to the ciénagas in the summer to find their fences damaged by the masses of entangled plants that sometimes choked these flood plains. In the early 1950s, Randell found that ranchers generally maintained their fences in good condition.

---

232 Randell (1953); Jiménez (1943).
234 Ocampo (2007).
236 AOFB, Jegua, Sabanas y ciénagas.
Ranch Management

Pasture management and other tasks

In the mid- to late-nineteenth century, ranchers managed their pastures in only rudimentary fashion. Large extensions and limited divisions was one sign of this. Lurá, the pasture developed by Medardo Rivas in the 1850s, appears to have been an undivided area capable of carrying 500 head.²³⁸ Likewise, the estate that Holton visited in the Cauca Valley had only three enormous divisions.²³⁹ In Old Bolivar, the average stocking capacity of Hacienda Berástegui’s 25 pastures was 550 head as late as 1916. Four could even carry between 1,000 and 2,500 head, although the largest had been subdivided into more manageable units.²⁴⁰ Fencing costs, especially before the introduction of barbed wire, limited the number of internal divisions: dividing a 600-hectare pasture in three raised the overall fencing costs by at least 40 percent. But more importantly, more intensive pasture-management practices had yet to develop.

Over the first half of the twentieth century, by contrast, the average size of pastures fell significantly. The Antioqueño managers of Marta Magdalena quickly subdivided the excessively large pastures, with a stocking capacity of 800 head, that they inherited from the previous French owners in 1913.²⁴¹ By 1931, they had a total of 61 pastures with a capacity ranging from 31 to 450 head. The smallest ones were used for milk cows and horses. Close to half had a capacity for 100 to 200 cattle, and

²³⁸ Rivas (1983).
only three could hold 400 to 450 head. Similarly, in 1916, Hacienda Santo Domingo, which the national government purchased to turn into an agricultural college in the upper Magdalena River Valley, had 11 pastures with an average stocking capacity of only 70 head. By the early 1950s, Randell found that many ranchers had divided their lands into pastures ranging from 80 to 100 hectares.

Good management practices did not always accompany pasture subdivision, however. Randell was surprised that many ranchers did not rotate cattle through their pastures and that some were unaware of the need to periodically de-stock them to allow the grass to recover. He also noted that many ranchers erroneously believed that they needed to wait until the grass was about a meter high before putting cattle out to graze. By this time, the nutritional quality of their grasses, which is best when they are young and tender, had declined substantially. Furthermore, such tall-growing grasses had the tendency to displace spontaneously-growing legumes, a potentially rich source of protein. Many other improvers noted these and other pasture-management problems: monocultures of single grass species, the removal of spontaneous legumes as weeds, the failure to store forage or provide any supplemental feed during the dry season, an over reliance on burning, and inadequate and unclean supplies of water.

---

242 Ibid., p. 55.
243 Ministerio de Agricultura y Comercio (1918), p. 40. My calculation, assuming a stocking rate if the pastures were well-maintained.
244 Randell (1953), p. 43.
245 Ibid., p. 44.
Undoubtedly, many of these criticisms rang true, although the causes cannot always be attributed to rancher “ignorance and negligence.” In 1935, Francisco Navarro noted that, “with regard to animal feed and nutrition in the tropics, little or nothing is known.” The national government had only just started to investigate pasture grasses in the 1930s. While new grass species started to be introduced during these years, few real alternatives became available for lowland ranchers to diversify their forage base until mid-century. While González Cortina called the “incessant extermination” of spontaneously-growing legumes one of the biggest errors made by ranchers in the Sinú Valley, others claimed that most ranchers recognized their dietary value and that this was one reason for the relatively high productivity of this region.

Due to the relatively high costs and limits of mechanization, cutting grass for silage or supplemental feed was impractical. It was far more efficient to let the cattle graze the grass crop on the hoof rather than have workers harvest it by hand. And most large ranchers, who would have been the only ones capable of investing in agricultural machinery, owned both winter and summer pastures, which was a more cost-effective method of supplying decent forage and water to their cattle year round and rotate pastures. Likewise, the high cost of drilling wells prevented many from further subdividing their pastures. And while large ranchers tended to annually burn new pastures until they had become well-established, with the frequency declining thereafter in favor of hand cleaning, which was less harmful and more productive, the

---

246 Mejía (1940), p. 16.
249 Ruiz Mesa (1952).
high costs of removing weeds encouraged smaller ranchers to rely more on the match than the machete.\textsuperscript{250}

Unfortunately, we have very little direct information on how ranchers managed their pastures. Some of the only available hacienda-level sources come from two operations that were probably somewhat atypical in terms of technical knowledge, level of oversight, and concerted effort to improve their practices: Marta Magdalena and the estates of Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. However, even from the correspondence between ranch managers and company headquarters it is difficult to get a detailed picture. It is clear that they recognized the benefits of rotation: rest, disease and pest control, and saving spare capacity for emergencies. They were aware of the need to keep the height of the grass down to improve its nutritional qualities, and put young cattle on better pastures to speed their development. Additionally, they experimented with different grasses, as well as planting and weeding techniques.\textsuperscript{251} The correspondence also highlights how pasture management was frequently a juggling act between various demands: stocking pastures with enough cattle to keep the grass down but not too much so that weeds spread, cattle growth slowed, and outbreaks of disease occurred in either cattle or grass; using pasture efficiently but making sure that there was sufficient in reserve for the following season and emergencies, such as a disease, drought or flood, or a fall in prices; moving cattle between pasture depending

\textsuperscript{250} Oakley (1944).
\textsuperscript{251} See also González Cortina (1940) for experiments with elephant grass (\textit{Pennisetum purpureum}) by the Dereix.
on the season, stage of development, and market destination, and then restocking those that had been partially emptied.\(^{252}\)

In addition, there were a variety of other tasks to be done on a ranch. Ranchers needed to build and maintain the corrals where they looked after the cattle. While the principal corral was generally located near ranch headquarters, smaller ones were often scattered throughout a property. Marta Magdalena had 70 corrals by the time it had finished developing new pastures.\(^{253}\) On large estates, ranchers also built camps in different locations to house temporary workers and to shorten the commute between living quarters and place of work. Trails through an hacienda also had to be maintained, especially after heavy winter rains. And ranchers needed workers to look after and train the horses required by the cowboys. If they milked cows, they also needed somebody to turn the milk into cheese. While the corraleros sometimes did this, on larger estates there might be someone assigned exclusively to this task.

Since ranchers typically provided their workers with food, they sometimes tried to produce as much as they could themselves. Although they often had fairly large areas planted in corn or rice, as part of creating or renovating pastures, they still needed to dedicate personnel to plant, clean, and harvest the crops. Someone also had to care for the ubiquitous grove of plantains. Raising hogs to turn corn surpluses into a marketable commodity, or to produce lard for the estate, was another task. Somebody also had to slaughter the sick or injured cattle typically used to feed workers. Some of

---

\(^{252}\) Another strategy that some ranchers used was to rotate cattle purchased for fattening through the best pastures, and follow them up with young cattle that was maturing to eat what remained. While the young cattle did not fare that well, it was a method of efficiently using the grass they had while maintaining high levels of productivity in their fattening operations.

the wives of resident workers might cook the communally-supplied meals. They, or someone else, also needed to gather the firewood used in the kitchens. Additionally, ranchers needed someone they could trust to manage the storage and distribution of food and supplies. In some cases, this person might operate the infamous company stores (*tiendas de raya*).

Finally, there were a variety of other miscellaneous jobs as well. Some were general, like washing clothes and cleaning the main house. Others were more specialized, such as tanning cattle hides. Some estates, such as Marta Magdalena, employed skilled workers: carpenters, iron-smiths, healers, pump mechanics, fire chief. On others, some of these tasks were probably hired out; others were performed by non-specialized laborers. Hacienda Marta Magdalena was probably rather unique in the division of labor that its managers established as well as their efforts to find more efficient ways of doing the work. The degree of specialized occupations that it created nonetheless underlines the variety of other jobs that needed to be done.

**Ranch managers**

Since the 1930s, when the Colombian government started paying closer attention to the ranching industry, various observers have underlined one of its fundamental weaknesses: high levels of absenteeism. In Old Bolivar, however, it is likely that many ranchers took a more active role in the management of their estates.
than the typical image of an absentee owner would suggest. Undoubtedly, some did live carefree lives after inheriting vast herds, move to distant cities, or dedicate their energies to a range of other professional activities. A number of outside elites also acquired cattle estates in the region. But the vast majority of ranchers had modest fortunes at best and were surprisingly provincial. Informants in the early 1940s claimed that, in 1880, probably not more than 20 ranchers owned 5,000 head of cattle. And Wylie wrote that in Old Bolívar, the land was “divided into many small ranches…. Most producers have 100 head or less.” While a few lived sumptuously, the material austerity suggested by the wills of some significant ranchers is striking. The large estate worth $22,700 gold pesos that the rancher Elias Sánchez left his wife and son in 1908 included, as the only household furnishings listed: two mirrors ($8), a dining room table ($3), eight chairs ($9.60), six rocking chairs ($12), and a desk ($8). His cousin, the rancher Juan Sánchez Racero, left his heirs six rocking chairs in bad shape ($6), a desk ($3), five trunks ($5), two tables in bad shape ($3), and 10 stools in bad shape ($5). In the late nineteenth century, Striffler also commented that few ranchers in Caimito, along the San Jorge River, could read or write. Early-twentieth-century notary records from Montería and elsewhere confirm the degree of illiteracy even among relatively important ranchers. A large part of the landed and

254 The claim that the fundamental problem with Colombian agriculture and ranching was rooted in absentee ownership is probably over-exaggerated. The problem of organizing effective management so owners do not have to directly oversee the entire production process is common to all forms of production.

255 Oakley (1944), p. 9.

256 Wylie (1942), p. 119.

257 ANM, btwn Nov. 22 and Nov. 29, 1908 (btwn nos. 414 and 427): testamento de Elias Sánchez.

258 ANM, Dec. 31, 1909, no. 271.
thus ranching class in Old Bolivar probably resembled rich peasants more than a socially-distinct class of overlords.

Many of these ranchers, even those who kept a house in town, may well have spent much of their time looking after their cattle operations. This, at least, is the impression given by Striffler: “It is well known that in this part of America, the lazy existence of the rentier is a utopia; the old man, no matter how large his fortune, can never retire from active life: he has to manage his capital with his own hands and see with his own eyes…. “259 Francisco Javier Tovio, despite his aristocratic gallantry and lavish spending, emblematized this dedication to work: “after several days of wild and exhausting parties, he lightly mounted his horse and returned to his tasks. It was back to another life: his gentleman’s outfits were stored for another occasion; and all his activity focused on the labors of his estate…. [E]verything was done under his constant supervision.”260 Striffler’s description of the living conditions endured by Sabana ranchers and their families along the ciénagas of the San Jorge River also suggests this kind of close oversight: “At first sight, it is uncomfortable to see those white women, of noble appearance, with their daughters, charming creatures, sitting beneath the most crude roof, on an uneven and dusty dirt floor, and surrounded by dense clouds of flies attracted by the smell of the milk and the cheese” that they made during this season.261

Despite this supervision, ranch managers (mayordomos) typically ran the day-to-day operations. This was particularly true for ranchers with multiple properties,

260 Ibid., p. 49.
261 Ibid., p. 73.
involved in other activities, or who lived some distance from their estates. Ranchers may have made the strategic decisions, but they depended on managers to effectively implement their orders and keep the estate running. Above all, this meant looking after the cattle, pastures, and work crews. But there was a great deal of other things to do as well. To a new ranch manager, Bernardo Ospina said: “keep your eye on all the business affairs of the hacienda and its cattle, and especially those concerning its administration, seeing to it that nothing is poorly done nor with too high a cost, and that the yield of a job corresponds to the wages paid and to the effort each worker is capable of.”

There was, in other words, much more to managing a ranch than “just riding around on horseback.”

Sometimes ranchers gave their managers detailed instructions. For example, in August 1916, Salazar told Juan de Dios Villa, the manager of Tarazá and other haciendas along the lower Cauca River, all the pasture work that needed to be done:

- After weeding the pastures, replant the barren areas in El Presidio, La Discordia, La Magdalena, and the little pasture near the house, the last three with guinea.
- Fence off the old grass in Tenerifre, the pasture of yaraguá, to put the cattle on it before it goes to seed.
- Plant the entire property bought from Isabelita Ferrao with grass as soon as possible, at intervals of half-a-meter in the areas that were farmed recently, so the pasture closes quicker, and at meter-long intervals in the areas of tall, secondary growth. If there is any high land with stones, wait until I see it to decide what to plant; all the low-lying land along Chingá Creek should be planted to the foot of the hills.

---

263 APNOyC, 1921-1922, f478.
• Carefully study the amount of work that needs to be done to clear the forests between the hill and the ciénagas of Caño-Prieto. If you think it is going to be expensive, let’s hold off. If there is not much forest to clear before reaching the ciénaga, then you can go ahead.

• In Hacienda Cachoa, clear only the area of forest that I authorized. Do not do any more pasture work than is necessary to maintain the cattle. If there is time, you should also clear the part of El Horizonte that is going back to forest and replant grass. At the same time, replant the strip between Quesada and Ciénaga Mohome.

• In Hacienda Apabi, replant La Esmeralda, and clear the strip between the creek and the corner of the ciénaga in order to burn in the summer and scatter yaraguá seeds.264

Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. also specified how to care for their cattle: note all newborn and weaned calves; castrate them early; keep the breeding and fattening herds separate; avoid moving the fattening herd and keep it supplied with salt; separate cattle by market destination; send well-fattened cattle to Segovia but not too fat that it suffers on the trail.265

But given the nature of the work and the potential communication difficulties, ranchers also valued managers who were self-reliant and resourceful. Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. frequently told managers to use their best judgment. Salazar wrote his brother, who managed the haciendas along the lower Cauca River, to burn all the pastures and recently-cleared land that he wanted to, but “keep me informed.”266

Regarding the provision of land to tenants on an estate in Antioquia, Salazar told its

---

264 APNOyC, 210, f302.
265 APNOyC, 1920 f145; Cáceres, f249, f302, f810; 350, f814; 200, f206; 210, f189; 230, f341.
266 APNOyC, 200, f36.
manager to resolve the issue “as you think is best for the interests of Pedro Nel Ospina.”267 And concerning the problem of advancing money to obtain workers:

“Although the ideal would be that the system of advances were ended in [Old Bolívar], we however give you full autonomy to make such advances, in your prudent judgment, if you consider that at certain moments and circumstances they are necessary for Good [sic] management….”268 The Ospinas also expected ranch managers to find ways to improve the operations. Bernardo Ospina told a new manager: “You will see the way to economize in all the work methods and will introduce the [changes] that you think appropriate after careful consideration.”269

Beyond cattle and pastures, there was a host of duties that kept ranch managers busy. Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. repeatedly emphasized the importance of keeping food expenditures under control: “You know that the future and good results of all businesses are based primarily on this point.”270 Managers often tried, therefore, to produce as much food as they could on the estate. But some products had to be purchased; and it was not always cheaper to grow food rather than buy it. They also needed to ensure that they had enough other supplies, such as vaccines, barbed wire, and tools. And they were frequently expected to find local buyers for crop surpluses, excess pasture, and any number of side-line businesses, like breeding and renting mules.271 Furthermore, ranchers often had their managers buy cattle for them. Sometimes they limited these purchases to small, local breeders. But if trusted, they

267 APNOyC, 200, f383; see also APNOyC, 210, f277.
270 APNOyC, 200, f456.
might also send them on buying trips throughout the region. Managers also had to attend to buyers who purchased animals directly from the estate when the owner was absent. Finally, all these market transactions required that they extend credit, collect debts, and receive and send bank wires.

Ranch managers also acted as the eyes, ears, and face of the estate, especially when the owners were non-local. For one, they needed to maintain control over estate property. The Ospina company told its managers to “[i]mpose yourself (impòngase bien) over the boundaries of the hacienda and defend them against any attack no matter where it comes from.”²⁷² They also insisted that managers mark and brand calves early, and count cattle frequently, to avoid rustling problems.²⁷³ Second, ranch manager kept tabs on local conditions and markets. Periodically, Ospina’s managers were told to look for land to buy, investigate cattle prices, or quietly inquire about potential buyers for a property.²⁷⁴ Lastly, managers might also represent a ranching operation locally. Before officials, Ospina’s managers filled out paperwork, requested help in land disputes, and intervened in tax assessments.²⁷⁵ When Bernardo Ospina started managing the company’s estates along the lower Cauca River, Pedro Nel Ospina Jr. told him to “see how you can best get along with [local] political bosses (gamonales) – the horses purchased to give to them as gifts are already figured in the budget.”²⁷⁶ Regarding local ranchers, Salazar instructed his managers to treat them cordially but to keep their distance: “Don’t give space to anyone to win you over in

²⁷² APNOyC: 232, f310; 160, March 12, 1913, f461; 1933-1934 Oct. 10, 1933.
²⁷³ APNOyC, 200, f207.
²⁷⁴ APNOyC: 160, Feb. 13, 1913; 252, f168; 1920, f377.
²⁷⁵ APNOyC: 200 f40; 160, Feb. 13, 1913; 200, f40; 350, f279.
²⁷⁶ APNOyC, 252, f168.
order to learn about our business; speak as little as possible and be very reserved. [In Old Bolívar], there is much gossiping and by no means encourage it (dar tiro). B]ite your tongue always, listen to them, and take advantage of their indiscretions….”

To be effective eyes and ears, the Ospina company demanded that its manager send frequent reports. When Deonicio Pérez took over the administration of Hacienda Corinto in 1918, Salazar told him to send Pedro Nel Ospina a weekly report if possible, but no less than one every two weeks. While managers did not usually meet this ideal, overall they did write frequently. Salazar nagged those who failed to do so. To the new manager of Hacienda Betancí, he wrote: “Keep me informed of everything you do in the hacienda – my instructions are based on this information. I cannot explain your silence, in your position as administrator.”

For more urgent issues, managers communicated with the Medellín office by telegraph. For instance, on Dec. 25, 1916, Juan de Dios Villa wrote that another outbreak of anthrax had appeared in Hacienda El Rayo. Salazar immediately responded that he should empty the pastures and should send 200 inferior steer ahead to the company’s estates in Antioquia in order to avoid overstocking its other haciendas along the lower Cauca River. The Medellín office also received Villa’s telegram summarizing the inventory he took on December 31, as instructed. But they urged him to send a more detailed inventory by letter, and berated him for failing to update them about the progress of

---

277 APNOyC, 200 f185.
278 APNOyC, 232, f294.
279 APNOyC, 200, f404.
the anthrax outbreak – especially since two of the pastures he emptied were new and needed to be restocked before the grass grew too high.²⁸⁰

Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. also required its managers to keep detailed account books. Since a large part of the company’s operations involved moving cattle from Old Bolívar to markets in Antioquia along a chain of estates, they needed to keep careful track of where cattle were and their stage of development. Each manager dispatched trail bosses with a detailed list of the animals sent. At their destination, the resident manager inventoried the animals that arrived. And the trail boss submitted a report indicating where he left any injured animals along the way so subsequent crews could pick them up later.²⁸¹ The other accounting task was to keep detailed books of their estate finances:

Following the custom established in our company, we expect that, with detailed monthly accounts, you will keep us informed of the expenses incurred by the estate, to know both how money was invested and to keep track of our own accounts. The detailed monthly report should include: the names of the workers, job, days worked, price of the work, and total earned. Then, in a separate section, the purchase of foodstuffs; and then various expenses. At the end of the report, a summary of the Cash account from which the value of the expense report is deducted, the money and wires received is credited, and your Balance Sheet with the balance in favor of the administrator of the work. In this way, we will always know the total amount of expenses and the state of the work, an indispensable thing, from our point of view.²⁸²

²⁸⁰ APNOyC, 200, f459.
²⁸¹ APNOyC, 170, f285. See also Arquez (1993).
²⁸² APNOyC, 200, f449.
The company’s accountant in Medellín went over these reports with a fine-tooth comb and sometimes struggled to get managers to keep and send in good records. Tensions periodically flared as well, especially when suspicions of embezzlement, usually in food expenses, lurked beneath the surface.

Ranch managers, especially in larger operations, did not organize and oversee all the work personally. In Marta Magdalena and the haciendas of Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía., they frequently had an assistant. In the former, it was their job to “keep on top of the workers, seeing to it that the work is done as [the administrator] planned, making sure that the camp workers start and stop working at satisfactory hours, go over the fence and generally everything related with overseeing the hacienda and keeping it in good order….”283 While Marta Magdalena also had a full-time accountant, in the Ospina estates, the second-in-command usually performed these duties. Additionally, it was the work captains (capataces) and their assistants who directly oversaw the work crews and reported back to the ranch managers. In Marta Magdalena, this hierarchy was even more subdivided. There, camp bosses organized the crews and tasks assigned to them by the ranch manager, with whom they kept in close contact over the internal telephone lines the owners had built.

Given the cultural differences and antagonisms between people from the interior of Colombia and the Caribbean coastal plains, Antioqueño ranchers who started operations in Old Bolívar invariably filled the managerial positions with other Antioqueños. To some degree, this regional preference was due to the network of contacts who could recommend capable people to fill these important positions.

283 Quoted in Echeverri (1993), p. 175.
Salazar even relied on his two brothers, Cesar and Roberto, to manage particularly important haciendas. But these Antioqueño ranchers also tended to distrust people from the coast. Partly, they thought them too “informal” or insufficiently conscientious. But they also wanted to be able to introduce their own work methods, which might be more difficult for a local to impose. Salazar repeatedly stressed to managers the importance of maintaining a distance between themselves and their workers, which came more naturally to an Antioqueño manager than a local. However, given the importance of this position, the decision to rely primarily on managers from Antioquia probably also stemmed from the control that ranch owners felt they could exercise over them and the degree of loyalty they expected. While regional identity and cultural differences played a role, so too did the fact that these managers did not initially have ties to the communities where they worked.

Nonetheless, the Antioqueño ranchers did not accept just any recommended compatriot as a ranch manager. Obviously, they needed to be able to read, write, and do simple math. This set them off from much of the country, which remained largely illiterate well into the twentieth century; and possibly many other ranch managers as well. But, as Bernardo Ospina specified, ranchers needed “a cowboy and a hard-working man,” not a “dandy” (cachaco) to fill the post. They needed people who were skilled in ranch work, could withstand the rigors of the climate and the risk of disease, did not mind the lack of comforts of a frontier existence, could follow orders, and had the ability to impose their authority. Unfortunately, the kinds of people who

284 APNOyC, 200, f185. 
fit this description were also those who might be tempted to found their own ranches. Many Antioqueño ranch managers did, in fact, use their initial position as a stepping stone to set up their own operations.\textsuperscript{286} Before the Ospina company prohibited its managers from attending to their own farms, such conflicts of interest periodically caused strain and financial losses.

**Different kinds of ranching operations**

While ranch work was fairly consistent throughout the industry, ranching operations differed according to the stage of production. In Colombia, there were three basic phases through the mid-twentieth century: breeding, growing (\textit{levante}), and fattening. The breeding stage ended when weaned calves were 12 to 18 months old. The growing stage lasted from this point until the steer had fully matured and were ready to fatten, usually between 42 and 52 months. The final fattening stage took anywhere from four months to a year.\textsuperscript{287}

Ranching operations did not always neatly coincide with these developmental stages, however. Some ranchers, especially smaller ones, focused predominantly on breeding calves and selling them shortly after they were weaned. If they had more land and capital, they might hold on to their calf crop until the animals were between 30 and 42 months. Such ranchers also frequently bought a few weaned calves to raise as well. Still larger and better-capitalized ranchers sometimes had ‘complete’ operations:

\textsuperscript{286} Berrocal Hoyos (1980).
\textsuperscript{287} Ministerio de Agricultura y Comercio (1916), p. xx; Aquiles Arrieta, (1935); Marulanda (1939); González Cortina (1940), pp. 41-42; Oakley (1944); Ocampo (2007).
breeding, growing, and fattening. While some of them purchased many of the animals that they eventually fattened, others might fatten only a small percentage for local or regional markets and sell mature or half-fattened cattle to ranchers in the interior of the country who finished the fattening process. Other relatively large ranchers avoided breeding and just bought young cattle, anywhere from 18 to 42 months, to grow and fatten. A few more speculative ranchers also bought young cattle to raise for a year or two before selling them to a fattener. Finally there were also specialized fatteners who only purchased fully-developed cattle (empostado) to prepare for slaughter. They were usually located relatively near the point of slaughter.

Additionally, there were a couple specialized ranching operations. The (quasi) pure-bred breeder developed after a few ranchers began to import new breeds of cattle in the late-nineteenth century. Initially, most did not introduce enough animals, or perhaps any cows, to become true pure-bred breeders. But they sold enough of their improved animals to cause the disappearance of the autochthonous breed from the altiplano of Cundinamarca and Boyacá. While some of this European blood did trickle down from the highlands, efforts to establish ‘pure-bred’ operations in the lowlands failed due to environmental obstacles until the introduction of the zebu breed of cattle at the turn of the twentieth century. Some ranchers in Old Bolívar did acquire a reputation for producing good animals by combining selective breeding techniques along with the introduction of some European blood. But selling their improved animals to other ranchers for breeding purposes was only a minor part of their overall operations at best. They raised most of these animals themselves in order to improve the reputation, and presumably price, of their cattle.
Dairy farms were the other specialized operation. Pure-dairy operations only started in the late 1920s after Washington Bernal demonstrated that the comparatively high price of fresh milk on the Sabana de Bogotá made it more profitable to slaughter newborn male calves rather than raise them for future sale.\textsuperscript{288} Through the mid-twentieth century, though, they remained very circumscribed geographically. Most of the country’s dairy ranchers, located primarily around larger cities, continued to raise their male calves to sell as yearlings to ranchers who would raise them for beef.\textsuperscript{289} Smaller towns, especially in the mid-altitude and lowlands, tended to receive their fresh milk from dual-purpose ranchers who milked their beef cows.

Beyond the fresh-milk-sheds, dual-purpose ranching varied the operations discussed above. Many ranchers, both large and small, milked some of their cows to produce salted cheese and help tame their cattle. Still, they did not milk all of their cows or tend to place much emphasis on improving this side of the business. However, as rising land values in the 1940s began to squeeze smaller breeders in some regions, they increasingly milked their breeding herd as a new source of income.\textsuperscript{290}

The decision of what kind of ranch to operate depended on a variety of factors. The amount of pastureland to which a rancher had access was an important determinant. It took a lot of space to raise beef cattle until they were ready for slaughter at about five years of age. The long growing phase required the most land while fattening needed the least. This was due both to the relatively short fattening period (four to twelve months typically) and the fact that fattening pastures usually

\textsuperscript{288} Bernal (1943).
\textsuperscript{289} See Oakley (1944).
\textsuperscript{290} González Cortino (1940); Oakley (1943).
had a higher stocking capacity than those used for growing cattle. The land demands for breeding fell in between the other two phases. Breeders required more land per head than pure fatteners (or even a rancher who raised growing cattle for just one year) since cows frequently gave birth once every two years. In other words, they needed two cows, and consequently double the pasture, to produce one calf per year. Typically, however, ranchers with less land focused on breeding. As mentioned above, those with the least amount generally sold their calves after weaning while breeders with more pasturage often held on to their animals for a year or two more.

Equally significant was the capital demands of the different operations. While fattening needed the least amount of land per head, it was the most capital-intensive phase: both in terms of the per-hectare value of fattening pastures and the cost of buying fully-grown steer. By contrast, breeding required the least amount of capital since both cows and calves could mostly be produced on the ranch rather than purchased. This is one reason why smaller ranchers focused on breeding rather than fattening. It is also why the size of a cattle operation cannot be determined by the size of an estate: a relatively small fattening operation could be much larger, in terms of cattle, value, and profits, than an extensive breeding operation on poor rangeland.

The ranching environment and its location also played a role. The quality and cost of pastureland influenced the type of operation. While not a hard and fast rule, ranchers tended to breed but especially grow cattle on less expensive land. These might be areas covered in natural grasses rather than planted pastures, or perhaps just poorer quality and less accessible land. For example, as the value of land in the Sinú Valley rose, ranchers there focused increasingly on fattening or combining breeding
with dairy. Fatteners with large estates that reached up into the poorer quality hills that circumscribed the valley floor might continue breeding there. Others bought cattle from smaller ranchers in these more marginal lands or from regions where lower land values permitted breeding and growing, such as the Sabanas region or as far away as the department of Magdalena. Even where breeders grazed their herds on artificial pastures, the kind of grass they were capable of growing also influenced their decision: pará grass, which needed low-lying humid soil, was preferred for fattening because the damp pastures increased calf mortality rates due the abundance of parasites. Fattening also tended to occur closer to the final market for cattle. The reason for this, as we will see in a later chapter, was the substantial weight losses incurred while trailing cattle to market. Until the cost of railway transport to Medellín fell in 1911, it was not profitable for ranchers in Old Bolívar to fatten cattle for the Antioqueño market.\(^{291}\) Instead, they sent fully-developed steer to Medellín where it was bought by specialized fatteners with pastures along the Cauca River in the southwestern part of the department.

Finally, a number of business decisions also determined the choice of operation. One decision had to do with the overall cattle market. Even though many observers considered fattening to be the most profitable kind of ranching, there were cycles of surplus production when the expansion of fattening capacity outpaced either market demand or the supply of feeder stock. There were moments in the cattle cycle, therefore, when breeding became the most profitable stage. To some degree, ranchers could focus on different phases of production depending on their impression of the

\(^{291}\) González Cardona (2003), p. 70. See also Brew (2000); APNOyC, 160, f346.
future outlook. They were more limited, however, in their ability to move in and out of breeding, since it took considerable time to develop a good herd. But market conditions could push them to cut back on breeding their own animals.

The other decision had to do with the levels and kinds of risk and the amount and kind of work. Many considered breeding to be the riskiest phase of production because of the relatively high rates of calf and cow mortality. After they were about a year old, the chances that calves would die from parasites or disease dropped dramatically. For example, Marta Magdalena got rid of most of its breeding operation in 1925, and the mortality rate of its cattle dropped substantially. Buying yearling or animals to grow out, therefore, pushed the risks of losses back on to the breeder. For many small breeders, however, the greater risk of losing several calves was preferable to the lower but potentially more devastating risk of losing a full-grown steer. By contrast, many ranchers preferred fattening to breeding since it required less oversight and fewer labor demands. Some stockmen, however, considered fatteners to be counterfeit ranchers since this stage required less knowledge and work.

THE SOCIAL RELATIONS OF RANCHING

“The natives believe that these lands, covered with grass today, have been fertilized by the sweat and blood of various generations of peasants from Bolívar, who have been sacrificed to exploitation and slavery for more than half-a-century” (Antolín Díaz, 1935).

292 Kalmanovitz et al. (1999).
293 Oakley (1943); Randell (1953).
294 Díaz (1935), p. 79.
The demand for ranch hands in Old Bolívar was significant. Because of the effort required to develop pastures out of forested land, ranchers there needed considerably more workers than their rangeland counterparts. The work was not as labor intensive as most agricultural enterprises, especially once the pastures were well established; and it was more flexible. But the contrasts frequently made between ranching – it “hardly absorbs any hands” – and agriculture are exaggerated if they ignore the requirements of pasture formation, maintenance, and renovation.\(^{295}\) To some extent, the emphasis on stock raising in Old Bolívar was a response to labor scarcity. It did not, however, provide an easy solution to the challenges of tight labor markets still in the early stages of development. How, then, did ranchers retain and organize the workers they needed?

By most accounts, the social relations of ranching in Old Bolívar were predicated on “violent methods of subjugation.”\(^{296}\) Victor Negrete, for example, points to a reliance on slave labor “mediated by the most brutal physical violence.”\(^ {297}\) Even scholars who do not take Díaz’s slavery reference literally still stress the “iron control” with which ranchers ruled.\(^ {298}\) They identify two key mechanisms that ranchers used to retain and control labor: land monopolization and debt peonage. Despite the contradictions between them, both explanations rightly point to the coercive streak running through labor relations in Old Bolívar. But rather than alternative possibilities,

\(^{295}\) ACER, 58.2.125, Alejandro Lopez to Carlos E Restrepo, Mayo 5, 1926, f242.
they represent two sides of an uneven and drawn out process of primitive accumulation: debt was necessary because the peasantry of Old Bolívar was not completely dependent on wages.

Both views, however, overestimate the degree of coercion behind labor markets. While it certainly existed, the ‘iron grip’ of ranchers was weaker than often imagined. For much of the period in question, they did not monopolize landholdings to the degree commonly suggested. The dispossession of the peasantry was protracted and incomplete. The frontier was also large and difficult to control. To expand their operations, ranchers could not just rely on the appropriation of peasant holdings and landless masses willing to develop pastures in exchange for the temporary use of a plot of land. They also had to hire workers. The wages ranchers advanced, however, were not simply a “trick” that they invented to ensnare unsuspecting peasants and reduce them to a slave-like status. Instead, these debts were frequently a sign of labor market negotiations: peasants successfully demanded advances even when ranchers were reluctant to provide them. Therefore, even though fully-developed capitalist relations did not become widespread until the mid-twentieth century, wages had long mediated labor markets.

\[299\] Fals Borda (1979), p. 112.
From slavery to free labor

Until the early-nineteenth century, many ranchers relied on slave labor. 300 Although slaves were not the only source of labor, they were important. 301 For example, based on records from 19 cattle estates around Colombia in the 1770s, Tovar calculated that they averaged 29 slaves each. 302 In Old Bolívar, José Fernando de Mery Guerra had some 30 slaves to work approximately 4,700 cattle in Tierras de Loba in 1739; the same year, 17 male slaves owned by Andrés de Madariaga looked after 1,087 head; and when Juan Pedro de Arraiz bought Hato de San Marcos in 1781, it included 128 slaves and 9,467 cattle. 303 Slaves worked as cowboys, corraleros, cheese-makers, as well as cleared land to grow crops and other tasks. 304 Ranchers even used them to oversee the work of other slaves and hired laborers. 305 As with sugarcane and cacao production, the relatively constant work of raising cattle justified the high initial expense of slaves. 306 But it was the relative labor scarcity in these coastal lowlands – a combination of the low and dispersed population and the difficulty of getting them to work – that made many ranchers rely on them. 307

300 Meisel (1980); Tovar (1980); Huertas Vergara (1992).
301 Indians also worked on livestock estates through the tribute requirements (the encomienda), forced wage labor (concierto), and incipient free wage labor (Tovar, 1980, pp. 62-73). These may have been more important in the interior of the country where the Indian population was larger. It also seems, from Tovar’s discussion, that Indian labor was more important in the seventeenth century than in the eighteenth century.
305 Fals Borda (1979), p. 119B. The one task it appears they may not have done is trail cattle outside of the estate (see Tovar, 1980; AOFB, Mompox, Transporte de ganado de Mompox a Cartagena en 1746 (Archivo General de Indias).
307 Helg (2004); Meisel (1980). The economics of slave labor in Colombia is not entirely clear. Tovar (1980, p. 43) found that slave-owning sugar producers in the eighteenth century
By the turn of the nineteenth century, however, slavery was in decline. The slave population fell by about half between 1778 and 1825, from 9,622 to 4,866.³⁰⁸ “Natural death, the end of the slave trade, the low birthrate among slave women, self-purchase, and flight,” Aline Helg notes, were all-important causes.³⁰⁹ The wars of Independence, in which quite a few slaves took advantage of the upheaval to runaway or proclaim their freedom, greatly accelerated this decline.³¹⁰ Formal abolition only came in 1851, but by that time there were just 1,408 slaves in Old Bolivar who directly benefited from the legislation.³¹¹

As the slave population dwindled, landed elites increasingly obtained workers from the racially-mixed population of free peasants (*libres de todos los colores*). Over the eighteenth century, the growth of this group dramatically outpaced that of slaves.³¹² By the end of the century, they comprised about two-thirds of the total

---

³¹² Ibid.
population. As free-peasant labor became a more plausible option, ranchers and other land owners began to shift the composition of their work force. Economic historian Adolfo Meisel even argues that, by reducing their dependence on slaves, some landowners used the freed capital to significantly expand their landholdings. This process of substitution expanded rapidly over the first half of the nineteenth century. And by the time ranchers embarked on a large-scale expansion around 1850, they were limited to this free peasantry. But how did they ensure that these peasants would come work for them?

“Permanent primitive accumulation”

Some scholars suggest that the concentration of landed property gave ranchers and other rural elites considerable leverage over this potential labor force. In the eighteenth century, the highly-skewed distribution of private property rights, and the resettlement of a dispersed population in new or re-founded towns, circumscribed their independence and even “forced [them] under the dominion of the landed elites.” The large-scale enclosure of the country’s agrarian frontier over the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries made them even more dependent. This notion is captured by a popular refrain in Colombian historiography: “The monopoly of the available...

---

313 Múnera (1994).
318 LeGrand (1986).
land was the only way to subjugate the labor force.” In other words, ranchers pushed peasants to become day laborers by denying them access to sufficient land with which to sustain themselves independently.

This “historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production” is what Marx called primitive accumulation. Reyes uses this notion to explain the expansion of ranching in Old Bolívar: “The history of the coastal hacienda has been a process of accumulating wealth represented by cattle and land planted with grass, whose original source of production has been the work of the peasant displaced from his land, who, at the same time that he reproduces his labor power, constitutes the motor of the expansion of ranching areas.” In other words, by pushing peasants off their land, ranchers benefited in two ways. First, they seized productive resources. What Reyes emphasizes, though, is not the appropriation of land alone but the labor invested by peasants in preparing it for use. In this way, ranchers found a way to help underwrite the cost of acquiring more pastureland. (In Marx’s account, this transfer of resources also turned them into capital.) Second, by creating a landless or land-poor peasantry, ranchers obtained a cheap and ready supply of labor to clear additional forests to plant in grass. Furthermore, rather than confined to the pre-history of ranching, these dual processes were integral to its relentless expansion, what Reyes calls a process of “permanent primitive accumulation.”

---

320 Marx (1976), p. 185.
322 Ibid.
In a variation of the classic process, however, Reyes and others argue that this dispossession did not lead to the development of free labor force and widespread wage relations. Instead, ranchers preferred to convert displaced peasants into an army of quasi-sharecroppers. In other words, they provided these peasants with a plot of land to farm for two or three years with the provision that they return it planted in grass. In these land-for-grass exchanges, ranchers typically provided the grass seed and gave peasants full rights to the crops they harvested. Sometimes they may have tried to squeeze more out of these workers, but their primary objective was to push the high cost of pasture development onto the back of this floating labor force. In addition, they avoided the problems of hiring workers, paying advances, and more closely supervising the work. A number of scholars have claimed that this form of ‘sharecropping’ grass epitomized the social relations of ranching in Old Bolivar, compared to the predominance of wage labor in the upper Magdalena and Cauca river valleys. This “peculiar evolution” in the social relations of Colombia’s Caribbean region was rooted in the fact that “there the appropriation of the land by a few individuals was vaster, the peasantry scarcer, and its dispossession cruder than in the rest of the Republic.” Thus, the ongoing and dual nature of primitive accumulation provided ranchers with a cheap way to conquer the forest and expand their operations.

It should be mentioned that ranchers and other landed elites also exercised leverage over the free peasants of Old Bolivar by providing them with a degree of security. During the frequent civil wars of the nineteenth century, some peasants

---

324 Kalmanovitz (1989), p. 126,
sought refuge under the protective wing of landowners against forced conscription, commandeered supplies, and the fighting itself.\textsuperscript{325} Even in times of peace, peasants derived a number of advantages, from reducing the risks of calamity to navigating the state bureaucracy, from such dependent relationships, which were often imbued “with a high dose of paternalism.”\textsuperscript{326} Thus, some ‘voluntarily’ gave up independence for security. More than land monopolization alone endowed ranchers and other landed elites with leverage over the free peasants of Old Bolivar.

While this view has much to offer, it also has a number of problems. First, it overestimates the monopoly control of the land by ranchers and other elites. As mentioned in the previous chapter, communal forms of land tenure persisted for sometime, giving a sizeable portion of the peasantry a degree of independence. In some cases, the resettlement of the population in the late-eighteenth century, by establishing or reconfirming village ejidos, may have acted like a form of land reform. The protests by a number of local elites over these measures suggests that they did not necessarily increase elite control over the population.\textsuperscript{327} Furthermore, despite the extent of the land grants between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, they did not close off the frontier. While they did enclose favorable and easily-accessible areas too much land was available to limit the possibilities of colonization. For example, although ranchers monopolized the land along the Sinú River south of Montería, the backsides of their properties invariably abutted unclaimed public land into the early-

\textsuperscript{325} I say supposedly because Kalmanovitz (1989, p. 131) also claims that landed elite used their tenants as “cannon fodder” in these frequent civil wars, which would have undermined the security they supposedly sought.

\textsuperscript{326} Reyes (1978), pp. 112-113.

\textsuperscript{327} It also needs to be mentioned that the dispersed peasant populations also frequently resisted the resettlement efforts.
twentieth century; and a large group of peasants were able to settle Loma Grande, a sizeable area less than ten kilometers outside of town at the turn of the century. Landed elites did not always even effectively control their own estates. This was more of an issue in the nineteenth century when the owners of sprawling properties frequently had little idea of what occurred in their remote corners. While their control increased significantly over time, even in the 1920s and 1930s, ranchers confronted ‘trespassing’ colonos. Sometimes these clashes were part of longstanding property disputes. But Bernardo Ospina also mentioned that some parts of Hacienda Corinto were so far away from the main operations that the manager had a hard time preventing peasants from ‘invading’ these portions of the estate. This is not to say that land pressure did not exist, especially in areas settled early on and where most of the land was titled, such as the lower Sinú Valley (e.g., San Antero) and parts of the Sabanas de Bolívar. But the more effective monopolization of landholdings in these sub-regions cannot be generalized across Old Bolívar until much later.

Second, sharecropping grass was not as pervasive as some claim. While large landowners used these arrangements to transform forested land into pasture in southwestern Antioquia as early as the 1840s, the earliest direct reference I have found for a similar practice in Old Bolívar is from the early 1920s. In this case, Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. found that they could increase their pastureland on an estate near the mouth of the Sinú River by renting rice plots to land-poor residents of San Antero and

---

While there were land conflicts over this region in the 1920s, elites did not, at least initially, effectively block access to land altogether.
planting the leftover clearings. Similarly, regarding Carolina, an estate near Yolombó in northern Antioquia, Ospina wrote in 1914: “We very much want to make large, really very large pastures of yaraguá in the little canyons that run into the Porce [River] between the Guinea and Guaduas [creeks]. I believe that by not charging rent but only a third [of the harvest] or a carga [125 kg.] there will be those who will clear the land…. Thus the only cost will be the seed and scattering it.”

Neither of these were classic land-for-grass exchanges because they took advantage of land rentals rather than providing land to be returned under grass. But they clearly show that Ospina and Salazar were not opposed to the practice. I can only assume that, especially facing financial difficulties, they made no effort to introduce such exchanges on their other estates because they knew the local peasantry, with enough land still to avoid this kind of desperation, would have rejected their attempts. The managers of Marta Magdalena did not employ these land-for-grass exchanges either. They did provide resident workers with plots of land to farm if they wished. And while they did convert these into pasture, the hacienda paid for the costs of planting grass, not just the seed, and even cleared the land of the large timber. This lack of evidence does not mean that ranchers did not employ such land-for-grass exchanges earlier. But it is telling that Bell, in a report on ranching in Old Bolívar from 1919, only noted the wages costs of clearing, fencing, and planting pastures. My suspicion

---

329 APNOyC, C 1917-1936, Memorandum sobre las haciendas de “Corinto” y “Tijo y Lobo” de propiedad de Pedro Nel Ospina & Co.
332 Bell (1919), p. 22.
is that these sharecropping arrangements started to become widespread only in the 1920s and 1930s.

Third, this view also underestimates the use of wage labor to develop cattle estates. Unfortunately, limited data makes it hard to determine the overall importance of wages. Ranchers in Old Bolívar may well have relied on the labor service of tenants to carry out much of their work despite little evidence for it. In the 1850s, Holton described such labor relations in the Cauca Valley. Sharecropping grass may also have been more significant than I suspect. But wage labor was clearly important. In 1915, Salazar complained about rising wages in Bolívar due to the high demand for workers on expanding cattle estates.³³³ The owners of Hacienda Marta Magdalena annually employed hundreds workers to convert some 10,000 hectares of forest into pasture between 1915 and 1940.³³⁴ The Lancashire and General Investment Company also hired a large workforce to clear over 22,000 hectares of land between the 1920s and the 1940s.³³⁵ Although Ospina and Salazar bought some land from peasant colonizers, such clearings were small compared to what they paid workers to develop.³³⁶ Striffler suggested that ranchers used wage labor from the beginning of their push into northern coastal forests in the mid-nineteenth century.³³⁷ And the 1892 ‘matrícula’ (registration) law, passed in Old Bolívar to better enforce labor contracts, also points to its significance.

³³³ APNOyC, 200, f452.
³³⁶ APNOyC, 170, f354; Cárceles, f182.
Nonetheless, land-for-grass exchanges did become widespread by the 1930s and 1940s. In 1943, Oakely claimed that it was “the most prevalent labor system in connection with clearing pasture lands.” Over time, ranchers had slowly increased their leverage over the peasantry. They had expanded their holdings at the expense of peasant properties, whether through land markets or outright appropriation; they had eroded the communal lands of villages and Indian reserves; and they had spread deeper into the frontier, limiting the opportunities for peasant colonization. A couple of additional factors also contributed to this process. First, the population of Old Bolívar grew substantially over the first half of the twentieth century: from some 300,000 in 1905 to over 990,000 in 1950. Although landowners periodically complained of shortages, labor had generally become more abundant and the competition for workers decreased. One sign of this was the ability of Marta Magdalena and Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. to start abolishing the practice of advancing wages by the late 1920s and 1930s. The growing population also fragmented peasant properties, leading to greater reliance on outside income. Second, toward mid-century, labor demands dropped in older areas of colonization where years of forest clearance had begun to wind down. In the early 1940s, for example, Marta Magdalena, completed a roughly four-decade-long effort to convert its forested land into grass. As a result, the average number of workers it employed per month dropped from a high of 407 in 1938 to 120 in 1949. Forest-to-pasture transformations continued, especially

---

338 Oakley (1944), p. 17. Still, 40 percent of the cattle operations he analyzes had high annual pasture clearing costs. For the others, which were not itemized in this fashion, it is impossible to tell how significant they were.
along the upper reaches of the San Jorge and Sinú rivers or further west into Urubá. But relative to the area already in pasture and the department’s population, these colonization fronts had become less important.

