

Global Cattle Networks: A Study of Tropical Cattle Raising and Its Emergence within Postwar Development Strategies

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Abstract

The following is a report of multiple weeklong research trips that I conducted at the Rockefeller Archive Center over the past year. In particular, it covers research related to my dissertation project on the expansion of the cattle industry during the post-World War II period. Access to the Nelson Rockefeller papers, International Basic Economy Corporation (IBEC) records, David Rockefeller papers, Rockefeller Foundation records, and Winthrop Rockefeller papers provided me the opportunity to trace the underlying social and material networks of the industry, especially in terms of cattle breeding and ranch development. Moreover, the scientific reports from the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) and Ford Foundation (FF) archives provided me with insights into the increasingly global nature of cattle production, the role of beef in development projects, and the ways in which such institutional knowledge is deeply connected to specific local environmental conditions. Throughout this report, I argue that by more clearly understanding the complex networks that were motivated and constructed through Rockefeller financing, scholars of 20th century livestock and meat production can gain a deeper sense of the vital role that cattle have played in shaping mid-20th century agricultural practices in the U.S. and abroad. Moreover, such records highlight the importance of continuing to promote histories that de-emphasize western centers of power as arbiters of science and development. As I reveal in this report, projects sponsored by individual Rockefeller family members, as well as by the RF, FF, and IBEC were negotiated processes that were constrained by particular social and environmental conditions.

Report

Over the course of the middle decades of the 20th century, beef production grew exponentially. While the majority of scholarly attention has focused on the centrality of American beef packers in this process, the collections at the Rockefeller Archive Center demonstrate the important ways that cattle raising and beef production simultaneously rested on global networks of developmental economics and animal sciences. Reports from the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation identify the critical ways that local extension offices and universities aided in the development of successful cattle raising systems and highlight the significance of considering ecological conditions in such research. The Winthrop Rockefeller papers provide a key lens into Hereford breeding practices at Winrock Farms and suggest the critical role that sociopolitical networks played in the success of this endeavor. The correspondence related to the Rockefeller brothers' investment in a large Brazilian ranch, found predominantly within David Rockefeller's papers, reveals the important role of American industry and finance in shaping the emergence of what has become one of the world's largest beef producing nations. Ultimately, in this report, I will argue that by more clearly understanding the complex networks that motivated and were constructed through Rockefeller financing, scholars of 20th century livestock and meat production can gain a deeper sense of the industry's contribution to shaping mid-20th century agricultural development in the U.S. and abroad.

In this paper, I will review findings of my research at the Rockefeller Archive Center through two different conceptual frameworks related to the cattle industry. First, I review records detailing the multiple ranching operations in which the Rockefeller brothers invested during the late 1950's and early 1960's. From these locations, a concerted and coordinated effort to improve breeding practices was implemented. However, records from these sites also reveal the difficulties of operating a cattle ranch oriented to the modern industrial market. In the second

section, I will address the role that Rockefeller Foundation and Ford Foundation grants, as well as IBEC investments, played in the facilitation of agricultural development projects centered on cattle raising operations. In particular, these support networks were used to develop knowledge related primarily to the development of cattle raising techniques in tropical climates. Reports and research were performed on a variety of issues including disease outbreaks, such as foot-and-mouth disease, as well as ways of developing coordinated agricultural systems that made use of local feed sources. Throughout the report, I will address the important ways that local environments, whether they be social or material, shaped the possibilities of cattle raising and beef production during this formative period in the industry's history.

A Tale of Two Ranches

As Henry W. Bagley, a representative of the International Basic Economy Corporation (IBEC) stationed in Rio de Janeiro, suggested in a letter sent to Francis A. Jamison in January 1957, the planned purchase of the Fazenda Bodoquena ranch was a sensitive matter. For IBEC, concerns arose largely from the potential political perceptions that would result from a “Rockefeller group” purchasing what would be the largest estate in Brazil. Moreover, as the ranch had a carrying capacity of up to 250,000 cattle and possessed possible mineral resources beneath the ground, reporters began to suggest that the purchase would provide the Rockefellers with control of the Brazilian meat market. To resolve these concerns, correspondence reveals practices of deceit by IBEC official, who denied the impending purchase, as well as the eventual stepdown of IBEC in lieu of private investments from David and Nelson Rockefeller. Letters from the Rockefeller Family Public Relations Department also demonstrate that the purchasing group ended up ceding controlling shares, at least for the first year, to a Brazilian businessman, Walter Moreira Salles.¹

Initial hopes for the ranch were high. A letter to Nelson Rockefeller on June 9, 1958 clearly illustrates what the investors had in mind with their purchase. Implementing breeding strategies that were developed at the recently opened Winrock Farms (which I will address in later sections), as well as making use of successful paradigms established on other Rockefeller-owned South American ranches, the plan was to begin “breeding up” beef cattle on the Fazenda. Moreover, as Berent Friele, a Rockefeller family associate, reported in 1962, the ranch was well positioned to take advantage of its location on the Noroeste railway, which could be used to carry cattle to slaughterhouses closer to the Brazilian coast.

