



# “TWILIGHT OF AN ERA”

## Native Cattle in the Longleaf Forest

*By Charles M. Simon, Covington County Extension Agent*

**A**rtist Wes Hardin recently completed painting another mural in downtown Andalusia, bringing the total to eleven ‘public’ works of art. One of these in particular was created to recall the region’s unique forest history. An 80-x-14-foot mural was commissioned to help people remember an era when the Spanish-origin cattle grazed the understory of the vast longleaf pine forest of the Gulf Coast. This old breed of cattle gave meat, hides, and tallow, as well as draft animals to a succession of owners, from the Spanish cattle ranches and missions of Florida, to the Southeastern Native Americans, and finally to settlers of the newly-formed United States.

Entitled “Twilight of an Era,” the new mural depicts the historical period of 1890-1910. During this time span, ‘old growth’ timber, predominately longleaf pine, was rapidly being harvested, opening up the land as a result. The pace of the introduction of new breeds of cattle picked up momentum as the ‘tick barrier’ was gradually eliminated (thanks to federal and state cattle tick eradication programs across the Southern United States), and the use of pastures and fences was being promoted by a new generation of agricultural progressives. The old free-ranging ‘native’ cattle were being cross-bred or eliminated completely from the

farm. By the 1960s, only a few of the pure native cattle survived on rangeland owned by families, such as Dewey and Okla Barnes of Covington County, who still saw value in the breed.

The mural portrays a young boy ‘salting’ his family’s free-ranging native cattle. The old growth longleaf pine forest has had its understory ‘freshened’ by a recent burn, while the cattle are grazing new-growth native grasses such as wiregrass and blue-stem, along with other recovering understory plants. Note that the cattle are ‘marked’ by having their ears cut in specific ways to denote ownership, a practice of the period. Brands were also used, but curiously not as much in Covington County. Carried out when the young calves were caught, ear marking was easier and permanent. The type mark and brand chosen were registered in one’s name at the local courthouse. Today, cattle ear marks are no longer utilized as an indication of ownership. Only hot brands and ear tattoos are now recognized by the State of Alabama.

The young boy’s horse, carrying a surplus McClellan saddle and old quilt used as a pad, along with the family dog, look on as he pours salt into a ‘lick log.’ Hollowed-out trough cavities in these logs were filled with coarse salt which was essential to the cattle and helped keep them in an area. The family’s dog is an example of an all-purpose farm ‘cur’ dog that was used for hunt-



ing, gathering, and/or catching of cattle. Their canine fierceness intimidated the cattle to bunch together and forced straying cattle back to the group so they might be driven to another location. The dogs could also grab straying cattle by the muzzle or ear for additional control. Examples of these dogs included black mouth curs, Catahoula curs, mountain curs, or any other mixed-breed cur-like dogs that were trained to do this herding-type work.

The mural is not only a colorful illustration of the lifestyle and material culture of a people, but also tells a story of a type of forest range management that used fire and cattle grazing to provide income to rural people that were here a century ago. Our history along the Gulf-Coast was not that of the ‘Plantation South’ but rather of the small, independent ‘yeoman’ farmer/stockman who made his living utilizing the resources that the longleaf pine forest provided. A distinct culture arose and thrived for generations. Hopefully, their contributions to our county and region will not be forgotten.

Today, many see the need to bring longleaf pine back to its rightful prominence in our Southern forestlands, along with the original natural understory described by early travelers through the region as “vast grasslands under forest.” Longleaf forests are being replanted, accompanied by a return of prescribed fire used liberally for promoting

timber growth and understory restoration by controlling invasive plants. Also, new groups of enthusiasts are trying to save the old lines of native cattle from disappearing. Today, they are called ‘Cracker Cattle’ and ‘Pineywood Cattle,’ depending on the family lineage. It seems to have come full circle!

Some cattle producers still allow limited access to their forestlands for shade, water, and grazing for undergrowth control. Others have even begun using the proven forest/pasture combination called ‘silvopasture.’ This forest management technique uses widely-spaced pines that allow a significant amount of sunlight to support a pasture of bahia grass or Bermuda grass to grow beneath the pine canopy. Silvopasture provides a long-term investment in pine tree production and short-term cash flow from cattle.

Finally, a question that is asked by many, “Why is the calf painted outside of the mural?” If you raise cattle, you know! It has to do with calves and fences.



The “Twilight of an Era” mural was made possible by contributions from the Alabama State Council on the Arts, Covington County Cattlemen’s Association, the Covington County Forestry Committee, the Solon and Martha Dixon Foundation, Dr. and Mrs. James Barnes, Mr. Albert Cravey, and in memory of Charles (Chas) H. Simon.†