The ascendancy of sharecropping grass was short-lived, however. As discussed below, many estate owners began expelling their tenants, in the wake of land reform legislation from 1936, to prevent them from claiming ownership rights over any improvements they made to the land. Oakley thought that the value of these improvements, often “notoriously expensive,” actually fostered squatting.341 This threatened to undermine the very purpose of land-for-grass exchanges, which was a cheap method of pasture expansion. The effect was a large-scale expulsion of tenant labor. In some areas of Colombia, landowners adjusted to this new labor market by turning from agricultural production to stock raising, putting the lands formerly used by tenants under pasture. In Old Bolívar, many ranchers turned (back) to using wage labor to develop and maintain pastures.342 While sharecropping grass may have continued, Randell did not note the practice in his 1953 survey of the cattle industry.343 Instead, he noted regional wage variations and the overall abundance of labor. By this time, the Sinú Valley, which had relatively high wages earlier in the century, now had some of the lowest wages for cattle workers in the country.

341 Oakley (1944), p. 44.
342 Oakley (1944), p. 18.
343 Randell (1953).
Rethinking debt relations

With uneven land-based leverage over the peasantry, ranchers relied on debt relations to obtain workers. \(^{344}\) Stories abound about the coercive nature of these relations, the host of tricks landowners used to perpetuate indebtedness, and even the inheritance of debts, which recalled slavery. In 1926, the U.S. Consul in Cartagena described the way landowners in Old Bolívar “force their employees to work for them as long as the latter are in their debt and find it a simple matter to keep the employees constantly in debt by supplying them with food, drink, clothing, and equipment, although the practice is expressly prohibited by Colombian law.” \(^{345}\) Similarly, a government commission to the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta found the Indians there frequently trapped in debt peonage. Merchants advanced them cash and goods, the latter marked up 200 percent, that they repaid in work for absurdly low wages. As a result, some Indians spent their lives in debt, passing on these obligations to their children. \(^{346}\)

For many, such as historian Francis Cronshaw, the imposition of debt peonage, epitomized by the infamous **matrícula** law, demonstrated the “almost unlimited power

---

\(^{344}\) Forced recruitment was another potential source. Some of the labor initially used to develop pastures in southwestern Antioquia in the 1830s was said to be from vagrants (vagos) and people sent from debtor’s prison (Vélez, 2002). These, however, were insufficient, and landowners soon turned to sharecropping arrangements. In 1851, the Liberal government abolished debtor’s prison, eliminating this source. The law allowed vagrants and regular prisoners to be ‘auctioned off’ to private estates in Old Bolívar. But here, too, the numbers were insufficient to make much of an impact. Likewise, ranchers probably used compulsory labor requirements (**trabajo personal subsidiario** – a form of taxation on the population that had limited means of paying cash; in 1905, the national government appears to have standardized this at three days labor annually [Junta Departamental de Obras Públicas de Nariño (1908)]). But here too, I doubt the impact could have been very great. The state did not assist ranchers or other landowners with long-distance labor recruiting either.

\(^{345}\) Quoted in Cronshaw (1985), p. 169.

\(^{346}\) Corral and Zuluaga (1937), p. 91.
held the rancher patriarchy of the Bolívar plains.”^{347} Passed in 1892, this law, which regulated labor contracts, supposedly consolidated an institution of forced labor. According to Kalmanovitz, it required that “[p]easants…register before the mayors of each settlement, and when landowners needed workers they were called, paid an arbitrarily-fixed wage, and given food.”^{348} Some have even considered the *matrícula* to be the continuation of slavery, abolished 40 years earlier, in a new guise.^{349}

An examination of the text of this law shows that it attempted to increase the control employers had over rural workers in two ways. First, it threatened workers who failed to fulfill their labor contracts with fines and jail, especially when their employers had advanced them wages.^{350} A breach of contract was only acceptable in case of calamity, such as serious illness or death in the immediate family, or significant threat to personal property (fire, flood, theft). In all other cases, workers who had been advanced wages would be fined up to $50 pesos, or jailed one day per peso fined.^{351} Workers who did not receive advances only forfeited the wages they would have earned; the contract remained valid, however. Second, the law also directed employers to implement a system of labor passes (*cartas de paz y salvo*) to control the movement of workers with outstanding debts or contracts between employers. The ordinance established $10 peso fines for employers who did not

---

^{350} Negrete (1981); AOFB, Legislación Agraria. It also attempted to tighten the noose by simultaneously threatening estate owners who hired workers with outstanding obligations, and police chiefs who were reluctant to hand over such workers to their ‘original’ employees (AOFB, Legislación Agraria).
^{351} Those who received less than $10 faced up to ten days in jail.
provide such passes; and fines from $10 to $100 pesos for hiring workers without them. The law also tried to deal with fugitive workers who fled to another municipality. If found, local police chiefs were required to hand these workers over to the police of the municipality were the work-abandonment claim was filed. The fact that these local police chiefs faced fines of $10 to $200 pesos if they did not cooperate suggests that they did not always do so.  

The matrícula was the legal mechanism that landed elites devised to address the problem of absentee workers, especially when wages had been advanced. To interpret it as the mere formalization of de facto practice, however, is to miss its very point. Landed elites pushed for the law precisely because of the problems they faced securing labor. It was an effort to increase their leverage over the peasantry because their power was not absolute. Rather than a mechanism “invented” by ranchers to ensnare workers, advances were often the only way ranchers could entice peasants to work for wages. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, Striffler noted that the employer was “at the mercy of the bad faith of day laborers who ask him for wages in advance only to mock him later.” Ospina and Salazar repeatedly tried to do away with this “dangerous practice.” But even offers of higher wages to those who would forgo the traditional advance failed. In the instructions to one of his ranch managers, Salazar demonstrated his pragmatic resignation: “we cannot try to get of this custom

---

352 From Manuel Dávila Florez, ed. Código de policía del departamento de Bolívar. Cartagena: Tipografía Mogollón, 1912. From extracts found in the AFOB, Legislación Agraria.  
353 The actual matrícula (registering) of the law comes from the fact that a copy of these labor contracts had to be filed with the police.  
355 Striffler (1994), Ch. 22.  
356 APNOyC. 200, f206.  
357 Ocampo (1988).
[of advancing wages], because we would end up without people, but you have to make sure that when making advances they are to people known to be good, and not give money to everyone who puts on a hat.”  

On the one hand, Ospina, Salazar, and other ranchers disliked the practice since it raised labor expenses and because “this way we lose a lot of money.” On the other hand, they also said that “people thus paid in advance work very little.” It was this frustration with losing some of the money they advanced, and with unfinished and drawn out tasks, that appears to have been behind the passage of the law.

The effect of the law also appears to have been mixed. It undoubtedly increased rancher control and encouraged abuses. In 1896, Joaquín Novoa managed to send Old Bolívar’s secretary of government a telegram from the Sincé jail: “Since last night I find myself detained in jail as a labor-contract deserter (concertado desertor), which is a big lie: neither is there nor do they present a contract (matrícula).” Even though Novoa was freed within a week, his case shows the power that the matrícula gave local elites to enforce and abuse labor contracts. There appear to have been important limits to its effectiveness, however. In 1908, the governor of the new department of Sincelejo, temporarily excised out of Bolívar, signed a similar bill into law: he claimed that the conditions that inspired the original law in Bolívar remained a problem. While this may have just been an excuse to put a similar law on the books in the new department, Salazar, the Ospinas, and the

---

358 APNOyC, 232, f294. Also see: APNOyC, 200, f206-207; 210, f277-278; 1920-1921, Bernardo Ospina to José Vásquez, Aug. 9, 1920.
361 Registro de Bolívar, April 15, 1896, no. 1329, Secretaría de gobierno, Contrato sobre concierto para trabajos agrícolas, p. 123.
managers of Marta Magdalena thought that advancing wages was problematic for many of the same reasons. Bernardo Ospina told the manager of Tarazá: “be careful with the loans and credit to workers, since you know very well that few know how to fulfill their promises….”

In the 1910s, Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. told their mayordomos in Old Bolívar not to hire any workers without first making sure that they did not owe work to another estate. Their rationale was practical – they hoped that other hacendados would reciprocate – rather than an effort to comply with the law. Furthermore, the law did not end the problem of ‘fugitive’ workers. In 1925, the losses from such workers and labor contractors on Marta Magdalena was close to $1,500 pesos, or over 4,000 days of labor. Part of the problem was that trying to enforce these contracts was often “impractical, as a consequence of the costs (especially in terms of the time invested by the administrative personnel) which required the establishment of legal proceedings against the ‘fugitive’ workers.”

A large, relatively open frontier, the mobility of the rural population, and the extensive networks of family and friends enabled these workers to abscond fairly easily. Miguel Reyes, an ex-cowboy from Marta Magdalena, recalled the abuses and the workers jailed for leaving an estate without fulfilling their contracts. But he also thought that the “matrícula ended because the majority ran off owing money.”

Reinterpreting the matrícula by no means balances the power relations between the

---

362 APNOyC, C 1920-1921, Bernardo Ospina to José Vásquez, Aug. 9, 1920.
363 APNOyC, 200, f206.
365 Ibid.
366 Ibid.
ranchers and peasants of Bolívar, but it does qualify the former’s “iron control” that many have imagined close to absolute.\textsuperscript{368}

\textit{Wage work}

If the peasants of Old Bolívar retained sufficient independence to compel employers to advance them wages, why did they bother to work for wages at all? Some were certainly forced to because they had lost their land or found themselves in dire straights. Miguel Reyes said that the area south of Montería was “full of people from the Sabanas-region because over there the land…was mostly of the rich…and over here there was more free land.”\textsuperscript{369} The continued erosion and fragmentation of communal lands also pushed increasing numbers of peasants to supplement their incomes by working for wages. The Indigenous community of San Andrés felt this squeeze rather intensely after the municipal government took control of its resguardo in 1909 and rented large parts of it out to ranchers and oil prospectors.\textsuperscript{370} Some residents left the community to colonize public lands, but others remained in San Andrés, forming an important pool of temporary labor for ranchers in the region.

\textsuperscript{368} Yepes (2001), p. 151. Regarding indebted labor in Latin America, see Bauer (1979), Knight (1986). The limited power of the state was partially a function of the small police force it could afford to field. For example, in 1924, the governor of the department of Magdalena noted that lack of funds meant that he could only provide the large area of El Paso with six policemen, and that this hampered the state’s authority there (AGPNO, Folder 79, ff19-22).

\textsuperscript{369} Quoted in Ocampo (2007), p. 154.

Peasant colonizers who sold their plots to expanding ranchers, but did not want to head out to the frontier again, could also end up without easy access to land.\(^{371}\) Poverty also forced some parents to send their children to live and work on an estate in exchange for small advances. While some ranchers paid them minimal wages, others simply provided room and board.\(^{372}\)

But this sort of economic compulsion does not tell the whole story. According to Alejandro López, the peasant from Antioquia considered working for wages to be a sign of failure. There, small-scale gold mining and access to frontier land perhaps preserved a staunch culture of independence. There was an important tradition of colonization and autonomy in Old Bolívar as well. Manuel Polo, an Indian who worked for years as an “avanzado” said the ideal was to be independent and “not need the rich.”\(^{373}\) But he also noted that there was a lot of movement back and forth between wages and working for oneself. Wage work may also have been less disparaged. For example, an ex-worker from Marta Magdalena, José Acosta, recalled that, as a young man in the early 1920s, he left the estate where his father spent his life as a contracted laborer (matrículado): “the matrícula was a type of promise to serve, to work constantly [on an estate]; a guy did not know how much he earned, nor how much they paid…if he left, they pursued him. I didn’t want to follow my old man in this life…”\(^{374}\) The issue, however, was not wage work itself but the kind of treatment and pay received. Acosta left for Marta Magdalena where “people coming back from

---

\(^{371}\) See AOFB, San Benito Abad 1773, Entrevista con Antonio Rivera, April 19, 1982.

\(^{372}\) Díaz (1935), pp. 31-32; AOFB, San Benito Abad 1773, Entrevista con Antonio Rivera, April 19, 1982.

\(^{373}\) Quoted in Ocampo (2007), p. 249.

\(^{374}\) Quote in Ocampo (2007), p. 151.
working there told me it was good, they paid 50 centavos.” Ocampo also notes that there was a degree of pride among the workers of Marta Magdalena. During festivals, its cowboys, “beating their chest saying ‘I am from Marta Magdalena’,” developed rivalries with the cowboys from other estates. Such attitudes may be partially rooted in a long tradition of wage work in the region that dates back to the colonial period. To supplement their slaves, ranchers hired extra cowboys as well as workers to clean, fence, and plant cropland. In the eighteenth century, hired hands appear to have trailed most cattle. During slack periods in the farming cycle, peasants headed into the woods to collect forest products and fell timber for wages. Striffler also recalled how, arriving in the Sinú Valley in the early 1840s to organize a gold-mining expedition, he quickly hired close to 200 men – “almost an army in unpopulated America” – from the all the “boat-pollers (bogas) and day-laborers (peones) [who] showed up in great numbers” looking for work.

Wages were attractive for a number of reasons. For one, they were a way to take advantage of the slow periods, when there was little farm work to do, to earn extra income. This sometimes caused headaches for ranchers, since peasants often came looking for work when there was less to be done and left jobs unfinished to care for their own crops. The hardest time to obtain workers was during March and April, when peasants planted their crops, and in September and October, when they

---

375 Ibid.
378 Fals Borda (1979); Sourdis (1996); Arquez (1993); Tovar (1980); AOFB, Mompox, Transporte de ganado de Mompox a Cartagena en 1746 (Archivo General de Indias).
381 APNOyC, 350, f743.
returned to harvest their first crop and plant the second.\textsuperscript{382} For peasants, this seasonality allowed them to continue farming their own fields, which was important for economic security and perhaps a sense of cultural identity. Wages may also have served as a form of diversification. This was especially important in a region where small markets were quickly flooded with produce and transportation difficulties made it hard to move surpluses.\textsuperscript{383} Even in 1945, after the development of roads and trucking, high transportation costs could make selling surplus corn in nearby Montería a losing proposition.\textsuperscript{384} Wages, therefore, may have been an easier way to obtain money. Because peasants were not entirely self-sufficient, it is possible that they integrated wage work into livelihood strategies. However, Striffler noted that, in the mid-nineteenth century, these peasants had also been infected by a desire for consumer goods.\textsuperscript{385} A classic romantic, he lamented the corrosive influence of traveling merchants, from as far away as Curaçao, and their cheap commodities. Striffler claimed that the peasants of Old Bolivar had lived simple but happy lives: “food was easily procured and nobody thought about dressing; they danced naked every night…under the moonlight, which was an economy and a guarantee of prudery. Such a pleasant state of affairs could have continued forever without the inopportune intervention of the traffickers….”\textsuperscript{386} As a result, wages were more than just a means of acquiring a few staples not produced locally: “[o]nly men of advanced age remember

\begin{footnotes}
\item[383] Striffler (1994).
\item[386] Ibid. p. 85.
\end{footnotes}
the simplicity with which men and women dressed in the Sabanas-region, and in the
countryside generally, some thirty years ago.”

In addition to the spreading taste for commodities, there was also a prodigal
streak in the culture of peasants from Old Bolívar. In contrast to a life of scrimping,
they spent freely during periodic festivals. Demonstrating disdain for money,
according to Ocampo, was also a source of prestige. During the midnight dances in
Ciénaga de Oro, Díaz saw “the air light up by the embers (rescoldos) of the sperm
torches that the women raised high in their right hand, the left one [on their hips]. The
cowboys, dominated by pride and enthusiasm, burn silk handkerchiefs and five peso
bills.” Striffler also commented on the quintessential wife of the poor peasant who
spent her nights dancing, spending money, and “burning through an untold number of
sperm candles when she lights her house with a sad, alligator-lard lamp.” The
demand for cash during these festivals turned them into prime recruiting grounds.
Advanced a month or two of wages, peasants “drink them in sugarcane alcohol
(aguardiente) or burn them in sperm [candles], in the fandango circles with music,”
and then go work off their debts.

---

387 Ibid., p. 36.
389 Díaz (1935), p. 139.
Organizing labor

Despite the importance of wages, various factors stalled the full development of capitalist labor relations. The uneven process of primitive accumulation meant that many peasants still had enough land to forestall becoming full-time wage workers. Although they may not have begrudged wage work, they hung on to what independence they had. Therefore, widespread wages without a completely ‘free’ labor force was partly due to the reluctance of peasants to such a fate. But ranchers did not want a full-time labor force either. Given the fluctuating labor demands of pasture work, they did not want to support a year-round labor force. And they wanted the ability to hire or fire workers according to their production needs and financial situation.

Ranchers devised a variety of strategies to flexibly meet their labor needs. Typically, they needed a few full-time workers, including the ranch managers and one or more servants cook and clean. Quite often, a minimum number of cowboys, corraleros, and a few other specialized workers (cook, warehouse manager, healer) had more or less permanent positions. Some of them may have been under contract while others were retained more informally. Generally, they lived on the estate in housing provided by the rancher, perhaps communal bunks if single or a simple hut if they had a family. They also frequently had the right to a plot of land to farm and limited access to pasture for a few animals.

---

392 Even more or less full-time workers planted crops when they could: the cowboys of Marta Magdalena, for example, paid peasants in the surrounding community to undertake the work when they could not (Ocampo, 2007).
In addition to full-time workers, ranchers frequently allowed a number of peasant families to settle on their estates. Some ranchers may have charged their tenants rent for the plot of land they farmed, which they paid by working on the estate, but most likely provided free access to land and paid their tenants to work. (When land became scarcer than workers, ranchers started to drop the wages they paid, granting free access to land in exchange for returning it in pasture.) While Salazar and other Antioqueño ranchers did not like the idea of having tenants, they recognized that this ensured they had a pool of easily-tapped labor. Many of these tenants may have worked on a fairly consistent basis. In July 1913, they averaged 29 days of work on Marta Magdalena. July, however, was one of the peak work months when the number of workers could be twice the nadir. Bell commented in 1919 that, on cattle estates, “usually a man will average only two days’ work per week” In 1916, there was even some considerable variation in the number of cowboys working on a bi-weekly basis, fluctuating between 3 and 7, with a couple of peaks at 16 and 19. In some cases, it was the resident peasants who determined the fluctuating rhythm of work. In 1933, the manager of Marta Magdalena wrote that he could not start the work instructed “because nobody is around, the personnel almost completely disappeared this week because everyone are doing the segundas [harvesting the second crop]….” Commodity prices also influenced the decision of peasants whether or not to work for wages. In 1918, the manager of Marta Magdalena wrote that, with “[t]he
high price of rice, corn, ipecac root, *canaime*, and generally all food and export articles…[the peasants] have dedicated themselves to these crops and [forest-collecting] work….”

But at other times, it was the rancher who made this decision, as when Bernardo Ospina ordered a manager to lower the wages he paid in order to reduce the number of workers they employed and their financial strain.\textsuperscript{399} By providing tenants with land, ranchers acquired a relatively stable work force but were not responsible for guaranteeing them a minimum amount of employment or worrying about their survival. These plots also allowed ranchers to place the burden of feeding their families (who did not work for the estate and thus receive rations) on the workers themselves.

Ranchers also relied on outside help to a considerable degree. Ranchers were less dependent on tenant workers than agriculturalists because their labor demands were more flexible since the main crop did not require immediate harvest. They also tended to use much more of their land themselves. There were two sources of non-resident labor. One group was composed of peasants living in the vicinity of an estate who ranchers hired periodically to supplement their tenant labor. These workers frequently kept ongoing accounts with an estate, sometimes running a surplus but mostly borrowing money and receiving merchandise that they paid back in work, cash, goods, or property. The second source were relatively large crews of temporary workers hired under contract for a specific amount of time and job. Ranchers typically relied on labor contractors to organize and supervise these workers. They hired them

\textsuperscript{398} Quoted in Echeverri (1993), p. 98.
\textsuperscript{399} APNOyC, Cáceres, f810. See also Ocampo (2007).
to clear forests, clean pastures, and plant and harvest crops, with contracts that might last from one to three months. On Marta Magdalena, many of these work crews came from the indigenous community of San Andrés. Others came from the region between the Sinú Valley and the Sabanas de Bolívar. In 1916, Juan Villa, manager of Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía.’s haciendas along the lower Cauca River, wrote that he was able to get 40 workers (mozos) from Yarumal, northern Antioquia, to come clean pastures.400 The residents of Marta Magdalena and the surrounding community viewed these groups of contracted workers somewhat disparagingly, calling them indebted (avanzados) even though they too frequently lived in debt. Part of this hierarchization was based on racial or ethnic characteristics differences. But it was also based, according to Ocampo, on the fact that the “avanzados” spent months away from home, lacked flexibility over their work schedules, and lost a percentage of their wages to the labor contractor. Ranchers relied on labor contractors because there was often not enough local labor available for the amount of work they wanted to undertake. Additionally, even though labor contractors cost more and did not always do a satisfactory job, they simplified the work of ranchers and promised to complete specific jobs. With local workers, there was always the risk that they would fail to show up. Nevertheless, in the mid-1920s, Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. stopped using labor contractors and hired workers directly. This required more careful supervision to make sure the work was done properly and to avoid cost overruns.401 Both

400 APNOyC, CR 1915-1916, Juan Villa to Marco A. Salazar, June 12, 1916. Bringing workers from Antioquia was often difficult because of their reluctance to work in the coastal lowlands because of the threat of disease, the heat, and perhaps cultural prejudices (APNOyC, 200, f452).

401 APNOyC, 350, f733.
neighboring and contract laborers also allowed ranchers to avoid having to sustain a large, full-time workforce. By farming their own land, these peasants largely sustained themselves. But ranchers did not always have a choice either: they were partly at the mercy of peasants who often did not want full-time wage work. Ranchers may have preferred a more stable workforce than most typically had, since finding and keeping track of their many part-time workers required a substantial amount of energy.

**Social relations and the transition to capitalism**

The social relations of ranching in Old Bolívar did not follow a linear movement from servile and coerced labor toward wages. In a good part of the department, wages were fundamental to labor markets from the mid-nineteenth century. Debts permeated social relations and granting access to land was significant. But underneath, wages were key. In 1915, the manager of Hacienda La Carolina wrote that he could not get workers to finish clearing a section of forest because they would not work for $25 pesos: other estates were paying $30, and the few who remained have left.\(^{402}\) In 1931, the manager of Marta Magdalena reported that the workforce on the hacienda was very reduced: “with wages low they have taken to the woods to farm.”\(^{403}\) Likewise, in 1924, Bernardo Ospina told the manager of Tarazá to cut wages as soon as it started raining in order to reduce the number of workers on payroll.\(^{404}\) Although labor markets did not function smoothly, wages generally did respond to economic conditions and serve to allocate labor. Competition for workers between

\(^{402}\) APNOyC, CR 1915, Jan 14, 1915.
\(^{404}\) APNOyC, Cáceres, f810.
estates, public works projects, and other enterprises, such as oil exploration, forced wages up just as economic crises caused them to fall.405

Wages alone did not always effectively regulate work habits to the satisfaction of ranchers, however. With some frequency, they complained about the “informality” of peasant-workers, or the lack of a strong work ethic. Salazar, for example, informed a new manager of Hacienda Tijó y Lobo that he needed to get rid of the poor habits of the workers there who showed up late and did little work.406 Other managers struggled to make sure also workers showed up at all. “You must keep constant watch over the tenants of the hacienda, seeing that they fulfill what they have promised to do so far…,” Salazar wrote his brother, Cesar.407 He also remarked that the tenants of Hacienda La Carolina, in northern Antioquia, dedicated so much time on their own plots that they hardly fulfilled their obligations to work for the estate. As a result, the manager was forced to hire outside workers, at substantially higher cost, for the sugarcane harvest.408 In the mid-nineteenth century, Striffler was shocked to discover the relative absence of strict, hierarchical social relations: “In our Europe the tone of the person who issues orders is curt and absolute, and the subordinate obeys by custom with passive and very quick obedience.”409 By contrast, the creoles of the coast did not know how to take a ‘respectful tone’ toward their superiors: “familiarity had erased all vestige of social distinction.”410 The owners of Pedro Nel Ospina & Cia. and Marta Magdalena insisted that their managers, to more effectively establish their authority

405 APNOyC, 1920-1921, f209); 200, f 206, f452; Ocampo (2007), pp. 260-261.
406 APNOyC, 232, f310.
407 APNOyC, 200, f206.
408 APNOyC, 210, f277.
410 Ibid., Ch. 25.
over workers, try to retain these social distinctions. To a new manager of Hacienda Boca de Betanci, Salazar said: “From the beginning try to establish the appropriate distance between you and the people you have to manage, so that they respect you definitively and decidedly in all fields and that they know that with regard to work they do not have to try to mock your vigilance....”

Part of the problem that ranchers faced was the limited coercive power of wages. On Marta Magdalena, punishments varied according to the severity of the case: suspension of the daily ration, changing a worker’s job and position in the hierarchy of the hacienda, fines, and ultimately expulsion. Workers did care about the possibility of being fired. When a group of cowboys from Hacienda Corinto failed to round up some particularly mean bulls, the other cowboys, worried about keeping their jobs, suppressed their own fear to go bring them in. But the threat of being dismissed was not as severe to the degree that workers had an independent way to sustain themselves. Furthermore, many workers owed their employers significant amounts of money. This made it harder to fire them since such action could jeopardize their ability to collect the debts. Roberto Salazar recognized this problem when he noted that people who were advanced wages do not work very well.

It is possible that both the paternalistic relations and physical coercion on cattle estates, which scholars have frequently noted, were rooted in the limited economic leverage that ranchers exercised. In other words, since their workforce was not completely dependent upon them, ranchers resorted to extra-economic incentives and

---

411 APNOyC, 200, f185.
punishments to increase their authority. According to Striffler, it was not uncommon to hear a servant, upon receiving orders, respond to his boss: “‘[H]e who orders, orders; but it doesn’t suit me to do that.’ The creole master is not offended; on the contrary, he caresses the disobedient person, and wins him over through the power of affection.” But Striffler noted the opposite approach as well: “there is either an equality of treatment, which levels all social positions and annihilates all class of respect, or there is oriental despotism, which establishes the most humiliating servitude.”

Miguel Reyes recalled his sister locked in the stocks on Hacienda Currañao around 1915. This form of corporeal punishment appears to have been fairly common on cattle ranches in the region. Reyes also recollected that on the manager of Eusebio Pineda’s estate, Dos Hermanas, hit disobedient workers and threatened them with dogs.

With time, however, the economic leverage of ranchers increased. As mentioned above, by the late 1920s and 1930s, Ospina’s company was finally able to start doing away with the practice of advancing wages. The fact that they also stopped using labor contractors and hired workers locally suggests that labor markets had become more favorable for them. The long process of primitive accumulation, as well as population growth and a declining frontier, exerted increasing pressure on the peasants of Old Bolivar. Although Ospina’s company continued to use wage labor, around this time other ranchers increasingly relied on landless peasants to expand their

---

415 Ibid.
417 Ibid.
418 They continued to advance wages, even at mid-century, when workers were hard to come by. But in general the tables had turned in their favor.
pastures through land-for-grass exchanges. Ironically, then, undermining the independent basis of the peasantry did not lead directly toward full-capitalist relations but encouraged the expansion of sharecropping.

The big push back to wage labor, and the development of a largely landless rural wage-labor force, came in the wake of agrarian conflicts in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1926, the Supreme Court issued a ruling that required landowners, in the case of disputed property rights and particularly when peasants claimed to be settled on public lands, to prove legitimate ownership of their properties by presenting copies of the original titles. Suddenly, all those estates established without state sanction but by de facto means, whether through appropriation, purchase, or direct settlement, were threatened. Peasants, particularly in the coffee zone of the department of Cundinamarca began to disavow their tenant status and claim, many with some legitimacy, that they were colonos on public lands. The agrarian disputes of this period culminated in the passage of Law 200 of 1936, which tried to forge a compromise between calls for land reform, the need to increase rural production, and a concerted push by landed elites to uphold private property rights and eliminate the requirement that they prove ownership with copies of the original title. The result was an anemic land-reform effort combined with the confirmation of existing property rights, on the condition that landowners met minimum production levels within ten years.\textsuperscript{419} The law, therefore, only recognized land disputes initiated before 1934. In any subsequent dispute, landowners only needed to prove 30 years of possession rather than present a copy of the original title to substantiate their property claims. Ironically, in the

\textsuperscript{419} LeGrand (1986), p. 151.
countryside many peasants believed that the law was designed to help them gain control over the land they farmed. As a result, even tenants and sharecroppers who did not benefit from the law began to agitate for land rights. One tenant of Marta Magdalena, declaring himself a colono, retained a lawyer who wrote to the hacienda: “Angel Montiel hired me to ensure that, in conformity with article 32 of Law 200 of 1936…you cannot evict him from there and without indemnization.”

The response of many landowners to this continued agitation was to get rid of their tenant labor force altogether. By turning to simple wage workers, without usufruct land rights, they hoped to avoid potential conflicts. For Marta Magdalena, and probably many other estates, this coincided with the end of their long process of converting forest to pasture. With less labor requirements, the manager of Marta Magdalena finally followed through with a long-standing threat to raze the tenant settlement, called El Pueblo, inside the estate. An unintended consequence of the legislation, therefore, was to coordinate the expulsion of tenants, divorcing a substantial part of the population from access to the means of production. As LeGrand remarks: “Law 200 left the system of large estates intact, but hastened the transformation of service tenants and sharecroppers into rural wage laborers.” I would only add that, in the case of Old Bolivar, a large number of part-time peasant workers, rather than just sharecroppers or service tenants, turned into full-time rural wage laborers. In response to the expulsions and a perceived threat to food production,

---

420 For Old Bolivar, see AOFB, Guzmán, f13; Ocampo (2007), pp. 286-288; Echeverri (1993), pp. 149-165.
the government passed another law in 1944 to reinstate but better regulate tenant relations and preserve landowner property rights. Some ranchers kept their tenants. In 1960, some eight percent of farms in Old Bolívar were still under some form of sharecropping, rental-in-kind, or labor service agreement. By and large, however, capitalist social relations had come to dominant ranching in Old Bolivar.

In the wake of these transformations, new issues began to characterize labor relations on ranches. In the 1940s, the government started to regulate working conditions and wages. It established a minimum wage, requiring landowners to pay their workers a form of unemployment insurance (cesantías) and social security (prestaciones sociales), for work on Sundays, holidays, and overtime, and provide them with overalls and shoes. In letter from 1950 to the ranching company, Hijos de Arturo García & Cía, Pedro Nel Ospina Jr. wrote that although there was lots of consternation about these new laws in Antioquia, ranchers, because they had less workers, were somewhat more willing to abide by the legislation: many paid for Sunday work; a few raised the wages they paid by 15 percent to comply with the new minimum wage and gave cesantías (unpaid wages that served as unemployment insurance); and almost none provided overalls and shoes. Ospina remarked that the ranchers of Old Bolívar had not adopted a unified response either. In the end, “it seems to me that the thing to do is raise [wages] a little and avoid problems.”

A small raise was probably necessary in any case, because of inflation and the expansion of cotton production in the Sinú Valley. By 1950, labor relations had entered a new

phase. Wages, by no means novel, had become more critical to rural workers, who were now much more reliant on them. Disputes also started to turn on partial compliance with national labor legislation. And ranchers, generally, had gained the upper hand.
“Cattle ranching as a productive activity is tenuous” (Susana Hecht, 1993).²

There is a surprisingly widespread view that, at best, cattle ranching in Latin America is only marginally productive. This notion holds true for much of contemporary ranching as well as its historic antecedents. It is all the more remarkable given that pastures are the dominant form of land use in the region. According to this argument, because it is “not profits from beef production” that has driven the remarkable expansion of cattle, the underlying logic must be found elsewhere.³ Some scholars have pointed to the prestige-value of ranching or “the cult of the Bull.”³ Others have emphasized the “hoarding” function of livestock or the notion that ranchers and peasants raise cattle to store wealth rather than for quick sale.⁴ Many have also stressed the “traditional function of livestock as a means of acquiring large areas of [land].”⁵ In Colombia, various scholars have asserted that territorial control is the “main function” of raising cattle.⁶ Even the economic logic of livestock is frequently found beyond the ranch gate: in subsidies from nature, land speculation, institutional

---

² Hecht (1993), p. 691.
⁵ Williams (1986), p. 83. See also Hecht (1993); Tucker (2000); Grandia (2007).
rents, collateral, or extra-economic sources. In other words, ranching often appears to have little to do with raising and selling animals for beef and other products.

A number of corollaries emerge from this perspective. First, since the goal of ranching was not, at least principally, profits from cattle sales, its expansion did not fundamentally depend on market demand. Second, the marginally-profitable nature of cattle raising has reinforced the view that, in the words of historian Mariano Arango, “it has been almost exclusively an activity of the wealthy.” After all, large-scale ‘ranchers’ were among the few who could parlay territorial power into economic gain. And third, by arguing that “ranching and the few landed elites who control it have constituted large historical calamities for the peasantry and the development of the country’s productive forces,” Colombian economist and historian, Salomon Kalmanovitz, underlines the effects of its supposed irrational character. For instance, the monopolization of the country’s best land with cattle, which forced peasants onto marginal lands and eroding hillsides, needlessly raised food prices. While this inefficient use of land developed out of long-standing property relations that were perpetuated by the near absence of taxes, it was also supposedly rooted in the non-economic mentality of ranchers who were not primarily driven by a quest for profits.

In stark contrast to this non-productive view of ranching, however, the internal correspondence of a major Colombian cattle operation, Pedro Nel Ospina & Cia.,

---

9 Kalmanovitz (1978), 103.
reveals a constant concern with the profitability of raising and selling livestock. A few examples from its internal correspondence underline the centrality of this preoccupation:

- “[Your] fear that we are on the edge of bad times doesn’t surprise me since I too have and continue to fear it, not because we are going to be unable to pay our debts, but because we are entering a long, unproductive period in the business…”
- “The fatteners from [the upper Cauca River] greatly fear the competition that has begun by [bringing] fat cattle from the coast, which does not leave them any profits.”
- “The struggle that will come to Bolívar [with the development of export markets] will be very tough…. [It] already started between Don Diego R. and me, since I decidedly parried his effort to push me out of the way in the purchase of some oxen and another lot of cattle from Don Antonio Lacharme and I notified him that I accepted the challenge and would defend myself with the same weapons that he used against me. The fight is on….“
- “I believe that the profits of the business this year will be good…. For next year I promise to redouble my efforts in order to make the business produce a pretty profit.”

Based on the correspondence of Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. and other sources, in this chapter I argue that ranching is best understood in terms of producing beef for profit. Ranchers were not always the most efficient profit maximizers, and they were also influenced by a myriad of alternative rationales such as those highlighted above.

10 APNOyC, 200, f357.
11 APNOyC, 200, f56.
12 APNOyC, 232, f148.
13 AGPNO, 79, f123.
But except for isolated cases, the latter complemented rather than displaced the productive logic of ranching. The stress on ulterior motivations, particularly territorial control, is frequently based on the erroneous assumption that, by breeding their own animals on inexpensive grass, ranchers had few costs. In Old Bolívar, however, grass was rarely cheap, at least initially. Therefore, even when their principal interest was land speculation or territorial control, the costs of pasture development and maintenance forced ranchers to consider the profitability of their interim cattle operations. Many ranchers, especially the larger ones, also purchased a significant portion of this stock, making them even more market-oriented. Additionally, the purpose of ranching sometimes may have been as a hedge against inflation. But more ranchers, ultimately, raised cattle with an eye to selling them for a profit even when those gains were not very large. As a result, the expansion of ranching was largely a product of increasing demand. And rather than a calamity, ranching did contribute to economic growth in Old Bolívar, even if relying on cattle was not a particularly propitious path toward development.

This chapter is divided into five sections. In the first, I outline the business strategy of Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. Beyond just showing a concern with profits and market conditions, I underline how its operations were organized to efficiently move cattle from the pastures of Old Bolívar to the markets of Antioquia. In the second section, I explore the larger economic developments, both international and domestic, that drove the cattle economy. Then I examine the beef commodity chain, showing the multiple hands through which cattle passed on their slow journey to a slaughterhouse. The significance of buying cattle, and the market demands that this entailed, become
apparent here. A focus on the commodity chain also reveals how small ranchers and peasant producers were more important to the cattle industry than their overall share of a regional or the national cattle herd would suggest. Next, in the fourth section, I return to the logic of livestock. Profits, or their expectation, were key to the expansion of ranching from the mid-nineteenth century. But cattle offered a number of advantages over other investments that helped make ranching the largest economic activity in the country. Lastly, I reflect on some of the economic consequences of ranching: was it a boon or bust?

**Pedro Nel Ospina & Compañía**

While it operated, from about 1907 to 1927, Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. was one of the major ranching enterprises in Colombia. Around 1920, its 14 properties in northern Antioquia and Old Bolívar totaled over 36,000 hectares. In 1926, it sold 9,651 cattle in Antioquia, or 7.5 percent of the total slaughtered that year in the department, the largest consumer in Colombia. But more than just its size, the company was significant for its role as an intermediary connecting the surplus-producing zone of Old Bolivar with markets in Antioquia. While it helped pioneer this trade, it was not the only important player and competition could be tough. In response, Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. developed a long string of estates in order to move cattle efficiently to market. It also integrated backwards to breed more of its own stock. Still, the company relied heavily on buying cattle from other ranchers, which,

---

14 This includes some properties, such as Hacienda La Carolina, Hacienda Tijó & Lobo, and Hacienda Corinto that belonged to Pedro Nel Ospina rather than Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía.
along with their highly-leveraged purchases, forced it to be very conscious of market
conditions. In this regard, Pedro Nel Ospina & Cia. was by no means unique. Though
somewhat exaggerated in form, the company illustrates the market dependence and
concern for profits that many ranchers felt.

The primary force behind the company, Pedro Nel Ospina, did not come from
a predominantly ranching family. His father, Mariano Ospina Rodríguez, was not a
stranger to the countryside: he was the son of a modest landed family, promoted coffee
production in Antioquia, and even advocated the modernization of ranching. But he
was much more a politician, intellectual, and educator than agriculturalist (*agricultor*).
In fact, Pedro Nel Ospina was born in the presidential palace, in 1858, while his father
served as chief executive (1857-1861).¹⁶ His mother, Eriqueta Vásquez, came from an
important merchant family originally from the gold-mining region of Santa Rosas de
Osos, an undulating, highland plateau northeast of Medellín. Her father and uncle,
Pedro and Julián Vásquez, were prominent members of the new republican elite in
Antioquia, men of modest backgrounds and unknown families who built their fortunes
in the resurgence of mining-based commerce from the end of the eighteenth century,
in gold mining, and by dominating the English import trade from Jamaica after
Independence broke the restrictions on colonial commerce. However, like many
successful merchants from the period, they also invested in land and cattle. The
Vásquez brothers obtained large concessions of public lands, tried to develop
immigrant agricultural colonies, were among the first in Antioquia to invest in large-
scale coffee production, and formed part of the mid-century movement of Medellín

¹⁶ Robledo (1959).
merchants into southwestern Antioquia to clear its forests and develop fattening pastures for cattle trailed in from the Cauca Valley.\textsuperscript{17} Julián Vásquez also financed Father José Pío Miranda’s construction of the Fatherly Trail (\textit{Camino Padrero}), which connected the cattle supplies of Ayapel to the mining regions of northern Antioquia.\textsuperscript{18}

Likewise, Pedro Nel Ospina was never solely a rancher. He studied mining at the University of California and in Europe. He and his brothers formed a company, Ospina Hermanos, that invested in a wide range of businesses: they opened the first assayers office in Medellín, managed a gold mine, imported merchandise, grew coffee, reorganized Antioquia’s ironworks (the Ferrería de Amagá), distilled alcohol, tax farmed, owned coalfields in Cundinamarca, supplied electricity to Bogotá, built the slaughterhouses of Bogotá and Medellín, owned a newspaper in Bogotá (\textit{El Correo Nacional}), among others.\textsuperscript{19} In addition, Pedro Nel Ospina ran guns for Rafael Núñez (1885), was a successful general during the War of a Thousand Days (1899-1902), helped organize the national mining school in Medellín (1887), studied the Mexican textile industry and started the Compañía de Tejidos de Bello (1902), and redesigned the steamboat used on the Magdalena River.\textsuperscript{20} He also had a distinguished political career, serving in the Assembly of Antioquia (1890-1892), Congress (1892-1894), as

\textsuperscript{17} Brew (2000), pp. 1-10; Vélez Rendón (2002).
\textsuperscript{18} Jaramillo (1988), p. 206; APNOyC, 350, f774. Others, however, suggest that Miranda initially built the trail, and that Julián Vásquez rehabilitated it (Striffler, 1995, p. 119; Fals Borda, 2002c, p. 81A). Berrocal Hoyos (1980, pp. 80-81) suggests that it was James Tyrrell Moore, a partner of the Vásquez brothers, who opened this trail in 1839 with Father José Pio Miranda. It was in 1844, though, that the provincial assembly of Old Bolívar authorized Miranda to build it (Jaramillo, 1988; Berrocal Hoyos, 1980; Ospina Vásquez, 1974). Ospina Vásquez (1974, p. 239), however, thinks that the trail had been in use since the late-eighteenth century.
\textsuperscript{20} Robledo (1959), pp. 52, 58, 63.
ambassador to the United States and Belgium (1910-1916), governor of Antioquia (1918-1920), and president (1922-1926).\textsuperscript{21}

Cattle, however, became a passion for Ospina and by the time died, in 1927, he had half of his capital invested in ranching properties and livestock.\textsuperscript{22} He and his brothers started raising cattle outside of Fredonía (Antioquia) in the early 1880s. In addition to planting guinea pastures to breed and milk cows, they also imported two Holstein-Friesian cows and one bull from the United States in 1883.\textsuperscript{23} Then around 1885 they turned their attention to the lower Cauca River in northern Antioquia, acquiring a large number of properties in these still forested lowlands through purchase, official adjudication, and direct colonization (see Table 4.1).\textsuperscript{24} The Ospina brothers predicted that this region would become strategic to the future cattle needs of Antioquia as an alternative source of supply to the Cauca Valley. They planned to access cheap cattle in Old Bolívar to sell in Medellín and to fatten for the high-priced mining markets of northern Antioquia. The Ospina brothers were prescient: by 1910,

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} APNOVJR., contabilidad, 1928, comprobante no. 1687, Asiento de la participación de los bienes de la sucesión del General Pedro Nel Ospina, Oct. 14, 1928. His estate was valued at $1,264,684. Of this, about 20 percent were in shares of various companies, 16 percent in urban real estate, and 12 percent in outstanding loans.
\textsuperscript{23} Robeldo (1959), p. 141; AOH, C, vol. 3, f84, f91, f107. They may also have fattened cattle, but this cannot be determined with certainty from their correspondence. In 1884, Santiago Ospina said that they had quit the business of male cattle some time ago. This probably refers to fattening, since he said that they could continue to grow (levantar) male cattle for sale to fatteners along the banks of the Cauca River. The comment, however, may just refer to the particular farm, La Cordillera, that he was trying to sell. They may have continued fattening cattle on other properties in the region that were better suited for it. La Cordillera had a capacity for 300 head, and was divided into five pastures, with the largest, Buenos Aires, capable of stocking 100 head. The business, he suggests, was breeding cattle to sell to neighboring landowners who had growing pastures (de levantar) and making cheese, which somebody bought at the farm gate every Thursday (AOH, C, vol. 3, f84, f91).
\textsuperscript{24} AOH, C, vol. 3, f114. They were also contemplating raising cattle and producing brandy in Kansas Territory in the U.S.
Antioquia had become dependent on cattle from Old Bolívar, which supplied 36 to 60 percent of the cattle it consumed through the early 1940s.\textsuperscript{25}

Table 4.1. The Cáceres properties of Ospina Hermanos (1884-1905)\textsuperscript{26}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Acquired by</th>
<th>Area (ha)</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cachirimé [El Pescado]</td>
<td>1884</td>
<td>Requested public land grant</td>
<td>4,900</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apaví</td>
<td>1890</td>
<td>Requested grant</td>
<td>3,840</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Rayo</td>
<td>1890</td>
<td>Requested grant</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>With Rafael Navarro y Euse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tarazá</td>
<td>1891</td>
<td>Bought from Belesario Olózaga</td>
<td>1,070</td>
<td>Large area in pará. Was first developed by Ezequiel Sánchez of Sahagún in 1880.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man [Batatal]</td>
<td>1893</td>
<td>Request for grant</td>
<td>4,890</td>
<td>Granted 1903</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cachoá</td>
<td>1893</td>
<td>Request for grant</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrales</td>
<td></td>
<td>Request for grant</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>Clearings purchased from José Antonio Soto.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Path and bridge of Raudal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Built by Ospina Hnos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Anorí)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House and small pasture in Raudal</td>
<td>1884?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>27,700</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When the Ospina brothers dissolved their company in 1905, Pedro Nel Ospina received the properties along the lower Cauca River as his share. He continued with the original project, appointing Marco A. Salazar, a livestock trader who had worked

\textsuperscript{25} APNOyC, 200, f364; López (1915), p. 31; Villegas (1919), p. 458; Oakley (1943), p. 25.