Notwithstanding initial optimism, reports from the ranch reveal that the operation struggled to ever materialize on the scale that was initially expected. The longtime ranch manager, Mauricio Verdier, became ill in the early 60’s, but continued to run the operation, despite objections from multiple people involved. As M.W. Irwin commented in a letter in 1964, “I cannot help but think that irregularities have been going on there for many years; the cattle shortage does not make sense.”² While they had expected to grow the herd to a six figure number by this point, the number had stagnated around 45,000. Ultimately, the ranch struggled to modernize its operation and continued to receive public and political criticism for the investment.

Despite mismanagement, the Rockefeller investors and ranch operators continued to try and turn the Fazenda Bodoquena into a premier cattle producing system. For example, in 1969, Ralston Purina performed a comprehensive review of the ranch. In addition to surveying the land and cattle stock, the Purina representatives highlighted ways that the Fazenda might begin to incorporate alternative feeding practices. In particular, they stressed the need to diversify the cattle’s diets, which at that point was almost exclusively reliant upon pasturage. This project drew from the company’s previous work on Texas cattle feedlots and attempted to translate those successes to new environments.³ In addition, the ranch sent its assistant manager, Alexandre Ferreir, to Colorado State to attend the Hedrick School for

Cattlemen, with the hopes of bringing U.S. management practices and technological developments to Brazil.⁴ Yet, despite these continued forms of investment, the ranch failed to materialize into a profitable endeavor. As John Blum wrote to Robert Blocker, David Rockefeller's representative for ranch-related matters, "The increase in cattle sold was not sufficient to offset the large increases in overhead. Bodoquena's problem could be that they have too many fixed expenses for a business that depends almost entirely on cattle sales."⁵

Around the same time that David and Nelson Rockefeller invested in the Fazenda Bodoquena, Winthrop Rockefeller (WR) made his renowned move to Arkansas. Over the course of the 1950's and 60's, WR would go on to establish a vibrant breeding facility in the northern part of the state, as well as begin promoting cattle-oriented science through the Winrock Institute. While my research into Winrock Farms was less extensive, a number of interesting materials related to Winthrop Rockefeller's operations provide access to the day-to-day activities of running modern cattle breeding facilities.

For instance, the records related to Winthrop Rockefeller's investment in the Turner feedlot and ranch in Oklahoma highlight the interconnections between politics, economics, and science that shaped the investment strategy of the Winrock operation. With the Turner business on the edge of insolvency, WR decided to invest in this Oklahoma center for Hereford breeding and feeding as a way to gain entry to the Southwest cattle production system. Having focused the Winrock ranch exclusively on breeding practices, this investment was a chance to diversify operations and start sending cattle directly to the market. Prior to this investment, the majority of profits for the Winrock ranch came from sales of bulls and semen to various ranch operations, including the Fazenda Bodoquena. Importantly, correspondence demonstrates how the decision to invest in a failing, but culturally vital, operation, like the Turner ranch, was justified through its framing of saving the substantial Hereford herd on the property. Letters from private investors and public figures, like the Oklahoma governor, were sent to

congratulate Winthrop Rockefeller for his incursion into the Southwest feeding economy and to welcome him to the Hereford industry. Ultimately, WR's operation proved to be a far more successful endeavor than the Fazenda Bodoquena. Understanding these operations on the granular level, therefore, provides the possibility for comparative work on U.S. and Brazilian ranching operations.⁶

Overall, the histories of the Fazenda Bodoquena and Winrock Farms offer an important lens into the state of the cattle industry during the 1950's and 60's. In further research, I hope to better situate these stories in their specific contexts. For the Fazenda, in particular, my upcoming research will focus on a series of documents that suggest that the ranch also became a site of local social struggles. Multiple references to "squatters" and "invaders," while lacking context, highlight the need to consider multiple perspectives on these developments and their impact.⁷ In addition, I hope to more clearly demonstrate how this Rockefeller investment became a key portal between American and Brazilian cattle raisers.

Building Knowledge of Tropical Cattle

The Fazenda Bodoquena investment was not, however, the first time that the idea of expanding and modernizing South American meat operations emerged as a possible form of postwar development. As I will examine in this section, organizations, such as the International Basic Economy Corporation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Ford Foundation, engaged in multiple projects that were aimed at facilitating cattle raising, feeding, and slaughtering throughout the non-western world. Ultimately, these documents illustrate that, alongside corn and grain, cattle played a key role in U.S. based agricultural development programs abroad.