\textsuperscript{26} Source: Ocampo (2007, p. 190); AOH, Linderos Baldíos, Linderos de los baldíos cuya adjudicación se pide ubicados en Cáceres; ABOV, Correspondencia recibida [CR] 1928-1930, Pablo Emilio Villegas to Presidente del Comité Ganadero, Aug. 6, 1928.
with the Ospina brothers in northern Antioquia since 1898, to help manage the properties. In 1912, with Ospina living in the United States as the Colombian ambassador, they formalized (or extended) their partnership as Pedro Nel Ospina & Compañía. They agreed that it would last ten years. By this time Salazar owned 29 percent of the properties that formed the territorial basis of the company’s operations: Apaví, Tarazá, and El Rayo. In addition, they each contributed 50 percent ownership in a couple of properties near Yarumal (Colombia and San Isidro), and, together, one-sixteenth share in a pro-indiviso property near Valdivia (El Tiesto) purchased by Julián and Pedro Vásquez in 1849. Lastly, Ospina contributed his shares in the Sociedad Ganadera de Berástegui a company formed in 1911 to supply cattle to Hacienda Berástegui in a form of long-term pasture renting. They valued these properties at $10,000 pesos. For working capital, Ospina promised to provide up to $60,000 to buy cattle and manage the haciendas, for which the company would pay him 12 percent annually in interest. Salazar promised to run the company fulltime, send Ospina monthly reports, and, in addition, manage of Ospina’s Hacienda La Carolina near Yolombó (Antioquia). Ospina and Salazar agreed to split the profits according to their share of the properties that each contributed. Until the company had accumulated its own working capital and paid Ospina back, Salazar would not draw a

29 APNOyC, CR 1912-1916, Medellín Notary no. 1, May 21, 1912, no. 81; AFVJ, Pedro Vásquez Calle, Libro de Escrituras 1845-1883, f11, División de la compañía entre Pedro y Julián Vásquez, Notaría 2 (Medellín), Nov. 4, 1854, no. 81.
30 In this arrangement, Ospina and Diego Martínez Camargo & Cia. paid off the mortgage Francisco Burgos had taken out on the hacienda, and agreed to supply at least 6,000 steer annually to fatten on its pastures. They split the profits on the sales, which were used to pay down the debt owed them at 12 percent annually (Burgos, 2000, p. 192).
salary. Instead, he had the right to draw up to $100 per month, interest-free, to be deducted from his share of the profits.  

Following the plan of Ospina Hermanos, the aim of the business was to tap the cattle stocks of Old Bolivar and deliver them to markets in Antioquia. They developed two markets for their cattle: the mining regions of northern Antioquia, which they supplied with fat cattle ready for slaughter; and the cattle fair in Medellin, which they supplied with some fat cattle but mostly with mature but thin steer for the specialized fatteners from the upper Cauca River Valley in southwestern Antioquia. While they bred and raised some cattle, the bulk of their operations consisted of buying three, four, and five year-old steer to grow out, fatten, and trail to market in Antioquia.

To fulfill these aims, Salazar and Ospina expanded their stocking capacity, incorporated additional properties, and positioned themselves to supply a variety of markets.  

By 1920, the company had grown substantially. They had planted close to 5,000 hectares of pasture on their lands near Cáceres along the lower Cauca River. Overall, they could stock more than 11,000 head of cattle on their numerous properties stretching from northern Antioquia to the coast of Old Bolivar (see Table 4.2, and Map 4.1). But it was the organizational structure developed by Ospina and Salazar, rather than just the size and carrying capacity of their estates, that was most telling. In 1919, they explained the company’s strategy in the following manner:

What seems to be a group of scattered haciendas is actually a series of properties carefully distributed and linked in order to establish and maintain

\[31\] APNOyC, CR 1912-1916, Medellin Notary no. 1, May 21, 1912, no. 81.

\[32\] APNOyC, 350, f174.
hegemony over the cattle business, whether in Antioquia, where 30,000 to
40,000 steer are annually shipped from Bolivar, or toward the export ports of
the coast and the Packing House, where buying centers for an unlimited
demand are rapidly being developed. The hacienda of [Boca de] Betancí will
be the center for buying and collecting cattle from the Sinú [Valley]; Corinto
will have this same purpose for the San Jorge [River Valley] as well as for
breeding and raising cattle in insuperable conditions; [the haciendas of]
Cáceres [will serve] as a depository for the trade with Antioquia and as center
of production of fat cattle for an important region; [Hacienda] La Carolina…is
to supply both a group of towns that consume significant amounts and to send
fat cattle to Medellín, where they arrive easily and in perfect condition thanks
to the railroad; and Buenaparte [or Tijó y Lobo is a] center for operations along
the coast, where cattle can be fattened for the Packing House and collected in
preparation for export on the hoof.33

33 AGPNO, folder 95, f24, Memorandum sobre el grupo de propiedades pertenecientes a
Pedro Nel Ospina y a Pedro Nel Ospina y Ca.
Map 4.1. The ranching properties of Pedro Nel Ospina & Compañía
Table 4.2. The properties of Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. (1907-1927)\textsuperscript{34}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date Acquired</th>
<th>Area (ha)</th>
<th>In Pasture (ha) 1914</th>
<th>In Pasture (ha) 1922</th>
<th>Carrying Capacity c1920 (head)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cáceres:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tarazá</td>
<td>1891</td>
<td>1,540</td>
<td>700-750</td>
<td></td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Rayo</td>
<td>1890</td>
<td>1,470</td>
<td>500</td>
<td></td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apaví</td>
<td>1890</td>
<td>1,640</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quebradona</td>
<td></td>
<td>950</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>200</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Batatal</td>
<td>1893</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cachoá</td>
<td>1893</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isla Guarumal</td>
<td></td>
<td>300</td>
<td>75</td>
<td></td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isla Bonilla</td>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raudal</td>
<td>1884?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Cubana</td>
<td></td>
<td>--</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Teresita</td>
<td>300</td>
<td></td>
<td>--</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La India</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td>--</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL (Cáceres)</td>
<td></td>
<td>16,325</td>
<td>1,750</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>4,250</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

San Jorge:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date Acquired</th>
<th>Area (ha)</th>
<th>In Pasture (ha) 1914</th>
<th>In Pasture (ha) 1922</th>
<th>Carrying Capacity c1920 (head)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corinto</td>
<td>c1913</td>
<td>9,600</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sinú:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date Acquired</th>
<th>Area (ha)</th>
<th>In Pasture (ha) 1914</th>
<th>In Pasture (ha) 1922</th>
<th>Carrying Capacity c1920 (head)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boca de Betancí</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flamenco</td>
<td></td>
<td>320</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tijó y Lobo (*)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,052</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Yarumal:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date Acquired</th>
<th>Area (ha)</th>
<th>In Pasture (ha) 1914</th>
<th>In Pasture (ha) 1922</th>
<th>Carrying Capacity c1920 (head)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>Pre-1910</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Anorí:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date Acquired</th>
<th>Area (ha)</th>
<th>In Pasture (ha) 1914</th>
<th>In Pasture (ha) 1922</th>
<th>Carrying Capacity c1920 (head)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Path and two bridges</td>
<td></td>
<td>1910</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Cedro</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Yolombó:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date Acquired</th>
<th>Area (ha)</th>
<th>In Pasture (ha) 1914</th>
<th>In Pasture (ha) 1922</th>
<th>Carrying Capacity c1920 (head)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>La Carolina (*)</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>10,880</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
<td>37,677</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11,250</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(*) Personal properties of Pedro Nel Ospina.

\textsuperscript{34} APNOyC, 170, f354, f467; APNOyC, CR 1912-1916, Notary record no. 81, May, 21, 1912, Medellín; APNOyC, C 1917-1936, Memorandum sobre la titulación de ‘Corinto’; APNOyC, C1917-1936, Memorandum of the farms of Caceres property of Pedro Nel Ospina & Company, Feb. 1, 1922; APNOyC, C1917-1936, Memorandum sobre las haciendas de ‘Corinto’ y ‘Tijo y Lobo’ de propiedad de Pedro Nel Ospina & Co.; AGPNO, folder 95, ff21-24, Memorandum sobre el grupo de propiedad pertenecientes a Pedro Nel Ospina y a Pedro Nel Ospina Y Ca; AGPNO, 95, ff38-39, Pedro Nel Ospina to José J. Toro, Oct. 2, 1921; AGPNO, folder 95, ff77-81, Memorandum sobre las propiedades de Pedro Nel Ospina & Cia; AGPNO, 95, ff102-106, Informe relacionado con la finca La Carolina de propiedad del Señor Pedro Nel Ospina.

284
The aim of their network of estates, therefore, was to facilitate access to the cattle supplies of Old Bolivar and move them efficiently to market. Along Ciénaga Betancí in the Sinú Valley, they acquired a pair of properties with good water resources that enabled them to buy cattle cheaply from ranchers who had to de-stock during the dry summer months. Likewise, Hacienda Corinto, the principal breeding estate, also gave them access to the substantial and relatively cheap supplies of young cattle from the savanna and ciénaga of Ayapel. From this property, straddling the San Jorge River, they could move cattle in a number of different directions: by trail to the Gulf of Morrosquilla (Hacienda Tijó y Lobo) for export; by boat to market in Barranquilla or up the Magdalena River to the Puerto Berrío from which they could ship cattle to Medellín by rail; or by trail to their haciendas outside Cáceres. Furthermore, plans to build a railway line along the Cauca River to connect Antioquia and the coast would allow them to ship fat cattle directly to Medellín. While Ospina and Salazar bred and raised some cattle on their Cauca River estates, these were primarily intended to serve two purposes: (1) to fatten cattle for the mining towns of northern Antioquia (Valdivia, Yarumal, Anorí, El Cedro); and (2) to hold cattle while they sent staggered lots of about a hundred head each to market in Medellín. Their properties along the trail to Medellín – La India, near Puerto Valdivia, and Colombia near Yarumal – served as weigh stations to feed and rest cattle on the move, hold others before shipping to market, and as places where cattle injured along the trail could recover. From Yarumal, they either sent cattle directly to Medellín or to fatten first in Hacienda La Carolina, along the banks of the Porce River and some 35 easy
kilometers to the train station at Porcesito. From La Carolina, they could also sell fat cattle to the surrounding communities of Yolombó, Carolina, and Amalfí.  

More than just facilitate the movement of cattle to market, however, Ospina and Salazar tried to monopolize some of the best routes. From La Manta, east of Ciénaga Betancí, to Batatal, their property along the Man River near the town of Uré, they built, in conjunction with the Villegas brothers, another pioneer ranching operation from Antioquia in this region, what they called the “only practical” trail from Antioquia into the Sinú Valley. In 1914, after four years of use, they considered that this trail, “obtained at great cost and much effort, has been a considerable factor in the success of [our] operations…, and [we] consider [that it is] not in our interests to cede [its] use…to other merchants or landowners.” Additionally, “[f]rom Batatal to the Cauca [River] the company has exclusive ownership over the trail through Quebradona and the [company’s] other haciendas [Tarazá and El Rayo], for a distance of more than 10 leagues [about 50 kilometers], cleared and maintained by it, and which it does not let cattle not of its property use.” In this way, they might have also controlled some of the better crossing points over the Cauca River to Apaví and via the island Guarumal. They did not close off travel between the Sinú Valley and the

35 AGPNO, folder 95, f24, Memorandum sobre el grupo de propiedades pertenecientes a Pedro Nel Ospina y a Pedro Nel Ospina y Ca; 95, ff38-39, Pedro Nel Ospina to José J. Toro U., Oct. 2, 1921; 95, ff77-81, Memorandum sobre las propiedades de Pedro Nel Ospina & Cia. See also APNOyC, 170, f354, f467; 1917-1936, Memorandum sobre la titulación de ‘Corinto’; Memorandum sobre las haciendas de ‘Corinto’ y Tijo y Lobo’.  
36 APNOyC, 170, f467. Pablo Emilio Villegas later contended that they had retrofitted a trail opened in the 1880s by Juan Quintero to connect Sahagún to the Cauca River (ABOV, CR 1928-1930, Villegas to Presidente del Comité Ganadera, Aug. 6, 1928).  
37 APNOyC, 170, f467.  
38 Ibid.
Cauca River: a public road reached the river in front of Caucasia.\textsuperscript{40} But their trail was shorter and presumably reduced transport costs. Recurring protests over their locked gates, preventing access to the trail, and the tolls they charged, suggest that they gave Ospina and Salazar an advantage over other ranchers also trying to move livestock from the Sinú Valley to Antioquia.\textsuperscript{41} Likewise, Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. also monopolized the sale of fat cattle to Anorí for a number of years by building their own trail, including two bridges, to the mining town. While there was a public trail to the town, its poor condition prevented other cattle merchants from competing with them.\textsuperscript{42}

The early monopolization of over 15,000 hectares by the Ospina brothers in the area around Cáceres served various functions. First, they expected this region to become an important fattening zone for Antioqueño markets. Pedro Nel Ospina explained that the alluvial soils, several meters deep in parts, were “more fertile than those of the upper Cauca [River] in Antioquia”\textsuperscript{43} The region also received abundant rainfall and the pastures of exuberantly-growing grasses could carry two steer per hectare. Furthermore, it was possible to fatten two rounds of cattle per year and still have pasture left over. “These conditions practically duplicate the capacity…of our upper Cauca [River],” he claimed.\textsuperscript{44} Second, there was also a speculative aspect to their bet on the future of the lower Cauca River. While these fattening grounds served northern Antioquia well, the arduous journey to Medellín and the substantial weight lost by cattle trailed overland limited their potential to supply fat cattle to the rest of

\textsuperscript{40}Another trail to the Cauca River went via Ciénaga de Oro and Ayapel.
\textsuperscript{41}APNOyC, 170, f467; 252, f177; 1920, f159, f160, f376; 232, f339; ABOV, CR 1928-1930, Villegas to Presidente del Comité Ganadera, Aug. 6, 1928.
\textsuperscript{42}APNOyC, 160, f248; 160, Oct. 10, 1912.
\textsuperscript{43}APNOyC, 170, f467.
\textsuperscript{44}Ibid.
the department. However, the establishment of railway service down the Cauca River, fulfilling the long-held dream of directly connecting Antioquia to the sea, would have radically improved the potential and value of these lands. Not surprisingly, Pedro Nel Ospina was one of the foremost advocates of the failed attempt to build the Ferrocarril Troncal Occidental.\(^{45}\) Third, given the potential of this region, the Ospina brothers tried to monopolize the best ranching lands. According to Pedro Nel Ospina, “[a]ll [our] land is first class and flat, which is what we had in mind when we made our claims and started colonizing, all the more so since the sloped land is generally of no value…. There are not many lands of this class, and well-watered besides, in the district and to find them in appreciable extension now one would have to resort to remote regions where the development costs would be very expensive…and the haciendas, once established, would be much less valuable and profitable.”\(^{46}\) Finally, they also used their extensive land claims to both facilitate the movement of cattle to Antioqueño markets and, where they could, force other ranchers to use more circuitous routes. Thus, even though the properties of Cachoá and Batatal turned out to be money drains – the high cost of maintaining pastures on them limited their use for grazing cattle – they may have kept the properties to maintain control over the paths they had built, to speculate on rising land values, and to limit potential competition from other ranchers.\(^{47}\)

\(^{45}\) Burgos (2000), pp. 316-322. Originally, it was with a view to the construction of the Ferrocarril de Urubá (AGPNO, 95, f22).

\(^{46}\) APNOyC, 170, f467.

\(^{47}\) ABOV, CR 1920-1922, Eduardo Villa to Bernardo Ospina, June 13, 1922; APNOyC, 350, f327, f948.
Ospina and Salazar, however, could not only rely on the routes they controlled to maintain market share. For example, in Anorí, tacit, market-splitting agreements with the ranchers who shipped cattle up the Porce River into northeastern Antioquia reinforced their monopoly position for a number of years. Salazar told their agent in Anorí not to pay much heed to the complaints about high prices by the town’s butchers and their threats to find another source of supply: the transport costs from Zaragoza prevented other cattle merchants from undercutting their prices.\(^{48}\) When Tomás Villa, one of those merchants, tried to grab market share in Anorí by offering cattle at a lower price, Salazar threatened to open a retail outlet in town and correctly predicted that Villa’s pockets were not deep enough to sustain a price war. Local politicians also pushed to undermine Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía.’s monopoly position by convincing the departmental government to improve the public road between Anorí and Zaragoza and build a bridge over the Porce River.\(^{49}\) In response, Salazar installed a scale in Anorí and promised to sell fat cattle for the same price per kilogram that they sold for in the Medellín market, but for cash instead of credit.\(^{50}\) The company also made a concerted effort to win the contracts to supply the various large mining operations in this part of Antioquia. While they were not always successful, the strategy of offering to supply fat cattle at one cent under the weekly market price in Medellín served them fairly well.\(^{51}\) One advantage that the owners of the company had was their haciendas along

\(^{48}\) APNOyC, 160, f392, f475; 180, f167.
\(^{49}\) APNOyC, 210, f56. Also see APNOyC, 160, f248.
\(^{50}\) APNOyC, 230, f188; 252, f84; 1920-1921, f219.
\(^{51}\) APNOyC, 160, f453; 170, f212; 252, f80, f131; C 1923-1925, f225; Cáceres, f43.
the lower Cauca River and the trail they built to Anorí, which allowed them to supply quality cattle at competitive prices.\textsuperscript{52}

While Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. did not dominate the market elsewhere in northern Antioquia as they did in Anorí, they still sold a large number of fat cattle there. For one, they faced greater competition from other cattle importers: Valdivia and Yarumal lay along the Cauca River route; and Carolina, Amalfí, and Yolombó were close to the Porce River route. Injured cattle constituted a good portion of the animals sold by other importers in these markets. But some ranchers and merchants from other districts in Antioquia also sold cattle there.\textsuperscript{53} Furthermore, after yaraguá grass started to spread in the 1910s, locally-raised cattle (the Blanco-orejinegro breed) could also be fattened in the region.\textsuperscript{54} Nonetheless, Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. competed fairly well in these markets: they produced cattle with a reputation for quality that butchers favored; and they had the infrastructure to acquire cattle cheaply and to trail them to market in good condition.\textsuperscript{55} They also tried to expand their market in this region by looking for different routes and means of selling cattle. They attempted to sell fat cattle in Yalí (Antioquia) by shipping them via boat and rail to a nearby train station to which they brought buyers.\textsuperscript{56} In the early 1920s, they also developed a profitable market in Yarumal selling cows that they spayed and fattened in Cáceres; and by cheaply buying injured cattle being trailed to Medellín that they allowed to

\textsuperscript{52} Still, sometimes they faced complaints about the quality and poor condition of the cattle arriving. The company took responsibility for any sick cattle that arrived and offered to send smaller and lighter cattle during the winter months, when the trail became more difficult, to reduce the number of injured cattle arriving (APNOyC, C 1920-1921, f146).
\textsuperscript{53} APNOyC, 210, f56.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{55} APNOyC, 232, f374
\textsuperscript{56} APNOyC, 350, f161; 350, P.N. Ospina Jr. to Arango, Nov. 2, 1926.
recover and fatten along their chain of estates before reselling them.\footnote{AGPNO, 77, f121; APNOyC, Cáceres, f67; 350, f279. Smaller butchers, if they had trouble selling an entire steer per day, may have liked slaughtering smaller cows.} Unfortunately, the company’s correspondence does not give a complete picture of its cattle sales and the distribution of its profits. In 1914, though, the company claimed to be selling 1,500 fat cattle annually in northern Antioquia. By the early 1920s, this was up to about 2,500 head.\footnote{APNOyC, 170, f467; 350, f323; AGPNO, 77, f121.} Because of the better margins on the sale of fat cattle, a large portion of their profits came from these sales. In 1924, Bernardo Ospina estimated that the company’s profits would be split evenly between the sales of 1,500 fat cows, 1,000 fat steer, and 3,000 thin steer.\footnote{AGPNO, 79, f118; 77, f121.}

Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía.’s second market for cattle was in Medellín. They sold some fat cattle there from Hacienda La Carolina, but the bulk of their sales were full-grown yet thin steer from Old Bolívar that were destined to be fattened along the upper Cauca River. In the 1910s, they hoped to sell upwards of 5,000 head annually, roughly 15 percent of the market.\footnote{APNOyC, 170, f467. Its not clear how many they actually sold. It may have been close to this because of the Berástegui contract, which required them to supply 3,000 head per year. In any case, by 1924 they were selling about 3,000 thin steer in Medellín per year, or 12 percent of the market (AGPNO, 77, f121).} Shipping cattle from Old Bolívar to Medellín was dominated by a relatively small group of people, but there were enough importers and routes to make for strong competition, both in terms of buying and selling.\footnote{APNOyC, 160, f346; 232, f267, f347. Some of these cattle traders included: Villegas Hermanos; Arbeláez & Cia., the González, Tomás Torres, Manuel del Cristo Torres, José Pio, the Pacini, Samuel Lémus, Marta Magdalena, the Echavarría, Vásquez Hermanos, Arturo García.} These traders also had to be careful not to flood the market: news that large numbers of cattle
were en route to Medellín frequently caused prices to fall.\textsuperscript{62} Ospina and Salazar’s string of properties allowed them to stagger their cattle shipments, positioning them to arrive in modest-sized lots of about 100 head, and to take advantage of high prices when they could or hold back cattle when prices dipped. But they still had to follow market conditions carefully. Selling cattle-to-fatten in Medellín had smaller profit margins than fat cattle, which made their success largely dependent on acquiring cattle relatively cheaply and accurately forecasting the future direction of demand. In 1913, Salazar informed Ospina that he had just sold 188 steer in Medellín for $49 each that he had bought in Old Bolívar for $35. “As you can see,” he said, this only left a “rational profit” since, on top of the expenses of running the haciendas, they had to subtract the following: $1.15 for banking fees, $1.75 for losses, $4 for transportation costs, and $0.85 for interest on capital for 60 days. Unfortunately, he continued, the profits in this trade had disappeared since prices in Old Bolívar had risen up to $40 while in Medellín they remained stable.\textsuperscript{63}

To buy cattle, Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. relied on an extensive network of contacts. As mentioned above, establishing their own estates in important cattle-producing areas helped them tap these stocks. They could often buy some cattle relatively cheaply from neighboring small ranchers and peasants, especially when the latter faced pasture shortages during the summer.\textsuperscript{64} They also took advantage of their better market information, relayed by encoded telegrams, to buy cattle before the news

\textsuperscript{62} APNOyC, 170, f276; 232, f347; 350, f120.
\textsuperscript{63} APNOyC,, 170, f19.
\textsuperscript{64} AGPNO, 95, f23.
of rising prices reached small producers.\(^6^5\) Having a foothold in key producing regions also facilitated the purchase of larger lots from medium and large ranchers, from whom they acquired much of their cattle.\(^6^6\) And it enabled them to keep abreast of inter-regional price differences and determine the best place to buy cattle at a particular time. Before they established these ‘buying’ haciendas, Salazar relied on his brothers, working on other haciendas in the area (Marta Magdalena and Berástegui) to buy cattle for the company.\(^6^7\) The company also relied on intermediaries and commission agents, who bought small herds of cattle from scattered ranchers and consolidated them into larger lots.\(^6^8\) Additionally, they entered into ‘share-cropping’ agreements: instead of buying from ranchers, they established an initial value and then pastured and moved the cattle to market, splitting the increase over the established value.\(^6^9\) Finally, they also bred some of their own cattle.

Equally critical to the company’s success were their assessments of the direction that markets were headed. Because they purchased the bulk of their cattle,\(^6^5\) ABOV, 1933-1934, Bernardo Ospina to N. Anaya, Aug. 3, 1933; APNOyC, CR 1915-1916, Restrepo to Salazar, July 15, 1915; 252, f166. The telegraph was key to quick communication. Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. frequently wrote in code to prevent leaks in the information they sent. The communication went both ways. They reacted to price changes in Medellín by trying to buy quickly. And they also used their network of contacts in Old Bolivar to stay on top of price fluctuations there. Salazar asked Pablo Emilio Villegas, who bought cattle for the company in 1918, to also keep him informed of deals being made there: “As I know many of the cattle of the [Montería] region [just tell me] cattle of so-and-so, this many, that price. From that I can more or less understand the deal” (APNOyC, 232, f304; see also APNOyC, 200, f379).

\(^6^6\) APNOyC, 200, f218, f357; cr 1915-1916, Eusebio Pineda to Salazar, May 20, 1916; 232, f304; 1920-1921, f5

\(^6^7\) APNOyC, 160, f86; 200, f83.


\(^6^9\) APNOyC, 200, f64, f498; 210, f383; CR 1915-1916, Roberto Salazar to M.A. Salazar, Jan. 8, 1915.
price fluctuations strongly influenced their bottom line. As mentioned above, rising prices in Old Bolivar, while those in Antioquia remained stable, could squeeze all the profit in their business.⁷⁰ And sharp price falls could cause substantial losses or bankruptcy. In 1915, Salazar informed Ospina that “[m]any are saying that this year was terrible, due to the great fluctuations [in prices], which ruined many and caused havoc and difficulties for others.”⁷¹ For Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía., as well as other ranchers, the fact that they often bought cattle a year or two in advance of sending them to market magnified the effect of these price fluctuations.

A range of factors affected cattle prices. Expectations of demand for fat cattle in Antioquia, a function of general economic conditions, particularly coffee prices and public works projects, influenced the price of thin cattle.⁷² The available supplies and prices in Old Bolívar, rooted in the strength of export demand, also influenced the price of thin and fat cattle. Weather and pasture conditions were another factor. While long dry spells forced ranchers in the upper Cauca River to unload stock and temporarily stop buying thin cattle, it also created pent up demand once the rains returned and the pastures improved. Dry weather might also force ranchers from Old Bolívar to quickly ship stock to Antioquia.⁷³ Reports of large lots of cattle on the move from Old Bolivar could undercut prices in Medellín.⁷⁴ Heavy winter rains limited the use of overland trails to ship cattle from Old Bolivar, while summer

---

⁷⁰ APNOyC, 170, f19; 160, Salazar to Cesar Salazar, Sept. 19, 1912.
⁷¹ APNOyC, 210, f56. A number of large ranchers, especially shippers to Antioquia, were bankrupt by rapidly falling prices, which caught them with stocks they were forced to sell for a loss. Villegas Hermanos was one victim (APNOyC, 200, f379).
⁷² APNOyC, 170, f473; 1920-1921, f437; 350, f146, f276, f279; APNOV, 1937-1939, Pedro Nel Ospina to Bernardo Ospina, Dec. 29, 1937.
⁷⁴ APNOyC, 170, f276; 232, f347; 350, f120, f202.
droughts periodically prevented boats from reaching the railroad line at Puerto Berrío, on the Magdalena River, limiting the inflow of both thin and fat cattle.\(^{75}\) (See the company’s ‘internal’ market reports in Table 4.3 for a sense of how they followed and tried to predict the cattle market.)

Table 4.3. Cattle market reports by Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. (1914-1928)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Report</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feb. 1914</td>
<td>Rising imports of fat cattle from Old Bolívar (having taken over markets in N &amp; NE Antioquia and that of the railroad) and the extraordinary quantities along the upper Cauca River has caused a large price fall. Many of the latter are being sold, after a year of pasture, for the price they cost thin. Ranchers in Antioquia expect prices to drop more and have stopped buying thin cattle, causing its price to fall too (APNOyC, 170, f473).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1915</td>
<td>News of high prices for the latest sales in the Sinú Valley has changed the opinion of ranchers here in Antioquia. They now think prices will rise and have started to buy thin cattle in expectation (APNOyC, 200, f218).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1916</td>
<td>The market for thin cattle in Medellín has improved because of the good prices in Bolívar and because the outbreak of disease along the import routes has reduced the number of shipments (APNOyC, 200, f452).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov. 1918</td>
<td>Demand for thin cattle is good but ranchers from the Sabanas de Bolívar are flooding the market. They must have a lot of cattle and are anxious to sell. “I am ready to take advantage of the situation there, buying some lots – the best possible in terms of quality and size, hopefully five years olds – the market here will allow us to bring in 600 to 1,000 head from now until March. We need to get credit for at least 60 days so as not to be rushed to pay, since it is not easy to get credit here due to the vacuum left by the coffee business, which sucks up all the available cash” (APNOyC, 232, f304, f269).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 1920</td>
<td>Prices for fat cattle are very good. Few have left the upper Cauca River, and others having trouble coming up the Magdalena River because of low water. News of high prices for fat cattle prices in the Sinú Valley means they won’t fall here. Even if prices fall there, which will bring them down here, I don’t</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{75}\) APNOyC, 350, f202, f276, f327, f773.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April 1921</td>
<td></td>
<td>think the price of thin cattle will change because of the minimum costs to ship them by river (APNOyC, 252, f163).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 1921</td>
<td></td>
<td>Perspectives are bad. The meat packing plant is delayed and the price of fat cattle here cannot rise because of the threat that fat cattle from Bolivar will be shipped here. Efforts to ship cattle on the hoof to Cuba have also failed (APNOyC, 1920-1921, f305).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 1925</td>
<td></td>
<td>Prices and demand generally good. Manuel del Cristo Torres is bringing 1,000 head through Zaragoza, but it is not enough to make prices fall. With the difficulty finding an export market, prices will now depend on domestic supply and demand. It is feared that the latter will drop substantially if Congress does not approve the loan and the public works projects are forced to stop (APNOyC, 350, f120).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov. 1925</td>
<td></td>
<td>Good demand for cattle continues, though with a lot en route. Send cattle quickly before the price differential disappears (APNOyC, 350, f126).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 1926</td>
<td></td>
<td>The strong summer and dry pastures in the upper Cauca River are forcing ranchers to sell. The price of thin cattle has not fallen because there are buyers from Manizales. However, there will be problems if the drought continues because of all cattle en route and the reluctance of the Cauca ranchers to buy. But once the rains return, and if the flow from Bolivar slows some, we will have magnificent prices for thin cattle to restock the Cauca (APNOyC, 350, f202).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 1926</td>
<td></td>
<td>Of the various factors contributing to the recent economic boom, now we only have one left: good coffee prices. The others – the oil pipeline, the American indemnity for Panama, high import duties, the public works projects – will end soon. If the next administration cannot get a loan and the public works projects stop, “how are we going to continue selling cattle at 24 cents per kilo to people without a job?” (APNOyC, 350, f276).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1926</td>
<td></td>
<td>The market for thin cattle is terrible. The demand I was expecting has not come yet, and I started to move cattle too soon (APNOyC, 350, f327).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1928</td>
<td></td>
<td>I have no faith in any business now – not even cattle. I think the consumption of fat cattle will drop, and the prices of all other cattle will follow. But I am afraid to sell off the stocks because the damage to the pastures from destocking will be greater than that from the slow drop in prices that I expect. Sell them if you think a sharp drop is coming. Otherwise only sell enough cattle to cover the expenses of the hacienda (APNOyC, CR 1928-1930, Instrucciones para Bernardo, no date).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The company also had to keep their expenses down. As noted in the previous chapter, the initial cost of pasture development was not cheap. Ospina and Salazar frequently underestimated the time and money required before a pasture was fully established and the cost of maintaining it dropped significantly. When prices were low and the company was short of money, this caused considerable tension between the pair. Additionally, their heavy reliance on borrowed capital, to expand quickly and purchase much of the cattle they traded, both cut into profits and caused considerable anxiety. Sometimes they could use the credit extended by the ranchers who sold them cattle to finance the purchase if they shipped immediately. But frequently they held onto cattle for a year or two before sending them to market. And when competition was stiff for cattle in Old Bolivar, paying cash was one way to get better deals. Even though they borrowed large sums, the pair was frequently short of capital and Salazar was forced to constantly juggle the money they made from sales (also frequently on credit) to cover their outstanding debts. In 1915, Salazar complained to Ospina: “Every day I am more and more convinced that there is no reason to force [our business] so much [with borrowed money] and so many debts remain a danger.” Adding to their problems was the short-term nature of the loans, usually just for a year or two, and the frequent need to look for new sources of capital. While their

---

76 APNOyC, 200, f85; 210, f189.  
77 APNOyC, 200, f357.  
79 APNOyC, 200, f85, f200, f452. Salazar was particularly worried that the heavy financial commitment required by the Berástegui contract was undermining their ability to stock their Cáceres haciendas.  
80 APNOyC, 200, f85.  
81 APNOyC, 160, f461; 210, f383; CR 1915, Banco de Bolívar to PNOyC, July 2, 1915; Pombo Hnos. to Salazar, Oct. 29, 1915.
dependence on borrowed money declined over time, it was a large burden in the early years. Salazar calculated that over 50 percent of the expenses in 1915 on their Cauca River properties were from interest payments.\(^{82}\)

Over the years, the company continually tried to improve its operations. They acquired new properties to increase production and facilitate the movement of cattle. They also sold several others that were not profitable or well situated. For instance, they sold their share of Hacienda Tijó y Loba after it became clear that the meat-packing plant in Coveñas was not going to operate as intended. They also sold their stake in the Sociedad Ganadera de Berástegui to Carlos and Fernando Vélez Daníes in 1917; re-organized production among their estates, sending calves bred in Cáceres to be raised on Corinto; and experimented with new ways of sending cattle to market in Medellín.\(^{83}\)

The biggest change, however, was the decision by Ospina and Salazar to dissolve their partnership a couple of years before it was due to expire. There had been considerable tension between the two over the years, especially when profits were down and expenses were high. Salazar was also frustrated with the heavy financial demands of the Berástegui contract. And he resented that he was not paid a salary and Ospina’s complaints, from afar, about the high cost of running the haciendas.\(^{84}\) Additionally, his agreement to work exclusively with Ospina prevented him from developing any of his own estates.\(^{85}\) But the final break came with the realization that

\(^{82}\) APNOyC, 210, f56.
\(^{84}\) APNOyC, 230, f167.
\(^{85}\) APNOyC, 200, f357; 230, f167.
Salazar needed to spend much more time buying cattle in Old Bolívar, which his deteriorating health and bouts of malaria prevented him from doing. As a result, in 1920, they split up the company.

Pedro Nel Ospina reorganized the company with his son, Pedro Nel Jr., who bought a 30 percent stake, valued at $60,000 pesos and started to manage the company from Medellín. General Ospina also brought in his nephew and son-in-law, Bernardo Ospina, to run the company’s operations in Old Bolívar directly from Hacienda Corinto. This would allow him to be in a better position to buy cattle and also keep closer tabs on the Cáceres properties. Bernardo Ospina drew a nominal salary for his work with a promise for a share in the profits. Ospina thus turned to family to help run the company and resolve some of the inefficiencies of distant management. But he also hoped to attract a large infusion of outside capital, either domestic or foreign, to significantly expand the company’s operations and reach into new markets, such as Caldas. These efforts never panned out, partly because of the failure of the meat packing plant in Coveñas, which limited the market for Colombian cattle. Neither the changes in ownership nor the ambitious expansion plans, however, changed the fundamental structure of the company’s business.

---

86 APNOyC, 232, f266.
87 AGPNO, 79, f188. Salazar took 29 percent of the livestock they owned, plus a couple of properties near Montería, and kept half of Hacienda Colombia and a share in Hacienda El Tiesto near Valdivia.
88 His son, however, disliked the problems and complications of larger companies with multiple shareholders.
Table 4.4. The inheritance of Pedro Nel Ospina’s children (1928)\textsuperscript{89}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child</th>
<th>Inheritance</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pedro Nel Ospina Jr.</td>
<td>Hacienda Corinto</td>
<td>$87,570</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cattle in Corinto</td>
<td>$67,212</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mining shares</td>
<td>$5,089</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luis Ospina</td>
<td>Hacienda La Carolina</td>
<td>$30,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hacienda Juntas</td>
<td>$13,000</td>
<td>Near Anorí?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hacienda La Vega</td>
<td>$50,000</td>
<td>Near Valvidia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hacienda El Tiesto</td>
<td>$6,130</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Haciendas de Cáceres [70%]</td>
<td>$2,100</td>
<td>El Pescado</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cattle in El Pescado</td>
<td>$2,575</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cattle in La Carolina &amp; La Vega</td>
<td>$53,343</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cattle in Corinto</td>
<td>$2,390</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Loans</td>
<td>$473</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helena Ospina</td>
<td>Haciendas de Cáceres [70%]</td>
<td>$23,380</td>
<td>Apabí, Las Llaves, La Maria, Guarumal, La Cubana, Cachoá, Los Caracoles, part of El Rayo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lot in Yarumal</td>
<td>$49</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cattle in Apabí [70%]</td>
<td>$29,370</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cattle in Corinto</td>
<td>$43,817</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other Cattle</td>
<td>$8,678</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>House</td>
<td>$50,575</td>
<td>Medellín</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Loans</td>
<td>$17,020</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuel Ospina</td>
<td>Hacienda Normandía</td>
<td>$42,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Haciendas de Cáceres [70%]</td>
<td>$79,100</td>
<td>Tarazá, La Isla, Quebradona, Bonilla, La Teresita, Man, part El Rayo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cattle in Tarazá</td>
<td>$32,037</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cattle in Corinto</td>
<td>$3,530</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Loans</td>
<td>$1,382</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The death of Pedro Nel Ospina in 1927 signaled the end of the company.

While the properties remained within the family, their unified structure began to

\textsuperscript{89} APNOV, Contabilidad, 1928, Asiento de la participación de los biens de la sucesión del General Pedro Nel Ospina.
unravel (see Table 4.4). The siblings who inherited the properties retained a degree of integration initially, but this became harder to sustain as there was no longer a singular purpose and diverging interests started to arise. For example, Pedro Nel Jr., who received Hacienda Corinto, increasingly turned away from breeding to concentrate on raising and fattening cattle. And he sought to ship cattle by river instead of the old overland trail that had been the basis of his father’s company.\footnote{APNOV, 1928-1931, Ospina to Cía Antioqueña de Transportes, April 2, 1930; Opsina to Cía de Navegación del Dique, Aug. 21, 1930; Opsina to Naviera Colombiana, Aug. 21, 1930. Also, during the Depression, unsuccessfully tried to find new markets in Santander and Cundinamarca (APNOV, 1928-1931, Ospina to B. Jaramillo, July 24, 1930). And in 1937, he was thinking of selling part of Corinto (APNOV, 1937-1939, Ospina to Nader Hnos., Sept. 28, 1937).} And Bernardo Ospina tried to sell his own Hacienda Cuba along with his wife’s share of the Cáceres properties that she, Helena Ospina, had inherited from her father.\footnote{ABOV, 1928-1930, Bernardo Ospina to Fernando Vélez Daníes, Dec. 28, 1928.}

How profitable was Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. over the years? Unfortunately, incomplete records prevent us from developing a full picture. Nonetheless, it appears to have done fairly well over the long run. In 1912 and 1913, the combined profits were a little over $49,000. Given that, in 1916, Salazar estimated that the total capital invested in the company was about $100,000, the profit rates for these early years were at least 25 percent annually.\footnote{While Ospina and Salazar had estimated the value of their properties at only $10,000 pesos, Ospina appears to have had $50,000 pesos invested in the Berástegui company and had obtained a loan for at least US$25,000.} Undoubtedly, they benefited from the significant price rise during these years (see Figure 4.1). However, as prices fell in 1914 and 1915, their profits dropped dramatically to somewhat over $9,000 annually. Then, as prices started to rise again, their profits doubled in 1916 to over $18,000. Over this half decade, their profit rate averaged about 17 percent per annum, roughly 2 to 5
percent higher than could get lending money. It also does not include the rising value of their improved properties.\textsuperscript{93} By contrast, the company was hit hard by the price crash starting in late 1920, a result of the post-World War I economic crisis and the failure of the meat packing plant to start operating as scheduled. In 1921 and 1922, it faced enormous losses from having bought stocks at high prices that it was forced to sell for a loss.\textsuperscript{94} Still, by 1923, as the economy and business picked up again, profits jumped to $30,000.\textsuperscript{95} And in 1928, during the division of Pedro Nel Ospina’s estate, appraisers valued his 70 percent share of the company at $533,000 (45 percent in cattle and the rest in the landed property). By this time, Ospina had paid off all the large debts that he used to start his cattle business. Assuming an initial investment of $60,000 in 1912, and reinvesting all profits, Ospina’s annualized rate of return was about 14 percent.\textsuperscript{96} Clearly, the company’s effort to turn a profit was successful.

\textsuperscript{93} That is, the value of the improvements (pastures, fencing, buildings, trails, etc.) they made, not just rising land values. The apparent rule of thumb used in Old Bolívar to value cattle properties in the early 1920s was $20 multiplied by the stocking capacity. While this undoubtedly depended on the condition of pastures and other factors, it suggests that a good deal of the capital invested in pasture development could be recouped by selling the property. The average value for public land at this time was about $3 per hectare, or as little as $1.50 per head under good pasture.
\textsuperscript{94} APNOyC, 350, f174.
\textsuperscript{95} By this time, however, as the value of the company’s assets had risen, the profit rate was considerably under 30 percent.
\textsuperscript{96} This includes rising property values, not only operating profits.
Before examining the beef commodity chain more generally, I want to first situate the expansion of ranching within the growing demand for beef and other cattle products. While periodic bonanzas of cattle exports, and efforts to establish the trade on a firm footing, influenced ranchers in Old Bolivar, it was the domestic market that drove most of the expansion of ranching since the mid-nineteenth century. In this section, I will first examine fluctuating exports before turning to the domestic demand for cattle.

97 APNOyC, 200, f364; ABOV, CR 1928-1930, Feria de Medellín; Londoño (1956); FEDEGAN (1972).
Exports

There had long been a small export trade in live cattle from the northern coastal plains of Colombia. In the colonial period, most of this trade was contraband. In the late-eighteenth century, ranchers from the province of Santa Marta drove considerable numbers of cattle to the Guajira peninsula to sell to English and Dutch merchants who exported them to various islands around the Caribbean.\footnote{Sourdis (1996).} In the decades after Independence, this island trade continued.\footnote{Ocampo (1984).} But its overall impact on cattle raising was generally rather minor.

Starting in the late-nineteenth century, however, a series of cattle export bonanzas provided considerable impulse to ranchers in Old Bolivar (see Figure 4.2). While the Dutch and English island trade continued, Cuba and Panama became important new, if fleeting, markets. In 1878, Cubans started buying large numbers of cattle from ranchers in Old Bolivar in order to restock the island’s herd after the Ten Years’ War. This trade lasted about four years before the Spanish colonial government put an end to it by raising the import duty on live cattle. This coincided with the initiation of excavation work on the Panama Canal and a boom in demand for meat, which enabled ranchers in Old Bolivar to continue ‘exporting’.\footnote{Panama was a department of Colombia until 1903.} This Panama market lasted until the French company building the canal went bankrupt in 1888. Exports subsequently dropped to the small island trade until the end of Cuba’s war for independence brought renewed demand to restock the island. From 1898 to 1906, when Cuban authorities again imposed an import duty rate to stem the trade,
Colombian ranchers sent some 500,000 cattle to the island. Economist José Antonio Ocampo estimates that the total value of these exports around $9 million, “a fabulous sum for the period.”

Figure 4.2. Colombian cattle exports (1843-1950)

---

101 Ocampo (1984, p. 375) estimates 400,000. The data from Holmes (1916, p. 234, 249), however, puts the figure at over 460,000, not including 1898 and 1899. Ocampo has Colombian ranchers exporting almost 19,000 head in 1898, and estimates 65,000 head for 1899. Manuel Dávila Flórez also estimated about 500,000 (AGN, 1915, Tomo 6, Leyes autografos 76-89, Ley 82 de 1915 (Nov. 30), Segundo informe, Manuel Dávila Flore, ff355-362). Ocampo has the imposition of a $3 export tax as the source of the end of Colombian exports to Cuba. Dávila, however, suggests that the export tax was long-standing and the prohibitive tariff was an effort by Cuban authorities to limit imports. Total Cuban imports dropped from about 410,000 in 1906 to almost 111,000 in 1907 and then down to 4,275 by 1909 (Holmes, 1916, p. 235). See also Posada Carbó (1998), pp. 179-181.


Despite the large shipments of cattle (including cows with calves) to Cuba, by 1914 ranchers from Old Bolívar, and elsewhere in the country, worried about the rebound of their cattle stocks and the threat of surplus production if they could not develop new export markets. Two sources promised salvation. First, between 1916 and 1920, the Panama Canal Zone again became an important export market for cattle from Old Bolívar, temporarily resolving the crisis. But the second was the object of even more optimism: the establishment of an export-oriented meat-packing plant.

The twentieth century began with great expectations for the Colombian cattle industry. Argentina had showed the world the wealth that cattle exports could generate. The Cuban exports gave some Colombian ranchers a taste of the possibilities. And global markets looked favorable. The general consensus, both in the US and Colombia, was that the former would soon become a major beef importer and the latter was well-positioned to become a major exporter. In 1914, an article in *The Evening Mail* of New York claimed that “Colombia has more and unused grazing land than any other country in the world…. [She] alone could feed us with beef for many years.”\(^{104}\) As part of the efforts to re-establish an export trade, the Colombian government asked the U.S. Department of Agriculture to send an official to investigate its cattle industry and, in particular, determine if any diseases were present that would prevent a trade in live cattle. Much to the dismay of Colombian officials, Ladson’s report found, among other problems, evidence of surra, a horse disease that closed off all possibility of live exports. This meant that the only way to sell cattle to the U.S.

\(^{104}\) Quoted in the Pan American Union (1915), p. 198.
was by exporting beef carcasses. In 1915, therefore, the government began a concerted effort to attract foreign capital to build a meat-packing plant.

The concession offered by the government and the promise of Colombian ranching attracted considerable interest. A host of meat-packing companies investigated the possibility of opening a packing plant in Colombia: Swift & Co., Sulzberger & Sons, the International Products Company, the British & Argentine Meat Company, as well as Swiss (or German) and Swedish concerns, and an English group headed by Robert W. Perks. Robert B. Cunninghame Graham, sent in 1917 by the British government to examine the country’s beef-export potential, described Old Bolívar as “one of the finest tropical cattle countries in the world.” In 1917, three firms bid for the concession to build and operate the plant, which would become the property of the Colombian government after 20 years. The government awarded the concession to a joint-venture (the Colombian Products Company) between four of the principal cattle ranchers in Old Bolívar and the International Products Company. Its confidence in the assured success of the packing plant is striking. The Minister of Agriculture and Commerce, for example, proclaimed that the great economic

---

108 The Colombian partners, Carlos and Fernando Vélez Danies, Diego Martínez Camargo, Julián Patrón, Celedonio Piñeres, had made considerable fortunes exporting cattle to Cuba, and thought that the packing plant represented a similar opportunity (AGPNO, folder 95, f185-187, Burgos to Ospina). The International Products Company was run by American tycoon, Percival Farquhar, who built his fortune constructing railroads in Brazil. It had considerable ranching, meat-packing, and logging operations in Paraguay (see Gauld, 1964)
development the plant would bring “will be so fabulous and extraordinary like it never
was before, not even during the good times of tobacco, cinchona bark, indigo, coffee,
rubber, and cacao.”

From the late 1870s, these exports, and their imagined potential, encouraged
ranchers in Old Bolívar to expand their operations. In 1876, the governor of the
Province of Barranquilla explained that “as a result of the export of cattle to the island
of Cuba, everyone is doing what is within their ability to extend their pastures and
prepare new lands in which to plant grass…” Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. looked to
the possibility of exports when they developed their network of estates in Old Bolívar.
Ranchers and others who wanted to start raising cattle in expectation of growing
exports sought substantial adjudications of public land in Old Bolívar. In 1917 and
1918, for example, a group of investors from the interior of the country acquired over
27,000 hectares near the coast in order to grab a slice of the export trade. And
various foreign interests acquired land in Old Bolívar with a view to its export
potential. The Vestey meat-packing family of England bought extensive properties
in the early 1920s, and the prominent Knight family of Mormon industrialists acquired
the huge colonial property, Tierras de Lobo, in the mid 1910s.

111 Ministerio de Agricultura y Comercio (1922), p. 65. The investors included: Eduardo
Wills, Roberto Wills, Enrique Carrizosa, Roberto Piedrahita, and Enrique Soto.
112 One of the earliest was the partnership of Bokelman and Punte who exported cattle to Cuba
from the Sinú Valley in the early 1880s (Burgos, 2000).
113 For Vestey land-holdings, see PRO, Treasury Solicitor’s Dept: 58.1027, Vestey
Settlements; AOFB, San Marcos. Guillermo Ortiz. Tobacco en Bolívar, Notaría de San Marcos,
May 31, 1921, no. 42. For the Knight interests, see Fals Borda (1979); Ministerio de Industrias
(1924), pp. 141-186; Knight (1940).
By the late 1920s, however, the influence of exports and their potential had waned considerably. For reasons discussed in the following chapter, the packing plant failed. The Colombian Products Company, which had amassed considerable properties and cattle in preparation for the export trade, was forced to sell live animals overseas – to Mexico, Peru, Venezuela, and the Caribbean islands – during the 1920s. Then, in the 1940s, war-generated demand for beef in the Panama Canal Zone sparked another round of cattle exports. This stimulated another phase of optimism that the country could become an important beef exporter. However, the arrival of foot and mouth disease in 1950 dashed this hope by closing off the U.S. market.\textsuperscript{114} Exports during the 1920s and 1940s contributed to rising cattle prices but they were no longer as critical to cattle industry and its continued expansion as the earlier bonanzas. Their relative weight had declined as the size of the national herd increased, and they took place during periods of fairly strong domestic demand.

\textit{Domestic demand}

For all the influence of exports, then, it was fundamentally the domestic market that drove the growth of ranching. The first big spike in demand for beef and other cattle products following independence occurred in the early 1850s. In the space of a few years, the price of beef doubled in much of the country, and the price of hides

\textsuperscript{114} Randell (1953), pp. 47-48; United Nations (1962). This, just as Central America started to become an important source of cheap, foreign beef for the U.S., sanitary restrictions prevented Colombian ranchers from participating in this trade. See Parsons (1965); Williams (1986); Kaimowitz (1996).
The rise was all the more impressive given the stagnation of the previous decades. While many expected that Colombia was going to experience a spurt of growth following independence and the elimination of restrictive colonial policies, the country entered the economic doldrums instead. Pineada recalled how, “[f]rom 1830 to 1848, [ranching] was unimportant because agriculture and commerce were prostrate.”

In the late 1840s, however, the liberalization of the tobacco trade sparked a resurgence of economic activity. Partly under the influence of the English corn laws, the Colombian government finally abolished the tobacco monopoly that it had inherited from the Spanish crown. In the context of rising international prices, exports grew sharply and ushered in a new era of growth and optimism. Despite the heady claims that the resulting bonanza was akin to the California gold rush, tobacco did jumpstart a moribund economy, paving the way for the mid-century Liberal revolution and the expansion of cattle ranching.

The epicenter of the initial cattle boom was near the Ambalema tobacco fields along the upper Magdalena River. According to Camacho Roldán, the tobacco boom, among other things, “caused the value of a fanegada of land apt for tobacco production to rise from 5 or 10 pesos to more than 100; tripled wages in the lowlands and doubled them in the highlands; introduced beef consumption among the working class, and thus created a source of wealth and prosperity; [and] led to the formation of pastures of planted grasses in an unimaginable quantity.”

---

115 Safford (1966); Nieto Arteta (1996), pp. 262-263.
117 Safford and Palacios (2002).
118 Camacho Roldán (1946), Ch. 14. See also Rivas (1983), Ch. 12.
participated in these developments, recalled how “clearing forests to convert the land in pastures of tobacco fields was the main enterprise [in the lowlands]. Uncultivated land was estimated at $16 per hectare, and in each hectare planted one could fatten a steer that gave a profit of $20 per year. Never before...had speculations of this kind been possible.”¹¹⁹ Within a couple decades, there were pastures to fatten some 40,000 to 50,000 head of cattle.¹²⁰

Both tobacco production and its multiplier effects soon spread beyond the upper Magdalena River Valley. Since lowlanders, particularly those who moved freight along the Magdalena River (bogas), had long consumed significant amounts of beef when they worked, the increased river traffic from exports and imports presumably translated into some rise in the demand for cattle in Old Bolivar.¹²¹ (By the late-nineteenth century, geographer Alfred Hettner remarked that meals outside the highlands were “almost always accompanied by a piece of beef, no matter how dry and hard it might be.”¹²²) Then tobacco production itself started to spread, including to the area around El Carmen de Bolivar and parts of the Sabanas de Bolivar. In 1852, Manuel Murillo Toro, a leading Liberal politician, described how, as a result of the expansion of tobacco production and the “notable growth” it spurred in the provinces of Soto, Socorro, Ocaña, Cartagena, and Mariquita, “[c]attle breeding and fattening has become very important, and despite the large imports of cattle from Venezuela [since 1846], the price of beef has doubled in almost the entire Republic, a fact that

¹¹⁹ Rivas (1983), Ch. 12.
¹²⁰ Rivas (1983); Kalmanovitz (1989); Ospina Vásquez (1974); Safford (1966).
proves the considerable increase in consumption….\textsuperscript{123} Between 1856 and 1864, nearly the entire growth of Colombian tobacco exports was the result of rapidly expanding production in Old Bolívar. By 1863, the department had surpassed the Ambalema region, in the upper Magdalena River Valley, as the largest producer.\textsuperscript{124} In El Carmen, the center of tobacco production in Old Bolivar, wages nearly tripled and the slaughter taxes it collected jumped five-fold between 1858 and 1867.\textsuperscript{125}

Over the rest of the nineteenth century, Colombia had mixed success supplying global markets with agricultural and tropical commodities. The tobacco boom peaked in 1857 and was ostensibly over by the mid-1870s. (With ups and downs, however, it remained an important export in Old Bolivar.) Other products – indigo, cotton, cinchona bark, rubber – followed in a similar pattern of boom and bust. But collectively, these export cycles had several important consequences. First, they convinced highland elites that the future of the country lay in the export of tropical commodities, turning them toward the lowlands and eventually coffee. Second, despite periodic crises, exports rose more or less steadily, providing much needed economic stimulus. From the 1840s to 1898, the total value of exports increased almost 500 percent, while non-gold exports sky-rocketed over 1,600 percent.\textsuperscript{126} And third, they spurred the expansion of cattle ranching, what economic historian Luis Ospina

\textsuperscript{123} Quoted in Nieto Arteta (1996), pp. 262-263.
\textsuperscript{124} Ocampo (1984), p. 240.
\textsuperscript{125} Gaceta Bolivar, Nov. 23, 1862, no. 239, Servicio subsidario. The slaughter taxes were for both cattle ($1.50 per head) and hogs ($0.50 per head). They rose from $1,320 in 1859 to about $8,000 in 1867. By contrast, in Cartagena, these receipts rose from $3,717 to 7,100. By 1874, the taxes in El Carmen had risen to $10,654. Gaceta de Bolivar, Sept. 5, 1858, no. 60, p. 4; Sept. 10, 1867, no. 506, p. 4; July 27, 1875, pp. 671-673.
\textsuperscript{126} Ocampo (1984), p. 84.
Vásquez called “the most important economic development to occur in the country…until the solidification of coffee production” at century’s end.\textsuperscript{127}

Demand for beef thus followed the general economic expansion that began in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1866, Pineda recognized how the market for cattle responded to shifts in the larger economy: “as [agriculture and commerce] have grown in importance, [ranching] has developed in its shadow and followed its oscillations.”\textsuperscript{128} In the 1840s and 1850s, the expansion of mining in Antioquia and the introduction of the pará and guinea grass led to the development of numerous new fattening pastures along the upper Cauca River southwest of Medellín. By 1875, this region, which had been ostensibly unoccupied in the 1830s, had close to 50,000 head of cattle.\textsuperscript{129} In Old Bolívar, Striffler repeatedly indicated 1850 as the year that cattle ranchers started to expand their operations, pushing into forested land to establish new pastures.\textsuperscript{130} For most of the period between the late 1840s and 1878, what livestock exports there were also dried up.\textsuperscript{131} By the early twentieth century, ranchers were well aware how general economic conditions, particularly coffee prices and public works projects, affected demand for their cattle. In 1914, Salazar told Diego Martínez Recuero that “we can’t count on Antioquia needing the same amount of cattle as last year since the principal consumers have been: the Railroad, which will only need maintenance workers; the foundation of new coffee estates that have already been established and will consume less; the end of the mule-trains…and the reduction in

\textsuperscript{128} Pineda (1866).
\textsuperscript{129} Vélez Rendón (2002); Brew (2000).
\textsuperscript{130} Striffler (1994).
\textsuperscript{131} Ocampo (1984); see Table 4.3.
mining, which is being taken over by large operations.”

Likewise, in 1923, ranchers from Old Bolívar informed Leroy Sawyer, the US Consul in Cartagena, that “favorable prices for coffee react quickly and effectively upon the cattle industry. Field laborers on the coffee plantations becoming meat eaters when the market for that commodity is up and…having to abstain from a meat diet when prices there are down and their wages are correspondingly low.”

Over the long run, however, consumption grew steadily. Camacho Roldán, an astute social observer, thought that the country consumed some 125,000 cattle annually in the mid-nineteenth century. By 1894, that figure had risen to over 426,000 head. Similarly, while Pineda estimated an annual consumption of about 27,000 cattle in Old Bolívar in 1866, by 1890 it was over 40,000 head. The striking rise in beef consumption, Camacho Roldán said, “has notably improved the condition of the population.”

If Camacho Roldán’s estimate for the mid-nineteenth century is correct, then the average annual growth of cattle slaughtered in the country between 1850 and 1894 could have been seven percent (not including his suggestion that the live weight of cattle increased by a third during this period). Between 1915 and 1950, the growth rate slowed, but it was still about five percent annually. A growing population explains some of the rise, but per capita consumption also increased.

Between 1851 and 1912, the total number of cattle slaughtered rose about 300 percent

---

132 APNOyC, 170, f473.
133 NARA, RG 166, 1904-1939, Colombia, “Local cattle industry – export of cattle on the hoof to Peru,” Clipped from report #85294, Feb 5, 1923.
134 Pineda (1866); Arboleda (1905), p. 108.
135 Camacho Roldán (1946), p. 164. See also Arboleda (1905), pp. 96-116.
136 Camacho Roldán’s estimate could have been low. But between 1890 and 1894, tax records indicate the number of cattle slaughtered rose 4.7 percent annually (Arboleda 1905, pp. 108-109).
while the population grew some 170 percent. Likewise, as the population increased about 109 percent between 1912 and 1951, the number of cattle slaughtered every year grew around 180 percent. Official estimates of the national annual per capita rate of consumption rose from about 19 kilograms in 1894 to 25 kilograms in 1951 (see Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3. Meat consumption in Colombia (1850-1950)\textsuperscript{137}

While consumption varied significantly – by class, region, employment, and probably gender and age – working for wages was one way poor Colombians could

\footnote{Contraloría (1932), p. 409; Dávila Tello (1949); Cañón (1952).}
include some meat in their diet. In the mid-nineteenth century, few agricultural workers, particularly in the highlands, received meat as part of their rations. By the end of the century, it had become more common. While meat consumption was still limited in the highlands of Cundinamarca and Boyacá, in the more dynamic coffee regions and elsewhere where workers remained scarce, beef had become fairly commonplace as part of daily rations. In the early-twentieth century, agricultural laborers in Antioquia received between 63 and 225 grams of beef per day; miners could get 725 grams. Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. calculated that the daily rations for its ranch workers in Old Bolívar should be a 167 grams of beef. In the mid-twentieth century, ranch workers in Old Bolívar received about 225 grams of beef daily. From the 1920s to the 1940s, the management of Marta Magdalena provided its resident families with daily rations of 725 to 1,000 grams of fresh beef, 725 grams of salted beef, and 1,500 grams of beef bones. Earlier in the century, the department

---

138 Meat, and particularly beef, consumption may have been an important incentive to work for wages. In any case, food rations were an important component of overall wage costs. And the amount of beef employers provided contributed a significant percentage of the total cost of rations.

139 Camacho Roldán (1946); Meisel and Vega (2004), p. 12; Cotes (1893); Hettner (1976).

140 Pérez, 1915, p. 105; APNOyC, 200, Jan. 13, 1916 and Jan. 14, 1916; Poveda, 1979, p. 120; Brew, 2000, p. 174; Parsons (1968), p. 119. Parsons cites figures for railway workers and miners in the 1930s and 1940s of 320 and 340 grams daily. By way of comparison, in the 1930s and 1940s, the cost of living index for a middle class family of 10 in Medellín included 10.5 kilograms of meat.

141 APNOyC, 200, f451, f456.

142 AOFB, Cereté Sindicato Liga de Trabajadores, “Montelibano: Jornal diario devengado con alimentacion,” Fuerzas Militares de Colombia, Montería, June 16, 1955; and “Sistemas de alimentación en la región de Sabanas.”

of Old Bolivar even provided prisoners in the jail in Cartagena with 225 grams of meat per day.\textsuperscript{144}

While local demand and exports stimulated the expansion of ranching in Old Bolivar, it was the increasing sales to other departments that helped it become the most important cattle producer in the country. Ranchers in Old Bolivar may have shipped some salted beef to the mining zone of northern Antioquia from the late-eighteenth century or early-nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{145} Presumably this trade increased some with cattle on the hoof following the construction of the Fatherly Trail from Ayapel in the 1840s. (There was also a trade in salted beef to the mining zone of Chocó.\textsuperscript{146}) But this trade started to become important in the late 1860s when ranchers and traders from Santander started buying cattle in Old Bolivar to attend to increasing demand for beef and hides resulting from tobacco production, the extraction of cinchona bark, and the establishment of coffee farms. By 1874, the governor of the province of Lorica reported that “the price of cattle in the Sinú [Valley] has risen considerably due to the frequent requests from the buyers in the Sabanas [de Bolívar], in their dealings with the [departments] of Santander and Antioquia.”\textsuperscript{147} In the mid-1870s, buyers from Santander were taking at least 16,000 head annually from Old Bolívar.\textsuperscript{148}

\textsuperscript{144}AHC, Gobernación, Justicia, 1905-1933, Folder 25, “…Marcial González…y Juan Grice han celebrado el siguiente contrato: 1905-6.”
\textsuperscript{145}Sourdis (1996); Ospina Vásquez (1974).
\textsuperscript{146}Gaceta de Bolívar July 2, 1858, no. 54, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{148}In El Carmen, in the early 1870s, ranchers or cattle traders from Cúcuta (Santander del Norte) bought about 4,000 head of cattle annually from the Sabanas de Bolívar. In 1876, the
This trade grew considerably over the first half of the twentieth century. Between 1890 and 1910, as expanding demand from the expansion of coffee production in Caldas absorbed the surpluses from the Cauca Valley, Antioquia turned to Old Bolivar to meet its cattle needs. In 1910, Salazar told Ospina how demand from Antioquia and other interior markets for cattle from Old Bolivar had grown. The need to replant coffee trees in Antioquia and Santander drove part of this growth. But trade policy also played a role. After the Venezuelan government imposed a export tax on cattle in 1912, fatteners and traders from Cúcuta (Santander del Norte), who had imported at least 30,000 head annually, turned to Old Bolivar. “In summary,” Salazar continued, “until 1911, the shipments from Bolivar and Magdalena to the departments of the interior can be calculated between 38,000 and 40,000; from 1912 until today from 70 to 75,000 annually, with the risk that this year it rises to 80,000, since demand in Tolima as well as Medellin has increased the traffic considerably….” By the early 1940s, ranchers from Old Bolivar were selling 125,000 to 130,000 head to departments in the interior of the country. Of these, about 32,500 went to Antioquia, 21,250 to Santander, and 22,500 to Cundinamarca, Caldas, and Tolima. Old Bolivar thus supplied a considerable share of the cattle consumed in these departments: about governor of the province of Mompós estimated that ranchers there annually fattened between 10,000 and 12,000 steer, from the Department of Old Magdalena or Old Bolivar, that they sold to buyers from Santander. Galindo (1875), pp. 157-158; Diario de Bolivar, Aug. 16, 1876, no. 1505, pp. 151-157: Informe…Mompos. See also Diario de Bolivar, Aug. 10, 1878, no. 1942, pp. 1333-1335: Informe…Corozal; Diario de Bolivar, Aug. 12, 1878, no. 1943: Informe…Lorica; Gaceta de Bolivar, Aug. 29 1869, no. 641: Informe…Chinú; Diario de Bolivar, Aug. 13, 1878, no. 1944, pp. 1341-1342: Informe…Lorica. 

\[149\] APNOCyC, 200, f364. 

\[150\] Ibid.
36 percent in both Antioquia and Santander, and 16 percent in Cundinamarca.\footnote{Oakley (1943), pp. 24-25; Contraloría (1942); Parsons (1968). As imports of cattle from Venezuela to Santander del Norte declined in 1932, due to unfavorable exchange rates, the department again turned to Old Bolívar. Its share of the cattle slaughtered there jumped from 20 percent in 1929 to 72 percent in 1932 (NARA, RG 166, 1904-1939, Colombia, “Cattle trade in the two Santanders,” John Brandt, Dec. 19 1933).}

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, therefore, ranchers in Old Bolívar were more dependent on interior markets than local consumption and exports. In 1915, about 55 percent of their cattle sales were to buyers from Antioquia, Santander, and Cundinamarca.\footnote{APNOyC, 200, f364; Villegas (1919). This assumes a trade with the interior of 60,000 head and that, since the cattle industry of Old Bolívar was much larger than that of Magdalena, and less devastated from the War of a Thousand Days, its share of the market for coastal cattle in the interior of Colombia was 75 percent. In 1923, the US Consul in Cartagena estimated the trade with the interior at 60 to 70,000 head annually, compared to local consumption of 50 to 60,000 head. That year, ranchers from Old Bolívar also exported 25,000 cattle (NARA, RG 166, 1904-1939, Colombia, “Cattle raising in the Cartagena Consular District,” L. Schnare, Dec. 19, 1924).} By the late 1930s and early 1940s, this figure had risen to about two-thirds of total sales.

While exports did periodically provide an important stimulus to ranching, overall they paled in comparison to the significance of domestic demand. The large shipments of some 60,000 cattle annually between 1898 and 1906 were notable and may have doubled local consumption and sales to interior markets.\footnote{Arboleda (1905). Between 1889 and 1894, Old Bolívar annually consumed, on average, about 41,000 cattle, and possibly sold another 20,000 head to departments in the interior.} But no other export bonanza matched it in either absolute or relative terms. During the next largest one, from 1916 to 1920, exports were about 21 percent of total average annual sales, compared to 36 percent for local consumption and an estimated 44 percent to other departments.\footnote{Villegas (1919); Contraloria (1927); see Table 4.3. My estimate of 70,000 average annual sales to interior markets. Average annual slaughter in Old Bolívar during these years was 57,000. Exports averaged 33,000 head.} By 1943, the relative weight of its cattle exports had fallen to about

---

\footnote{Oakley (1943), pp. 24-25; Contraloría (1942); Parsons (1968). As imports of cattle from Venezuela to Santander del Norte declined in 1932, due to unfavorable exchange rates, the department again turned to Old Bolívar. Its share of the cattle slaughtered there jumped from 20 percent in 1929 to 72 percent in 1932 (NARA, RG 166, 1904-1939, Colombia, “Cattle trade in the two Santanders,” John Brandt, Dec. 19 1933).}

\footnote{APNOyC, 200, f364; Villegas (1919). This assumes a trade with the interior of 60,000 head and that, since the cattle industry of Old Bolívar was much larger than that of Magdalena, and less devastated from the War of a Thousand Days, its share of the market for coastal cattle in the interior of Colombia was 75 percent. In 1923, the US Consul in Cartagena estimated the trade with the interior at 60 to 70,000 head annually, compared to local consumption of 50 to 60,000 head. That year, ranchers from Old Bolívar also exported 25,000 cattle (NARA, RG 166, 1904-1939, Colombia, “Cattle raising in the Cartagena Consular District,” L. Schnare, Dec. 19, 1924).}

\footnote{Arboleda (1905). Between 1889 and 1894, Old Bolívar annually consumed, on average, about 41,000 cattle, and possibly sold another 20,000 head to departments in the interior.}

\footnote{Villegas (1919); Contraloria (1927); see Table 4.3. My estimate of 70,000 average annual sales to interior markets. Average annual slaughter in Old Bolívar during these years was 57,000. Exports averaged 33,000 head.}
ten percent of total sales. These periodic export cycles gave impetus to the cattle industry in Old Bolívar. By extension, they also lessened the competition that ranchers in the interior of the country faced when excess supplies in Old Bolívar had trouble finding external markets. Yet nationally, between 1915 and 1950, total exports were just a little over one percent of all domestically-consumed cattle.\textsuperscript{155}

The larger point of this section is simply to underline the links between demand and the expansion of ranching. If it were true that its logic can be found in non-productive rationales, like using cattle to establish territorial control, then it would possible to imagine chronic problems of either surplus production or shortages in cattle and beef markets. In other words, given the strength of the ulterior motives behind ranching, prices were an ineffective means to regulate production. To the contrary, however, ranchers appear to have responded fairly quickly to prices and shifts in demand. In fact, they generally seem to have been more responsive than farmers. In periods of strong demand, cattle prices often rose at a lower rate than many food crops, despite the biological difficulty of rapidly increasing production. Some of this difference, of course, was due to the structural rigidities of Colombian agriculture, including the monopolization of much farmland by cattle. But it also points to the underlying market orientation of the country’s ranchers.

\textsuperscript{155} Kalmanovitz et al (1999); see Table 4.3.
Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. profited off of a bottleneck in the beef commodity chain: moving cattle from the breeding grounds of Old Bolívar to the fatteners of Antioquia. The capital and logistical requirements of this trade limited the number of participants, though there were enough to make it competitive. Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. was also not the only operation to develop a network of properties and trails to ship cattle more efficiently. Nor was their strategy of breeding their own cattle, fattening, or even entering the meat retail meat trade unique. Even with these efforts at vertical integration, Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. and the other cattle shippers occupied only a portion of the beef commodity chain. They purchased most of the animals that they traded from other ranchers and resold them to specialized fatteners, holding on to stock for only a limited part of their lives. Likewise, the majority of other ranchers also only participated in discrete sections of this chain. Because of the nature of cattle production and the geography of consumption, many more people were involved in the beef commodity chain than might be expected given its relative simplicity. While officials and industry observers lamented about the inefficiencies reflected by so many participants, the large number also highlights a couple of significant factors regarding

---

156 I focus on the beef commodity chain because beef was the primary product derived from cattle. Nevertheless, by the mid-twentieth century, the value derived from dairy products (primarily cheese) was roughly equivalent to the annual slaughter (Dávila Tello, 1949, p. 44bis; Cañón, 1952, p. 112). In Old Bolívar, Oakley (1943, p. 41) estimated that milk sales were still 50 percent less than that of beef cattle. While some ranchers began to specialize in dairy operations, the bulk of national production still came from beef cows that were also milked. Although hides had long been an important export commodity (in relative more than absolute terms), by the mid-twentieth century they were worth less than 10 percent of the cattle culled annually.

157 APNOyC, 200, f279; 232, f267.

158 Ocampo (2007); Berrocal Hoyos (1980); APNOyC, 200, f279; 232, f267.
cattle raising. First, many ranchers, especially the larger ones, bought an important portion of the animals they raised. This was especially true for cattle traders and fatteners. Thus, as we move up the commodity chain, more and more cattle were traded on the market. This turns the ‘hoarding’ view of cattle raising on its head: buying animals forced ranchers to pay attention to market conditions and seek to turn them over as quickly as possible. Second, although cattle raising is frequently seen as an elite-dominated activity, the concentration within the industry is partly a function of this progressive consolidation of animals along the commodity chain.

The beef commodity chain contained three basic parts: production, shipping, and butchering. The whole process, from conception to carcass, took five or six years. As mentioned in the previous chapter, cattle production was composed of three stages: breeding, which typically lasted until a few months after a calf was weaned; the growing stage, from about one to four years of age; and fattening for slaughter, which often took six to twelve months.\(^\text{159}\) The shortest and simplest chain was a rancher who slaughtered an animal that he or she bred. This occurred with some frequency since a rancher with 25 workers could go through a cow every ten days or so.\(^\text{160}\) Many of these animals were injured, defective, or diseased animals, and selling them for a decent price outside the ranch would have been hard if not impossible.\(^\text{161}\) Nonetheless, some ranchers may have been able to sell beef directly to the neighboring community as well. Otherwise, ranchers in Old Bolivar sold fat cattle, mostly older cows, to local

\(^\text{159}\) Oakley (1943); González Cortina (1940), pp. 41-42; Ocampo (2007); Ministerio de Agricultura y Comercio (1916); Marulanda (1939).

\(^\text{160}\) In the late 1940s, livestock analysts assumed that the average slaughter weight of cows was 320 kilograms, with a yield of 50 percent (Dávila Tello, 1949, p. 54). Meat rations did not include bones.

\(^\text{161}\) NARA, RG 84, 1943-1948, Colombia, Martelo Hmos. to Oakley, Jan. 14, 1944.
butchers who slaughtered them as needed. Since cattle were widely raised in the department, most communities ate locally-produced beef.

Yet many cattle in Old Bolívar, even those destined for local consumption, passed through various hands on their slow journey to market. In a 1943 report on the cattle industry of Old Bolívar, the US vice-consul in Cartagena, Kenneth Oakley, wrote that “[m]ost cattle are bred and raised for the first one and one half or two years, by small ranchers, mostly on the poorer grazing lands, and are then sold because the breeders have insufficient capital to feed and keep them until ready for shipment to market.”

162 Frequently, Oakley explained, one group of intermediaries traveled around buying cattle in lots of five to twenty head from small breeders and then resold them to another intermediary who worked on a commission basis for larger ranchers who then raised the cattle to the age of about four years when they were ready to fatten or ship to markets in the interior of the country. 163 As mentioned in the previous chapter, there were a number of additional ways that this consolidation process occurred. The smallest breeders sometimes sold their calves soon after weaning; those with somewhat more capital might buy some of these and hold onto their own for a year or two more; and still another, better capitalized group of ranchers bought most of the animals they raised and sold them after several years to still larger (breeder-) grower-fatteners, simple fatteners, or to someone who would ship them to more distant markets. 164 Oakley also emphasized the geographical aspect of this trade: “Cattle from

---

162 Oakley (1943), p. 21.
163 Ibid., pp. 21, 30. As late as 1970, some 80 percent of the cattle in Córdoba were still sold on the ranch rather than at cattle fairs, underlining the importance of these commission agents (Posada, 1974). For a similar account for Antioquia, see Ospina Pérez (1918a).
164 González Cortina (1940).
the Department of Magdalena bordering Bolívar, are sold to a considerable extent to ranchers on the ‘Island’ of Mompós. Many cattle from the Mompós area, the Department of Atlántico, and the Carmen area are sold to buyers in the ‘Sabanas’ area near Sincelejo and in the Sinú valley. From the ‘Sabanas’ many are sold to buyers in the Sinú valley.”165 All told, over 50 percent of the cattle in Old Bolívar changed ownership a number of times before they were ready to fatten.166 Thus, even though medium and large ranchers bred cattle, they purchased many of the animals they raised from smaller breeders and even peasants (see Table 4.5).

---

165 Oakley (1943), pp. 21-22.
166 Oakley (1943), p. 30.
### Table 4.5: Cattle purchases by ranches Corinto and Marta Magdalena (1922-1947)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Seller</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Seller</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Jan. to June 1922, Corinto</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Oct. 1927, PNOyC, Santiago Angel commission agent</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>P. Noriega</td>
<td></td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Juan B.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>J. Vertel</td>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
<td>E. González</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>J. Ortiz</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>J. Bernal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Abisambros</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N. Vélez</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>P.N. Ospina</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>A. Arias</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>S. Vitar</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>V. Ochoa</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>P. Coronado</td>
<td></td>
<td>123</td>
<td>J. Puerta</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>PNOyC</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>R. Velásquez</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>P. Coronado</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>L. Cano</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>P. Coronado</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Lino</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>E. Moreno</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>J. Loro</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Manuel ?</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>B. Garcés</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>55</td>
<td>For B. Ospina</td>
<td></td>
<td>74</td>
<td>D. Pérez</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Sr. Olmo</td>
<td></td>
<td>200</td>
<td>T. Torres</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>143</td>
<td>Anon.</td>
<td></td>
<td>150</td>
<td>R. Galán</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Alberto J.</td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>U. Real</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>49</td>
<td>R. Duque</td>
<td></td>
<td>70</td>
<td>J. Agumendo</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>75</td>
<td>Fernández</td>
<td></td>
<td>50</td>
<td>M. Oveido</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>127</td>
<td>E. Méndez</td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>J. Peña</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Chamorro</td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>P. Villalba</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>119</td>
<td>R. Bolaño</td>
<td></td>
<td>50</td>
<td>G. Palomino</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>M. Ruiz</td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>V. Vertel</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>April 28 1922, PNOyC</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Sept. 1938, Marta Magdalena</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>352</td>
<td>J. Salleg</td>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>D. Pérez</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>P. Coronado</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>T. Torres</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Pereria Vélez Hnos.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>R. Galán</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>110</td>
<td>L. Aguilar</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>U. Real</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>205</td>
<td>L.M. Pérez</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>J. Agumendo</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sept. 1924, Marta Magdalena</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Jan. 1947, Marta Magdalena</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
<td>R. Berrocal</td>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>A. Sánchez</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>116</td>
<td>R. Ruiz</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>D. Ángel</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>141</td>
<td>A. Castillo</td>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>J. Pérez</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>200</td>
<td>D. García</td>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>A. Sánchez</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1,400</td>
<td>Ohagui Hnos.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>D. Ángel</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>March 1926, Marta Magdalena</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>March 1926, Marta Magdalena</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>200</td>
<td>G. Tobón</td>
<td></td>
<td>250</td>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>M. de la Ossa</td>
<td></td>
<td>120</td>
<td>J. Perna</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>425</td>
<td>L. Méndez</td>
<td></td>
<td>81</td>
<td>A. Chaíd</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>J. Jiménez</td>
<td></td>
<td>93</td>
<td>P. Buelvas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>300</td>
<td>J. Sánchez</td>
<td></td>
<td>45</td>
<td>M.A. Núñez</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

Then, in order to move cattle to more distant markets, they often changed hands several more times. While large ranchers tended to sell directly to cattle traders, medium-sized ranchers frequently relied on intermediaries.\textsuperscript{168} Some of these traders bought cattle for their own fattening operations or worked on a commission basis for fatteners in the interior of the country. Many, however, were like Pedro Nel Ospina & Cia., moving primarily full-grown but thin steer to resell to fatteners in the large cattle fairs of Medellín, Bucaramanga, and La Dorada.\textsuperscript{169} A significant portion of the cattle raised in Old Bolívar was destined for this trade. While the department consumed about 51,000 head in 1915, its ranchers sent about 45,000 steer to Antioquia alone, not counting those that went to Santander or Tolima.\textsuperscript{170} By the late 1930s and early 1940s, Oakley estimated that, on average, Old Bolívar consumed about 63,000 cattle annually while it sold 125,000 head principally to markets in Antioquia, Santander, Cundinamarca, and Caldas.\textsuperscript{171} On top of this, between 1915 and 1950, ranchers exported about 20 percent of what the department consumed.\textsuperscript{172} Altogether, ranchers in Old Bolivar sold some 50 to 70 percent of the animals they raised to outside markets.

\textsuperscript{168} Oakley (1943), p. 30.
\textsuperscript{169} For exports, the process was similar. With the Cuban trade, the shippers amassed cattle from various sources that they then dispatched to Cuban intermediaries or their own operations and pastures on the island (Ripoll, 1999). For exports to the Panama Canal Zone, American officials contracted with large ranchers to supply a certain quantity of cattle at a stipulated price (APNOyC, CR 1912-1916, Burgos to PNOyC, Jan. 4, 1916; CR 1915, Martínez to PNOyC, Dec. 1, 1915). These ranchers sold some animals they raised but the bulk were purchased from other medium and large ranchers or other intermediaries. The reason why even large ranchers needed to buy most of the livestock they exported was the low 10 percent extraction rate of Colombian cattle: a rancher with 10,000 head could only expect to have about 500 fat steer per year ready to ship (Cañón, 1952, p. 34; Oakley, 1943, p. 25; United Nations, 1962).
\textsuperscript{170} Contraloria (1930), p. 453; Ocampo (2007), p. 44.
\textsuperscript{171} Oakley (1943), p. 25.
\textsuperscript{172} Consumption data from Kalmanovitz et al. (1999). Regarding exports, see Table 4.3.
Map 4.2. Cattle trails from Old Bolívar to Antioquia


327
There were three main routes from Old Bolívar into Antioquia (see Map 4.2). The route used by Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. went along the Cauca River to Puerto Valdivia, and then started climbing the central cordillera to Valdivia and Yarumal. From here, the herds of cattle crossed the Santa Rosa highlands, descending to catch the train in Barbosa or walking into Medellín via San Pedro. Various trails from the Sinú Valley, Ayapel, and the Sabanas de Bolívar fed this route, arriving at the Cauca River in Caucasia or Cáreres. The second route was up the Nechi River to Zaragoza. Some cattle traveled by boat as far as Zaragoza, loading on at Margento, on the Cauca River if they came from the Sinú Valley and Ayapel, at Nechi, or even Yatí, on the Magdalena River, if they came in from the Sabanas de Bolívar and San Jorge River Valley. From Zaragoza, the cattle had to continue overland to Medellín. Most went via the mining towns of Segovia and Remedios before turning toward to Yolombó and Cisneros, where they caught the train for the final leg of the journey. After the government improved the trail along the Porce River, some cattle importers followed this river upstream to the train station of Porcecito. The third option was to trail cattle to Yatí, the Magdalena River port outside of Magangué. From here, cattle

---

173 There were a couple of other routes through Urubá or up the Atrato River. Additionally, some cattle from the Sinú Valley went by boat from the lower Sinú River to Cartagena. Others traveled down the San Jorge or Magdalena rivers to Barranquilla (Ocampo, 2007, pp. 76-84). There was also an important overland route (or maybe more than one) to the Santanders via Ocaña. Once the railway between Puerto Wilches, on the Magdalena River, and Bucaramanga was built, many cattle traveled by boat (loading on principally at Yatí) and then rail. To markets in Cundinamarca, Caldas, and Tolima, cattle traveled further up the Magdalena River by boat to La Dorada (Oakley, 1943; Randell, 1953; Parsons, 1968, p. 131).
177 APNOyC, cr 1915-1916, Puerta to Salazar, June 17, 1916; 210, f56.
traveled up river to Puerto Berrío, where they were loaded onto the train that took them to Medellín.\footnote{Ocampo (2007), p. 81; Oakley (1943), pp. 21-23, 31; Contraloría (1942), pp. 294, 298, 305; Randell (1953).}

Trailing cattle overland, either via Yarumal or Zaragoza, was a long and difficult affair. The trip from Montería to Medellín generally took 40 to 55 days. Traveling part of the way by boat to Zaragoza might knock a week off the journey. The trip from Cáceres, at the foot of the cordillera, to Medellín took at least twenty days. The distance, some 230 kilometers, was not great, but the cattle had to climb steep and often rough roads that made the journey slow going. From Cáceres to Yarumal, the trail rose from 150 to 2,265 meters above sea level, and required at least ten days. By Santa Rosa de Osos, the path rose an additional 300 meters before dropping back down to Medellín at 1,500 meters above sea level. To help prevent injured hooves, which required leaving cattle along the way, ranchers sometimes fitted the cattle with leather booties or used horse shoes. Even then, it was not uncommon to have significant injuries. Cattle importers also calculated their losses, or deaths, at five percent of the animals shipped.\footnote{Parsons (1968), p. 131.}

The cattle traders contracted somewhat specialized drovers to trail the animals to market in Antioquia. These workers, called \textit{mochileros}, not cowboys, for the \textit{mochilas} or bags of supplies they carried slung over their shoulders, drove the cattle on foot.\footnote{Ocampo (2007). They were also called peons (\textit{mozos}). Presumably, the tough journey on relatively narrow trails and through forested land served to keep the cattle from scattering, reducing the need for horses to
round up stray animals. In any case, the climb into Antioquia would have required mules, not horses. And using either one would have substantially increased shipping costs. The expenses of transportation alone (not including losses, weight loss, and pasturage) amounted to about 20 percent of the price of thin cattle from Bolivar in the Medellín market.\footnote{APNOyC, 200, f364; Oakley (1943), pp. 23, 31-32.} Because they went by foot along narrow paths, the trail crews, typically seven to eight mochileros and one trail boss (capataz), drove relatively small lots of 80 to 125 head of cattle.\footnote{Ocampo (2007); Randell (1953).} With a ratio of cattle to workers of only about 12- to 14-to-1, trailing cattle overland was not a particularly efficient enterprise.

Additionally, cattle trailed overland to Medellín lost a substantial amount of weight. It was not uncommon for them to lose up to 25 to 30 percent of their body weight, or anywhere from 80 to 120 kilograms.\footnote{Randell (1953), p. 63.} In 1943, an agricultural advisor to the Colombian government reported that these cattle needed six months of pasture in Antioquia just to regain the weight they had lost. The cost of this pasture time almost doubled the cost of physically bringing the cattle into Antioquia. Pasturing animals along the way, and moving slowly, could help reduce the amount of weight lost, but it also substantially increased shipping costs. For this reason, Oakley said that the only cattle importers to use this route with any regularity were those who owned or rented pastures along the way.\footnote{Oakley (1943), p. 23.} This weight loss represented huge inefficiencies in the beef

\footnote{APNOyC, 200, f364; Oakley (1943), pp. 23, 31-32.}
commodity chain. Nationally, analysts estimated that this annual weight loss was equivalent to 40,000 to 70,000 cattle.\footnote{El Mes Financero y Económico (1946), p. 204; Cañón (1945), p. 16.}

The alternative was to ship cattle by boat and rail to Medellín. This route was faster and resulted in less weight loss, but it was also considerably more expensive than the overland route. From Yatí, the principal debarkation point on the Magdalena River for cattle from Old Bolívar, cattle barges or specialized cattle crafts took about six days to reach Puerto Berrío, Antioquia’s main river port. For there, it was one day by train to Medellín. From Montería, however, the entire trip took 20 days: ten on the trail to Yatí, where the cattle rested two days; and one additional day’s rest in Puerto Berrío.\footnote{Mejía (1940). While some six workers trailed the cattle to Yatí, three typically continued with the cattle all the way to market (Randell, 1953, p. 63).} This route became viable only after the governing board of Antioquia’s railroad lowered the tariff on cattle in 1911.\footnote{González Cardona (2003).} Even then, the entire trip cost about twice as much as trailing cattle overland.\footnote{This was true in both 1915 (APNOyC, 200, f364) and 1943 (Oakley, 1943, p. 23).} But lower mortality rates (1\% vs. 5\%) and reduced weight loss (15\% vs. 25-30\%) made it competitive.\footnote{Parsons (1968), p. 131; Mejía (1940); Cañón (1945), p. 16.} In fact, Oakley found that when the cost of renting pasturage along the overland route was included, so that the cattle arrived in roughly the same condition as those coming by boat and rail, trailing animals turned out to be a little more expensive. Still, for those ranchers with their own pastures along the way, it was cheaper to send cattle overland. In the early
1930s, the numbers going overland and by boat and rail were split evenly. A decade later, about 40 percent of the cattle shipped to Antioquia still went on the hoof.  

By 1950, the use of trucks to move cattle between Old Bolívar and Medellín had considerably shortened the trip and become commonplace. From El Polo, the most important point for loading cattle onto trucks along the Cartagena-Medellín road, the trip took just one day. However, from Montería, it still took eight days to trail cattle to El Polo. By the time the cattle reached Medellín, they had lost about 40 kilograms. And the fare, some 75 percent more than trailing cattle overland, was not cheap: the trucks could only carry between six and twelve steer; and the cattle and the rough roads made for high maintenance costs.

In Antioquia, most of the thin cattle from Old Bolívar passed through the weekly cattle fair in Medellín. The importers or their agents met the animals arriving from Old Bolívar and rented pasture for them if they did not have their own. The day of the fair, they rented corral space at the fair grounds where they negotiated prices with buyers in private as opposed to an auction. Any animals that did not sell had to be pastured until the following week. The buyers then trailed the newly-purchased animals to their fattening pastures. Through the 1910s, the upper Cauca River (at an elevation of about 600 meters above sea level) was the most important fattening

---

191 Randell (1953), p. 63; Mejía (1940); Currie (1960).
192 Ibid. From Montería to Bucaramanga, the cost per head was slightly more than moving cattle by truck to Medellín. Probably, the boat and rail route continued for those cattle that were relatively close to a river port, while trucking was preferred for cattle further away. Currie (1960) said that the per-head cost of shipping cattle by boat and rail from Mompós to Medellín in 1959 was $33.50; by contrast, trucking the cattle from Planeta Rica to Medellín cost between $70 to $85.
193 Randell (1953).
grounds in Antioquia. These fatteners were a relatively small and wealthy group. In 1914, they owned 103 fattening properties in this valley with a total capacity of about 50,000 head.\footnote{López and Rodríguez (1914), pp. 133-134. There were a number of additional properties, with a capacity for some 4,000 more head, on the Cartama, Arma, and Buey rivers, which drained into the Cauca, and on the Cauca River itself, south of La Tuerta.} Still, this fattening stage was less concentrated than that of shipping. It also became somewhat less concentrated as the fattening industry expanded into the Magdalena River Valley (down the railway line cutting through the Nus River Valley towards Puerto Berrío), and into highland areas after the diffusion of yaraguá.\footnote{APNOyC, 232, f267.} With the dispersion of fattening, the Medellín cattle fair lost some of its former importance. Ranchers from the Magdalena River Valley imported cattle directly from Old Bolívar or perhaps bought them while the animals were being transferred from boat to train; highland fatteners bought growing numbers of locally-raised cattle. The Medellín fair, however, still remained the most important price setter in the department, if not the country.\footnote{APNOyC, 350, f276, f327.} And when low water in the Magdalena River prevented boats from arriving as far south as Puerto Berrío, fatteners from that area and even as far away as Manizales, had to buy thin cattle trailed overland to Medellín. \footnote{Londoño (1956).}

After fattening the cattle for up to a year on pastures of pará or guinea, these fatteners sold them to butchers or, perhaps more frequently, to intermediaries who resold them to butchers. Some went directly to the towns surrounding the fattening districts or further afield. But about a third of the fat cattle consumed in Antioquia passed through the Medellín cattle fair, rising from an average of 346 per week in \footnote{APNOyC, 232, f267.}
1912 to 1,470 in 1950 (see Figure 4.4). In 1932, only 60 percent of the fat cattle sold in this fair were actually slaughtered in Medellín. The rest were trailed by their buyers to other municipal slaughterhouses.