The Venezuelan Basic Economy Corporation (VBEC), a subsidiary of IBEC, provides a poignant example of these kinds of cattle-oriented projects. During 1947, the corporation was asked to help establish a viable beef market in Venezuela. This discussion began by VBEC officials pushing back on a national project to establish a large-scale slaughterhouse. While goals for the packing plant were to be able to handle 50,000 to 80,000 cattle annually, officials on the ground raised concerns that such a scaled system would not be supported by the nation's livestock practices.⁸ Instead, through IBEC, Nelson Rockefeller began reaching out to companies like Cargill, Inc., with the intention of developing the nation's grain production, distribution, and storage infrastructure.⁹ Similar to the strategy implemented a decade later at the Fazenda Bodoquena, the priority for these projects was focused on solidifying the carrying capacity of Venezuelan pastures and ensuring the cattle maintained weight as they awaited going on the market. In line with my research on the West Texas feedlot industry, the scaling of the global beef economy fundamentally relied on the ability of local ranchers and cattle feeders to maintain vibrant cattle populations that could sustain increased processing. This was accomplished through attention to breeding and the development of chemicals and fertilizers to support increased weight gain.

While the IBEC records highlight this history from an economic and development viewpoint, grant records provide insights into the day-to-day efforts through which such projects were implemented. These records take a few different forms: the sponsoring of western academic advisors as consultants for non-U.S. extension offices and university projects, the funding of conferences, and longer-term projects, such as developing feeding programs in Mexico and Brazil. Overall, the majority of funded programming for cattle-related development focused on the central question of how to successfully raise cattle in tropical climate conditions, while still being competitive in national and international markets.

In 1958, the IBEC Research Institute funded a project to assess the impact of stilbestrol on Zebu cattle in feedlot conditions. As stated in the report, "A major

factor limiting the production of cattle in Brazil is a lack of feed for the animal during winter season.”¹⁰ In response, a program was developed on Fazenda Jaganda, where, over 140 days, steers were fed improved grain and measured for weight gain. On average, three-year-old steers responded to the drug, by outgrowing their equivalents by 58%.¹¹ As noted, this was especially useful data, as the majority of cattle that went to market in Brazil were three years and older.

Other programs included a Rockefeller Foundation grant to have a Utah State University professor, Dr. John E. Butcher, visit the Rancho Experimental La Campana in Zacatecas, Mexico. Between October 22nd and November 19th, 1972, Butcher composed a report that addressed ways cattle raisers in the Zacatecas region could better utilize available feed, both to maintain herds during dry seasons, and bring cattle to marketable weight during wet seasons. In addition to this more formal reporting, Butcher also comments on the ejido landowning system and suggests the need for developing ways of better disciplining cattle raisers through management practices. Again, local context for this report would provide an interesting lens through which to understand the historical impact of such development-based agendas.¹²

In 1972, the Rockefeller Foundation also funded a three-year project at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, at the cost of \$885,000. Led by Dr. Almut Dettmers of the university’s animal science department, the project focused on experimenting with cross-breeding European stock and Ndama cattle. The latter, which are raised in parts of West Africa, are less susceptible to the tsetse fly. However, they also grow more slowly than European breeds, and thus struggled to compete in the beef market. Dr. Dettmers argued that through crossbreeding, a viable stock might be developed that could prosper in the specific environmental conditions of West Africa. In addition to administering this program, the grant also funded a trip for Dettmers to visit multiple Latin American extension projects, where similar crossbreeding experiments were underway.¹³

In one final example, the Rockefeller Foundation helped fund a conference at the University of Edinburgh in 1973 on tropical beef production. Sponsored by the University's Centre for Tropical Veterinary Medicine, organizers intended for the conference to develop a report which would "result in an authoritative publication summarizing the present state of knowledge" on tropical breeding and production. As one letter in the file documents, foundation money was used to help defray travel costs of people like Dr. Ignacio Ruiz. Ruiz was in charge of the National Beef Program at the National Agricultural Research Institute in Chile, where he had been working on adapting Hereford and Holstein cattle to range conditions in that country. He wrote to the Rockefeller Foundation, inquiring about funding to travel to Edinburgh to participate in the Tropical Beef conference. Overall, the conference was attended by a wide array of scholars and resulted in the intended publication.¹⁴

The development of tropical cattle systems raises a number of questions that I hope to pursue in future research. Why were these specific programs chosen by the Rockefeller funding apparatus? How were the individual programs received by local interests, such as scientists, private investors in the industry, as well as individual cattle raisers, such as the ejidos mentioned by Butcher? What impact did these programs have on the development of different national cattle industries? Were some more successful than others? Finally, attention to the concept of tropical beef, more broadly, raises important questions about the role of western power in the development of agricultural science and practices. Do considerations of climate and feed availability preclude attention to social and political factors that might also impact these developments? As I have found in more extensive research on the West Texas meat industry, claims to scientific authority are put into practice through sociopolitical forms of discipline and authority. What do those systems of management and discipline look like in non-U.S. cases, and how do they impact the history of global beef production?