Figure 4.4. The share of the Medellín cattle fair in terms of total consumption in Antioquia (1888-1950)

Slaughtering in Colombia was a local affair. There was some trade in sun-dried and salted beef, but most meat had to be consumed close to where it was

---

slaughtered.\textsuperscript{200} The main reason for this was the absence of a cold chain. Through the mid-twentieth century, almost no retail outlets had functioning refrigerators; refrigerated trucking was unknown; and even the slaughter houses of the major cities lacked cold rooms.\textsuperscript{201} Without a means to lower the temperature of recently slaughtered carcasses, the meat started to decompose immediately. Typically, the slaughterhouses operated at night or early in the morning, and butchers killed just the number of animals they thought they could sell that day. In the cool climate of Bogotá, they sometimes sold left over meat the following day for half the going rate of fresh beef. In warmer climates, however, any leftover meat needed to be salted.\textsuperscript{202} Under these conditions, and given the poor transportation infrastructure, local slaughtering was essential. Almost every municipality had their own slaughterhouse, even if it was just a tree on the edge of town. Furthermore, the fact that municipal governments received a large portion of their revenues from collecting slaughter taxes on cattle and hogs perpetuated decentralized slaughtering even where there was some possibility of consolidation.\textsuperscript{203}

Slaughterhouses in Colombia were also a service industry. Often owned by the municipality, or given in concession, they charged a fee to sacrifice an animal for its owner but never purchased, slaughtered, and marketed animals themselves. In most cities, especially small- and medium-sized ones, butchers bought cattle from fatteners and sent them to slaughter as they needed. In larger cities, however, there might be an

\textsuperscript{200} Gaceta de Bolívar, July 2, 1858, no. 54; Galindo (1875), p. 151; Gaceta de Bolívar, Aug. 12, 1878, no. 1943, pp. 1338-1339: Informe…Lorica; Striffler (1995); Oakley (1943), p. 26.
\textsuperscript{201} Randell (1953), p. 80.
\textsuperscript{202} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{203} Ibid.
intermediate wholesaler who purchased the cattle from the fatteners, had it slaughtered, and sold large cuts of meat to small butchers or stores scattered about the city or even congregating in the central market place.  

While the geography of the beef commodity chain did not remain static through the mid-twentieth century, its basic structure endured. One significant change was Antioquia’s increasing dependence, between 1890 and 1910, on Old Bolívar as a source of cattle. This shift away from the Cauca Valley, however, did not significantly alter the nature of the commodity chain itself. An event with potentially larger repercussions was the 1911 decision by Antioquia’s railway board to cut the tariff it charged cattle by two-thirds. As mentioned above, this made it viable to ship live animals from Old Bolívar to Medellín by boat and then rail. Between 1909 and 1912, the number of cattle shipped to market in Antioquia jumped from 40 to almost 10,000. The specialized fatteners along the upper Cauca River feared that, with the reduced weight losses, it would be possible to ship fat cattle directly from Old Bolívar and thereby eliminate them from the commodity chain. An influential group, they pressured the railway board to reverse its decision. After this failed, they threatened to boycott any cattle trader who also shipped fat cattle directly from Old Bolívar. It is not clear whether the boycott was effective. More likely, rising demand for fat cattle within Old Bolívar in order to export to Panama diverted many of those that might have been shipped to Medellín. There also may have been persistent weight loss

---

204 Ibid.  
206 Ibid., p. 88.  
207 Ibid.,
problems that limited the efficiency of shipping fat cattle directly from Old Bolívar.\textsuperscript{208} The reduced tariffs, however, did encourage the development of new fattening haciendas close to the railway line in the Nus River Valley and near Puerto Berrío.\textsuperscript{209}

Again, the expansion of fattening into the Magdalena River Valley did not restructure the fundamental character of the cattle trade either. By contrast, the diffusion of the yaraguá, starting in the 1910s, allowed ranchers in what had been marginal highland regions of Antioquia to fatten locally-raised cattle.\textsuperscript{210} This greatly expanded the geography of fattening within Antioquia. Nevertheless, growing demand for cattle meant that these new developments did not displace the traditional fattening grounds along the upper Cauca River.

The one other major effort to restructure the geography of cattle fattening occurred in the 1940s. In response to the heavy weight losses incurred during the transport of live animals from Old Bolívar to Antioquia, various ranchers and entrepreneurs from Medellín, Old Bolívar, and Barranquilla, including Pedro Nel Ospina Jr. and Luis Arturo García, formed the Sociedad Abastecedores de Carnes in 1945. By slaughtering cattle close to the centers of production, they hoped to profit from the reduction in weight lost during the movement of cattle to Antioquia, by shipping dressed carcasses, and by reducing the time required to produce a fat steer. While they initially proposed to rehabilitate the shuttered meat-packing plant in Coveñas and build another in Caucasia, along the lower Cauca River, they eventually

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{208} In the early 1940s, at least, a Belgian agricultural consultant with many years of experience in the country said that ranchers in Antioquia found it more profitable to buy thin cattle from Old Bolívar to fatten locally rather than buy bring in already fat cattle (NARA, RG 84, 1943-1948, Colombia, Cartagena General, Hauzeur to Oakley, Aug. 5, 1943).}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{209} Brew (2000); Monsalve (1927).}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{210} APNOyC, 232, f267; Parsons (1968); Brew (2000).}
\end{footnotesize}
decided on constructing a new plant in Planeta Rica (present day Córdoba), which opened in 1949. Because of the distance to Medellín and Bogotá, the owners opted to fly beef carcasses to market. Unfortunately, the high cost of air transport made the project unviable. They also had trouble buying cattle because ranchers from Old Bolívar said they got better prices by selling to ranchers or intermediaries from Antioquia. By 1953, they had effectively shut down.\(^{211}\)

What light does the beef commodity chain shed on the nature of ranching more generally? First, it paints a strikingly different picture of ranchers than that imagined by the “hoarding” school. Robert Williams, who studied the cattle boom in post-1950s Central America, suggested that “the general purpose of owning cattle in the days before the export boom was not so much for turning a quick profit as for serving as a store of wealth. The possibility of selling an animal for beef at some point in its life supported it as worthy investment of hoarding, but the central focus of attention was not on this final step in the animal’s life.”\(^{212}\) This view might have some validity for ranchers who primarily bred their own animals and had minimal operating costs. In Old Bolívar, however, over 50 percent of cattle changed hands at least once before they were ready to fatten. And up to 70 percent of its cattle crop left the department, passing through still more hands before being resold to specialized fatteners close to their final destination. In other words, most cattle in Old Bolívar were bought and resold various times before entering the slaughterhouse. For many ranchers, therefore,

\(^{211}\) Randell (1953), pp. 76-77. A similar attempt, underwritten by the national government, also planned to increase the efficiency of shipping cattle to Bogotá from Villavicencio, at the foot of the eastern cordillera. This project failed too, partly because the refrigerated trucks required to transport the carcasses did not function properly (NARA, RG 166, 1942-1945, Colombia, “Proposed slaughter house in Villavicencio, Colombia,” Elinor F. Paine, Nov. 20, 1944).

\(^{212}\) Williams (1986), p. 83.
especially shippers and fatteners, the hoarding logic did not hold. While they were not necessarily the most efficient or completely interested in profit maximization, these ranchers bought cattle to turn over and make a profit.

Second, examining the commodity chain helps explain a controversy about the social structure of ranching. There has been a widespread view in Colombia that ranching was primarily an activity of the rich and powerful. Fals Borda, for example, says that “while elites…controlled cattle, the exploited classes could only benefit from small livestock (ganado menor).” Recently, however, there has been an incipient effort to reexamine the historical makeup of the industry. The historian Eduardo Posada Carbó, noting various historical references to small cattle raisers, suggested that ranching was a “widely dispersed activity among Colombians, in which a large number of people participated.” He cites several U.S. consular agents and officials (from the 1920s-1940s) who all stressed the prevalence of small operations and downplayed the importance and relative wealth of large ones. The social structure of ranching has also taken on political tones, with José Felix Lafurie, the president of the national cattlemen’s association (FEDEGAN),

---

214 Fals Borda (1979), pp. 72-73.
216 Posada Carbó (1998), 203. See also NARA, RG 84, 1906, Colombia, John Barrett to Elihu Root, Secretary of State, Jan. 5, 1906); PRO, FO, 1909, 368.281, 8326, “Agriculture in Colombia,” Francis Stronge, March 3, 1909; Randell (1953).
stating that, given the overwhelming numbers of small cattle owners, the sector is “very far from being concentrated.”

So was cattle raising dispersed or concentrated? The answer depends on what stage of the commodity chain one examines. According to the 1960 agriculture and livestock census, 80 percent of livestock farms in Old Bolívar (those with less than 100 hectares) owned just over 18 percent of ranching land. By contrast, just over 3 percent of livestock farms (those with at least 500 hectares) controlled 45 percent of the land. Nationally, the figures are similar: 84 percent of livestock farms occupied around 16 percent of grazing land, while just 712 ranchers owned over 30 percent of all the land in cattle estates. Similarly, although 92 percent of all cattle owners had herds under 50 head – Lafaurie’s point – the largest 1.4 percent of ranchers controlled close to one-third of all cattle. Obviously, there was a great deal of concentration in ranching. But the data also shows that cattle raising was not an activity exclusive to landed elites. In Old Bolívar, small ranchers and peasants (with under 100 ha.) owned 30 percent of the departmental herd. Nationally, this figure was 40 percent. Despite the concentration of land and cattle, small producers controlled a sizable portion of the industry. It is also possible that, by concentrating on breeding, their significance was even greater than the numbers alone suggest. In other words, the concentration with the cattle industry was not only a function of the inequitable

217 Lafaurie (2005), p. 273. Lafaurie disingenuously sidesteps the question by only focusing on the fact that the majority of cattle owners in Colombia have small operations and not looking at what share of the cattle industry they control.
218 DANE (1964).
219 DANE (1962).
220 Ibid.
221 DANE (1964).
222 DANE (1962).
distribution of resources, but also the progressive consolidation of animals moving up the beef commodity chain.

**THE LOGIC OF LIVESTOCK**

The easiest way to sustain my argument about the underlying productive logic of ranching is to show that ranching was profitable. While I underlined the market dependence of many ranchers, and demonstrated how the expansion of ranching was tied to growing markets, so far my direct evidence of profitability has been limited to a single company. In this section, therefore, I will examine the bottom line of ranching more generally. Profits alone, however, cannot explain the prevalence of stock raising. Many ranchers did not have a completely capitalist mentality. Few would also hesitate to use whatever non-economic power they could exercise for financial gain. And they accrued a variety of other benefits along the way. Consequently, I will also examine the other factors that influenced the logic of livestock. Some of these include the non-productive explanations emphasized by numerous scholars. Clearly, developing ranching properties can serve a range of functions. But I will also show how the political, cultural, or extra-economic logic of ranching complement rather than supplant its underlying economic rationale.

Unfortunately, there is very little data on the profitability of Colombian cattle operations, especially before 1950. Generalizing from a few cases is also problematic. Profit rates varied considerably over time and space, and by kind of operation and management quality. And, as others have pointed out, ranchers often did not include
all commonly-accepted accounting costs, such as their own labor or inherited land, in their profit calculations. Nonetheless, ranching was generally considered to be: “very profitable,” “very lucrative,” “extremely profitable,” “economically favorable,” “one of the most brilliant opportunities,” a “sure profit,” an “excellent” investment. For example, in the 1920s, one rancher from Bolívar calculated annual profit rates of 15 percent while another estimated that they ranged from 10 to 30 percent. In fact, in the 1920s, the astute social observer, Alejandro López, noted that the profitability of ranching helped lead to larger social and economic problems:

The tropical forests (selva) of Antioquia were felled to make way for the extensive cultivation, in spite of the expense, of grass for breeding cattle, and this closed economy, at the same time that it gave good profits to ranchers, repressed the formation of the family farm (granja and pegujal),…without which communication problems are more difficult [and]…the birth of new industries, which support agriculture by taking advantage of its byproducts, is almost impossible.

---

223 NARA, Record Group 166, 1942-45, Colombia, “Cattle Raising and Related Industries in Department of Bolivar, Colombia,” R. K. Oakley, July 31, 1944, p. 29; Edelman (1992); Kaimowitz (1996).
The expectation of profitability thus spurred the expansion of ranching. On the macro level, there was a near constant belief in the bright prospects of Colombia’s cattle industry. “We agree with those who believe that the true industrial future of the country lies in ranching,” wrote Rafael Flórez in 1926.\(^{227}\) These expectations influenced many individual ranchers as well. In 1879, a newspaper from Antioquia explained the draw of ranching: “No other business was so enticing to hacendados. Sending one hundred, two hundred, or more cattle to fatten, and after two years, or less, to find one’s investment had doubled, it was the golden dream that constantly agitated the thoughts of businessmen. They all developed pastures or invested rather large sums in the purchase of cattle to fatten . . . .”\(^{228}\) Likewise, in 1906, Joaquín Caicedo argued that the strong demand and high prices for cattle, as well as the continuing threat of locusts, were behind the forest clearance and swamp drainage to expand pastures in the Cauca Valley.\(^{229}\) Isidrio Parra, from Manizales, also explained how small farmers could also benefit from the establishment of pastures: “The hardworking man who starts developing pastures can finish them quickly with his own labor, if he does not have the resources [to hire help], and can be certain of obtaining as many cattle as his pastures will hold, either by renting pasture or by sharecropping cattle, which is an advantageous business for both parties.”\(^{230}\)

In terms of actual profit rates, the story is not quite so rosy. Salazar and Ospina, for example, earned less than four percent from their haciendas in northern

\(^{227}\) Flórez (1926), p. 51.  
\(^{228}\) Quoted in Bew (2000), p. 182.  
\(^{229}\) Caicedo (1906), p. 113.  
Antioquia in 1914, and lost money in the downturn of the early 1920s. Yet in good years they made over a 25 percent return.\textsuperscript{231} Between 1924 and 1950, the annual profit rate for Hacienda Marta Magdalena, in the Sinú Valley, averaged around 13 percent, not including the Depression years of 1929 to 1933 when it lost almost nine percent annually.\textsuperscript{232} In the early 1940s, the American vice consul in Cartagena (Bolívar) gathered production data from 9 different ranches near the San Jorge River and in the Sinú Valley as part of an investigation of the region’s export potential. Near the San Jorge, profits averaged 16.5 percent in 1942, a moment in which real livestock prices were rising. By contrast, in the Sinú Valley, where land values had risen considerably, the average profit rate was only 6.4 percent.\textsuperscript{233} Oakley concluded that the “low profit is simply due to the use of too expensive land for pastures, to the lack of selection, and to faulty [management] technique.”\textsuperscript{234} Nevertheless, “It is safe to say…that most ranches are profitable…but because [they] are located on poor lands or in undeveloped regions where land values are low.”\textsuperscript{235}

Even with its potentially low profits, and the requirements entailed in developing pastures, ranching offered a number of advantages.\textsuperscript{236} While the market for beef depended on general economic conditions, three other factors favored ranching.

\textsuperscript{231} APNOyC, CR 1915, May 21, 1915; 200, f47; 230, f168.
\textsuperscript{232} Ocampo (2007), p. 36.
\textsuperscript{233} NARA, RG 166, 1942-45, Colombia, “Cattle Raising and Related Industries in Department of Bolivar, Colombia,” R. K. Oakley, July 31, 1944, p. 27. These were breeding ranches with herds ranging from 1,000 to 16,000 head. He found a similar profit rate of 18 percent for an open range breeding herd of 1,000 head that was also milked in the neighboring department of Magdalena: NARA, RG 166, 1942-1945, Colombia, “Observations regarding livestock industry in parts of the Dept. of Magdalena.” R. K. Oakley, Aug. 20, 1942.
\textsuperscript{234} NARA, RG 166, 1942-45, Colombia, “Cattle Raising and Related Industries in Department of Bolivar, Colombia,” R. K. Oakley, July 31, 1944, p. 29.
\textsuperscript{235} Ibid., p. 26.
\textsuperscript{236} See also Hecht (1993).
Even without exports, demand was growing steadily. In 1924, Lester Schnare, the U.S. Consul in Cartagena, suggested that “the general use of beef, either fresh or dried, as food for practically all classes doubtless has also been a factor in the growth of the industry.”\(^{237}\) Consumption levels were also well below daily recommended amounts, so the domestic market was far from saturated. Additionally, while Colombia periodically imported live cattle from Venezuela, without a network of cold storage chains, its ranchers were generally protected from competition by imports, a threat faced by farmers, lard producers, and even landlords. Finally, beef had no real competitors on the domestic market. Except for fish in some lowland regions, beef was the cheapest form of animal protein. As a result, it dominated the Colombian meat market. From 1915 to 1950, some 75 percent of the animal meat that Colombians consumed was beef (see Figure 4.4). There are also indications that similar ratios extended back into the nineteenth century. While some industry analysts have suggested that cheap natural grasslands made beef the most inexpensive meat, elsewhere I argue that the reason has more to do with the comparatively high cost of corn and other agricultural products used to fatten hogs and chickens.\(^{238}\)

Ranching also enjoyed some economies of scale while agriculture, through the mid-twentieth century, had few. The greatest cost savings was in labor. For example, it was just as easy for one mounted person to watch over 20 head of cattle as over a couple hundred head. There were still supervision issues to ensure the quality of production, but they were generally not as critical as in agriculture. Furthermore,

\(^{238}\) Van Ausdal (2008c).
various large capital investments, such as wells or cattle-dipping tanks, were only cost-effective for ranchers with rather large herds. The ability to buy good bulls was generally limited to moderately large operations. Larger herds also facilitated the use of selective breeding techniques to improve them.\textsuperscript{239}

Additionally, larger ranchers could take advantage of the fact that volume prices in the cattle industry rose instead of fell. In other words, the price per head in a large, uniform lot of cattle was greater than that in a small, mixed lot. This peculiarity stemmed from the biology of reproduction. Because cattle were raised in relatively dispersed fashion, consolidating small groups of animals into larger lots took time and money. By not relying on intermediaries, either to buy or sell cattle, a rancher could pocket their commissions, which were generally already incorporated into market prices. Furthermore, there was a good deal of variability among livestock that emerged out of a production process that was difficult to standardize.\textsuperscript{240} The fact that cows gave birth year round meant that the levels of maturity within calf crops were rather wide.\textsuperscript{241} The high cost and slow process of genetically improving a herd also led to considerable disparity between the animals from a particular ranch. The long production process (four to six years), and the multitude of variables that influenced growth during that time, also created significant variability in the development, size,

\textsuperscript{239} Lugari (1935), p. 644. Lugari also mentions that it is easier for larger ranchers to acquire good bulls, and it is easier to improve herds with more animals.

\textsuperscript{240} While agriculture faces similar issues, the degree of variation among livestock is even more exaggerated. For the biological aspects of agriculture, see Mann (1990).

\textsuperscript{241} To some degree this was mediated by the time it took to reach maturity, however.
and quality of animals. Larger ranchers, therefore, were better able to benefit from the price premium for uniformity.²⁴²

Ranching also offered various other advantages over agriculture. For one, raising cattle was frequently less risky than most other agricultural pursuits. There were always plenty of potential problems: sick or dead animals, drought or flooding, pests or pasture blight, and market fluctuations. But on the whole, cattle were more resilient than most crops. Able to walk to water, fresh pasture, or away from flood waters, cattle could, to some extent, avoid many of the vagaries of climate. Grass withstood the periodic plagues of locusts and other pests better than the majority of crops. In 1915, one observer from the Cauca Valley wrote that a “large part of the impulse behind [ranching] is the uncertainty of other crops that are easily destroyed by migrating locusts.”²⁴³ Furthermore, timing was not so critical in their ‘harvest’. Ranchers, so long as they had sufficient forage and capital, could wait out temporary price drops. The fact that cattle raisers could sell their stock at any time, also made ranching flexible. Additionally, the biology of reproduction tempered the violent price swings that characterized sugarcane production, for example. The ‘cattle cycle’ – in which ranchers initially hold back animals from market when prices rise in order to increase the numbers and weight of their own herd – magnified price fluctuations.²⁴⁴

But barring large imports, the expansion of cattle stocks was limited by the ‘natural’ (and slow) growth rate of cattle. This stood in sharp contrast to annual crops, in which

²⁴² The incentive to form uniform lots are economic: they sell at better prices. The reasons for this likely lies in that it is easier to judge the overall value and growth potential of uniform lots of cattle, and they are easier to handle (eventually they get sent to slaughter at the same time).
²⁴⁴ This same biology is responsible for the production and price swings of the cattle cycle (Jarvis, 1987).
seeds were generally not a limiting factor with regard to output. Furthermore, the fact that cattle could walk to market was also crucial advantage in a country with poor infrastructure. And relatively low labor demands of ranching, compared to agriculture, made it a viable option where labor was scarce and a weak state could not (or was not willing to) underwrite more aggressive labor recruitment schemes.

Raising cattle also avoided the invariable competition with peasant production, which occurred in most crops and pushed most landed elites, at least before 1950, into a fairly restricted range of rural activities: coffee, bananas, sugarcane, livestock, and land rental or sharecropping. 245 Not only did they avoid competing with peasants, who could usually farm more cheaply than large landowners, but they benefited from small-scale and peasant cattle breeders. On the one hand, such breeders often shouldered more of the production risks, since mortality rates are highest during the first year of life and pregnancy. Furthermore, until calving rates improved, the fact that many cows only gave birth every two years or so, as opposed to annually, meant that breeding was often less efficient than buying young cattle to raise. On the other hand, small-scale breeders selling only a few animals sold them more cheaply than did ranchers who could sell fairly uniform lots of about 100 head. As noted above, this was due to the cost of collecting small numbers of cattle into moderate- or large-sized lots. While intermediaries often profited from this price differential, larger ranchers could also benefit by buying small numbers of animals from small-scale breeders close to their ranch.

Additionally, over the long run, grass was cheapest crop to grow. As we have seen, the start-up costs were high. These, however, could be amortized over many years: guinea pastures were said to last up to 20 years.\(^\text{246}\) In a report on the cattle industry in Old Bolívar from 1919, Bell conservatively estimated the average cost of clearing, planting, and fencing forested land in pasture at $20 per hectare. Once well-established, a process which takes several years, “the maintenance cost is very low, being around 50 cents per hectare per year. The only expenses are upkeep of fences and the burning off of the grass every third year.”\(^\text{247}\) It took Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. somewhat more effort and expense than Bell suggests to rid their pastures of weeds. The environmental conditions along the lower Cauca River, where rainfall was higher, made their task more difficult than elsewhere in Old Bolívar. But they too eventually succeeded, and could substantially lower their maintenance costs. In 1924, Bernardo Ospina told General Ospina that “the haciendas are in better condition than ever, and the expense so far this year will definitely be lower than last year. I believe this year will bring a good profit.”\(^\text{248}\) By contrast, farming annual crops was a labor-intensive and expensive affair (see below).\(^\text{249}\) Just one of the cost savings in ranching was that cattle, rather than people, harvested the grass crop.

Finally, various of the non-productive rationales that many scholars have given for ranching also had some validity. No other agricultural pursuit could beat grass as a

\(^\text{246}\) Randell (1953) found that ranchers who relied on sharecroppers to plant grass renewed their pastures every ten years or so. That they could rely on this cheap method of pasture development may have caused them to maintain the pastures poorly knowing that it was cheaper to have quasi-tenant laborers take care of this work themselves.

\(^\text{247}\) Bell (1919), p. 22.

\(^\text{248}\) APNOyC, Cáceres, f749.

\(^\text{249}\) Van Ausdall (2008c); Caja de Crédito Agrario, Industrial y Minero (1955).
way to occupy space: the capital and labor costs just too high. Ranching, therefore, was the best way to claim vast territories and speculate in rising land values. For example, Rafael del Castillo bought part of a large cattle hacienda near Cartagena in 1887 for $1,400 pesos. The following year he was able to sell part of the property to the Vélez Danies brothers for $6,000 pesos, and the remainder in 1894 for $16,000.250 Likewise, Pedro Nel Ospina chose and held onto large properties on the lower Cauca River partly to speculate that their values would rise dramatically with the construction of a railway line through them connecting Antioquia and the sea. Cattle ranching could also carry considerable prestige. William Scruggs, who served as the U.S. minister to Colombia in the late-nineteenth century, found that elites in Bogotá bought rural properties as a hedge against inflation.251 Ranchers also used their properties as collateral to raise capital, possibly for other, more profitable ventures or even conspicuous consumption. Prisciliano Cabrales mortgaged his hacienda south of Montería, El Naranjo, to invest in oil exploration.252 And when institutional rents started to appear, ranchers were among those who took the greatest advantage of them. By 1938, ranchers had monopolized over 40 percent of government-backed agricultural and industrial credit.253

Nonetheless, these non-productive rationales for ranching, by themselves, do a poor job explaining the underlying logic of ranching. The prestige associated with cattle, for instance, was quite relative. The simple, even frugal life of a successful,

---

250 Ripoll (1999), pp. 16-17.
253 Contraloría (1939).
frontier rancher at the end of the nineteenth century inspired little envy in a run-of-the-mill lawyer or merchant from Bogotá. The esteem with which they held the leisured elite who imported European cattle to his estate on the Sabana de Bogotá was another matter. But in this case, prestige flowed from the moneyed life rather than owning cattle. While land could serve as a hedge against inflation, the case highlighted by Scruggs was particular: the hyper-inflationary period at the turn of the twentieth century. Furthermore, although land may have been a safe investment during the politically turbulent nineteenth century, cattle were easily commandeered or stolen.254 Even if some ranchers used their properties primarily as a source of collateral for other ventures, many used these loans to run their operations and especially to buy cattle. This was certainly the case with Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía., and indirect evidence suggests they were not peculiar in this regard. For example, in 1906, Francisco Restrepo, from the Cauca Valley, reported how rising interest rates negatively affected the breeding business:

A terrible crisis has come to the grass business, a crisis that stems from the creation of pastures on the one hand, and, on the other, from the general economic situation in the country, because with interest rates between 3 and 4% [per month], no one will breed and raise cattle, thus lower the supply of cattle to fatten. The business of breeding, the best in the country when money was cheap, at 10 to 12% annually, is not viable today with money from 2 to 4% monthly.255

254 In the early-twentieth century, some had even started to take out insurance policies in London to stave off such losses in the case of yet another outbreak of conflict.
255 Restrepo (1906).
In 1939, ranchers told William Heard, the U.S. consul in Cartagena, that the main cause of falling cattle prices was the tightening on credit that banks gave ranchers: “There are, of course, some cattle raisers with sufficient liquid capital to permit them to wait until prices improve, but for the small man with only a hundred head or more, who form the bulk of the cattle raisers here, and who is in constant need of funds and unable to borrow from the banks the outlook is not so bright.” The bankruptcies that followed downturns in the cattle economy when the value of stock bought on credit fell below what was owed, also underlines the ‘productive’ use of borrowed money. And lastly, institutional rents, at least through the 1950s, did not exist in any meaningful way. The state decided to partially subsidize the introduction of foreign pure-bred animals in 1916. Yet for years it did not have the funds to make good on its promise and what it offered would not, by itself, encourage anyone to become a rancher. In the 1930s, the government created credit facilities for the countryside. Cattle raising and coffee absorbed the vast majority of these resources. Undoubtedly, some of the funds intended for ranching ended up invested in more speculative sectors. But the total value of these cattle-related loans in 1938 was still rather small: under $5 million pesos or less than 2 percent of the total capital invested in cattle.

---

256 NARA, RG 59, 1930-39, Colombia, “Drop of cattle prices and the effect on the economy of the Dept of Bolivar,” W. Heard, Nov. 13, 1939. Oakley (1943, p. 36) also found that “a surprising number of ranchers in [Old Bolivar] still obtain loans from usurers who collect up to 4% interest monthly,” not generally a way to use ranching properties as a source of investment capital.

257 Contraloria (1939), p. 129. Cattle got 43 percent of the loans and coffee 35 percent.

The one significant institutional rent that the government may have provided ranchers and other landed elites was handing out generous amounts of public land. But even in this case, cattle were not fundamentally a tool to acquire land rights. Too often this noted function has an immaterial quality to it in which landowners simply stock their land with cattle to solidify property claims. Williams, for example, contends that cattle provided large landowners with “a convenient way to validate claims on peripheral areas [of their properties that were] difficult to patrol” because “[p]hysical barriers to cattle ranching were temporary: forests were felled and roads built.”

Using cattle to establish and maintain land claims in forested areas, however, entailed much more than simply putting them out to graze: trees had to be cleared and pastures planted. The territorial logic of ranching, therefore, required considerable effort and expense.

---

259 Williams (1986), pp. 121, 158-159.
260 Some scholars, such as Hecht (1993), do underline the expense of pasture formation and management, even after the introduction of heavy machinery and chemical herbicides. In her Amazonian case, this was one of the reasons why she considers that ranching was not economically profitable. Additionally, as Edelman (1992) and Hecht (1993) have pointed out, timber extraction was one way that ranchers could offset the high cost of pasture formation. Edelman found that many of the ranchers of Guanacaste province in Costa Rica initially accumulated capital in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century timber boom. In some cases, this also occurred in areas of Colombia with relatively easy access to markets (cf. Rivas, 1983). In the Sinú Valley, a number of ranchers made money logging mahogany and cedar, working for logging companies, or in commerce during the general economic upswing that the timber boom brought between the 1880s and 1910s (Parsons, 1952; Berrocal, 1980; Fals Borda, 2002b). But from what I can tell, this was not the case with most ranchers. For one, the Boston-based George C. Emery Company controlled much of the logging operations. And others, such as Ospina and Salazar, were too engrossed in their cattle business to oversee logging operations. Furthermore, the selective logging of tropical hardwoods left much of the forest intact, so the timber-based origin of some ranching capital does not change my argument about the costs and motivations of pasture development. Similarly, although cattle can graze in forested areas, and did so in parts of Colombia, this option generally seems to have been limited to relatively open forests, unlike those where Ospina and Salazar operated.
Furthermore, it was considerably cheaper to acquire public lands by redeeming territorial bonds than by developing pastures and raising cattle. In other words, direct colonization with cattle, or some other form of exploitation, was not the only way to establish property claims on the frontier. In the early 1920s, these territorial bonds sold for the equivalent of 25 to 35 cents (centavos) per hectare.\textsuperscript{261} Titled but undeveloped land in frontier regions of Old Bolívar sold for about $3 pesos per hectare. By contrast, it cost about $20 pesos per hectare to develop a pasture out of the forest.\textsuperscript{262} Similarly, in 1922, Pedro Nel Ospina’s company estimated that their monthly operating expenses (i.e., weeding, fence repair, animal care and salting) for 4,000 head of grown cattle on already formed pastures were 30 centavos per head.\textsuperscript{263} Cattle, therefore, were a rather expensive way to establish property claims. The reason why many ranchers requested title to public lands as direct colonizers was more than likely because they intended to develop the pastures anyway.

Additionally, simply occupying public lands with cattle did not ensure ownership rights. Much of the conflict of frontier colonization in Colombia was between settlers, who cleared the forest to grow crops and plant grass, and ‘land entrepreneurs’ who showed up later waving a title (supposedly) granted by the state to force the original colonizers to pay rent or to sell their land improvements (mejoras).

\textsuperscript{261} LeGrand, 1986, p. 40; APNOyC, 170, f9.
\textsuperscript{262} AGPNO, 95, f79; Izquierdo (1918), p. 17. On the natural savannas of the Patía Valley, in the department of Cauca, it cost $25 pesos per hectare to plant yaraguá and $50 pesos per hectare to plant micay (Axonopus micay). The land itself sold for $1.25 to $2 pesos per hectare (Anon., 1923, pp. 365-366). Likewise, in 1920, the manager of La Patria, a cattle estate in the Sinú Valley, signed a contract with Luis A. Pacheco to develop a pasture in a section of forested land owned by the estate. The manager promised to pay Pacheco $3.75 pesos for each hectare of grass he planted and he allowed him to retain half of the ownership rights in the pasture (ANM, Feb. 9, 1920, no. 92).
\textsuperscript{263} APNOyC, 1917-1936, Feb. 1, 1922, “Memorandum of the farms of Cáceres.”
and leave. While most settlers were peasants, a good number were ranchers. When Pedro Nel Ospina applied for title to a large area of land outside of Ayapel (Bolivar) in the 1920s, several such ranchers, running cattle on untitled pastures that they had developed on public land, found themselves on someone else’s property and under pressure to sell out.

The point I want to make is that using cattle to claim land implied a certain commitment to ranching. If one wanted land for speculation, political power, or status, it was considerably easier and cheaper to buy undeveloped land (either outright or through territorial bonds) than to claim it by developing pastures to stock with cattle. Speculation was certainly a driving force behind the colonization of public lands. But speculators who used cattle to claim land were necessarily in the ranching business until their bets paid off: otherwise the initial investment and the constant maintenance costs would erode any potential future profit. Undoubtedly, there have been cases around Latin America in which excessive institutional rents and abnormally rising-land values could make pasture development alone an economically efficient way to acquire land. But in pre-1950s Colombia this was not the case.

---

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RANCHING

In 1917, Robert B. Cunninghame Graham proclaimed that “the future of Colombia lies in cattle raising.” He was not alone in his optimism. Over the years, many industrial boosters, government officials, and others thought the country could become a second Argentina. While this cattle-based prosperity remained elusive, in many ways Cunninghame Graham was not mistaken. Through the mid-twentieth century, Colombia was in many ways a ranching nation. Spatially, the predominance of pastureland was uncontested. By the mid-twentieth century, there were, depending on the estimate, 6 to 22 hectares of land in grass for every hectare of land farmed. Economically, too, cattle raising was fundamental. In 1921, the U.S. trade representative in Colombia remarked:

Taken as a whole, cattle raising may be said, in view of its wide distribution, the number of head actually in the country, and their value as compared with other products, to form the chief wealth of Colombia – outranking coffee as a national resource, though coffee is the chief export on which the country relies for its basis of exchange in trade for imports of foreign manufactured merchandise.

Likewise, agricultural analysts estimated that the value of cattle-related sales (beef, milk, tallow, hides) in 1950 nearly doubled that of coffee exports. In fact, they were almost as large as the value of all agricultural output that year. If these sales, historically, were just a third of agricultural production, the contribution of the cattle

---

266 PRO, Board of Trade 1381, Meat report, Daily Chronicle article, July 31, 1917 (Meat from Colombia), Cunninghame Graham.
267 Varela Martínez (1952); DANE (1962), p. 16.
268 Bell (1921), 139.
269 Varela Martínez (1952), pp. 22, 112. See also Randell (1953), p. 2; Cañón (1952), iii.
industry to GDP would have been 20 percent in 1925 and 13 percent in 1950. More capital was also invested in ranching than any other economic activity. In fact, between 1925 and 1950, cattle alone soaked up as much or more capital than the value of all machinery and equipment in the country, or roughly 15 percent of gross capital investment. While not the primary motor of development, ranching was the largest economic activity in the country. Industry boosters took obvious pride in the preeminent position of ranching. Alberto Abondano, an editor of *El Hacendado Colombiano*, went so far as to suggest that “we owe all our well-being directly or indirectly to our wealth in cattle.”

The more predominant view was not so positive, however. Many officials, even those in the Ministry of Agriculture, complained about the poor techniques employed by ranchers. More scathingly, in the 1920s Alejandro López, argued that the extensive nature of ranching frustrated economic development. A kind of Jeffersonian, he promoted the creation a large class of small freeholders as the only way to achieve economic growth. Ranching, he complained, “has the problem of requiring hardly any workers, and these are generally hired hands….While a cowboy, usually paid a daily wage, cares for and manages several dozen cattle occupying various dozen [hectares], an entire family of peasants lives well and independently by farming one hectare of coffee trees.” Thus, raising cattle “is surely lucrative for landowners, but not [for]

---

270 CEPAL (1956), Table 1; The Departamento Nacional de Planeación (1998, p. 6) estimates 12 percent for 1950.
271 CEPAL (1956), pp. 9, 91. The cattle industry, for the purpose of this estimate, is composed only of the total value of the cattle population and the land dedicated to grazing. See also Wylie (1944), p. 116; Contraloria (1939), p. 44.
the society at large.”274 That the minister of industry felt the need to counter this perspective in 1930 – “It is an absolute error to believe, as some have been suggesting, that ranching is a cause of impoverishment rather than a source of wealth” – shows the currency that it had achieved.275 More recently, Kalmanovitz reinvigorated this critique, calling the expansion of ranching since the mid-nineteenth century a social and economic calamity. The problem with ranching, he claimed, was that it stimulated land dispossession and monopolization; prevented the introduction of better farming techniques by creating land tenure insecurity; drove up food costs by pushing peasants to farm marginal areas; and contributed to the formation of a parasitic landed class that hampered the expansion of industrial production, the growth of a working class, and the expansion of the ‘home’ market.276

But was ranching really so calamitous? This is the question that an incipient group of revisionist historians has begun to ask. Without returning to a naïve boosterism, they suggest that the legacy of ranching was not so negative. First, the prevalence of ranching in Old Bolívar was largely due to the lack of viable alternatives. For Eduardo Posada Carbó, who pioneered this revisionist effort, “[t]he preference for ranching should be understood as a rational response to the frustrating experiences in agriculture:” plagues, floods, droughts, transportation difficulties, and scarce labor.277 Raising cattle, therefore, was one of the only ways to put this land to

274 Ibid., p. 248.
productive use. Second, ranchers were not the retrograde, irrational actors often imagined, but calculating, modern businessmen with vision, dedication, and a keen interest in accumulating capital.²⁷⁸ And third, ranching in Old Bolívar decisively contributed to regional economic development. Ranchers and ranching capital, they argue, was critical to early industrial development, banking, manufacturing, transportation, and commerce. According to historian María Teresa Ripoll, “[r]anching was the activity with the greatest regional impact, as a generator of capital, and as mediator of the economic reactivation in the second half of the nineteenth century.”²⁷⁹

The revisionists are correct to underline the role of ranchers in capital formation and a range of other economic ventures in Old Bolívar. The Cuban export bonanza from 1898 to 1906 was a key moment of accumulation, particularly for exporters, such as Fernando and Carlos Vélez Daníes, Diego Martínez Camargo, Rafael del Castillo, Bartolomé Martínez Bossio, and Arturo García.²⁸⁰ These ranchers funneled the profits from this trade into a range of important endeavors. Two significant developments were the creation of the Colombia Sugar Company by the Vélez Daníes brothers in 1907, and the Cartagena Oil Refining Company by Diego Martínez in 1908. Rafael del Castillo & Cía. was an important investor in both, and also participated in, among other things, a shipping (Compañía Fluvial de Cartagena), mangrove-bark tannin production (Compañía Colombiana de Extractos Tánicos), and

²⁷⁹ Ripoll (2001), p. 27.
²⁸⁰ For Fernando Vélez, see APNOyC, 200, f364. Burgos (1965) suggested that they bought up cattle cheaply during the War of a Thousand Days.
a beer company (Cervecería Cartagena), all in association with the Vélez Daníes. Diego Martínez also created a steamboat company on the Sinú and Atrato rivers, opened a steam-powered lumber mill on the Sucio River to supply Cartagena, and operated a plant that produced powdered milk and butter in Lorica, along the Sinú River. In 1917, the Vélez Daníes and Martínez, along with Julián Patrón and Celedonio Piñeres, joined forces with the New York-based International Products Company to build the first meat-packing plant in Colombia.

Many other ranchers also participated in a variety of businesses beyond cattle. Francisco Burgos, of Hacienda Berástegui, and Prisciliano Cabrales, the largest heir of the de Lora landed fortune in Montería, were among the initial investors in the Cartagena Oil Refining Company. They also, along with Diego Martínez and other ranchers, spent several frustrating decades exploring for oil. Additionally, Burgos built a sugar refinery on Hacienda Berástegui and produced rum. Various ranchers owned shipping companies and tanneries: Julián Patrón operated steamboats on the Sinú River, and transported people and freight from Cartagena to Panama; the Compañía Fluvial de Sabanas was formed by Arturo García, Rogelio Támara, Salomón Urzola, and other ranchers, In 1913, rancher Antonio Lacharme built a trail through Urubá to connect the Sinú Valley with Antioquia in exchange for the right to collect tolls on it for 12 years. Ranchers were also frequently involved in local businesses, everything from exporting forest products and general commerce to

\[\text{281} \text{ Petrona Ignacia Lora de Pérez, when she died in 1915, in addition to various pastures, 3,400 head of cattle, and various urban properties in Montería, owned shares in the Cartagena Oil Refining Company, the Colombia Sugar Company, and various banks (ANM, April 12, 1915, #113).}\\ 
\text{282} \text{ ANM, May 19, 1915, no. 133.}\\ 
\text{283} \text{ ANM, Dec. 9, 1913, no. 438.}\]
operating local ice and electric plants.\textsuperscript{284} Furthermore, they lent money individually and were behind the formation of regional banks. In Cartagena, the Vélez Danies brothers and Martínez Bossio were instrumental in the formation of various banks, such as the Banco de Bolívar in 1907 and the Banco Industrial in 1913. In the provinces, Oliver and Leo Dereix, the French brothers who became important ranchers in Montería at the beginning of the twentieth century, founded the Banco del Sinú in 1916; and Arturo García, owner of Hacienda Santo Domingo, created the Banco Nacional de Sabanas in Sincelejo in 1920. In fact, according to Adolfo Meisel, the impulse and capital behind the creation of the banking industry in Old Bolívar, between the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, primarily came from ranchers.\textsuperscript{285}

The movement of capital was not just from ranching into other sectors, however. A good deal of the capital that the Cuban exporters used to buy cattle did not originate from ranching operations but from commerce and inherited wealth. The Vélez Danies brothers appear to have inherited a considerable sum that, in the mid-nineteenth century, was invested in a sugar estate in the Guajira peninsula. Around the same time they started investing in and exporting cattle, they also founded the Banco Popular de Cartagena (1883).\textsuperscript{286} Although Diego Martínez Camargo had roots in ranching, he was also an important merchant. And Rafael del Castillo was primarily a merchant who dabbled in cattle exports when the profits were good. Many other ranchers also got their start in commerce. Quite a few of the new group of ranchers

\textsuperscript{284} Pertuz (2006).
\textsuperscript{285} Meisel and Posada (1994); Exbrayat (1971); Fals Borda (2002b); Viloria (2001).
\textsuperscript{286} Ripoll (1997).
whose fortunes rose over the second half of the nineteenth century, such as Adolfo Támara, Sebastián Romero, and Arturo García started out as merchants. While Julián Patrón inherited land and cattle, he also earned much of his initial capital trading agricultural and other products between Old Bolívar and Panama. The large German rancher, Adolfo Held, also started out as a merchant, as did many who made money exporting tobacco or other products, such as the Pizarro family and Elie Mathieu. On a smaller scale, many local merchants also diversified into ranching. This transition is particularly clear in the Sirio-Lebanese community. In Old Bolívar, many of these families, who started immigrating to Colombia at the end of the nineteenth century, initially set up small stores in provincial towns. Within a generation or two, however, a good number of them had become ranchers as well. Many professionals and government officials were also invested in livestock. Before the mid-twentieth century, diversification was a fundamental strategy of many Colombians and their families, so it is not surprising that cattle would be a popular investment. Cattle offered a relatively safe place to park one’s capital while retaining remarkable liquidity. They served as a hedge against inflation and enabled speculation in rising land values as well. Ranching also did not require constant oversight, and it promised a profit along the way. It was often, therefore, a means to safeguard and expand capital accumulated in other sectors.

But even if a good deal of ranching capital originated elsewhere, the sector still contributed significantly to economic growth. In 1943, Oakley estimated that the sales

---

288 Meisel and Viloria (1999); Fals Borda (2002b).
289 Viloria (2003); Montes and Sierra (1959).
of cattle and their products (milk and hides) represented a quarter of Old Bolívar’s gross income. Data from 1948 shows that these sales were greater than the total estimated value of all agricultural production in the department. Likewise, investment in cattle production vastly surpassed the fixed capital in manufacturing. In 1938, this latter amount was almost $6 million pesos, over two-thirds of which was represented by sugar refineries. By contrast, five years later, with cattle prices more or less stable, Oakley estimated that the total capital invested in the department’s cattle industry was $312 million pesos. More than just an etymological link, much of the capital in the department literally grew by chewing its cud. Additionally, in 1943, Oakley estimated the value of cattle sold outside of Old Bolívar to be almost four times larger than those slaughtered for consumption in the department. In this way, ranching tied Old Bolívar to the more dynamic parts of the national economy and, indirectly, to the coffee trade. So long as cattle raising was even somewhat profitable, it necessarily contributed to economic growth and capital formation.

But we need to be wary of extolling the economy legacy of ranching in Old Bolívar. While it did contribute to growth, stock raising did not pave a very propitious path towards economic development. Unable to compete on the international beef market, its exports were limited to nearby countries where it could ship live cattle. Production, therefore, was limited by the moderately growing domestic market. While there were some productivity gains over the years, as we will see in the following chapter, they were insufficient to turn the industry into an independent source of dynamism. And although ranching was generally profitable, its returns were not large

---

290 Oakley (1943), p. 41.
enough to generate more than slow growth. Even back in 1876, the governor of the province of Chinú warned that “the profits from ranching alone cannot lift [this province] from the state of prostration in which it lies.” Progress was slow, in part, because ranching generated few multiplier effects. Ranchers required a variety of inputs: axes and machetes, barbed wire, grass seed, saddles, branding irons and horseshoes, salt, veterinary products, food staples, and space on cattle barges and railroad cars, to list some basics. But all told, their needs were small and quite a few of them, such as tools, barbed wire, and some veterinary products were imported. In 1943, Oakley estimated the value of the capital invested in the cattle industry, beyond land and cattle, at just 2.5 percent of total capitalization. And this figure included buildings, riding animals, and so on. Downstream, the industries that transformed cattle products, such as tanneries, soap makers, and shoe makers, were also limited. While these industries represented 42 percent of all manufacturing firms in the department in 1938, their fixed capital was only 15 percent of the non-sugar refining total. Nationally, these industries employed around 4,000 workers and had sales that were equivalent to about 150,000 fat steer or about 15 percent of the total slaughter rate in 1938. But most of them were small, artisan establishments whose largest expense was the raw material they transformed. (About 30 percent of the inputs used in soap making and tanning were imported as well.) Their share of the national fixed

291 Diario de Bolívar, July 22, 1876, no. 1485, p. 438: Informe…Chinú.
292 Oakley (1943), p. 41.
293 Contraloria (1939). Out of a total of 78 firms in the department, 9 produced shoes, 5 tanned hides, and 19 made soap. Their fixed capital investments, including sugar, were only 0.5 percent.
capital invested in manufacturing was only three percent; and in over 60 percent of them, that investment was worth less than 14 fat steer.\textsuperscript{294}

By contrast, cattle ranching was capital intensive. The problem was the slow turn over of that capital. Again, according to Oakley, total cattle sales in 1943 were about $15 million, plus about half that in unprocessed milk and hide sales. In all, gross sales that year were less than five percent of invested capital.\textsuperscript{295} These estimates are crude, and snapshots are not a good way to judge a cyclical industry like ranching. Nonetheless, they indicate the difficulty of relying on a domestically-oriented cattle industry to stimulate rapid economic growth. It was profitable enough to keep the economy moving, to employ more people than is often realized, and to monopolize the bulk of the capital in the department. But capital invested in cattle mostly primarily produced more cattle and not much else. Neither the volume of cattle ranchers culled, nor the profits they earned, could generate much economic development.