Conclusion

Based on this preliminary research, it is clear that engagement with the emerging global beef supply system was a critical component of U.S.-based development projects. This was particularly the case in tropical regions, where development funds were used to create protocols for breeding, feeding, and slaughtering that responded to local ecologies. As I have raised throughout this paper, however, further research is needed to situate this research agenda within specific local contexts. Through such exploration, I hope not only to address the ways in which emerging technologies and sciences from the U.S. shaped agricultural development elsewhere, but also how the emergence of tropical cattle production systems forced U.S. cattle producers to respond, in order to stay competitive on the global market. In recent decades, the gap between U.S. cattle output and that of other nations has effectively closed.¹⁵ Research at the Rockefeller Archive Center has provided me with a sense of the historical roots of that transformation and has generated new questions that I plan to address in further research for my dissertation.

¹ Fazenda Bodoquena, cattle, 1957-1958, Folder 104, Box 10, Series K, Nelson A. Rockefeller personal papers, Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC).

² *Ibid.* and Robert Anderson Stock Sale, 1968-70, Folder 217, Box 30, Series 1, David Rockefeller papers, Associates, Warren T. Lindquist papers, RAC.

³ Fazenda Bodoquena: Ralston Purina, 1967-69, Folder 240, Box 32, Series 1, David Rockefeller papers, Associates, Warren T. Lindquist papers, RAC.

⁴ Fazenda Bodoquena: Expropriation, 1969, Folder 229, Box 31, Series 1, David Rockefeller papers, Associates, Warren T. Lindquist papers, RAC.

⁵ Fazenda Bodoquena: Robert Blocker, 1966, Folder 220, Box 30, Series 1, David Rockefeller papers, Associates, Warren T. Lindquist papers, RAC.

⁶ See the following: Turner Ranch Division First Annual Production Sale, 1963, Folder 3, Box VI 14, Series VI_2, Winthrop Rockefeller Papers, RAC, Turner Ranch Division General Correspondence, 1963-1965, Folder 4, Box VI 14, Series VI_2, Winthrop Rockefeller Papers, RAC, and Turner Ranch Division Purchase of 1963, Folder 6, Box VI 14, Series VI_2, Winthrop Rockefeller Papers, RAC.

⁷ Fazenda Bodoquena: Squatters Land Reform, 1969, Folder 249, Box 33, Series 1, David Rockefeller papers, Associates, Warren T. Lindquist papers, RAC.

⁸ Brazil - Nutrition, IBEC Technical Services Corporation, Slaughter House, 1947, Folder 135, Box 13, Series B, Nelson A. Rockefeller personal papers, AIA-IBEC, RAC.

⁹ See: Board Meetings, IBEC - Cargill, Inc., 1947, Folder 108 and 109, Box 11, Series B, Nelson A. Rockefeller personal papers, AIA-IBEC, RAC.

¹⁰ Results of Stilbestrol in Fattening Grass Fed Zebu Cattle in Brazil, 1958, Folder 321, Box 34, Series B, Nelson A. Rockefeller personal papers, AIA-IBEC, RAC.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Utah State University - Mexican Livestock, 1972-72, Folder 598, Box 89, Subgroup 3, Series 200, Rockefeller Foundation records, projects, RG 1.3-RG 1.8 (A76-A82), RAC.

¹³ University of Ibadan - Cattle Improvement, 1973-1975, Folder 86, Box 9, Series 497, Subseries 497.D, Rockefeller Foundation records, projects, RG 1.3, RAC.

¹⁴ University of Edinburgh - Beef Cattle conference - Evaluation, 1976-77, Folder 4142; Folder 4141 and 4142, Box 622, Series 6, Rockefeller Foundation records, projects, RG 1.3-RG 1.8 (A76-A82), RAC.

¹⁵ See coverage of a recent FAO report on the world's cattle population: Rob Cook, "World Cattle Inventory: Ranking of Countries (FAO)," *Drovers*, August 2, 2015. Accessed on Saturday, June 6, 2019: <https://www.drovers.com/article/world-cattle-inventory-ranking-countries-fao>.