So what were the consequences of this emphasis on ranching? Socially, for the many peasants directly or indirectly displaced by cattle, it was certainly calamitous. Environmentally, clearing forests to plant pastures is generally not an auspicious transformation. Economically, though, the story is not so straightforward. Low profits could certainly have pushed ranchers to dispossess peasants when the opportunity arose. Additionally, as many scholars have pointed out, grazing was not an intensive form of land use. Not including coffee, the average value of agricultural production

\textsuperscript{294} Contraloria (1941), p. 206.
\textsuperscript{295} The difference between a low profit rate for the industry and the bright prospects that many saw in ranching, or the higher profit rates for individual enterprises, most likely explained by the failure of many ranchers to calculate the opportunity costs of the land they ranched.
per hectare in 1948 was almost 29 times that of stock raising. But even tripling the amount of land planted with crops would still have left vast areas dedicated to cattle. And there was also that nagging question of what would have been done with the surplus production. Undoubtedly, many Colombians would have eaten better, either by production more food themselves or because food prices had fallen through the floor. (Exporting these surpluses was not an option because production and transport costs made Colombian agriculture, except for coffee, uncompetitive internationally.) But low food prices would not have been sustainable unless they were accompanied by improved methods of production. And I am skeptical about how much ranching discouraged more efficient farming practices and contributed to higher food prices. Certainly, it had some effect on agricultural productivity. For example, there probably could have been some improvements if crops, rather than grass, had been grown on richer, valley-bottom soils. Likewise, lower transport costs by farming more accessible areas could have helped to lower food costs. Better land tenure security might also have spurred farmers to invest in land improvements. And getting rid of the parasitic landlord class would have been a beneficial step. Additionally, one has to be cognizant of the fact that, overtime, small changes do multiply and can led to a series of improvements that might not have been easily foreseeable.

But Colombian agriculture faced a huge ‘internal’ challenge: the amount of labor required to produce a crop. In 1955, the national agricultural bank (Caja Agraria)

---

296 At times, structural rigidities in Colombian agriculture meant that it did not respond quickly to rapid increases in demand, such as during the 1920s. In 1927, the government started importing food to cover the shortfalls and contain rapidly rising prices (Machado, 1981; Moncayo, 1986; Bejerano, 1979).
calculated the costs of producing a variety of crops in different parts of the country. In
the municipality of Montería, for example, it took about 57 days of labor (or 456
labor-hours) to produce 1,500 kilograms of corn, not including another 28 days’ worth
of labor in various expenses, such as land rental, seed, transportation, etc. (see Table
4.6).297 By way of comparison, up to 1940, the average yield per hectare of corn in the
U.S. was 1,600 kilograms. But the average number of labor-hours it took U.S. farmers
to produce 1,600 kilograms of corn dropped from 163 in the mid-nineteenth century to
64 by 1940.298 The key difference between the two countries was not crop yields but
the amount of effort required to produce that crop.299 The differences show up clearly
in the price of Colombian corn, which was twice that of the U.S. in the late-nineteenth
century and almost three times higher by 1960.300 Some form of mechanization or
other change was needed in Colombia to increase agricultural productivity and lower
food costs.301 Ranching may have contributed in some ways to slowing the
development of agricultural productivity, but it does not appear to lie at the root of the
country’s problems.

297 Caja de Crédito Agrario Industrial y Minero (1955); see also Currie (1966), p. 174;
299 Added to this, in Colombia, were problems of storage losses and high marketing costs
(Dawe, 1915; Guerra, 1966; Ruiz de Londoño and Pinstrup-Anderson, 1975).
M.T. Dawe (1915, p. 525), the British agricultural advisor to the Colombian government in
the late 1910s, was shocked by the high price of corn, which he said sold for four times what it
did in eastern and southern Africa.
301 The mechanization of farming only began, in earnest, in the wake of World War II.
Ironically, it progressed most quickly on large estates that had been dedicated to cattle. There
was relatively little need to piece together small farms in order to create larger ones that could
offered economies of scale. Curiously, except for rice, the initial impact of mechanization of
food crop production was limited. Mechanization, it seems, substantially increased the costs of
production to the point that they even undercut the productivity gains.
The economic legacy of ranching, therefore, was mixed. While the expansion of cattle raising did cause problems and hardship for some, it is hard to call ranching an overall calamity. Its pervasiveness was not so much a cause of the country’s poverty as its reflection. At the same time, while ranching did contribute to capital formation and industrial development, it was, for the most part, rather anemic growth. That such a large percentage of the country’s capital was invested in domestically-consumed cattle did not bode well for the possibilities of quicker development. Nonetheless, it may well have been that Old Bolivar could not have produced much besides cattle that would have found a stable market beyond its borders.
Table 4.6. Corn production costs in Córdoba and Bolívar (1955)\textsuperscript{302}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Montería (Córdoba)</th>
<th>Sahagún (Córdoba)</th>
<th>Tierralta (Córdoba)</th>
<th>Bolívar (General)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cost ($2.50/day)</td>
<td>Cost ($2.50/day)</td>
<td>Cost ($3/day)</td>
<td>Cost ($3/day)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land rental (1 harvest)</td>
<td>$20</td>
<td>$20</td>
<td>$20</td>
<td>$23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearing secondary growth, ¼ of value</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De-rooting and de-trunking (¼ of value)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plowing with team of oxen</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeds</td>
<td>$10</td>
<td>$10</td>
<td>$10</td>
<td>$10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planting by hand</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weeding by hand</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvest</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hauling to storage facility</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shucking and de-graining</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacks (¼ of value)</td>
<td>$6</td>
<td>$6</td>
<td>$6</td>
<td>$6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation to market</td>
<td>$10</td>
<td>$36</td>
<td>$24</td>
<td>$15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amortization on tools (5%)</td>
<td>$3.75</td>
<td>$3.75</td>
<td>$3.75</td>
<td>$3.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>$49.75</td>
<td>$75.75</td>
<td>$63.75</td>
<td>$57.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yield/hectare</td>
<td>1,500 kg.</td>
<td>1,500 kg.</td>
<td>1,250 kg.</td>
<td>1,125 kg.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{302} Caja de Crédito Agrario Industrial y Minero (1955).
In 1917, Robert B. Cunninghame Graham proclaimed that the “future of Colombia lies in cattle raising.”¹ The English government had called upon this Scottish author and adventurer, with extensive experience in the grasslands of Argentina and Venezuela, to investigate the feasibility of opening a meat-packing plant in Colombia. Cunninghame Graham returned enthusiastic about the prospects. The coastal department of Old Bolívar, he reported, “constitutes one of the finest tropical cattle countries in the world.”² Among its advantages was the “capacity of this department for carrying cattle, the entire absence of all contagious diseases and the phenomenal resistance of the planted grasses to continued drought.” He was pleasantly surprised by the appearance of “well-being and domesticity” of the local cattle. They were also light-boned and extraordinarily fat for range cattle, yielding a high amount of “good and juicy” meat.³ Finally, he wrote, “prices are probably lower than…in any other part of the world.”⁴

Even before Cunninghame Graham submitted his report, there was a great deal of optimism about the future of Colombian ranching. International demand for beef

---

¹ PRO, Board of Trade, 1381, Meat Report, “Meat from Colombia” (Daily Chronicle), July 31, 1917.
³ Ibid.
⁴ PRO, Board of Trade, 1381, Meat Report, “A short report upon the meat resources of Colombia” (Confidential), R.B. Cunninghame Graham, Nov. 1916.
was rising and the traditional exporters were thought to have little room for expansion. Europeans and Americans were searching for new sources of supply. And Colombia had good, relatively undeveloped ranching land that was both close to the coast and favorably situated, compared to Argentina and Australia. In 1915, the Colombian Information Bureau promoted the “great opportunities” that Colombia offered: “vast savannas…found in nearly every part of the country, the low price of land, the diversity of climate, the exceptionally favorable position of the country relative to the Panama Canal, [and] its proximity to the principal shipping ports of the United States.” The enthusiasm was palpable. The Minister of Agriculture and Commerce claimed that, “with the quality of [our] land, the abundance of water, and [favorable] climatic conditions, it seems that Nature herself has signaled the livestock industry to be at the center of our economic development and the broadest path by which [we] can achieve rapid progress.” The possibility that Colombia could become a second Argentina was almost predestined: “everyone can see that our patria is called

---

5 Colombian Information Bureau (1915); AGN, 1915, Tomo 6, Leyes autografos 76-89, Ley 82 de 1915 (Nov. 30), Segundo informe, Manuel Dávila Florez, ff355-362.
6 The British, in particular, were responding to the aggressive expansion of U.S. meat packers into the Argentinean market, largely supplanting their former dominance. Cunninghame Graham’s mission, therefore, had an extra sense of nationalist urgency (Watts, 1969, p. 71; PRO, Board of Trade, 1381, Meat Report, “Colombia…from discussion with Cunninghame Graham,” Nov. 23, 1916). In 1916, Lord Harcourt, president of Britain’s Board of Trade, stated: “After the war there will be a general scarcity of meat – almost a war famine. Germany, Belgium, and Holland are faced with a post-war deficit of 8,000,000, and Denmark, Austria, Servia and Roumania another 8,000,000. Europe, therefore, will seek to import 16 million to 20 million head of cattle. Britain only produces 60 per cent of the meat consumed. I am so impressed with the seriousness of the position last year that I have sought to arrange a scheme for securing a supply of chilled meat, which will be ample for Britain for several years after the war” (quoted in Pearse, 1920, p. 1).
7 Colombian Information Bureau (1915), pp. 196 and 198.
to a brilliant future by means of the development of the cattle industry,” wrote another pundit.9

The dazzling promise of Colombian beef exports, and the cattle industry more generally, never materialized. U.S. and Colombian investors built a meat-packing plant, but it never operated. While they exported some cattle on the hoof during the 1920s, the demand was never sufficient to dramatically build up stocks. By the time Colombia began exporting live cattle again in the 1940s, there was considerable debate as to whether or not the country had any surplus to spare. Various theories circulated to explain the failure of the meat-packing plant and the elusive riches that beef exports were supposed to bring. Some pointed to construction delays and the downturn of the international beef market by the time it was finally completed.10 Others suggested it was a conspiracy by the U.S. investors to block any potential competition from Colombian cattle with the company’s other meat-packing operation.11 The real problem, however, was that Colombian beef was not competitive on international markets: its quality was too low and its price too high.

Why did the Colombian ranching industry turn out to be so uncompetitive? Much of the blame fell on the ranchers themselves. While government officials and industry boosters encouragingly indicated how ranchers could improve their operations in the 1910s and 1920s, by the following decades their optimism had turned

9 Camacho (1918), p. 133.
11 ACER, D123-286, Carlos Escobar to Carlos E. Restrepo, March 13, 1923; Arrieta (1935); Moré Sierra (2003).
into frustration.\(^{12}\) Many cited the “empirical,” “backwards and routine” mentality of ranchers for the lack of progress.\(^{13}\) As a result, Colombian ranching remained “primitive” and “extensive,” another way of saying not very productive.\(^{14}\) Manuel Gómez Rueda, head of the national livestock department, suggested that “ranchers simply use cattle to take advantage of natural grasses. The bull works alone and the ranchers collect the offspring….\(^{15}\) Raúl Varela Martínez went so far as to lament the lack of “real ranchers or real ranching.”\(^{16}\) More recently, historian and veterinarian Luis Jair Gómez has emphasized the “immaculate unproductive tradition of ranching” as its defining characteristic.\(^{17}\) Ranchers, he claims, prefer extensive operations in order to reap “natural rents” rather than reinvest profits. Thus, “[t]he years of technological agitation after 1950 did not affect [the sector].”\(^{18}\) While not all industry observers offer such a scathing assessment, most presume that the technological strides made by Colombian ranchers have largely occurred since 1950.\(^{19}\)

\(^{12}\) Some made the direct connection with the failure of exports and the packing plant. By the 1930s and 1940s, however, the concerns about the low productivity of ranching, and the high price of beef, had turned largely toward the domestic market. See Mira (1936); Gómez Rueda (1936); Aguilar (1937); Velásquez (1938); Reyes (1939); Federación de Ganaderos de Bolívar and Torres (1939); Gartner (1939), pp. 41-43; Abondano (1940); Mejia (1943); Ubidia (1943); Bonilla (1945); NARA, RG 166, 1942-1945, Colombia, “Proposed slaughter house in Villavicencio, Colombia,” Elinor F. Paine, Nov. 20, 1944; Departamento Nacional de Ganadería (1947), pp. 4-5

\(^{13}\) In order: García Cadena (1939), pp. 12-13; Gómez Rueda (1938), p. 35. See also Velásquez (1938); Gómez Rueda (1939); Rosales (1943).

\(^{14}\) Federación de Ganaderos de Bolívar (1939b); Velásquez (1938).

\(^{15}\) Gómez Rueda (1938), p. 37.

\(^{16}\) Varela Martínez (1930), p. 630.

\(^{17}\) Gómez (1987), p. 70.

\(^{18}\) Ibid.

\(^{19}\) Kalmanovitz (1972, pp. 213 and 214), for example, identified 1954 as the turning point: up to that point, “ranching developed…very slowly;” but afterwards, “one can see a rather large change.” Luis Lorente (1986) emphasizes the willingness of ranchers to adopt new technologies but he is not clear how much change occurred before 1950. At least through the end of the nineteenth century, he contends (p. 334) that ranching was fundamentally an
mid-twentieth-century watershed, Colombian ranching languished in a kind of self-imposed Dark Ages.

But did the ‘failure’ of Colombian ranching stem primarily from the ‘empirical’ mentality of ranchers? Or was it largely a product of the difficulties of ranching in the tropics? In other words, even if ranchers had made a concerted effort to improve their operations, could they have become internationally competitive? Of course, this social-environmental dichotomy is a false one. The low productivity of Colombian ranching stemmed from a combination of environmental, social, and institutional constraints. Nonetheless, framing the issue in such stark terms, if only temporarily, allows me to focus on what improvements ranchers did make as well as the limits to what they could do.

I make three related arguments in this chapter. First, I suggest that it is a mistake to characterize ranching, especially prior to 1950, as primitive and ranchers as uninterested or incapable of improving their operations. While clearly not the paragon of modernization, there is evidence that they did improve the productivity of cattle raising between 1850 and 1950. Second, although Colombian ranchers surely could have done even more, significant environmental limits stood in the way of Colombia turning into a second Argentina. Ultimately, however, the relative backwardness of extractive industry “almost entirely dependent on natural grasses and the capacity of cattle to reproduce themselves, similar to deer in a hunting park.” This view is partly a by-product of fact that more reliable data about ranching started to be collected starting then. Additionally, the growth of studies about ranching in the late 1960s and 1970s tend to use the1950s as their starting point. In more recent work, however, Kalmanovitz and colleagues (1999) pay more attention to the productivity changes prior to 1950.
Colombian ranching is rooted in a complex mix of environmental obstacles, social limits and political-economic constraints.

The chapter has four sections. In the first, I discuss the failure of the meat-packing plant itself. In the second, I outline the efforts of ranchers to improve the productivity of their operations in the century prior to 1950. In the third, I highlight the environmental limits of ranching in the tropics. In the final section, I address some of the other constraints to improving the productivity of Colombian ranching.

**THE FAILURE OF BEEF EXPORTS**

By passing Law 82 of 1915, the Colombian government hoped to attract foreign capital to build an export-oriented meat-packing plant in the country. This was not its first attempt. There had been some proposals several years earlier to develop such a plant, but they remained nascent. Various events pushed the government to act more decisively by 1915: the rebound of cattle stocks in Old Bolivar by 1914, following the export bonanza to Cuba between 1898 and 1906; the transformation of the of the U.S. from a beef exporter to a beef importer in 1912; the closure of the U.S. market to live imports due to sanitary restrictions; and the belief that war in Europe, by devastating local herds, was going to reinforce its demand, which had already been rising quickly before the outbreak of hostilities.

---

20 AGN, 1915, Tomo 6, Leyes autografos 76-89, Ley 82 de 1915 (Nov 30) ‘por la cual se fomenta el establecimiento de carnicerias y refrigeradores Packing Houses para la exportación de carnes,’ ff339-373.

Initially, the government thought that it could attract sufficient capital to build several plants, both on the Caribbean and Pacific coasts. To generate interest, it offered various incentives: the duty-free import of all materials and machinery needed to build the plant; and twenty-year exemptions from slaughter taxes (except a departmental tax of 10 centavos per head) and all export taxes. What it required, in return, was that all cattle slaughtered in the plant be exported; that the plant be capable of processing its waste into fertilizer; and that no fertile cow be slaughtered. The government also retained the right to limit exports in order to control local prices should they rise too quickly from insufficient supply or national emergency.\footnote{AGN, 1915, Tomo 6, Leyes autografos 76-89, Ley 82 de 1915 (Nov 30) ‘por la cual se fomenta el establecimiento de carnicerías y refrigeradores Packing Houses para la exportación de carnes,’ ff339-344; Machado Amador (1989); NARA, RG 84, 1916, Colombia, “Packing House law, American Minister to Secretary of State,” Jan. 20, 1916.} In 1916, an English group offered to build the plant, but with significant changes to the law as originally conceived. In exchange for a guaranteed minimum return on capital, they would construct and operate the plant for ten years, after which it would become the property of the government. The government denied the request, claiming that the law did not allow it to renegotiate the terms.\footnote{Ministerio de Agricultura y Comercio (1916), pp. 163-165.} Over the following two years, however, Congress did alter the law. In addition to the above exemptions, the Colombian government changed the terms and added extra incentives, including a guaranteed return on up to £100,000 of capital invested in the plant at eight percent interest for four years. It initially limited this subsidy to a maximum of four plants, but later they
changed it to a monopoly concession. In exchange, the plant would become the property of the government after 20 years.\textsuperscript{24}

In 1917, the government solicited final bids for the concession to build the meat-packing plant. As mentioned in the previous chapter, three groups applied: a Swiss group that U.S. consular officials feared might have been a front for German capital; an English group led by Sir Robert W. Perks; and a partnership between four large Colombian ranchers from Old Bolívar and an American company, the International Products Company.\textsuperscript{25} While the English were fairly certain of winning the concession due to the anti-Americanism that still abounded from the U.S.’s role in the separation of Panama, the Colombo-American group won the bid. In the end, they made a better offer, though Perks was certain that the Americans only planned to renegotiate the terms at a later date.\textsuperscript{26}

The Colombian Products Company (CPC), which was the partnership between the Colombian ranchers and the International Products Company, ran into difficulties from the outset. Initially, it had trouble getting permission from the U.S. government to export the materials, machinery, and capital needed to construct the plant because of

\textsuperscript{24} Machado Amador (1989); Ministerio de Agricultura y Comercio (1916), p. clxiv; Congreso de la República (1917); Ministerio de Agricultura y Comercio (1917), p. lxvii; Ministerio de Agricultura y Comercio (1918), p. 171; Camacho (1918); PRO, Board of Trade, 1381, Meat report, “Percy Wyndham to Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs,” Dispatch no. 63, Oct. 19, 1917; PRO, Board of Trade, 1381, Meat report, “Lloyd-Owens to Robert Perks (Enclosed: re Cattle Trade in the Republic of Colombia), Nov. 9, 1916; NARA, RG 84, 1918, Colombia, Belden to Secretary of State, June 30, 1918; NARA, RG 166, 1904-1939, Colombia, “Packing house at Coveñas,” Aug. 25, 1920.

\textsuperscript{25} Machado Amador (1989); NARA, RG 84, 1918, Colombia, Belden to Secretary of State, June 30, 1918; PRO, Foreign Office, 1918, 368.1894, 131227, “Establishment of packing industry in Colombia: Business taken by American International Corporation,” July 29, 1918.

\textsuperscript{26} PRO, Foreign Office, 1918, 368.1894, 151134, “Colombia packing concessions,” Sept. 3, 1918.
war-time restrictions. Later, a variety of other problems, including railroad strikes in the U.S., delayed construction still further. While the company had agreed to finish building the plant by 1920, they completed it only at the end of 1923. In the meantime, the CPC exported live cattle to Mexico and Peru. But by the time the plant was finally ready to operate, the markets where they originally planned to sell were no longer so favorable. European demand had slumped significantly in the wake of the post-war economic crisis; and protectionism had closed off the U.S. market.

Furthermore, the responses from possible buyers in England, Italy, and Germany, to whom the CPC sent samples, were not promising. They all noted the low quality of the meat. The English graded it as equivalent to second-class, frozen, creole carcasses from Argentina. Neither they nor the Germans were interested. The Italians, who could not afford to be as discerning, offered to buy up to 500 tons monthly. But the price they offered, the equivalent of about $32 pesos per steer, would have caused the CPC to lose money. Fernando Vélez, the company’s president, also noted that

---


they could sell live animals in Mexico and Peru for $40 per head. And some fatteners in Old Bolívar were getting up to $46 for their cattle in the Medellín market. So long as “second class” cattle sold for 8¢ per kilogram in Colombia, compared to 6.8¢ per kilogram for the best creole-European crosses in Argentina and Uruguay, he said, “it is obvious that the packing-house cannot start operating yet.” And it never did.

Two interrelated problems undermined the competitiveness of Colombian beef: breed and age. Colombian cattle were descendents of the original stock brought to the country by the Spanish at the beginning of the colonial period. They were somewhat more full-bodied and heavier than their Mexican counterparts. And Cunninghame Graham remarked that, for range cattle, they fattened relatively well and yield a good proportion of meat. For these reasons, Cuban buyers paid a small premium for Colombian cattle, compared to Mexican and Central American animals, between 1898 and 1906. But they were still creole range cattle, with rather lean, stringy meat and heavy on the less valuable cuts from the forequarters. That their meat was inferior in both quality and yield to the European cattle, or even the creole-European crosses, raised in Argentina was primarily due to genetics. English breeders

30 Ministerio de Industrias (1924), p. 40; NARA, RG 166, 1904-1939, Colombia, “Cattle raising in the Cartagena Consular District,” L. Schnare, Dec. 19, 1924; NARA, RG 166, 1904-1939, Colombia, “Cattle Industry In Colombia,” W. Boaz, Dec. 18, 1925; NARA, RG 166, 1904-1939, Colombia, “For fourth quarter, 1925,” L. Schnare, Jan. 14, 1926. Vélez also noted that the value of the by-products, after subtracting the cost of slaughtering a steer and freezing the carcass, was about $5 pesos.
31 Quoted in Ministerio de Industrias (1924), pp. 39-40. See also NARA, RG 166, 1904-1939, Colombia, “Cattle raising in the Cartagena Consular District,” L. Schnare, Dec. 19, 1924; Fryere (1926).
32 Machado (1989); Posada Carbó (1998), pp. 184-192. In 1937, after their 20-year commitment was fulfilled, the owners of the Colombia Product Company handed over the infrastructure it built to the nation and dissolved the company.
had created animals that produced tender meat interlaced with fat deposits and had a larger proportion of the most valuable cuts from the hindquarters. They also dramatically lowered the time it took these breeds to reach maturity, both increasing the productivity of meat production and producing younger, more tender, and more valuable beef. In 1924, the U.S. consul in Cartagena, Lester Schnare, noted that it took ranchers in Old Bolívar about five years to produce a steer that yielded 250 kilograms of beef and sold for $40 to $46 pesos. By contrast, Argentinean ranchers raised steer in 2.5 years that yielded 340 kilograms of beef and sold for $54. “Thus, in the Argentine, a grower can produce in the same length of time thrice the quantity of beef, sell it at a lower price per pound, and realize more than double the amount of money, as compared to a grower in this district.”

Although he expected European markets to improve in the future, “it does not appear possible that the cattle rearing industry can be of constant and permanent value to Colombia or become a competitor in the world’s markets for packed meats and live cattle until radical changes shall have been made in the care and treatment of cattle and the herds shall have been greatly improved by large importations of blooded cattle and careful breeding.”

While the Argentine ambassador to Colombia noted this same problem in 1926, he retained a sense of optimism. Colombia, he said, possessed highly favorable conditions for ranching: space, a variety of climates, healthy cattle, exuberant natural grasses, the ease with which artificial pastures could be established, and the possibility of rapidly upgrading its stock by cross-breeding with European animals. To increase

33 NARA, RG 166, 1904-1939, Colombia, “Cattle raising in the Cartagena Consular District,” L. Schnare, Dec. 19, 1924. See also Ministerio de Industrias (1924), pp. 37-40;
34 Ibid.
productivity and competitiveness of its cattle, ranchers needed to raise better grade animals on improved pastures and provide additional forage during summer droughts. Although this would entail higher operating costs, the time-savings (on capital and lower administrative costs per animal), and higher prices for better quality beef, would more than make up the difference.\textsuperscript{35} For some time, government officials and others still held out hope that the country could become a second Argentina. By mid-century, however, as it became clear that the path to riches via ranching was a chimera, for many the “backwards,” “empirical,” “miserly,” “primitive,” and even “feudal” character of the country’s ranchers themselves had become the cattle industry’s fundamental problem.\textsuperscript{36}

\textbf{IMPROVING PRODUCTIVITY}

Yet contrary to the widespread view that Colombian ranchers, especially before 1950, did little to improve their operations and only expanded by bringing new land into production, the historical evidence suggests that they did achieve productivity gains. It is important to treat this data with caution. Historical evidence of changing productivity in the cattle industry is difficult to find and not always very reliable. It is also scattered temporally and geographically making comparisons problematic. And we need to be careful about generalizing from individual cases. The evidence I present, therefore, should be interpreted only in terms of rough tendencies. Furthermore, I do not want to overstate the case and give the impression that ranchers

\textsuperscript{35} Fryere (1926).
\textsuperscript{36} Gómez Rueda (1938), p. 35; Navia (1939), p. 22; Federación de Ganaderos de Bolívar (1939b), p. 5; Rodriguez Rosas (1943), p. 34; Beltrán (1943); Cañón (1947).
were a paragon of modernizers. As I will discuss later on, there was much more that they could have done to improve their operations. But against the pervasive impression of ranching prior to the 1950s as primitive and unchanging – driven by the desire for land and status, largely disconnected from market forces, and “absolutely incompatible with the search for capitalist profitability” – it is important to acknowledge that change did occur.\(^\text{37}\)

In this section, I first examine the following measures of ranching productivity: meat yields, calving and mortality rates, and the rate of beef production. I then try to account for these improvements by discussing the diffusion of new technologies: grasses, breeds, fencing, and management techniques. Finally, I address the continued shortcomings of Colombian ranching at mid-century.

**Historical Evidence of Improvements in Ranching Productivity**

The increasing size and yield of cattle, starting in the mid-nineteenth century, is one way that the productivity of ranching improved. Between the 1850s and 1950s, the average carcass weight of Colombian steer appears to have jumped some 75 percent or more (see Table 5.1). Four estimates of cattle yields in meat and fat in the mid-nineteenth century, three from Old Bolívar and a more general one, suggest that the average dressed weight of Colombian steer ranged from 125 to 160 kilograms.\(^\text{38}\)

\(^\text{38}\) A couple of these estimates are derived from estimates of yields in salted and dried beef, which was said to reduce the yield in fresh meat by one-third (Dorta, 1962; Gaceta de Bolívar, July 2, 1858, no. 54, p. 3). Villegas (1919) suggests that sun-dried and salted meat lost 50 percent of its weight. See Table 5.1 for sources.
Assuming a yield of 50 percent, the live weight of Colombian steer probably ranged from 250 to 320 kilograms.\textsuperscript{39} By the end of the nineteenth century, however, Colombian cattle already appear to have grown significantly. In 1900, Camacho Roldán claimed that they were, on average, one-third larger than they had been some 50 years earlier.\textsuperscript{40} Over the first half of the twentieth century, Colombian cattle continued to grow in size. By the 1950s, the average steer weighed about 450 kilos and some pushed upwards of 600 kilos. Since then, by contrast, average carcass weights have remained stable or even declined as increasingly younger animals have been sent to slaughter.\textsuperscript{41}

Carcass weights do not only increase because the animals sent to slaughter are larger. They are also a function of its yield, or what percentage of the live weight remains as the carcass. One of the aims in breeding beef cattle is to increase the size of the body cavity, where most of the meat is located, and reduce the size and weight of the head and legs. The short-legged, boxy shape of the classic beef breeds contrasts sharply with lean, long-legged Texas longhorns, for example. Creole cattle from Old Bolívar, though similar to their Mexican counterparts, were larger and rounder. Cunninghame Graham also remarked that they were light-boned and fattened well,

\textsuperscript{39} While this might seem excessively small, ‘unimproved’ cattle elsewhere also appear to have been similar in stature during this period. In 1849, the average dressed weight of cattle in Cuba was estimated at 150 kilos (de Frías y Jacott, 1849, p. 10). Camacho Roldán (1973, p. 81) estimated that the carcasses of four-to-five year-old Texas longhorns weighed between 130 and 160 kilos at the end of the nineteenth century. In the 1860s, the average weight of native four-year-old cattle in Missouri was 215 kilos, producing a 107.5 kilo carcass assuming a 50 percent yield (Missouri State University, Agricultural History Series, Missouri Beef History, <www.lyndonirwin.com/mobeef3.htm>). A couple of other sources out the average weight of ‘unimproved’ cattle from Texas and Alabama at 360 kilos (Blevins, 1998; Young and Sparks, 1985).

\textsuperscript{40} Camacho Roldán (1946), p. 194.

\textsuperscript{41} Lorente (1986).
giving them a comparatively high yield, for range cattle, of 50 percent.\textsuperscript{42} Other estimates of average yields during the first decade of the twentieth century confirm this figure. For cows it was between 45 and 50 percent.\textsuperscript{43} There is evidence that these yields started to improve in the 1910s. By 1920, cattle from Old Bolivar often yielded 52 to 55 percent. In the 1930s, the yield of the best animals from this department was up to 60 percent, which compared favorably with the yields of European beef breeds.\textsuperscript{44} By 1950, national estimates of average steer yields had risen to 53 to 55 percent (see Table 5.2). Although this change might not seem dramatic, the incremental improvements, multiplied by the total number of cattle slaughtered, did make a difference. If yields had not risen, Colombians would have had to slaughter more than 63,000 additional cattle in 1950 just to be able to consume the same amount of beef. Together, rising live weights and improving yields meant that ranchers could produce more meat from the same number of animals.

\textsuperscript{43} AGN, 1915, Tomo 6, Leyes autografos 76-89, Ley 82 de 1915 (Nov. 30), Segundo informe, Manuel Dávila Florez, f360; Villegas (1919).
\textsuperscript{44} Velásquez (1932; 1938); Mejía (1940b); Oakley (1943); Departamento Nacional de Ganadería (1943), p. 4; Departamento Nacional de Ganadería (1945), pp. 4, 16, 17, 232; Zalamea and Arcimiegas (1949), p. 30; Cañón (1952); Randell (1953).
Table 5.1. Average carcass weights of Colombian steer by area (c.1760 to c.1960)\(^{45}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>General</th>
<th>Old Bolívar</th>
<th>Antioquia</th>
<th>Bogotá (or other)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1760s-1860s</td>
<td>130 kg</td>
<td>125-160 kg</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880s-1890s</td>
<td>150-200 kg</td>
<td>190-225 kg</td>
<td></td>
<td>190 kg (Valle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910s-1920s</td>
<td>180-225 kg</td>
<td>225-265 kg</td>
<td></td>
<td>175-200 kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930s-1940s</td>
<td>210-230 kg</td>
<td>200-230 kg (Barranquilla market)</td>
<td>225 kg</td>
<td>190-210 kg (llanero) 235-260 kg (sabanero)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950s-1960s</td>
<td>220-225 kg</td>
<td>250-270 kg</td>
<td></td>
<td>215-225 kg</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.2. Slaughter yields (c.1910 to c.1950)\(^{46}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>National</th>
<th>Old Bolívar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Through the 1910s</td>
<td>45-50%</td>
<td>45-50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920s</td>
<td></td>
<td>52-55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930s</td>
<td>Up to 60% in the Romosinuano</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>53-55%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{45}\) Dorta (1962); Gaceta de Bolívar, July 2, 1858, no. 54, p. 3; Pineda (1866); Camacho Roldán (1946); Camacho Roldán (1973), p. 76; Fernández (1894), p. 343; López and Rodriguez (1914), p. 132; AGN, 1915, Tomo 6, Leyes autografos 76-89, Ley 82 de 1915 (Nov. 30), Segundo informe, Manuel Dávila Florez, f360; Ospina (1918b); Villegas (1919), p. 460; Freyre (1926); Velásquez (1932); Rojas Maldando (1938b), p. 37; Velásquez (1938), p. 5; Mejía (1940b), pp. 19-21; Departamento Nacional de Ganadería (1942); Departamento Nacional de Ganadería (1945), p. 232; Mendoza Neira (1946), p. 209; El Mes Financiero y Económico (1946), p. 200; Dávila Tello (1949); Cañón (1952); Randell (1953); DANE (1961); Montes y Candelo (1980); Lorente (1978); Lorente and Ulloa (1983); United Nations (1962); Littman (1966); World Bank (1970); Arias Puerta (1999).

\(^{46}\) See footnotes nos. 43-45.
Another set of productivity measures tracks the efficiency of reproducing and expanding cattle herds: calving and mortality rates. Calving rates usually measure the number of calves produced annually as a percentage of the total number of cows of breeding age. A rate of 100 percent means that every cow capable of breeding produces one calf per year. By contrast, a calving rate of 50 percent means that, on average, cows give birth every other year. A low calving rate has a number of implications. For one, it means that cattle herds grow slowly. Consequently, the extraction rate, or how many animals can be culled each year, has to be relatively low. It also increases the cost of producing calves: with a calving rate of 50 percent, twice as many cows and pasture land are required to produce the same number of calves as a herd with a rate of 100 percent. Additionally, a low calving rate makes the task of improving a herd through selective breeding more difficult, if not impossible, as all or most females calves must be retained to replace old cows that no longer serve.

Scattered data suggests that calving rates also improved prior to 1950. While the estimates prior to mid-century can be rather crude, the general trend does appear to be headed upwards as opposed to flat. From the 1860s through the 1920s, the common assumption seems to have been that the annual calf crop was about 35 percent of the number of breeding cows.47 A couple of estimates put it lower, at around 25 percent. And one person suggested that, with better care, it could reach 40 to 70 percent.48 These estimates rose to about 50 percent in the 1930s and reached 55 to 60 percent by

47 Pineda (1866); Camacho Roldán (1973), p. 75; Freyre (1926). For most of this period, such calving rates were estimated in terms of the entire herd, and not just breeding cows. The rate of 35 percent is my calculation of what the stated rate of 20 percent would be if it were based solely on breeding cows.
48 Villegas (1919).
the 1960s.\textsuperscript{49} For Old Bolívar, the estimates of calving rates were even higher than the national average: around 57 percent in the 1940s and 63 to 65 percent by the 1950s and 1960s (see Table 5.3). Unfortunately, it is hard to corroborate these estimates with concrete data from actual operations because many ranchers kept poor records or their books have since been lost. One exception is Hacienda Marta Magdalena, where Kalmanovitz found that calving rates steadily improved over the first half of the twentieth century (see Figure 5.1).\textsuperscript{50} While we cannot extrapolate from this particular hacienda to the nation as a whole, it does confirm the suggestions that improvements in calving rates were not only possible but did occur.

Table 5.3. Calving rates (1860 to c. 1960)\textsuperscript{51}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>National</th>
<th>Old Bolívar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1860-1920</td>
<td>25-35%</td>
<td>25-35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930s</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940s</td>
<td></td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950s-1960s</td>
<td>55-60%</td>
<td>63-65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{49} García Cadena (1939), p. 8; Oakley (1943); Randell (1953); Staffe (1956); Rivas (1981); Hertford and Nores (1982).

\textsuperscript{50} Kalmanovitz et al (1999).

\textsuperscript{51} Departamento Nacional de Ganadería (1942; 1945); Rivas and Valdés (1978); Staffe (1956); United Nations (1962); Currie (1966); Hertford and Nores (1982); Rivas (1982); Arias Puerta (1999); World Bank (1970).
Mortality rates are the flip side of calving rates. Heavy calf losses can undermine otherwise good calving rates; and a reduction in the mortality rate can increase the effective calving rate, or the number of calves weaned annually over the population of breeding cows. High adult mortality rates can be an even more serious problem since the direct economic losses are larger. Data on mortality rates from Hacienda Marta Magdalena shows fluctuations, likely climate and disease dependent, but a general trend of slight improvement over the first half of the twentieth century.

52 Kalmanovitz et al (1999); Lorente (1986).
It is harder to find trends in the other estimates of mortality rates, partly because of their scattered nature and the different ways in which they were calculated. But the evidence does suggest that there may have been slight improvements in this area as well (see Table 5.4). The spreading practice of vaccinating cattle against a number of important diseases probably played a role, at least in adult cattle.

Figure 5.2. Mortality rates on Hacienda Marta Magdalena (1913-1940)

---

53 Kalmanovitz et al (1999). Unfortunately, the mortality figures do not disaggregate calves from adults, but instead are separated by sex. The significant drop in female mortality rates in 1924 is probably the result of a transition from breeding to fattening. See also Ocampo (2007).

54 Departamento Nacional de Ganadería (1942; 1945); Rivas and Valdés (1978); Montes and Candelo (1980); United Nations (1962); Currie (1966); Rivas (1982); Hertford and Nores (1982); World Bank (1970); Lorente (1978; 1983); Arias Puerta (1999).

Table 5.4. Mortality rate estimates (1940-1999)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Calf mortality rate</th>
<th>Adult mortality rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>Dept. de Ganadería (1942)</td>
<td>Nus Gvt Farm</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>Dept. de Ganadería (1942)</td>
<td>Nus Gvt Farm</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>1.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>Dept. de Ganadería (1945)</td>
<td>Montería Gvt Farm</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>United Nations (1962)</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>Currie (1966)</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>Randell (1953)</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>1 to 15% (avg 3 to 4%)</td>
<td>1 to 10% (avg 3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956-69</td>
<td>World Bank (1970)</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956-69</td>
<td>World Bank (1970)</td>
<td></td>
<td>20%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Rivas (1982)</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Rivas (1982)</td>
<td>Valle</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Hertford and Nores (1982)</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Hertford and Nores (1982)</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>5% (general)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>Hertford and Nores (1982)</td>
<td>Llanos</td>
<td>10-15%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940-70</td>
<td>Rivas &amp; Valdes (1978)</td>
<td></td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Hertford and Nores (1982)</td>
<td>Caribbean Coast</td>
<td>4.6% (general)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Rivas (1982)</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.3% (general)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Rivas &amp; Valdes (1978)</td>
<td></td>
<td>5% (under 3 years)</td>
<td>3% (over 3 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Rivas (1982)</td>
<td>Caribbean Coast</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>Lorente (1983)</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>4-14% experimental farms (average 8%)</td>
<td>1-1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Montes &amp; Candelo (1980)</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>4.89% (down from 8% in 1950)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Rivas (1982)</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>1-2 years: 5% 2+ years: 1% cows: 4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Extractive</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Traditional extensive</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Improved extensive</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Arias Puerta (1999)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Another key measure of productivity is the time required to produce an animal ready for slaughter. Reducing the slaughter age has a number of beneficial effects. First, a steer ready to be culled in four years, as opposed to five, is 20 percent more efficient at producing meat, assuming the carcass weight remains the same. Second, it can lower the cost and risk of beef production: the former by shortening the time that capital is tied up in an animal and by reducing management and feed costs; the latter by holding onto an animal less time. And third, the meat of younger animals is more tender, which can translate into better prices in some markets. In the meat-packing-plant fiasco, the advanced age at which Colombian cattle were slaughtered created two problems: it increased production costs and lowered the quality of the meat and the price that European buyers were willing to pay.

Unfortunately, there are few statistics of slaughter ages prior to 1950, in part because there was no premium in the Colombian market for younger animals. Instead, the market rewarded size irregardless of age.\(^{56}\) Nonetheless, there is scattered evidence that the average age of slaughter slowly declined over the first half of the twentieth century, at least in some regions. In the 1910s, most cattle from Old Bolívar were ready to fatten at five years, making them 5.5 to 6 years old at the time of slaughter. By the 1920s, the average age that they were ready to fatten appears to have dropped to 4.5 years. This improvement might have been particular to Old Bolivar, however. In 1930, cattle fatteners for the Bogotá market wanted steer at least 5 years old, while fatteners for the Antioqueño market preferred animals that were 4.5 year old and

\(^{56}\) Littman (1965); Anderson (1961); Currie (1962), pp. 46-48.
discouraged older ones. Kalmanovitz’s calculations of the average age that steer from Hacienda Marta Magdalena were sent to slaughter shows a steady decline for most of the 1913-to-1950 period. This decline coincides well with Lorente’s calculations of the national average for the 1950s and the continuing slow improvement over the rest of the twentieth century (see Figure 5.3).

Figure 5.3. Average age of steer at slaughter, Hacienda Marta Magdalena and national average (1915-1996)

PNOV, C 1928-1931, Ospina to B. Jaramillo, July 24, 1930.

Kalmanovitz et al (1999); Lorente (1986).
The final productivity measure I want to examine is the rate of beef production. This measures how much beef a cattle herd produces annually as a function of its population. It thus takes into account the size of cattle at slaughter, how much they yield, and the extraction rate or how many animals of the total herd are slaughtered every year (which is a function of the effective calving rate and age of slaughter). Because there are decent figures for the number of cattle slaughtered and exported annually going back to 1915, we can estimate the amount of meat produced per year (based on increasing yields). We can then calculate the beef production rate using Kalmanovitz’s estimates of the cattle population between 1915 and 1950.\textsuperscript{59} Again, the figures for the mid-twentieth century coincide well with similar calculations for the second half of the twentieth century based on Lorente’s population estimates (keeping the average carcass weights constant; see Figure 5.4). The fluctuations in the beef production rate are a function of cattle cycles: the troughs are periods of low prices when ranchers tend to hold back animals, and the peaks are periods of strong demand when more animals are sent to slaughter. What we see is a fairly steady increase in the overall productivity of cattle ranching over much of the twentieth century.

\textsuperscript{59}Kalmanovitz et al (1999).
Therefore, contrary to the widespread impression that ranching practices and productivity in Colombia were generally stagnant prior to 1950, there does appear to have been some significant improvements since the mid-nineteenth century. It must be remembered that the data presented here are rough estimates and subject to considerable error. Rather than precise changes, they should be interpreted in terms of general tendencies. Nonetheless, even if over-estimated, they suggest that ranchers were not so bullheaded as often imagined. In fact, instead of dividing the history of ranching into the ‘primitive’ period before 1950, and the subsequent efforts to

Kalmanovitz et al (1999); Lorente (1986).
modernize, the history of productivity changes seems to be characterized by slow but steady improvements rather than punctuated by dramatic shifts.

**The sources of productivity improvement**

The improvements in ranching productivity between 1850 and 1950 were largely driven by ranchers slowly adopting a range of new technologies: African pasture grasses, imported breeds, barbed wire fencing, and improved forms of management. For some time, historians have noted the significance of these technologies, even going so far as to claim that they caused an economic “revolution” in ranching during the second half of the nineteenth century. Just what they mean by “revolution” is not generally spelled out in any detail. Most often it seems to imply the territorial expansion of ranchers and ranching rather than any intensification. What I focus on here is how these technologies also helped increase the productivity of the cattle industry.

Four key new pasture grasses were introduced between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. Ranchers rapidly planted large areas of pará and guinea grasses starting in the 1840s and 1850s. And Rafael Uribe introduced yaraguá or gordura (*Melinis minutiflora*) and yaraguá Uribe (*Hyparrhenia rufa*) from Brazil in 1906. These grasses, which all originated in Africa, had a couple of advantages over native grasses in terms of raising livestock. First, they tended to grow faster and produce greater biomass than many natives. They did this by putting more of their

---

62 Parsons (1968; 1972); Sierra (1916); Burgos (1965); Rivas (1983); Striffler (1994).
energy into growth, cycling soil nutrients more efficiently, using water more opportunistically, and photosynthesizing at higher rates.\footnote{Williams and Baruch (2000); Bilbao and Medina (1990); D’Antonio and Vitousek (1992).} Second, they were generally more resilient to grazing and trampling – the product of their co-evolutionary development with large herbivores, absent in tropical America since the Pleistocene.\footnote{Parsons (1972); Garza (1978); Simoes and Baruch (1991); Williams and Baruch (2000).} These qualities helped them to better suffocate the secondary growth in recently-cleared patches of forest than most native grasses. In this way, they probably facilitated the development of new pastureland and became an important tool in the rancher-cum-landed elite’s monopolization of the country’s lowlands.\footnote{Rivas (1983); Kalmanovitz (1989); Parsons (1972).} But in addition to these territorial and environmental effects, the new African grasses also helped increase the productivity of ranching. In the first place, their vigorous and abundant growth produced more forage for cattle, thereby increasing stocking rates.\footnote{They also extended the area that could be productively turned into pasture. Pará, which grows well in low-lying, damp ground, allowed such areas in forest to be converted into pasture. Striffler (1995) noted how the mid-nineteenth-century arrival of pará in Old Bolivar led to an expansion of pasturelands in the forests surrounding the ciénagas where many ranchers summered their cattle. Likewise, yaraguá, which grows well in less fertile soil and has high soil-retention properties, enabled rugged and poor quality lands in Antioquia, which farmers had ignored, to be converted into pastures (Parsons 1968).} While one head of cattle needed almost three hectares of native grasses to feed, on “artificial” or planted pastures it required only between one-half and one hectare.\footnote{Bell (1919); Oakley (1943); Randell (1953); APNOyC, C 1917-1936, Memorandum of the farms of Caceres property of Pedro Nel Ospina & Company, Feb 1, 1922.} Such spatial intensification could have had a number of effects on ranching costs and productivity. Theoretically, more animals in less space could lower pasture-formation, fencing, and management costs. It could also make the provision of care to animals easier. And greater forage availability could help raise or maintain
nutrition levels, especially during dry summer months when feed was scarce. As we will see below, this could benefit calving, mortality, and growth rates.

Compared to native grasses, the nutritional advantages of these African imports had a more direct effect on productivity. While some native grasses are nutritious when young and tender, these levels rapidly drop off as the grasses quickly mature. Similar problems also confront the African imports, but overall they are better suited for raising livestock. Guinea, for example, is still considered to be a preeminent tropical pasture grass; and in wide areas of the Llanos, ranchers have encouraged the spread of yaraguá.68 The improved diets that these grasses afforded was in all likelihood an important factor in the growing live weight of Colombian cattle between 1850 and 1950. Camacho Roldán claimed that cattle raised or fattened on artificial pastures were 20 percent larger than those confined to native grasses.69 Similarly, when yaraguá was introduced into Antioquia in the first decades of the twentieth century, the slaughter weight of the local Blanco-orejinegro cattle fattened on such pastures increased some 25 percent.70 These grasses, by producing more muscle and fat in relation to the skeletal frame, also helped improve carcass yields.

Diet quality is also important for calving and mortality rates. Cows grazing on less nutritious grasses tend to lose weight during pregnancy and lactation. They then require considerable time to recover their body’s reserves after weaning and before becoming pregnant again. As a result, it is not uncommon for cows to delay going into heat for a year or more. This is a key reason why cows in areas where nutritional stress

---

68 Alacrón (1979).
69 Camacho Roldán (1973), p. 76.
70 APNOyC, 232, f267.
is common frequently give birth every two to three years, as noted by Striffler for Bolivar in the mid-nineteenth century. By contrast, cows grazing on better pastures return to heat much faster. For this reason, ranchers tried to give breeding cows at least decent pastures. In the hierarchy of production stages, they did not receive the best pastures, which were usually reserved for fattening; but they were provided with better pastures than young cattle (in the growing or levante stage). Similarly, cattle with more nutritional forage are able to better resist disease and parasites. Consequently, mortality rates tend to be lower on better pastures. This is particularly true for cows and calves. The compromised resistance of cows on poor pastures after calving can lead to high losses. With inferior feed, cows will also produce less milk, which can increase the chances that their calves will suffer from disease, parasites, and injury.

Finally, improved pastures can also speed up production. As noted above, greater calving efficiency and lower calf mortality are one way this occurs. But better forage can also reduce the time needed to fatten a steer. In Colombia, the best fattening pastures, for example, could cut the time required to fatten a steer in half, from twelve to six months. A cow that produced good quantities of milk, in part a function of pasture quality, could also produce larger calves at weaning. And young cattle raised on good pastures mature considerably faster, enabling steer to be slaughtered at a younger age. The opposite extreme occurs in regions that experience

---

72 APNOyC, C 1917-1936, Memorandum of the farms of Caceres property of Pedro Nel Ospina & Company, Feb 1, 1922; Oakley (1943); NARA, RG 166, 1942-1945, Colombia, “Request of Dept. of Antioquia for assistance in combating diseases of cattle,” Fluharty (J.M. Mejia M.), June 29, 1943; Contraloria (1947), pp. 433-435.
forage shortages or nutritional stress during part of the year. In such cases, cattle can lose weight that they have to subsequently recover before they can continue growing.73

Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, ranchers began planting fairly substantial areas around the country with these new pasture grasses.74 At the end of the nineteenth century, Camacho Roldán estimated that close to two million hectares of land were planted in pará and guinea.75 The 1934 livestock census estimated that Old Bolívar alone had over four million hectares of land planted in grass.76 While both these estimates are probably high, they nonetheless emphasize how pervasive such artificial pastures had become. By 1958, the FAO estimated that there were about 10 million hectares of ‘artificial’ pastures in Colombia, or one-third of the total pastureland and over half of the country’s stocking capacity.77 Ranchers initially used many of these new artificial pastures to fatten livestock, taking advantage of the better and quicker weight gains they offered. But the introduced grasses also drove a good deal of the expansion of ranching into new, previously forested districts. And as these artificial pasture multiplied, they had an increasing effect on other stages of cattle raising as well.

The second way that productivity rose was by improving existing stocks. Colombian creole cattle, of which there were various regional types, had descended from animals introduced by the Spanish in the early colonial period. Natural (and

73 Riviere (1972).
74 Rivas (1983); Parsons (1968; 1972); Velez (2002); Brew (2000); Burgos (1965); Striffler (1995).
75 Camacho Roldán (1946), p. 164.
76 Contraloría (1942), p. 299.
possibly human) selection had resulted in hardy animals that resisted the rigors of the tropical climate, various pests and diseases, poor-quality forage, and difficult trails to market. But they had a number of disadvantages: they were relatively small, grew slowly, and creole cows neither produced much milk nor were especially fertile. So long as there were relatively high numbers of cattle relative to the human population, these creole animals performed adequately. But as the demand for beef and other cattle products increased, their disadvantages began to outweigh their benefits. Ranchers then started to search for ways to improve them. Such improvements came about in two parallel ways: the introduction of new breeds, and by better selecting existing ones.

The introduction of European breeds of cattle started in the mid-nineteenth century. The first person to undertake the expense and risk of this endeavor was an American consul in Bogotá who imported two Durham (Shorthorn) bulls in 1849. A few years later, a prominent hacendado from the Sabana de Bogotá introduced a couple of Herefords. It was, however, only in the 1860s and especially in the 1880s that the introduction of European breeds began to pick up. Ranchers, mostly from the Sabana de Bogotá, imported a variety of different breeds. The classic English beef breeds, Durham and Hereford, were popular initially. These were followed by better milkers: Holstein, Normand, Jersey, Guernsey, Aryshire, Devon, Suffolk, and Alderney. There was also some renewed the efforts to improve beef cattle by

78 Carrasquilla (1908); Terán (1907).
79 Terán (1907) said that Enrique París imported a pair of Hereford bulls in 1853 while Camacho Roldán (1973, p. 147) thought he did so in 1846.
introducing some Angus and Red Polled. The bulk of these pure-bred imports stayed on the Sabana de Bogotá and surrounding highlands where the conditions were most favorable. Although highland ranchers imported relatively few animals, there were enough to cause the original type of cattle from the highlands of Cundinamarca and Boyacá to disappear by the beginning of the twentieth century through progressive cross-breeding. There was some criticism that these imports were driven by fads, and that ranchers did a poor job of cross-breeding, continually mixing in new blood without any defined plan. The result was said to be a genetic mish-mash that brought out the defects of each breed as much as their qualities, and that often ended in substantial degeneration. Nonetheless, cattle from the highlands did become larger. The importation of a variety of different breeds, as well as their diffusion, also shows that ranchers were willing to take risks and adopt new technologies, even if they did not always do it in the most effective manner.

A number of ranchers also attempted to bring these European breeds down from the cool highlands to warmer mountain valleys and the hot lowlands. Many of these efforts failed. In a few cases there was some limited success upgrading creole stocks in these areas through cross-breeding to increase their size by the end of the nineteenth century. Ranchers in various regions even developed a few new breeds

80 Camacho Roldán (1973), pp. 145-147; Terán (1906a; 1906b; 1907); Carrasquilla (1908); Izquierdo (1909); B.Z. (1906); Colombian Information Bureau (1915); Ospina Pérez (1918a).
81 Anon. (1881); Fernández (1894); Ministerio de Hacienda (1917); Ospina Pérez (1918-a).
82 Camacho Roldán (1973), p. 147; Terán (1906c; 1907); Jaramillo (1917).
83 Camacho Roldán (1946), p. 164; Fernández (1894); Colombian Information Bureau (1915); Ospina (1918a).
84 Camacho Roldán (1946), p. 164; Cardozo (1881); Camacho Roldán and Carrasquilla (1893), p. 350; Vergara (1907); Izquierdo (1909); Colombian Information Bureau (1915); Ministerio de Hacienda (1917); Ospina Pérez (1918a); Lyons (1920); Ministerio de Industrias
based on European and local crosses: the Azul-pintado in Caldas (a Durham-creole mix); the Lucerna in Valle del Cauca (Hartón del Valle mixed with Holstein and Hereford); and the Romosinuano in the Sinú Valley (Costeño con cuernas crossed with Angus and Red Polled). There was some controversy about whether or not the Romosinuano had any European blood. But whether it was the result of cross-breeding or a genetic mutation is to some extent besides the point. The subsequent development of the new breed – with its larger size, faster development, higher yield, and better conformation – testify to the skills and dedication of various local ranchers in the Sinú Valley.

These new breeds point, more generally, to the role that ranchers might also have played in slowly improving creole cattle through the process of selection. In other words, it is possible that some of the improvement in the size and yield of creole breeds was partly due to ranchers’ own breeding work and not only the spread of better pastures and the diffusion of European blood. There is, it must be said, only scant evidence for such efforts, and various statements to the contrary. Nonetheless, because such change was incremental, it may have largely gone unnoticed. Despite the criticisms that cattle owners paid limited attention to the management of their ranches,

---

(1924), Anexos, p. 86; Ministerio de Industrias (1925), Anexos, p. 127; Flórez (1926), p. 51; Ministerio de Agricultura y Comercio (1934), pp. 330-350; Ochoa (1931a), p. 540; Navarro (1935); Bernal (1939); Mejía (1940b).

85 Parsons (1968), p. 130; Roa (1939); Durán Castro (1970).
86 Staffe (1956).
87 Terán (1907; 1917); Ministerio de Agricultura y Comercio (1934); Roa (1939). Also see the attention paid to creole breeds in the livestock shows (Carrasquilla et al., 1880). In 1880, however, there was still generalized disappointment about the quality of the creole animals presented (Carrasquilla, 1880).
88 Terán (1907; 1917); Jaramillo (1917); Ministerio de Agricultura y Comercio (1934); Torres (1935); Abondano Herrera (1938).
this kind of selective breeding was not beyond them. Just as ranchers could buy European breeds to improve their herds, they could also buy good bulls and promising cows. They also had some control over which young males to leave as reproducers and which to castrate; and they could (and did) discard inferior cows. The growing use of fenced pastures was another way they could exercise better control over reproduction. And contrary to the common belief that ranching was dominated by huge operations, most herds were on the smaller side, often from 100 to 500 head. Even if cattle grazed continually on the open range or in large pastures, and were only infrequently rounded up, this does not mean that ranchers (or cowboys) could not keep fairly close tabs of their animals. (On the western rangelands of the U.S., a herd this size was considered a small operation.) In the end, it is likely that many ranchers either did not try or were not very effective at improving their herds. This is demonstrated, in part, by the modest change in the productivity of creole breeds. But some of the improvement in the size of animals as well as their yields (partly the result of improved conformation, or increasing the body size and shape in relation to those parts that have little use, such as the head and lower legs) does suggest that a number of them did try.

The biggest change in the look and genetic makeup of Colombian cattle was the result of the diffusion of zebu blood through the national herd. The first zebu bulls

---

89 de la Torre (1918), p. 443. During the first half the 20th century, government officials complained about the excessive number of cows sent to slaughter. Ranchers countered that they needed to be able to slaughter younger but unproductive cows in order to improve their herds.

90 In addition, there was the problem of low calving rates, and the fact that perhaps of the breeding animals were left in the hands of peasants and very small ranchers for whom the obstacles for improvement were even greater.
were imported at the turn of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{91} By the 1950s, the majority of creole cattle had at least some zebu blood. Ranching experts even feared that Colombia’s autochthonous types of cattle were on a fast-track to extinction, a prognostication that has nearly come true.\textsuperscript{92} The advantage of the zebu over European breeds, as we shall see below, was their pre-adaptation to the rigors of the tropics.\textsuperscript{93} The initial crosses with creole breeds were also very promising: the animals were larger and more precocious.\textsuperscript{94} Some experts worried about the rapid and ‘disorganized’ adoption of such crosses and succeeded in banning further imports for much of the 1930s.\textsuperscript{95} Others later pointed out that the benefits from the first couple generations of crosses, which many had attributed to the inheritance of zebu traits, was largely the product of hybrid vigor. Therefore, if ranchers did not preserve creole herds with which to cross with zebu cattle, such benefits would eventually disappear. Few ranchers heeded these warnings and the Colombian beef cattle herd became one based almost entirely on zebu animals rather than focusing on hybrid-vigor from cross-breeding. Nonetheless, improvements in zebu breeds has helped improve the productivity of beef cattle production over the second of the twentieth century. It is

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{91} Gallini (2005); Oeding (1989); Eder (1913); Ospina (1918a).
\textsuperscript{92} García Cadena (1939); Velasco (1939a); Bonilla (1943), pp. 11-12; Bonilla (1945), p. 21; United Nations (1962), p. 16; Krogzemis (1967); Pinzón Martínez (1984); Gallini (2005). See also Rhoad (1938); Herrán (1939).
\textsuperscript{93} Rhoad (1938; 1955); Herrán (1939); Kelley (1939); Plasse (1974); Payne (1990).
\textsuperscript{94} Asamblea de Ganaderos de Bolívar (1935a); Navarro (1935), pp. 724-725; Rojas (1938a), pp. 13-17; Ospina (1939c); Archila (1939); Galvis (1940; Bonilla (1943), p. 12; Gómes Cásseres (1959).
\textsuperscript{95} Gallini (2005); Ochoa (1931a); Oakley (1943). There was also substantial prejudice against zebu cattle. Suspicion towards the odd-looking beast likely combined with a form of deflected racism. On more practical grounds, experts noted that they posed various problems: they had a tendency to be mean and difficult to handle; the cows were poor milkers; and the quality of the meat was inferior to that of creole animals. See Freyre (1926); Zapata (1931); Velasco (1939b); Gallini (2005).
\end{footnotes}
likely, though, that some of the improved productivity of Colombian cattle herds between the 1920s and 1950s was the result of hybrid vigor as zebu blood slowly spread through the national beef herd.

Barbed wire fencing was the third ranching innovation of the late-nineteenth century. Patented in 1874, it had revolutionary consequences for ranching in the western U.S. where wood was scarce and fencing had been too costly to use. In Colombia, ranchers did not always face the same shortage of raw materials with which to construct fences. Before, and even after the introduction of barbed wire, there were various kinds of fences and other barriers: rammed earth or stone walls, wood or bamboo fences, living (plant) fences, and ditches. But barbed wire certainly made the construction of fences easier and lowered their expense.

The function of barbed wire, and other fences, can be thought of in two ways. The function of barbed wire, and other fences, can be thought of in two ways. The first is as a means to claim property rights. A good deal of attention has been paid to ranchers putting up, moving, or knocking down fences in Colombia.\textsuperscript{96} Relatively cheap and quick-to-erect fencing made it possible for ranchers to reinforce their property claims (often over public lands) and to enclose parts of communally-owned properties. This is part of the ‘dark-side’ of ranching productivity gains.

The second way to think of fences is in terms of ranch management. Fences enable greater management over breeding by controlling which bulls and cows were allowed to mingle. As the introduction of barbed wire lowered the cost of fencing, it likely had a beneficial impact on efforts to improve cattle herds. Without it, ranchers

\textsuperscript{96} Reyes (1978); Fals Borda (2002); LeGrand (1986); Kalmanovitz (1989).
in the Sinú Valley might not have been able to develop the Romosinuano. Barbed wire also made it possible to subdivide pastures into smaller units, enabling ranchers to use their grass more efficiently and when it was most nutritious. Smaller pastures also made it easier for ranchers to provide better care for their animals by limiting the area in which they roamed. A greater number of smaller pastures could also help ranchers keep closer track of the performance of their herds by dividing animals into groups of similar ages and kinds. While some ranchers may have used barbed wire fencing to improve their operations in these ways, observers reported that they were the exception to the rule. Much of the management-based drive behind the expansion of barbed wire fencing, therefore, could have been to prevent others from benefiting from one’s own improvements: artificial pastures and better bulls.97

The final and often overlooked way that ranchers helped to increase the productivity of their operations was through improved management. The repeated claim that cattle were half-wild was probably an exaggeration.98 While there was undoubtedly some truth to this for the Llanos, on the coast Cunninghame Graham was surprised by the docility of the cattle, likely the result of relatively frequent handling. One method that larger ranchers on the extensive, communal pastures of Ayapel used to tame their cattle was let poor people from the community milk their cows.99 The growing provision of salt to cattle was another method that ranchers used to both increase contact with cattle and improve their productivity. Salt, by improving the

97 This can be seen in the growing number of ‘artificial’ (and by, definition, fenced) pastures in the notary records of land sales (see ANM; AOFB, Sincelejo notaria; AOFB, Caimito; Gaceta de Bolivar and other incarnations of the official newspaper from Old Bolivar in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries).
98 Kalmanovitz (1989); Lorente (1986).
appetite of cattle, contributed to their increase in size, helped to improve their fertility, and boosted their resistance to disease and pests. With the introduction of mineralized salts in the 1940s, ranchers could also correct some of the mineral deficiencies in the soil that affected reproduction, health, and growth rates. The practice of vaccinating cattle, which Bell suggested, in 1921, was starting to spread widely, likely had an impact on lowering adult mortality rates. In 1929, the government also began to subsidize the construction of tick-dipping tanks, which helped to promote the practice of dipping to better control ticks and the diseases they spread. Additionally, the diffusion of information through various public and private journals, radio programs, and traveling vets, helped encourage ranchers to better care for their animals: paying attention to newborn calves sooner, dehorning and castrating at younger ages, better branding techniques, getting rid of male dairy calves.

The continued shortcomings of Colombian ranching

While ranchers in Colombia did improve the productivity of their operations before 1950, I do not want to invert the narrative to suggest that they were aggressive modernizers. Obviously, that is far from the truth. For one, even though the productivity of Colombian ranching did improve, and was generally better than in much of Latin America, it still lagged far behind the levels of leading ranching countries, such as the U.S., Australia, and Argentina (see Table 5.5). The

100 Roa (1937); Gómez Rueda (1939), p. 22; Ospina (1939d); Marulanda Caicedo (1939); Carvajalino (1943); El Mes Financiero y Económico (1946), p. 199; Ruiz Mesa (1952), p. 6.
101 Anon. (1932b); Ministerio de Agricultura y Comercio (1935a); Sanclemente et al (1936); Congreso de la República (1939); Gómez Rueda (1939; 1942); Departamento Nacional de Ganadería (1943); Bernal (1943); Randell (1953).
improvements to Colombian ranching must be kept in perspective: they were incremental, spread slowly, and started from a low base. Second, even though some government officials and industry observers started to note, by the mid-1940s, that productivity improvements in ranching had started to be “appreciable,” “notorious,” “surprising,” or “of great importance,” they continued to underline the numerous ways that Colombian ranching was still very much deficient.102

Table 5.5. Ranching Productivity, Colombia in Comparative Perspective (late-1950s)103

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Carcass Weight</th>
<th>Yield Rate</th>
<th>Calving Rate</th>
<th>Mortality Rate</th>
<th>Age of Slaughter</th>
<th>Extraction Rate</th>
<th>Beef Production Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>176 kg</td>
<td>58-60%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>18-30 mo.</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>73 kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. West (c. 1920)</td>
<td>275-300kg</td>
<td>55% (est)</td>
<td>66% (75%) (effective)</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>36 mo</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>158 kg</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>80-90% (est)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>47 kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>270-300kg (1937)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>20-24 mo. (1937)</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>48 kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uruguay</td>
<td>210 kg</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>60% (effective)</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>54 mo.</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>28 kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>213 kg</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>53.5 mo.</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>27 kg *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>187 kg</td>
<td>45-60%</td>
<td>45-55%</td>
<td>6-20%</td>
<td>48-60 mo.</td>
<td>10-11%</td>
<td>20 kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>150-160kg</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>55-60%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>13-14%</td>
<td>15 kg (est)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>170 kg</td>
<td>47-50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>13 kg</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(*) My re-calculation of the FAO estimate of 30.5 kg.

102 Cañón (1949); Lleras Restrepo (1946), p. 30; Mendoza (1946), p. 198; Departamento Nacional de Ganadería (1942), p. 3.
103 United Nations (1962); Potter (1921); Lorente (1978).
In the late 1950s, the FAO calculated that losses from disease and parasites were equivalent to one-third of the annual livestock production.\textsuperscript{104} Some progress had clearly been made: a number of the major diseases (e.g., anthrax and blackleg) that had previously taxed the industry were relegated to the “miscellaneous” category by mid-century. But in the meantime, new diseases, such as foot-and-mouth and brucellosis, had become serious threats; and older ones had not been entirely eradicated.\textsuperscript{105} The reluctance of some ranchers to systematically vaccinate against a range of diseases hindered more effective sanitary campaigns. Some waited until a case appeared in their area before vaccinating; others, often said to be peasants and small ranchers, feared or did not understand the value of preventative vaccinations; still others improperly disposed of infected animals. Ranchers could also get around government regulations regarding the movement of cattle with bribes and counterfeit vaccination certificates. And although the practice of dipping cattle in arsenic solutions to combat ticks had spread, the parasites were still a critical source of losses to the industry.\textsuperscript{106} In addition to serving as disease vectors, ticks retarded development, caused weight loss, lowered milk production, compromised disease resistance, lowered calving rates, reduced hide values, and could even cause death. The number of tick-dipping tanks built in the 1930s skyrocketed, but by the early 1940s there was still only one tank for every 5,000 or 6,000 head of cattle; the National Livestock

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., pp. 21-23.
\textsuperscript{106} Ministerio de Agricultura y Comercio (1934), p. 342; Gómez Rueda (1939), pp. 18, 40-41; Gómez Rueda (1942), pp. 14-15; González Cortina (1940), p. 58; Perlaza (1941); Ruiz Mesa (1952), p. 9.
Department thought that ratio needed to be reduced by a factor of ten.\textsuperscript{107} (In 1937, Old Bolívar had only one tank for every 20,000 head.\textsuperscript{108}) To better combat ticks, government officials argued that, above all, they had to “end the resignation and indifference of the rancher.”\textsuperscript{109}

Officials also complained about “unsatisfactory pasture management.”\textsuperscript{110} Despite the diffusion of barbed wire fences, pastures were still too large. Continuous rather than rotational grazing made it difficult to properly manage the grass crop: ranchers either allowed the grasses to grow too high, in which case they lost their nutritive value; or they overgrazed them, causing a loss of carrying capacity. It also limited their ability to combat weeds, parasites, and disease through rotation and rest. In addition, by not cutting grasses to make hay during the growing season, ranchers allowed much forage go to waste. Invariably, pastures were monocrops of single grass species. “The advantages of mixed pastures are almost unknown,” the FAO reported.\textsuperscript{111} Not only did ranchers pay little attention to the value of legumes as forage, they removed spontaneously-growing ones as weeds. And they did not fertilize or irrigate pastures. The result was not only a “serious problem of malnutrition” in some cases, but poor quality forage and deteriorated pastures.\textsuperscript{112}

Observers found other dietary aspects of ranching also wanting. The FAO thought that the amount of salt ranchers gave their cattle needed to increase from

\textsuperscript{107} Bonilla (1943), p. 7.
\textsuperscript{108} Gracia (1937b), p. 1391.
\textsuperscript{109} Ospina (1939f), p. 11
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.
17,500 tons to 150,000 tons annually; and they needed to start correcting the mineral deficiencies in the diet of their cattle. It also found that, too often, ranchers did not provide sufficient watering places for their cattle, and they eliminated shade trees under the erroneous belief that they encouraged cattle to lounge instead of eat. Even though many cattle districts in Colombia had relatively high stocking rates, the extensive nature of ranching, rooted in the lack of supplemental feed, was a common criticism.

Another shortcoming of mid-century ranching in Colombia was insufficient animal care and poor ranch management. Despite some progress, newborn calves and cows about to calve did not receive adequate or prompt care. The periodic attention that cattle require more generally was also said to be too sporadic. Additionally, the three-phase division of the industry, in which ranchers raised young males on the poorest pastures, increased their slaughter age and slowed the turnover of stock. Furthermore, castration techniques – carried out too late and with unhygienic practices – were unsatisfactory. Even with government efforts to improve branding, poor practices still caused important losses in hide values. Reproductive management was frequently deficient. And few ranchers kept adequate records from which to judge productivity gains.

There was, therefore, still much that Colombian ranchers could have done by the mid-twentieth century to further improve the productivity of the cattle industry. Ranchers did not radically modify their practices before 1950, and ranching productivity lagged significantly behind the more advanced cattle producing regions in the world. Undoubtedly, some of the standard criticisms are valid: tradition,
complacency, absenteeism, non-economic motivations, or not calculating the true costs of production.

Still, the failure to implement a number of reforms does not mean that ranchers did not make any improvements. The low productivity of Colombian ranching at mid-century, compared to that of the United States, Australia, or Argentina, gave the impression that its “drawbacks and deficiencies…have their origin in the obsolete and even primitive practices which prevail in many stock farming activities,” the FAO reported. But sweeping condemnations of industry practices as primitive, even when many may have remained so, made it difficult to see both the progress that had been made and what other limitations made change difficult. Why did ranchers experiment with and adopt some new technologies with relative alacrity but not others? Tradition and the host of other criticisms probably played some role. Nevertheless, a number of the suggested improvements may have been impractical. For instance, it seems misplaced to have criticized ranchers for using single-grass pastures when there few if any viable candidates with which to established mixed-grass pastures. Was hay-making economically or environmentally practical? Could ranchers have provided additional water sources so long as the high-cost of drilling wells was beyond the means of most? In the final section, I will return to importance of also paying attention to the larger context in which ranching developed. In the meantime, I turn to the difficulties of ranching in the tropics.

---

113 Ibid., p. 25.
THE PROBLEMS OF TROPICAL RANCHING

To what degree was the failure of Colombian ranchers to turn the country into an important beef exporter a feat beyond their reach? While they could have taken additional steps to improve their productivity, in this section I underline the considerable environmental hurdles that they faced. While the tropics alone did not determine their failure, it did impose significant limitations on the ability of ranchers to compete on international markets given the available ranching technology.

One critical problem of tropical ranching has to do with abundant but poor quality forage. For many, especially early observers, the vigorous growth of grasses in the tropics represented a promising resource. It was often assumed, for instance, that the Llanos Orientales could become one of the world’s great cattle-producing grasslands if only the problem of access could be overcome. For a highly-productive ranching operation, however, pasture quality matters more than quantity. Tropical grasses, while exuberant, are generally of lower quality than temperate ones. One Australian study, for example, found that “milk production per cow from unsupplemented improved tropical pasture swards is markedly lower than from temperate swards fed at a similar stage of growth.”

The lower nutritional levels of tropical grasses is further exacerbated by their rapid growth. While they can have adequate protein levels during their early stages of growth, when shoots are young and tender, tropical grasses tend to mature quickly at which point their nutritional quality drops rapidly. The exuberance of tropical grasses

114 Stobbs and Thompson (1978), my emphasis.
is not only a result of the propitious growing environment, but also because many of them possess a physiological adaptation, known as Kranz anatomy, that allows them to photosynthesize faster, under conditions of high light intensity and temperatures, than ‘normal’ (C₃) plants. The result is two-fold. Not only do these tropical C₄ grasses grow more quickly than temperate ones, which are generally C₃ plants, but the very adaptation that allows them to photosynthesize faster results in cell walls that have a higher lignin (or woody) content. This coarse quality further lowers the digestibility of tropical grasses. While the African pasture grasses that laid the basis to improve tropical ranching tend to be more nutritious and productive than many native Latin American grasses, they too have the same problems of rapid growth, high-fiber content, and falling nutritional properties. Even though “guinea grass is the most productive forage grass in tropical America,” its quick growth followed by rapid deterioration make it difficult to manage and undermines its nutritional potential.¹¹⁵

Nutritional quality, in turn, impacts productivity in a variety of ways. For one, a poorer diet slows the speed with which cattle mature and lowers the rate of weight gain. In extreme cases, where seasonal scarcity combines with low protein content, cattle can lose weight. While they do have a mechanism, called compensatory gain, that enables them to quickly regain lost weight when forage quality improves, such ratcheted growth still increases the age at which cattle can be slaughtered. Cows on lower-quality pasture also produce less milk, which results in smaller calves at weaning and more time required to raise them until they are ready to fatten. Secondly, a poor diet lowers reproductive efficiency. The longer cattle take to mature, the later

the age at which they can start breeding. If cows are forced to draw on their own body reserves during pregnancy and lactation in order to compensate for poor nutritional intake, then they will require a longer period of recuperation before becoming pregnant again. Lastly, mortality rates tend to rise as forage quality decreases. Poorer diets lower the resistance of cattle to disease and parasites, and raises the chances of aborted and still-born calves.

High temperatures are another issue faced by ranchers in the tropics. The tolerance for heat varies by breed and species of cattle: in the Americas, creole and zebu cattle have various physiological adaptations that enable them to withstand higher temperatures than European breeds. As we will see below, this was one obstacle to the introduction of ‘improved’ cattle. As temperatures rise, all cattle will eventually take measures to cool off: seeking shade in the heat of the day; limiting their movement; and eating less. Since digestion takes energy, which emits heat, high temperatures have the effect of depressing the appetite of cattle.¹¹⁶ This issue is even more pronounced in the tropics where the forage is often highly fibrous and takes greater energy to break down. Reduced appetites can further exacerbate the consequences of poorer quality forage: slower growth, reduced milk production, greater susceptibility to disease and parasites, and lower reproductive productivity. In bulls, for example, high temperatures can both reduce their sex drive and affect the thermoregulatory function of the scrotum, which affects the quality of their sperm.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ The heat generated from a belly full of rumen enable cattle to withstand temperatures well below zero (Young and Sparks, 1985).
Furthermore, the constant high temperature and humidity of the tropics provide a favorable breeding ground for parasites and disease vectors.\textsuperscript{118} Not all the diseases that have taxed Colombian ranching over the years are exclusive to tropical latitudes. Anthrax, blackleg, brucellosis, hoof-and-mouth, salmonellosis, Texas fever (babesiosis or piroplasmosis), anaplasmosis among various others, have also caused losses in the U.S. cattle industry. But a number of significant diseases are more prevalent in or exclusive to subtropical or tropical areas, such as pseudo-aftosa (vesicular stomatitis), piroplasmosis, anaplasmosis, paralytic bovine rabies, and trypanosomiasis. Many of these ‘tropical’ diseases are restricted by the biogeography of the insect or bat vectors that transmit them. Freezing winter temperatures in temperate regions also helps control various diseases, such as salmonellosis, by killing infectious spores. Likewise, although temperate zones are not free from internal or external parasites, environmental conditions in the tropics are more favorable for their reproduction. In fact, the FAO calculated that, even with the ravages of foot and mouth disease, parasitic infestations caused over half of all disease- and parasite-related losses in Colombia in 1958.\textsuperscript{119}

Lastly, the exuberant growth of grasses in the tropics is often matched by that of weeds.\textsuperscript{120} The rapid growth and biomass of imported African grasses did seem to help ranchers establish pastures out of forested lands by hindering the secondary growth. Nevertheless, competition from unwanted invasive species could be severe,

\textsuperscript{118} Payne (1990), pp. 29, 279-280. \\
\textsuperscript{119} United Nations (1962), p. 21. \\
\textsuperscript{120} In similar fashion, mineral deficiencies are not exclusive to the tropical soils, but because of the leeching effects of heavy rainfall, they do tend to be more serious there. Such deficiencies can cause various diseases, such as bovine hematuria. But the more serious effect is lower productivity levels more generally.
and artificial pastures had to be periodically weeded: once a year for pará and twice-a-year for guinea. Furthermore, trying to graze artificial pastures more intensely to better maintain nutritional levels also ran the risk of leaving pastures more vulnerable to weed invasions. While ranchers periodically set fire to artificial pastures in order to control weeds, there seems to have been some recognition that weeding by machete made for more productive pastures, though it did substantially raise maintenance costs.

One of the key environmental limitations of efforts to improve the productivity of Colombian ranching was the difficulty of introducing European breeds. By the end of the eighteenth century, British cattle breeders had developed various new breeds of beef cattle that produced significantly more meat in less time. These Shorthorn, Hereford, and Angus breeds provided the genetic basis for quickly improving the productivity of cattle raising in many temperate regions around the world by upgrading the native stock. For instance, as early as 1916, Uruguayan ranchers reported that only four percent of the national herd was composed of creole cattle.\(^\text{121}\) By contrast, Colombia’s tropical environment prevented ranchers there from introducing improved European breeds on any significant scale. A number of ranchers did attempt to upgrade their herds with imported animals but their frequent failures discouraged most from risking the substantial sums needed to import purebred cattle or even bring down crosses from the highlands. Critics frequently blamed the inadequate or inappropriate care that ranchers gave these European breeds as the reason for the high mortality rates or subsequent degeneration. While there was

probably a degree of truth in such claims, the larger problem was the tropical environment itself.\textsuperscript{122}

The constant high temperatures of the lowland tropics presented a critical obstacle. The improved European breeds came from the cool or inclement climates of northern Europe. As a result, they did not have very high levels of heat tolerance.\textsuperscript{123} The way that these cattle developed a solid layer of subcutaneous fat posed one problem. While this layer of fat helped to keep them warm through cold winters, it made it hard to cool off in high temperatures. One of the adaptations of creole cattle to the tropics was a discontinuous layer of fat under the skin, facilitating the escape of body heat. Zebu cattle, for their part, lay on fat between their muscles as opposed to a continuous, subcutaneous layer.\textsuperscript{124} Coats of fur developed for cooler climates also fared poorly in the heat, where light-colored and smooth-coated animals do better. In a study of Herefords under subtropical conditions, animals with standard coats weighed 135 kilos less, and had 50 percent lower calving rates, than a smooth-coated variety.\textsuperscript{125} Furthermore, improved breeds of beef cattle were bred to use forage efficiently. In the tropics, however, their high rate of metabolism becomes a disadvantage since it

\textsuperscript{122} Diseases of tropical or subtropical origin, such as Texas fever, killed off quite a number of purebred imports. Eventually, however, ranchers did develop methods to acclimatize the offspring of such animals through, for instance, inoculations with the blood of infected animals in order to develop early immunity.

\textsuperscript{123} Some European breeds do quite well in the heat for limited periods of time. Thus, Angus do well in the searing daytime temperatures of Arizona, but because they are able to cool off at night, and because they are not subject to such temperatures year round.

\textsuperscript{124} Other adaptive traits of zebu cattle that enable them to better deal with high temperatures include: large areas of skin (the folds and protruding parts) for their body size, which increases the efficiency of heat escape; the ability to retain body water, by concentrating their urine, to help cool them off; and sweat glands.

\textsuperscript{125} Bonsma (1955a).
increases their internal body temperature. The coarse quality of tropical grasses, which require more energy to break down, further exacerbates this problem.

A host of problems for these improved breeds stemmed from the heat and humidity of the tropics. As noted above, beyond looking for shade and reducing movement, a key response to excess heat is the loss of appetite. Lower feed intake means that the animals grow less and more slowly. Thus, a main reason to introduce these breeds is lost. But reduced appetites lower their productivity in other ways as well. On the one hand, it reduces their reproductive efficiency. Slower growth means that they begin to breed at a later age. Cows also recover from pregnancy and lactation more slowly and delay going into heat again. Added to these nutritional-based problems, high temperatures can reduce the sex drive in bulls; and because their scrotums do not adequately regulate the temperature of their testes – zebu scrotums are better at this – they can experience temporary infertility. On the other hand, reduced appetites can also increase mortality rates. In a South African study, 35 percent of pregnancies in European cows ended in still birth compared to only 8 percent for native cows. Reduced milk production, because of inadequate diets, not only leads to poor growth in calves but makes them more susceptible to disease and parasites. Poor feed intake also lowers the resistance of adult cattle. This susceptibility is exacerbated by the thin hides of European cattle, which makes them more vulnerable to ticks and other external parasites as well as the diseases they transmit. The thick hides of the creole and zebu cattle better allow them to withstand such pests. Zebu cattle also have muscles that allow them to shake their loose skin to remove insects.
Not only do the productivity levels of European breeds introduced to the tropics fall, but successive generations frequently undergo a process of degeneration. The shape of their body or conformation can change, acquiring larger heads, thick necks, and stunted loins and rumps (the most valuable meat cuts), for instance.

Furthermore, the pelvic areas of cows can become smaller, causing difficulties when calving. In other words, these European breeds can lose many of the qualities for which they were originally designed and introduced. Such problems were not only experienced by Colombian ranchers who attempted to upgrade their herds with European animals. Ranchers in tropical zones around the world, including European colonists, faced such challenges. “That many types of livestock originating in the Northern Hemisphere do not thrive in tropical and subtropical environments can no longer be denied,” concluded the South African cattle expert, Jan Bonsma, in 1955.126

Therefore, although Colombian ranchers did experiment with the introduction of European breeds, the environmental limits they faced effectively closed off this path as a key way to increase the productivity of their herds. Because the Pampas were hospitable to European breeds, Argentine ranchers could import large numbers of Shorthorns and Herefords to thoroughly upgrade their creole stock. This allowed them to increase their productivity and meet the high demands of English consumers. In the early 1920s, for instance, they annually imported some 150,000 purebreds from the U.S. and Europe.127 Similarly, ranchers in northern Mexico brought in over 125,000

---

head of Herefords in 1924 and 1925.\textsuperscript{128} By contrast, Colombian ranchers imported less than 100 head of purebred cattle per year during the 1920s, and over half of these were dairy cows.\textsuperscript{129}

The ability to upgrade native cattle with European breeds alone did not guarantee competitiveness in the international beef market. English ranchers in the highlands of colonial Zimbabwe found that they could improve their cattle by such cross-breeding, but that the productivity gains were not encouraging. The problem was that they continued to use cheap but relatively poor quality natural savannas for forage.\textsuperscript{130} Likewise, as late as the 1950s, European breeds on the natural grasslands of Uruguay still needed 4.5 years to mature.\textsuperscript{131} Without high quality feed, these improved breeds did not live up to their potential. On the Sabana de Bogotá, Shorthorn cattle only performed well in a few circumscribed areas, likely where they had access to appropriate pastures.\textsuperscript{132} Critics of Colombian ranchers were wont to repeat the maxim, “feed makes breed.”\textsuperscript{133} They faulted ranchers for paying too much attention to cattle breeds, and not enough on what they ate. The Argentine cattle industry was not only founded on the importation of English beef breeds but by grazing them on high-quality alfalfa pastures.\textsuperscript{134} Even if Colombian ranchers could have successively introduced

\textsuperscript{128} Ríos and Fierro (2001), p. 77.
\textsuperscript{129} Ministerio de Industrias (1924; 1925; 1927; 1930); Flórez (1926). When herd books were first set up in the country, a total of 283 animals were registered.
\textsuperscript{130} Phimister (1978).
\textsuperscript{131} United Nations (1962), pp. 52, 58.
\textsuperscript{132} Camacho Roldán and Carrasquilla (1893), p. 347.
\textsuperscript{133} Jaramillo (1917), p. 135; Bernal (1939), p. 28; Bonilla (1945), p. 30; Marulanda Caicedo (1947).
\textsuperscript{134} Whitbeck (1926); Giberti (1961); Scobie (1964); Barsky (2003).
European cattle, they still might have run up against the deficient quality of their pastures.

Colombia’s tropical environment also made the provision of high quality feed difficult. Argentina’s success was based, after all, on the introduction of European breeds and fodder. Of course, better management of existing pastures and cattle could have brought out unrealized qualities in native stock. For instance, with careful rotational grazing ranchers could have improved their use of artificial pastures by maximizing the production of younger, more nutritious grasses. They could have propagated native legumes instead of removing them. And they might have grazed young males on better pastures to prepare them for slaughter faster. But such improvements would have resulted in incremental gains; by themselves they could not repeat the dramatic breakthrough achieved by Argentine ranchers at the turn of the twentieth century. In fact, a similar breakthrough for tropical ranching only began to be developed in Australia in the 1960s based on improved legume-grass pastures, the application of super-phosphate fertilizer, and zebu-European cross breeds. Even then, it proved difficult to export this technology to other tropical regions. One limitation was the scarcity and high cost of super-phosphate fertilizer. Another, in Latin America, was the difficulty of finding appropriate grass-legume combinations.

135 It does seem like there was some ‘unlocked’ potential in native breeds. The manager of the government’s experimental farm in Valledupar noted that the Costeño con cuernos breed show excellent results when they were fed well (Departamento Nacional de Ganadería, 1945, p. 20). Likewise, in the 1940s the Romosinuano steer achieved a weight of 400 kilos in two years in the experimental farm in Montería (Mejía, 1940a, p. 23). Some of this gain, however, was likely the result of earlier crossing with European breeds. By contrast, a Brazilian study from this period noted that creole cattle there, at two years, weighed only 112 kilos (Mejía, 1940b, p. 21).

Because many of the legumes on which the Australian model was based had originated in Latin America, they were subject to a range of diseases and pests in their native environment that did not exist in Australia.

Nonetheless, the problem of Colombian ranching was not fundamentally one of pasture quality, at least in a number of regions. That Colombian ranchers could slaughter cattle at the same weight and at the same age as European breeds in Uruguay in the 1950s is largely testament to the productivity of their pastures (see Table 5.5).\textsuperscript{137} Of course, they could have improved these pastures. But no dramatic breakthrough in Colombian ranching was possible unless ranchers could have imported European beef breeds. The feed focus by livestock experts largely came in the wake of the realization that it would not be possible to increase beef cattle productivity through the introduction of European breeds; and that Colombian ranchers were increasingly turning to the zebu to upgrade their stock. The Australian experience shows that ranchers in tropical areas can compete with their temperate-based counterparts. The tropics is not entirely or forever determinant. But through the mid-twentieth century, at least, Colombia’s tropical lowlands, at one time thought to be propitious for raising cattle, turned out to be a major obstacle in the country’s quest to mimic Argentina’s beef-based prosperity.

\textsuperscript{137}For instance, the fertility of alluvial soils in the Sinú Valley, and a variety of spontaneously-growing legumes, contributed greatly to the good size and performance of its cattle (see Herrán, 1934, p. 330; Navarro, 1935, p. 720; Rodríguez Rosas, 1936b, p. 909; Marulanda Caicedo, 1939; Krogzemis, 1967).
The Social Limits to Productivity Improvements

As I noted in the introduction to this chapter, the failure of Colombia’s first export-oriented meat-packing plant was not determined solely by environmental conditions, but was also rooted in a broader history of social constraints.

First, the history of animal breeding is, to a large degree, socially rather than environmentally determined. Northern European cattle are not ‘naturally’ easier to improve through selective breeding than their tropical counterparts. It is just that, for a variety of reasons, northern Europeans made the effort. The story of productivity improvements in British cattle, for instance, does not begin in the eighteenth century with Bakewell. His efforts, however innovative and important, built upon the prior work of earlier livestock breeders going back to the sixteenth century, if not before, and the importation of improved breeds from Holland.\(^{138}\) The success of the new eighteenth- and nineteenth-century breeds was also dependent on a host of other changes to British agriculture that provided the high-quality forage needed to take advantage of the genetic improvements. Furthermore, the development and diffusion of these large, fast growing cattle were partially tied to ideological aspects of class ascendancy.\(^ {139}\) The social and economic conditions that favored the improvement of European cattle did not exist in Colombia or elsewhere in Latin America. Quite frequently in the Americas, the abundance of space, limited labor, and relatively high ratio of cattle to people militated against greater attention to breeding. And whatever

\(^{138}\) Trow-Smith (1957); Walton (1984).

\(^{139}\) Ritvo (1987).
long history there is to breeding cattle in India, the aim was certainly not more efficient beef production.

Second, the productivity of tropical ranching was not only a function of environmental limits but, as Australian efforts demonstrate, depended on the degree and success of large-scale research projects. Colombian ranchers benefited from some technological developments in the United States and Europe, such as anthrax, blackleg, and brucellosis vaccines and tick-dipping technologies. But such technological transfers were limited to problems that affected both temperate and tropical ranching. Beginning in the 1930s, the Colombian government did begin to fund research on improving livestock, pastures, and disease prevention. But the investment that it was able to make, even if it did bring some benefits, was insufficient to make important improvements. For instance, the experimental farm charged with improving the Costeño con cuernos breed had so few animals (some 200) that the government official in charge of the farm said the efforts were a waste of time.\footnote{Bonilla (1945), p. 20.} Likewise, forage and disease research was also limited by financial and personnel constraints.\footnote{Ministerio de Agricultura y Comercio (1935a), pp. 113-114, 152; Sanclamente et al (1936), p. 892; Ministerio de la Economía Nacional (1939), p. 43; Reyes (1942), pp. 13-18; Departamento Nacional de Ganadería (1943), p. 26; Departamento Nacional de Ganadería (1945), p. 7; Departamento Nacional de Ganadería (1947), p. 7.} The big push in tropical pasture research came with the foundation of the internationally-funded CIAT (Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical) center.
in 1967. Yet even then, the principal focus of its research was on forage plants for the acid soils of the Eastern plains, which was not the center of ranching in the country.\textsuperscript{142}

In a similar fashion, the Colombian government was also limited in its ability to provide assistance through extension or other means. While the government decreed in 1915 that it would subsidize the cost of importing purebred cattle into Colombia, for almost a decade it did not have the funds to make good on the offer.\textsuperscript{143} Likewise, the multiplication of tick-dipping tanks was slowed by the limited funds that the government budgeted to subsidize their construction. In 1935, the Minister of Agriculture and Commerce noted that the low pay and scarcity of vets had prevented efforts to send one to all the regions of the country.\textsuperscript{144} Old Bolívar, the most important cattle-raising department, was the best served with three vets. But that meant that each was responsible for attending rancher inquiries, visiting farms, disseminating information, and other extension work for over 500,000 head of cattle. Such efforts were not in vain, but there was only so much that they could do.

Additionally, the government was not very successful at containing or eradicating numerous cattle diseases despite its attempts. It passed restrictions on moving cattle without proof of vaccination against various diseases. It set up frontier check points to control the importation of cattle into Colombia. It provided free or subsidized vaccines, and tried to inform ranchers of the proper way of disposing of

\textsuperscript{142} Sánchez and Tergas (1979). The idea was to make the Llanos the center of cattle production, however. The logic was that if they could make ranching sufficiently productive in this region, and encourage ranchers to make it the center of cattle raising, this would free-up land in the center of the country for agricultural production.


\textsuperscript{144} Ministerio de Agricultura y Comercio (1935a), p. 153.
infected animals in order to avoid spreading the contagion to other farms. They did
make some progress in reducing the occurrence of some traditional diseases such as
anthrax. The seriousness of the disease, combined with regulations restricting the
movement, convinced many ranchers to apply preventative vaccines. But they could
not convince all ranchers to do so. In the late 1930s, government officials estimated
that ten percent of ranchers still refused to vaccinate against these diseases.\textsuperscript{145} Quite a
bit more were also reluctant to vaccinate against some of the new cattle plagues that
had started to spread. Some of the blame for the government’s limited success at
eradicating or even containing various diseases does lie with ranchers themselves. But
limited funding, inadequate enforcement of existing regulations, and poorly
orchestrated campaigns also played an important role. For instance, when the first case
of Brucellosis was diagnosed in 1927, the government created National Livestock
Sanitary Board in order to prevent the disease from spreading. The effort, however,
was not very successful. The board only met for the first time in 1930. While it
vaccinated 30,528 cows against Brucellosis in 1942, it acknowledged that the number
should have been 120,000.\textsuperscript{146} Inefficient policing also limited the effectiveness of this
and other campaigns: forging vaccination certificates and bribing officials charged
with checking these papers occurred with some frequency.\textsuperscript{147} In a number of ways, the
failed attempt to halt the spread of Brucellosis was the dress-rehearsal for the

\textsuperscript{145} Departamento Nacional de Ganadería (1947), p. 7.
\textsuperscript{146} Departamento Nacional de Ganadería (1943), p. 3.
\textsuperscript{147} Reyes (1942), p. 18.
government’s inability to prevent or at least contain the spread of foot and mouth
disease, which entered Colombia in 1950 and quickly spread around the country.\textsuperscript{148}

To better understand why ranchers did not implement as many changes as they
might have, we also need to examine economics of improvement. In other words, what
were the cost-benefit ratios? Unfortunately, they are difficult to determine due to the
paucity of detailed historical data on productivity gains and production costs. I will
just point out, therefore, various ways that the cost side of the equation was inflated by
the character of the Colombian market, political system, and the size of ranching
operations. Take something as simple as salt, for example. Industry observers
frequently criticized ranchers for not giving their cattle enough. Ranchers countered
that its high cost prevented them from doing so. It is not clear to what degree the
productivity gains from providing more salt, especially outside the fattening stage,
justified the added expense. But salt was more expensive than it needed to be, the
result of the central bank’s monopoly on most salt production in the country. For
years, the bank resisted suggestions to produce denaturalized salt that was not fit for
human consumption – as a way to make salt cheaper for cattle without undermining
the revenue brought in by regular salt – on the grounds that some of this would
undoubtedly be consumed by people as well. Likewise, the relatively high cost of
contracting drilling equipment to open wells limited the ability of many ranchers to

\textsuperscript{148} For Brucellosis, see Ministerio de Industrias (1930), p. 272; Ministerio de Agricultura y
Comercio (1935a), p. 156; Ospina (1940); Perlaza (1941); Departamento Nacional de
Ganadería (1942), pp. 13-19; Cañón (1943). The best account of the arrival of foot and mouth
disease is from U.S. consular records, see NARA, RG 166, Formerly confidential narrative
reports, 1940-1954, Colombia, 1950-1951.
make smaller pastures.\textsuperscript{149} And while the introduction of barbed wire significantly lowered the cost of fencing, the expense of importing and distributing it still placed limits on how much ranchers were willing to use.\textsuperscript{150} Quality issues in various products – vaccines, pasture seeds, mineral mixtures – also sometimes made ranchers reluctant to employ them.\textsuperscript{151} Finally, credit was often expensive and, for small breeders, hard to get.\textsuperscript{152}

Given the cost of increasing productivity, it is possible that many ranchers did not adopt the suggestions pushed by government officials because they were skeptical whether the benefits would outweigh the added expenses and increased risk. In this way, rancher traditionalism can be seen as similar to peasant conservatism with regards to market production and adopting new technologies. While ranchers were thoroughly dependent on the market, they also adopted risk-averse strategies to minimize their susceptibility to fluctuating prices. Furthermore, the cost of such improvements might not have brought sufficient gains to make them worthwhile. In the late-nineteenth century, the benefits of growing alfalfa to cut for hay allowed Nevada ranchers to pay for these expensive fields within five years.\textsuperscript{153} Elsewhere in the U.S. West, upgrading the Texas-based stock with British beef breeds enabled ranchers to cut the time required to produce a steer ready for slaughter by up to half.\textsuperscript{154}

\textsuperscript{149} Ruiz Mesa (1952).
\textsuperscript{150} APNOyC, 232, f148; Anon. (1882); Jiménez (1943); Staffe (1956), p. 48.
\textsuperscript{151} Sacco (1930), p. 468.
\textsuperscript{152} Camacho (1918), p. 145; NARA, RG 59, 1930-1939, 821.6156, “Drop of cattle prices and the effect on the economy of the Dept. of Bolivar,” W. Heard, Nov. 13, 1939; Sociedad de Agricultores del Magdalena (1939); Bernal et al (1939); Guerrero (1942); Oakley (1943); Cañón (1947).
\textsuperscript{153} Young and Sparks (1985).
\textsuperscript{154} Potter (1921).
Such dramatic improvements eluded Colombian ranchers. It was just such difficulties that Lauchlin Currie, the noted development economist, discovered when tried to establish a highly productive dairy farm on the Sabana de Bogotá. Although he successfully reached his productivity goals, the costs of achieving them made the farm unprofitable and he was forced to sell it. His assessment of the beef industry was similar. Although Currie arrived in Colombia highly critical of ranching, after living in the country for some years he began to think that its low productivity was rooted in the market conditions of the country: “The technological backwardness of Colombian ranching is not the fault of its ranchers, but a natural economic consequence of a combination of factors, like the very limited demand, especially for high quality meat and the superabundance of grazing lands…. Until [demand, especially for high quality meat] is a reality, the emphatic advise of national and foreign experts will not modify [ranching] practices.”¹⁵⁵

The nature of the consumer market also limited the incentives of trying to increase productivity by producing steer ready for slaughter at a younger age. In the U.S. and England, the market gave price premiums for younger steers; and it penalized – or might not accept – the stringy and tougher meat from older animals. The benefits of raising British beef breeds, and providing them with the quality feed that they required to reach a slaughter-weight in 24 to 36 months was not only from the increased productivity but the better prices that ranchers received for such animals. Colombian consumers, however, did not demand – and generally could not afford – more tender beef. In fact, the market incentives were just the opposite. The grading

system that developed differentiated animals by weight rather than quality or age. Butchers paid more per kilogram for the largest animals and less for smaller ones.

The emphasis, therefore, was on large and low cost cattle. With the added genetic intransigence of native cattle and the deficient quality of many pastures, the result was a continuation of the three-stage form of production. And since cattle took a long time to raise, the tendency was to put them on the low-cost pastures, which reinforced the slow growth rate. It is not clear where the slow decline in the average age of slaughter over the first half of the twentieth century came from: increased weights at weaning because of better breeding pastures, or the increasing use of better pastures for at least part of the growing stage.\textsuperscript{156} Even if ranchers could have skipped this growing stage and started to fatten steer as they matured, would the savings be greater than the added costs? Without market premiums for higher quality cattle, Colombian ranchers relied only on uncertain productivity gains to entice them to produce cattle more quickly.

Finally, the Colombian market did not push ranchers to increase their productivity. The fact that the country did not produce an abundant supply of meat helped to sustain cattle prices. There were periodic periods of surpluses that found their way to foreign markets. But generally, the domestic market could absorb most production increases. Colombia never had the vast herds of cattle in relation to the human population. In 1915, this ratio was probably just over one to one. By contrast,

\textsuperscript{156} Lorente suggests that was an important drop in the late 1960s, which was the result of two factors: the break up of large cattle estates, which allowed better care; and perhaps more importantly, starting to skip the \textit{levante} stage and fatten steer as they matured to meet the demands of an export market.
around 1890, the ratio in Argentina was almost six to one. Furthermore, the fact that most of the expansion of cattle ranching in Colombia from the mid-nineteenth century was based on clearing the forest to plant pastures meant that initial capital investments were relatively high, which helped to slow the expansion of ranching. Beef also had no real competition in Colombia from other forms of animal protein. Largely because of corn was expensive to produce, pork and chicken cost more than beef. The domestic market, therefore relied fundamentally on beef, which accounted for about 75 percent of the meat diet over much of the twentieth century. The lack of competition and the slow growth of cattle herds, therefore, helped to sustain relatively high cattle prices and limited crises of surplus production. These, in turn, reduced the incentives for Colombian ranchers to recapture falling profit margins by increasing the productivity of their operations.
CHAPTER SIX

SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON THE POLITICS OF RANCHING

In this historical geography of cattle ranching in Old Bolívar between 1850 and 1950, I have sought to understand the dynamics of one of the most important and least understood activities in Colombia. Faced with deeply-entrenched interpretations that I found partial or distorting, I have tried to rethink its logic and purpose. Thus, to explain the expansion and persistence of ranching, I have underlined the significance of its productive character; emphasized the importance of land markets rather than just a simple and unrelenting process of dispossession; pointed out the limited control that ranchers had over peasant workers in the context of the latter’s continued access to land and the relatively strong demand for ranch hands to clear forests and develop pastures; and stressed the incremental yet significant productivity gains that ranchers achieved before 1950 despite the difficulties of ranching in the tropics.

To conclude, I briefly extend this analysis to the political realm, examining the power that ranchers wielded at the local and national level. As with much related to ranching, scholarly accounts frequently endow ranchers with an exaggerated degree of authority and influence. Rural sociologist, T. Lynn Smith, for example, claims that “[s]ocially, economically, and politically [they]…are by far the most important group in Colombia.”¹ Similarly, Yepes asserts that they ruled with “iron control.”² My aim is neither to deny nor explain away the power of ranchers. Instead, I want to start prying

it apart to better understand it how operated. On the one hand, I caution against a repeated tendency to conflate ranchers and the state. As numerous other studies have pointed out, fractions between different levels of government, among elites, and the limits of state authority all complicated the way ranchers, as a group, exercised power. On the other hand, ranchers also had to devise non-repressive ways to ensure an authority they could not always take for granted.

In this chapter, I first address various ways that ranchers did exercise a great deal of power. Next, I explore some of the limits to that power, both at the local and national level. Third, I examine a number of obstacles that hindered the influence of ranchers. I end with some brief reflections on the ways that power operated in ranching regions.

**The Power of Ranchers**

Ranchers exercised considerable power. There are abundant accounts, for example, of the different ways that they used their influence in struggles over land and other resources: letting cattle loose in peasants’ fields to pressure them to give up claims to untitled lands; erecting fences on communal lands to privatize resources; using false documents to evict peasants and claim their property; pressuring them to sell their land, sometimes at below market prices. Through guile and force, ranchers thus consolidated peasant plots, pushing them to the agrarian frontier where this process was repeated over again. In 1945, participants in the Third Labor Conference in Cartagena complained about these “unrelenting persecutions [and evictions] that
our compatriot peasants of this region suffer…at the hands of mayors and landed elites.”

3 When peasants protested, ranchers’ ties to local judges helped them win lawsuits; and they could call on the police to evict and jail supposed squatters. If local officials opposed their will, they maneuvered to have them removed from office.

4 They also operated outside legitimate channels, hiring their own thugs to intimidate peasants and enforce their de facto authority. According to Fals Borda, the “tricks, pressures, exactions, deceits, and deaths…[have] saturated the history of the struggle for land in the entire region [of Old Bolívar].”

The close ties between ranchers and the state underwrote much of their authority. The legislature provided them with favorable laws, such as the infamous matrícula. The police enforced their will. At other times, authorities would look away.

In 1924, Bernardo Ospina complained to Pedro Nel Ospina about the corruption, abuses, and power of local elites in Ayapel:

You know better than anyone that in [Old] Bolívar the rich defraud and enjoy complete freedom even to defend their misdeeds, while the poor are the victims of the former who take advantage of them at will and squeeze them to extract their very last drop of sweat. The main source of this problem lies in the fact that the local political bosses (gamonales) influence the selection of public employees, and since honorability here is a myth, the result is that the current officials are almost entirely the puppets of the rich who manipulate

---


4 In 1876, interested parties obtained a suspension of the decree by the mayor of Corozal, who had tried to retain communal access to land and paths that had been blocked by illegally-constructed fences. Authorities in Cartagena, the capital of the department, later removed the mayor from office and appointed a replacement (Diario de Bolivar, August 3, 1876, no. 1495, pp. 475-476: Informe…Corozal).

them at will and make demands on them that they have to fulfill or risk losing their post. I just learned that they removed the mayor of Ayapel because he committed the crime of trying to fulfill his duty without distinguishing between political bosses and common people.\textsuperscript{6}

Similarly, in 1935, investigative journalist Antolín Díaz wrote that Hacienda Berástegui was a “State within a State,” and that its owners, the Burgos family, “served in congress, the [department] assembly, and municipal councils. The mayors, police, Indian reserves were [their] slaves.”\textsuperscript{7} The hundreds of residents and workers on its estate, he added, also voted as they bided. From such accounts, it is perhaps not surprising that scholars would find that the state and ranchers were effectively one and the same. Fals Borda, for example, concludes that “the bourgeoisie and the landed elites tended to be the same, and between them both they constructed the state: it has been nothing except their appendage.”\textsuperscript{8}

**Some Limits to the Power of Ranchers**

The power of ranchers had limits, however. At the local level, they did not wield complete authority despite the repeated impressions suggesting that they did. Power relations with peasants were highly unequal, but the supposedly iron-handed grip of ranchers was weaker than generally imagined. Episodes of counter-violence could cause ranchers and officials to think twice before acting arbitrarily. Manuel A.

\textsuperscript{6} AGPNO, folder 77, f121.
\textsuperscript{7} Díaz (1935), pp. 79-80.
\textsuperscript{8} Fals Borda (1984), p. 79B.
Pineda, the rancher and speculator who first started claiming parts of the Indian reserve of Jegua as public land, was shot at one night: a warning, that he supposedly heeded, to never return.\(^9\) On March 8, 1905, a group of 16 to 20 men invaded Hacienda Buenavista, burned down the main house, and forced its owners and other residents to flee.\(^10\) In 1876, the governor of Mompox reported that the reluctance of juries to find criminals guilty made it hard to implement justice in the province. Additionally, people took matters into their own hands, intimidating or taking vengeance on officials. That same year, the mayor of Mompox was attacked with a knife in broad daylight and a judge was attacked inside his home with a machete.\(^11\) In similar fashion, in 1875 the governor of Sincelejo noted the difficulty he had maintaining order in San Onofre because criminals just fled to the forest when he arrived, and they returned to continue their retributions – in this case killing various donkeys and horses by machete in the yards of the mayor and secretary – after he left.\(^12\) The residents of various regions in Old Bolívar were also infamous for being “bellicose” (San Antero), “ungovernable” (Mompox), and “insubordinate” (San Onofre).\(^13\) Effective policing was compromised by extremely limited personnel. The governors of Corozal and Mompox complained about “the great difficulty of going

\(^9\) AOFB, Personal archive of Gabriel Cárcamo (the remains of what was the archive of José del Espíritu Santo Cárcamo), Cartagena, June, 1982.

\(^10\) AHC, Gobernación, Hacienda, 1873-1933, Sr. Gobernador del Departamento, March 7, 1905.

\(^11\) Diario de Bolívar, August 16, 1876, no. 1505, p. 515: Informe…Mompox.

\(^12\) Diario de Bolívar, July 29, 1878, no. 1931, p. 1290: Informe…Sincelejo.

\(^13\) AHC, Gobernación, Manuscritos, Distritos Municipios, 1878-1886, folder 15, Gobernador de la provincia de Lorica to Secretario General del Estado, Jan. 17, 1880; and Gobernador de la provincia de Mompox to Secretario General del Estado, July 5, 1880 (f217). Diario de Bolívar, July 29, 1878, no. 1931, p. 1290: Informe…Sincelejo. In the first two cases, however, the governors were pleasantly surprised that the reputation was not entirely deserved. In the latter, the governor noted that, as a result, it was difficult to find anyone willing to accept the post of mayor.
after and apprehending criminals since the municipal council, due to the poverty of its revenue, cannot maintain a police force” and the people who provided unpaid service were not available when needed. This made cattle rustling and acts retaliation a nagging problem in the countryside. The need to impose the matrícula law, and its incomplete effectiveness, further demonstrates some of the limits of ranchers’ power (see chapter three).

The example of Bernardo Ospina’s frustrated efforts to intervene in local affairs in Ayapel demonstrates that, at the local level, the largest ranchers were not always the most influential. Ospina was not only one of the most important ranchers in the area, but boasted political connections to the very center of power in Colombia. Local officials, probably to ingratiate themselves with Pedro Nel Ospina, had earlier offered to grant him the status of local resident, which would give his cattle operation grazing privileges on communal pastures in the vast savannas and ciénaga of Ayapel. What is curious is that Bernardo Ospina had a difficult time getting them to honor their offer. Likely, the reluctance was a jealous effort to keep powerful outsiders at arm’s length. And even though the Communal Land Board (Junta de Terrenos Comunales) finally acquiesced, the Ospinas were never really confident in these

---

14 Diario de Bolívar, August 16, 1876, no. 1505, p. 515: Informe…Mompos; Diario de Bolívar, July 28, 1884, no. 3395, pp. 463-465: Informe…Corozal. See also Gaceta de Bolívar, Nov. 2, 1862, no. 236, pp. 1-3: Informe…Mahates; Diario de Bolívar, Aug. 12, 1878, no. 1943, pp. 1338-1339, Informe…Lorica and Informe Ciénaga de Oro.

15 AHC, Gobernación, Hacienda, 21, 1873-1933, Sr. Gobernador del Departamento, no. 408, March 7, 1905; AHC, Gobernación, Hacienda, 1873-1933, Sr. Gobernador, Sincé, June 17, 1905; AHC, Gobernación, Justicia, 1905-1933, Juez del circuito de Chinú, Jan. to Dec, 1911; López and Rodriguez (1914); Sociedad de Agricultores del Magdalena (1937a); de la Espriella (1939); Meléndez et al (1939); Vinasco (1944); Jiménez (1947a); Vallejo (1947); Mora Dávila, (1948); Asociación Colombiana de Ganaderos (1948).

16 APNOyC, Cáceres, I34.
rights. In the end, they preferred to develop another area instead of risking dependence on uncertain access to communal resources. Despite his economic might and political connections, Bernardo Ospina’s local influence was circumscribed. When he wrote to the governor of Old Bolívar trying to get him interested in reforming local government offices, the governor thought his interests emerged primarily out of the dispute he was having with Ayapel’s Communal Land Board and was unwilling to intervene.\footnote{APNOyC, Cáceres, f187.}

Bernardo Ospina might set aside horses to offer as gifts to local political bosses to secure their favor. But it was not obvious how he might create his own clientelistic network to gain a local power base. For one, he was from Antioquia and an outsider. The distance this implied may have been rooted in the reluctance of Antioqueños to commit themselves to life in Old Bolivar. (The Sirio-Lebanese, by contrast, thoroughly integrated themselves into the region and politics.) Such relative aloofness may have prevented him and other Antioqueños from developing their own local power bases. With weak influence over local government, Bernardo Ospina had limited ability to grant access to resources, provide jobs, confer favors, and other means around which such clientelistic networks turned. His political contacts may have been too distant and too high to give him real influence in local affairs (especially as long as the arm of the central state remained relatively weak).

Additionally, the limits of ranchers’ political influence at the national level are quite surprising given that they were supposed to be the most powerful in the country. Ranchers frequently complained about the difficulty they had getting the government to pass legislation favorable to the industry. The high price of salt was a constant
concern that, through the 1940s, they were unable to fully resolve. Noel Ramírez, a congressman from the department of Tolima who tried to get the legislature to authorize the production of denatured salt for cattle, only found an “Aragonite stubbornness” among his colleagues. While ranchers did recognize some assistance, by and large, and especially compared to that received by other sectors, they felt that the government did little to foment cattle raising. “Government officials have always viewed the cattle industry with absolute indifference,” editorialized a ranching journal from Old Bolívar in 1935. Another wrote that “the most glacial indifference regarding ranching affairs reigns in the capital.”

Rather than just neglect, ranchers also periodically fought legislation that they felt threatened to undermine the cattle industry. One key moment, which helped coalesce a political consciousness among ranchers, was the 1933 treaty with Venezuela that promised to open Colombia’s borders to the duty-free import of cattle. This was one of the concessions the Colombian government was required to make in order for Venezuela to allow Colombian goods (particularly coffee from Santander) to be exported through the Gulf of Maracaibo. Ranchers feared that cheap Venezuelan cattle would flood into Colombia, causing prices to fall and taking away a good part of their market. Ranchers in Old Bolívar were quick to organize, and they

---

20 Federación de Ganaderos de Bolívar (1935b). See also Federación de Ganaderos de Bolívar (1935a); Támara López (1935).
21 Federación de Ganaderos de Bolívar (1936), p. 1875
22 Asamblea de Ganaderos de Bolívar (1935b); Chadid et al (1935). Also see ABOV, Venezuela tratado 1933.
found strong support in Antioquia and Caldas. Through newspaper publicity, a letter and telegram campaign to government officials, and presumably personal entreaties, Colombian ranchers were able to get a restriction imposed on the number of Venezuelan cattle allowed to enter – but only to 25,000 annually.\textsuperscript{23} While they managed to exert some influence, they failed to stop or radically reform the treaty.\textsuperscript{24} Although unfavorable exchange rates ultimately limited the number of Venezuelan cattle imported, the specter that government officials would throw open the country’s doors to large-scale imports continued to haunt the industry for the next couple decades.\textsuperscript{25}

Over the years, ranchers had limited success protesting against a variety of other threats as well. They struggled against periodic prohibitions on the slaughter of cows, or substantial increases in the slaughter tax, designed to force ranchers to increase the size of their herds. In 1927, rancher Martín Mejía expressed his concerns to Bernardo Ospina regarding one such proposal:

\begin{quote}
You who know this business so well, will understand that if they do not allow the slaughter or the spaying of female cattle, the industry will be notably damaged since it will cause an incurable build up and depreciation of cows and the scarcity of pasture with which to sustain male cattle; this will give them very cheap but very bad meat and at the cost of ruining the industry and its industrialists.\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{23} Chadid et al (1935).
\textsuperscript{24} Federación de Ganaderos de Bolívar (1936).
\textsuperscript{25} Herrera (1939); Jiménez (1939).
\textsuperscript{26} ABOV, 1928-1930, Mejía to Ospina, Dec. 30, 1927. See also ACER, D123-286, Carlos Escobar to Carlos E. Restrepo, March 13, 1923.
Ranchers spent years trying to revise a surplus profits tax implemented in the mid-1930s. They felt particularly slighted since the coffee, mining and banana industries all received exemptions.27 Their complaints that the cattle sector, faced certain “ruin and death,” having just started to recover from the depths of the Depression, fell on deaf ears.28 Their frustration was further exacerbated by the ill-conceived ways in which the government calculated these profits: based on the unrealized annual increase in the value of animals instead of their actual sale price.29 Ranchers and other rural elites also had great difficulty getting the government (departmental or national) to form a rural mounted police to deal with insecurity and cattle theft.30 In 1939, the Rancher Federation of Bolívar (Federación de Ganaderos de Bolívar) stated that the “absolute insecurity with regard to the interests of ranchers…could be resolved with the creation of a rural police force at the disposition of the Federation.”31 While some departments formed their own rural police forces, they remained surprisingly small. The department of Cauca formed a ‘force’ of eight officers in 1939.32 The neighboring department of Valle assigned 30 officers to rural service the year before. While ranchers and other landowners complained that this needed to be raised to 200, the department assembly said that they did not have the

27 Federación de Ganaderos de Bolívar (1935a; 1935b; 1936, p. 871).
29 Federación de Ganaderos de Bolívar (1938); Asamblea de Ganaderos de Bolívar (1939), p. 17; Federación de Ganaderos de Bolívar (1939b), p. 126; Congreso Nacional de Ganaderos (1947), pp. 16-17.
30 Federación de Ganaderos de Bolívar (1939a); Sociedad de Agricultores del Magdalena (1937a); Sociedad de Agricultores del Magdalena (1937b), p. 62; Velasquez (1938), p. 11; Moncaleano (1938), p. 35; Gobernación del Valle del Cauca (1938); Pradilla (1940); Mora Dávila (1948); Isaza (1948), p. 28; Jiménez (1947b); Almanaque Creditario (1947).
31 Federación de Ganaderos de Bolívar (1939a).
32 Caicedo (1941), p. 6-7.
funds for such an increase.\textsuperscript{33} Nationally, it was only in 1943, during President Alfonso López’s second administration, that the Minister of Agriculture, Pedro Castro Monsalvo, managed to push through legislation to create such a force.\textsuperscript{34}

There were also important tensions between different levels of the state. The interests of the local, regional and national officials were not always the same. Furthermore, the national state, in particular, was not simply at the beck and call of local elites. Congress passed laws to protect the interests of peasants in their struggles against land speculators.\textsuperscript{35} Local elites could not always count on the courts to rule in their favor. For example, although the community of San Basilio de Palenque struggled to prevent local ranchers from taking over their communal lands, it won an important lawsuit in 1884 that served to protect its property rights at least through the early-1970s.\textsuperscript{36} The problem peasants faced was that ranchers and other elites often had more resources and endurance: they could look for more sympathetic government officials to back their claims and continue to put extra-legal pressure on peasants to wear them down. Or they could ignore the directives descending from higher levels. Bernardo Ospina noted that even the governor’s office in Cartagena had little influence in Ayapel: “here neither the laws nor the ordinances are enforced.”\textsuperscript{37} While the incidents in which the state backed peasants against local elites may have been relatively rare, to simply collapse state and elite interests obscures important tensions between them. Only by paying attention to these divisions can we understand the land

\textsuperscript{33} Aragón (1938).
\textsuperscript{34} Asociación Colombiana de Ganaderos (1949).
\textsuperscript{35} LeGrand (1986).
\textsuperscript{36} de Friedmann, 90.
\textsuperscript{37} APNOyC, Cáceres, f362.
reform efforts of the 1930s and 1960s. Although they were limited and short lived, demonstrating the power of landed elites and the alliances they were able to forge, to write off such fractures is to misunderstand the dynamics of politics in Colombia.

**SOME OBSTACLES THAT LIMITED THE POWER OF RANCHERS**

If ranching was such an important component of the economy, and many of the country’s elite owned cattle, why did ranchers have such trouble influencing the national government? One obstacle that ranchers faced was the rising power of urban-industrial interests. Scholars of agrarian history in Colombia generally point to 1927 as the first important break between landed elites and an urban and coffee-based bourgeoisie. As the economic boom of the 1920s increased the demand for foodstuffs, which the agrarian sector had trouble supplying, the government reacted to rapidly rising prices by implementing the “Emergency Food Law,” which reduced or eliminated the tariffs that had protected Colombian agriculture. Landed interests were irate, claiming that the imports discouraged local production and undermined economic growth. While ranchers were not directly affected by this law – the threat to their interests came in 1933 when the government agreed to eliminate the tariff on cattle imports from Venezuela – the fundamental division between urban-cum-coffee and rural interests was the same. In 1939, Alfredo García Cadena, president of the

---

38 Bejerano (1975a, 1975b, 1975c); Machado (1981); Moncayo (1986).
Sociedad de Agricultores de Colombia, the landed elite’s (including ranchers) political organization, ranted against the “imperialism of the creole industrialist.”

Over the following decades, increasing concern for consumers, who had started to become a more potent political force, also shaped the government’s attitudes toward the cattle industry. As the price of beef rose, officials berated ranchers for slaughtering cows that could have been used to increase their herds. (They raised the slaughter tax on cows, pushed to prohibit the slaughter of most cows altogether, and threatened to import cattle from Venezuela to make up production shortfalls.) Ranchers argued that the real culprits of rising prices were the high taxes on cattle and the large number of intermediaries involved in the cattle trade, who García Cadena called “multi-headed dragons that…submit the consumer to abstinence and fasting.”

But their pleas found little reception.

The fact that cattle were not an important foreign exchange earner also undermined the influence of ranchers at the national level. While there were moments of fairly significant exports, they were brief and never established solid base. After the failure of the meat-packing plant in the 1920s, legislators may have lost interest or faith in the possibilities of ranching. Or rather, many officials may have started to view ranchers as a retrograde lot who were both privileged and incapable of modernizing. Instead of simply accepting the argument of ranchers that intermediaries

---

40 Ibid., p. 9.
were the source of rising prices, many officials blamed the “lack of a ranching culture” in Colombia as the fundamental issue.  

Ranchers had an image problem that worked against them. Congressman Ramírez remarked that, in their fight against the surplus profit tax, the opposition “painted ranchers as the most fortunate beings in the land. Nobody considered the small-scale ranchers and only went against the large ranchers who do not properly constitute a large percentage in this country. Do you think that, with these prejudices, it is at all possible that they will provide salt for animals at fair prices in order to save this industry?” Similarly, “Congress did not take us seriously,” he reported, when ranchers tried to get legislators to unify slaughter taxes around the country. And in 1947, Alejandro Angel Escobar, president of the recently-formed national rancher’s association, complained that the cattle industry remained the “foundlings” of government assistance because of the view that it was rich and did not need support.

Ranchers acknowledged their limited political influence and partly blamed themselves. In the face of their failure to reform the Colombo-Venezuelan treaty of 1933, the Rancher Federation of Bolívar lamented that “there does not exist solidarity, common aims and aspirations among our ranchers, nor anything that makes them strong.” In 1938, José Velásquez emphasized the importance of forming a national federation of ranchers, like that of the coffee industry, that “would take charge of

41 Abondano Herrera (1940).
42 Ramírez (1936).
43 Ibid.
44 Asociación Colombiana de Ganaderos (1947), p. 3. See also Ángel (1947); Ministerio de Industrias (1930), p. xli.
45 Federación de Ganaderos de Bolívar (1936), p. 875.
creating a ranching consciousness that the country so needs."\textsuperscript{46} While ranchers made some progress in this regard, the leaders of the nascent Colombian Association of Ranchers (\textit{Asociación Colombiana de Ganaderos}) still complained, in 1947, that it remained weak because of “the lack of resources due to the lack of interest and indifference of the country’s ranchers.”\textsuperscript{47}

Part of the problem that ranchers faced in forming a sense of collective interests was their relative isolation. Travel was difficult well into the twentieth century. Nearly all ranchers sold their animals on the farm. Even when they resided in a small town, they had limited contact with other ranchers. And what contact they might have had with ranchers from other districts was often mediated by competition for resources. The first cattle fairs in Old Bolívar, which started to bring ranchers from different parts of the department together, only began in the 1940s. In fact, the Rancher Federation of Bolívar encouraged these developments precisely to help form wider class consciousness among ranchers.

Additionally, there were important divisions within the industry itself. Breeding, raising, and fattening cattle often had different needs and interests. Limited government assistance pitted different kinds of ranchers against each other. For example, while most industry observers agreed that breeding needed the most support, breeders had to struggle with fatteners for access to credit. Similarly, the way that the government calculated ranching profits affected the various stages or production unequally. Regional divisions added another layer of tension. Congressman Aquiles

\textsuperscript{46} Velásquez (1938), p. 22.
\textsuperscript{47} Ángel (1947), p. 25; Federación de Ganaderos de Bolívar (1935b); Federación de Ganaderos de Bolívar (1936); Sociedad de Agricultores del Valle del Cauca (1948), p. 2.
Arrieta, arguing against the Colombo-Venezuelan trade treaty of 1933, noted that the proposed importation of 25,000 cattle was not just to satisfy the needs of Cúcuta, since that province only consumed some 6,000 steer annually. Influential ranchers from that district, he remarked, wanted to fatten and sell the rest elsewhere, taking away markets from Colombian-raised cattle:

In Cúcuta there is no ranching, only fatteners, and the business of fattening is not the cattle industry, and it does not need protection; it is the breeding and raising industry that needs it. It is the 48 months of breeding and raising that defines the character of the industry, not the 4 or 6 months of fattening. 48

These regional and productive phase-based divisions can also been in the reaction by ranchers from Old Bolívar to an ordinance passed by the Assembly of Antioquia requiring that cattle entering the department be quarantined until they could be tested for a variety of diseases. This requirement, they complained, was actually an underhanded attempt by the rich cattle fatteners of Antioquia, including the governor and the treasury secretary, to increase their leverage in the purchase of cattle from Old Bolívar. 49 As beef prices rose rapidly in the 1940s, the growing recriminations between breeders and fatteners, further intensified these divisions. 50

Furthermore, if we want to understand the exercise of power in the Colombian countryside, and the difficulty ranchers had forming a more effective national organization, we cannot ignore the persistent conflicts between ranchers themselves.

50 Ramírez (1936).
While it is important to emphasize the long history of struggle between peasants and ranchers, this was not the only axis of conflict: neither peasants nor landed elites identified solely with their class interests. A good deal of the tension in the countryside arose between elites. Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. had some trouble with peasant colonizers, but it is surprising how rarely such conflicts appear in their correspondence. By contrast, extended lawsuits with various other elites were of much more concern. It is possible that peasants did not have the resources to trouble them much while other elites did. But that, in part, is the point: inter-elite conflict was very real. Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. accused the Villegas brothers, ranchers with whom they did business, of knocking down their fences; they told their ranch managers to be wary of incursions into their properties by neighboring hacendados; they fought a host of lawsuits over property rights; and they incurred the enmity of many ranchers by monopolizing various cattle trails. They also took great pains to keep their business operations as secret as possible. Additionally, the entrenched partisanship of Colombian politics both reflected such fractures and deepened them. For example, in 1865, ranching elites from San Benito Abad, along the San Jorge River, clashed during an election. Manuel F. Tovío, Felipe de la Ossa, and 12 to 14 other men armed with pistols, machetes, and sticks, violently interrupted the elections that were underway and threatened to kill the ranchers-cum-officials, Pío A. Morón and


52 APNOyC, 200, f185; 200, ff206-207.
Francisco J. Alvis, charged with overseeing them.\textsuperscript{53} Similarly, in 1905 the prefect of Magangué, along the Magdalena River, tried to dispel complaints that he only prosecuted Conservatives.\textsuperscript{54} Historian Mary Roldán also points out how cattle theft in northern Antioquia during La Violencia, in the 1950s, was principally undertaken between ranchers of opposing parties.\textsuperscript{55} To understand power in the Colombian countryside, therefore, it is important not only to look at landed elite-peasant relations.

In similar fashion, the influence that ranchers had depended on the larger political networks in which they were enmeshed. In a different situation but with parallels, historian Michael Jiménez stresses the importance of examining networks of power, and how they formed and operated, rather than assuming that elites, by their very wealth or landholdings, automatically wielded power at the local level. Jiménez demonstrates how the Liberal coffee elite of Cundinamarca lost their struggle with peasant tenants over land rights in the 1920s and 1930s in part because they had not developed local political and patronage networks in the areas where their estates were located. They were Liberals in an era of Conservative hegemony, and thus lacked access to much of the political and financial resources to create such clientelistic networks; and they spent a good part of their time in Bogotá, attending to other businesses and pursuits, which also limited their ability to develop stronger bases of support at the local level.\textsuperscript{56} Similarly, Mary Roldán notes how the large Conservative ranchers along Antioquia’s periphery were unable to control the violence unleashed by

\textsuperscript{53} Gaceta de Bolívar, Nov. 19, 1865, no. 394: Informe…Chinú.
\textsuperscript{54} AHC, Gobernación, Asamblea, 1894-1924, Prefecto de Magangué to Srio de Gobierno, 1905.
\textsuperscript{55} Roldán (2002).
\textsuperscript{56} Jiménez (1995).
the Conservative followers of Laureano Gómez as the latter attempted to extend their control over these traditionally Liberal zones.\textsuperscript{57} We cannot just assume that elites could simply exercise power because they were elites: their success depended a good deal on their position within larger networks of power and resources.

**EXERCISING POWER: WRAPPING UP**

The point I have tried to make in this chapter, and throughout this study, is that the common stereotypes about ranchers do not entirely hold up under close scrutiny. Ranchers did wield power and influence, but they did not control the state, especially at the national level. As many other scholars have emphasized, the state, even in a relatively poor and predominately rural society like Colombia before 1950, is rarely monolithic and reducible to a single set of class interests. It was not the “appendage” of ranchers and other landed elites. Even at the local level, ranchers did not rule with unhindered authority. Political divisions created some space for less privileged groups who also asserted themselves in more subtle ways and periodic outbursts. There was, additionally, no simple correlation between size and power, as Fals Borda’s “Law of Three Steps” implies.

Ultimately, however, the question is not whether or not ranchers had power. They obviously did, even if it was more circumscribed than often suggested. The question is how ranchers exercised power and to what effect? While a more thorough answer requires additional research, here are a few thoughts in the time being. Clearly,

\textsuperscript{57} Roldán (2002).
their influence over state officials, even if limited, was critical. But it also seems that the limited reach of the state, rather than simply their “control” over it, afforded ranchers a good deal of latitude locally. As officials from central, departmental, and provincial governments noted over the years, it was often hard for them to exercise much control over local powers and practices. One source of ranchers’ power, then, was the lack of effective state authority. Sometimes the state sanctioned the private use of force and discipline, such as the use of the stocks on haciendas. At other times, it merely turned a blind eye. But the ranchers’ power also arose among the gaps, geographic and temporal, of the state’s own authority: the limited reach of a poor, weak state enabled, and sometimes encouraged, ranchers to take matters into their own hands.58

Ranchers, however, could not exercise power locally through force alone; they also relied on social and clientelistic relations. In the strife-prone nineteenth century, the ability of ranchers to offer some protection to their permanent residents, from the violence and forced recruitment, gave them leverage. Their ability to grant favors, assistance, or provide access to resources, whether personally or acting as an intermediary to the state, also provided them with significant influence.59 This sort of clientelism did not only exist between ranchers and peasants but permeated social relations throughout Old Bolívar. In 1941, for example, U.S. consular officials in Cartagena worried about the influence of fascist Spanish priests in Old Bolívar. They operated with the assistance of Sirio-Lebanese merchant-ranchers who, in turn, were

59 Kalmanovitz (1989); Reyes (1978).
beholden to the Catholic Church and the Bishop of Cartagena due to the liberal credit that it granted them in their livestock transactions.\textsuperscript{60} Finally, the personalistic relations between rancher and peasant that many have noted in Old Bolívar, and against which Pedro Nel Ospina & Cía. warned its managers to avoid, was yet another manner to exercise power without relying on a heavy hand. Ranchers dangled carrots rather than only threatened to hit with sticks.

\textsuperscript{60} NARA, RG 84, 1939-1943 (Formerly classified), Colombia, Cartagena, “Activities of Spanish priests in the Dept. of Bolívar,” S.C. Memo, Oct. 25, 1941.
WORKS CITED


Arrieta, Aquiles (1935). Discurso pronunciado por el honorable Senador Aquiles Arrieta, al discutirse el proyecto de ley que autoriza la celebración de un acuerdo comercial con Venezuela. *Ganadería de Bolívar*, 3 (28-29), 801-820.


Bejerano, Jesús Antonio (1975c). El fin de la economía exportadora y los orígenes del problema agrario III. *Cuadernos Colombianos*, 2 (8), 541-633.


Bernal, Washington (1943). Una Cruzada en defensa del ternero. La Vida Rural, 4 (42), 9-10


Camacho Roldán, Salvador (1946 [1900]). Mis Memorias. Bogotá: Editorial ABC.
Camacho Roldán, Salvador (1973 [1890]). *Notas de Viaje (Colombia y Estados Unidos de América).* Bogotá: Banco de la República.


D'Orsonville, Mario E. (1931). La garrapata, enfermedades, perdidas que ocasiona y su erradicación. *Suplemento al Boletín de Agricultura*, 4 (2),1-31

D'Orsonville, Mario E. (1932). La garrapata, enfermedades, perdidas que ocasiona y su erradicación [con’t.]. *Suplemento al Boletín de Agricultura*, 4 (17), 1-34.


de la Torre, Ricardo (1918). Importante carta de un experto sobre la ‘castración de las vacas’. *Boletín Agrícola, 1* (10), 442-443.


Federación de Ganaderos de Bolívar (1939a). Informe de la Junta Directiva de la Federación de Ganaderos de Bolívar a la Asamblea de Ganaderos. Ganadería de Bolívar, 6 (57), 5-12.


Federación de Ganaderos de Bolívar and Alberto H. Torres (1939). Importante correspondencia con la Superintendencia Bancaria (Federación de Ganaderos de Bolívar). Ganadería de Bolívar, 6 (58), 11-25.


García, Pablo (1915), Fiebre de Texas (letter from Pablo García A. to D. Enrique Coronado, Director of the Oficina de Información de Colombia, Washington DC). *Revista Agrícola*, 1 (6), 342-344


Hamilton, John Potter (1993 [1827]). *Viajes por el Interior de las Provincias de Colombia.* Bogotá: Banco de la República, Biblioteca V Centenario Colcultura.


466


Herrera, Blas (1939). A miembros de la Comisión de Aduanas y Agricultura, de Blas Herrera Anzoatigui (Sección de Obras Públicas, Agricultura y Ganadería). *Ganadería de Bolívar*, 6 (60), 4-6.


Jiménez, Rodrigo (1947b). La sociedad de ganaderos del Llano. El Ganado, 1 (1), 18-21


Julián, Antonio (1951 [c. 1770]). La Perla de la América, Provincia de Santa Marta. Reconocida, observada y expuesta en discursos históricos a mayor bien de la Católica monarquía, formento del comercio de España, y de todo el Nuevo Reino de Granada, e incremento de la cristiana religión entre las naciones bárbaras que subsisten todavía rebeldes en la provincia. Bogotá: Ministerio de Educación Nacional.

Junta Departamental de Obras Públicas de Nariño (1908). Acuerdo Número 4 que relamenta la recaudación de la contribución personal establecida por la Ley 60 de 1905. Revista del Ministerio de Obras Públicas y Fomento, 3 (3), 1-3.


Knight, Alan (1986). Mexican peonage: what is was and why was it? Journal of Latin American Studies, 18 (1), 41-74.

Knight, J. W. (1940). The Jesse Knight Family; Jesse Knight, His Forebears and Family. Salt Lake City: The Deseret News Press.


López, Alejandro and Jorge Rodríguez (1914). Estadística de Antioquia. Medellín: Imprenta de 'Gaceta Antioqueña'.


Mejía, José María (1943). El fondo ganadero de Antioquia será banco. La Vida Rural, 5 (49), 20-22.

Mejía, Santiago (1940a). El ganado Romosinuano. La Vida Rural, 2 (14), 15-23.


Oakley, R. Kenneth (1943). In NARA, Record Group 166, 1942-1945, Colombia, “Cattle raising and related industries in the Department of Bolivar, Colombia,” July 31.


Oficina de Estadística Nacional (1875). *Anuario General de Estadística de los Estados Unidos de Colombia.* Bogotá: Imprenta de Medardo Rivas.


Ospina Pérez, Rafael (1918b). La actual crisis mundial ganadera y su influencia sobre la ganadería antioqueña. *Boletín Agrícola*, 1 (8), 281-287.


Ospina, Germán (1939b). La garrapata, los perjuicios que causa y los baños garrapaticidas. *Boletín de Ganadería*, 1 (6), 19-23.


Pineda, Manuel A. (1866) Informe de la comisión de revisión a quien pasó el proyecto de lei sobre derecho de degüello. Gaceta de Bolívar, 454 (Nov. 4), 1-3.


Ruiz de Londoño, N. and P. Pinstrup-Anderson (1975). *Descripción de factorores asociados con bajos rendimientos de maíz en fincas pequeñas de tres*

Sacco, Victorio (1930). Segunda circular a los agricultores del Tolima. *Boletín de Agricultura*, 3 (8), 463-471.


Terán, José Ignacio (1906a). Raza normando. Revista Nacional de Agricultura, 1 (9), 142-147.

Terán, José Ignacio (1906b). Ganado normando. Revista Nacional de Agricultura, 1 (14), 298-299.

Terán, José Ignacio (1906c). Mejora de raza. Revista Nacional de Agricultura, 1 (14), 310-312.

Terán, José Ignacio (1907). Nuestra primitiva raza de ganado. Revista Nacional de Agricultura, 2 (3), 81-82.

Terán, José Ignacio (1917). Mejora de las razas por la selección (J. I. Terán to Luis E. Jaramillo). Boletín Agrícola, 1 (4), 208-214.


Virviescas, Francisco (1931). La campaña contra la tripanosomiasis bovina en la costa. *Boletín de Agricultura*, 4 (9-12), 523:


