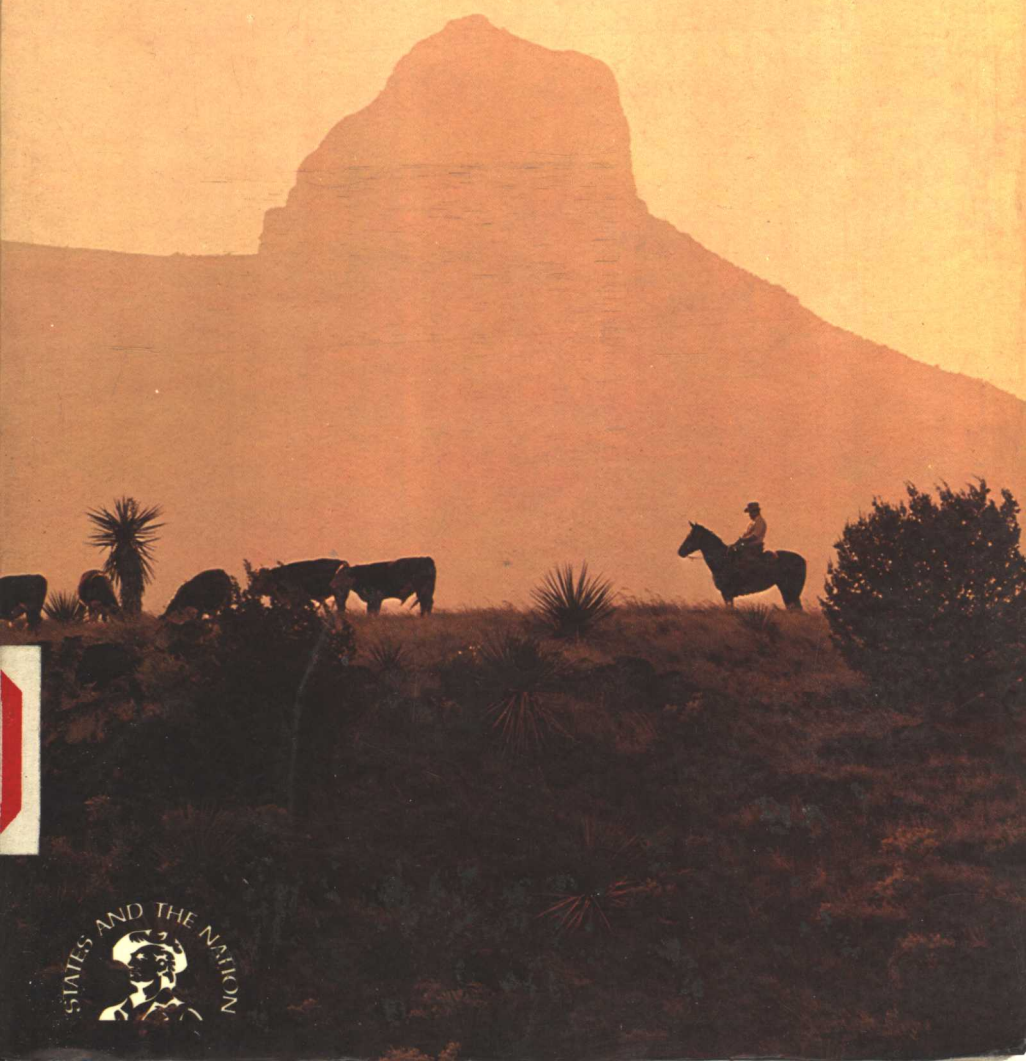


# Texas

A History

Joe B. Frantz



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**A History**

**Joe B. Frantz**

**With a Historical Guide  
prepared by the editors of  
the American Association for  
State and Local History**

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*To Jolie and Lisa*

# *Historical Guide*

## TO TEXAS

### *Introduction*

The following pages offer the reader a guide to places in this state through which its history still lives.

This section lists and describes museums with collections of valuable artifacts, historic houses where prominent people once lived, and historic sites where events of importance took place. In addition, we have singled out for detailed description a few places that illustrate especially well major developments in this state's history or major themes running through it, as identified in the text that follows. The reader can visit these places to experience what life was like in earlier times and learn more about the state's rich and exciting heritage.

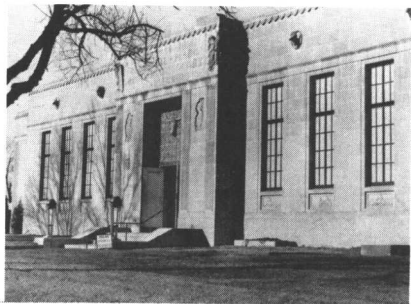
James B. Gardner and Timothy C. Jacobson, professional historians on the staff of the American Association for State and Local History, prepared this supplementary material, and the association's editors take sole responsibility for the selection of sites and their descriptions. Nonetheless, thanks are owed to many individuals and historical organizations, including those listed, for graciously providing information and advice. Our thanks also go to the National Endowment for the Humanities, which granted support for the writing and editing of this supplement, as it did for the main text itself. —*The Editors*

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# Panhandle-Plains Museum

## *Canyon*

★ The Great Plains are one of the truly striking features of the American landscape. Stretching in a broad belt from Montana and North Dakota south to Texas, they define where the West begins. Their vast treeless expanse sweeps gradually upward to the eastern ramparts of the Rocky Mountains, a juncture



*Main museum building*

of landforms as dramatic as any in the world. The land is flat or undulating, drained by shallow rivers that flow east and south to the Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico. The climate is semi-arid, the contrast in seasons typically extreme. Hot summers, freezing winters, and fierce winds chasten the region. Such a land supports life grudgingly. For centuries nomadic tribes followed the wildlife, which followed the grass. By the mid-nineteenth century, the new American nation had pushed to the plains' eastern edge, where many a settler and his family waited, bound for some promised land.

For most of them, the promised land lay much farther west, and the Great Plains were just an obstacle to be crossed en route there. From the reports of earlier explorers, Americans had an image of the plains as "The Great American Desert," a place unfit for human habitation. Thus on to Utah, California, and Oregon they hurried, leaving on the plains only wagon ruts and the graves of their dead.

Until then the process of settling the continent had proceeded in a more or less orderly fashion. One region was settled before people moved on west to the next. The process took place in gentle increments, not all of equal length. It took nearly 200 years, for instance, before settlement east of the Appalachian Mountains was ready to spill over into the great interior valleys of the Ohio and the Mississippi. But between the American Revolution and the Civil War it was possible to conceive of the Americans as on a rapid march westward,

settling and civilizing everything in their path. The pattern held until they reached the plains, which, though well traveled over, were generally settled after places farther west.

That process of later settlement and the natural and Indian history that preceded it are the subjects of the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum in Canyon, Texas. The high plains reaching northward from the Texas Panhandle through parts of Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, and Nebraska are the Great Plains in pure form. They rise to an elevation of some 3900 feet above sea level. Only grasses grow on their windswept vastness; only structures built by men punctuate their flatness. Life there has never been easy, and maintaining a balance with nature, today as in the past, is the key—and a constant challenge.

Exhibits at the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum interpret this continuing process from prehistoric times to the present day. All the groups of men who have ever lived here have depended ultimately on the kinds of flora and fauna this dry land would support. Some types grew naturally, such as the rich prairie grasses that prompted early visitors to visualize the region as a sea of waving grass. Well adapted to the dry climate, they supported a surprising population of wild things, from the lordly buffalo and lithe antelope to prairie dogs and prairie chickens. The animal population rose and fell and moved around to nature's rhythms. Dependent on the grass which nature grew just so much of, its numbers were limited and subject to hardship and sudden death. Natural history exhibits graphically depict these forces.

Indians were the high plains' first human inhabitants. They have inhabited the Panhandle-Plains region probably for 12,000 years. Most of that time the tribes were nomadic hunters who followed the game, though agriculturalists with a more settled way of life were known to have existed along some streams and rivers. In the museum's Hall of the Southern Plains Indians, visitors can glimpse the culture of the Cheyenne, Comanche, Kiowa, and Arapaho who once lived here. Exhibits include life-size replicas of Indian dwellings and artifacts depicting how these peoples dealt with their harsh environment.

Their demands on it were in fact small. But so were their numbers, and the Indians eventually gave way before the compelling force of another civilization. The cattlemen who came next saw the land differently and produced from it very different results. The Hall of Ranching suggests what these were. Cattle had been in Texas long



before the 1870s and 1880s, the peak of the range-cattle business. Cattle and Spanish missions had spread across Texas together; as early as the American Revolution thousands of head of cattle ranged on haciendas on either side of the Rio Grande, especially in the low chaparral between the Rio Grande and the Nueces. Later the cattle moved north. After the Civil War, when the railroads running west into Kansas opened lucrative eastern markets to western beef, enterprising Texans made the range-cattle business into something from which legends grew. But the Texas trinity of mustangs, longhorns, and cowboys was fact, not legend. On the rich grasses and open range of the Panhandle, cattle flourished and fortunes were made. It did not last, however. Ranchers overstocked the range and destroyed the grass, and eastern tastes changed to favor better beef than what trail-driven sinewy longhorns could provide.

Cattle of course would still be raised in Texas—by the millions—but after the 1880s they no longer would have the plains to themselves. By the turn of the century the farmers had arrived. For the first time, the sod was broken and the land fenced, and with hard work and much patience thousands of new pioneers made the land yield new kinds of wealth. Their disputes with the cattlemen over fencing of the open range are famous, but in time both came peacefully to share this high dry place. Along with the farmers and their families came the towns. Not wild and woolly places like Dodge City and Abilene, these were the domestic creations of ordinary folk who were settling in. In the Panhandle-Plains region few towns were even founded before 1890, and their schools, churches, retail blocks, and grain elevators foretold a new and more lasting chapter in the history of the high plains.

The state of Texas made it easier for citizens to buy public land, and railroads and land promoters did their best to lure people here. Some came from East Texas and the eastern United States; others from farther afield. Clinging to each other, Poles, Germans, German-Russians, Czechs, and Scandinavians dotted Northwest Texas with communities—actually “folk islands”—that to this day preserve much of the Old World culture. The “Panhandle Town” exhibit depicts typical town life as it emerged around the turn of the century when farming was beginning to displace large-scale cattle-raising. The exhibit is an actual replica of a town, with five streets and fifteen full-size buildings furnished with period artifacts.

Thus the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum interprets the history of this high plains region as part of a continuing process. The relation of man to nature has always been a basic part of that process. Nature has not been generous here, which is why in the history of western settlement settlers came here later than to places much farther away. When finally they did come, they learned what their predecessors too had had to know: partnership with nature would yield more than war with her. Some of the details of that partnership have changed with changing markets and new technologies. The necessity for it has not.

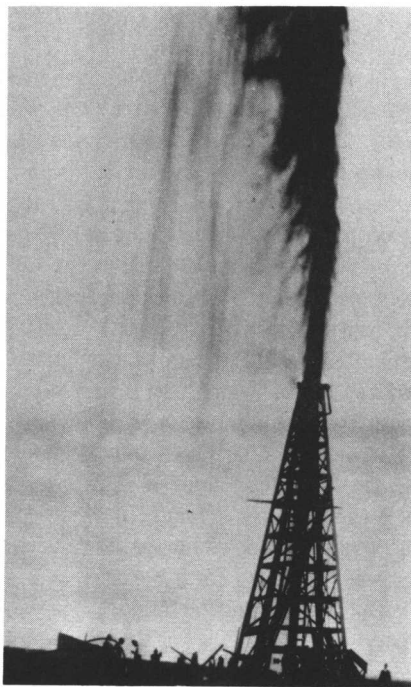
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## Spindletop Museum

### *Beaumont*

★ Spaciousness—the sheer expanse of a physically enormous state—is one of the great themes of Texas history. But for all its great size, much of the land of Texas is inhospitable. Though East Texas is green and well watered like the Lower South, Texas farther west is dry and forbidding. East or west, it took time to settle such a vast place. Despite their popular hell-for-leather, larger-than-life image, most Texans for many years built up their state as others built up theirs: slowly, steadily, and, as Texas historian Joe Frantz relates, always willing to pray for miracles but not really expecting any.

Pots of gold at rainbow's end are rare anywhere, anytime. Though nature endowed America more



*Lucas Gusher, Spindletop*

richly than she did many lands, much of that endowment required application of much human talent before it became economic wealth. True windfalls have been relatively few. One of the most famous was the discovery of gold in California in 1849. Another was the discovery of oil under the Spindletop dome in Texas in 1901.

That the oil was in Texas was especially fitting. It gave to Texas spaciousness a new dimension; great wealth overnight joined great space in Texas history. It had always been possible to coax wealth from Texas' thousands of square miles and countless quarter sections, and some did so. But oil was different. From it wealth flowed faster and with less nurture. The risks and rewards therefore were more enormous than ever before. The process began near Beaumont, Texas, on the very first day of the twentieth century, and it quickly changed the way that Texas looked and in time the way that America lived. Today some of what it first looked like is recaptured in the Spindletop Museum and reconstructed Gladys City Boomtown, operated by Lamar University in Beaumont.

In the late nineteenth century petroleum geology was still an infant science, but what knowledge there was about where oil might be found said the Gulf Coast was not the place. Since the 1860s America's major oil-producing region had been in Pennsylvania, where Edwin L. Drake had drilled his pioneer well in 1859. The geology there and the geology of East Texas could hardly have been more different, so many experts claimed there could be no oil under Beaumont. It took a local real-estate man with an educated hunch and considerable persistence to prove otherwise. Patillo Higgins had long suspected that beneath Spindletop Hill, where cracks in the ground emitted gaseous vapors and sulfurous water, lay a vast pool of oil. To find out he formed a partnership with others who owned land on the hill and began the Gladys City Oil, Gas, and Manufacturing Company (its namesake, Gladys Bingham, was a student in Higgins' Sunday School class at the First Baptist Church of Beaumont). Thinking big, Higgins drew up plans for the elaborate model city he hoped to build there, and of course he drilled for oil.

But the drilling technology was not adequate to the local geology. The hill was actually a large salt dome with a rock cap. To get below the cap required drilling through layers of quicksand and gumbo to depths far greater than had been necessary in eastern oilfields. Three

dry holes and much frustration resulted. Higgins seemed on a fool's errand. But he would not give up and searched far afield for the drilling know-how that might release the oil he still believed was there. He found it through the help of an Austrian immigrant and mining engineer, Anthony F. Lucas, who agreed to pay for new drilling in return for a ninety percent share in the partnership. At first Lucas too turned up a dry hole, and he went for help to the Pittsburgh drilling firm of James M. Guffey and John H. Galey. Guffey secured \$300,000 backing from Philadelphia banker Andrew W. Mellon, and together Guffey and Galey hired the Corsicana-based drilling team of Allen, Curt, and Jim Hamill to get on with the work.

They began in October, 1900, but by Christmas still had not struck oil. Spindletop's quicksands were a constant problem, though by a new technique of introducing mud into the hole they were able to stabilize it and to lubricate their rotary drilling bit. On January 10 they had reached a depth of about a thousand feet, and as they had done often before they withdrew the drill bit to change it. What followed had not happened before: the drill pipe itself began to rise out of the hole straight up through the top of the derrick. A thousand feet, some six tons of it, rose up and fell back to the ground in great sections, wrecking much of the drilling equipment as it came. There was a great roar of escaping natural gas—and then the oil. The drilling derrick was eighty-four feet high, and the geyser of thick greenish-black oil reached a hundred feet above that. The "Lucas Gusher" spewed out of control for nine days before the Hamills succeeded in capping it. The flow probably measured 80,000 to 100,000 barrels a day, creating a colossal mess and a serious fire hazard but also giving clear notice of what really was down there.

The word spread fast, and overnight Spindletop Hill sprouted a forest of oil derricks and a bedlam of shanties and buildings that bore little resemblance to Higgins' paper-planned city. (In two years the population of Beaumont itself soared from 9,000 to 50,000.) Higgins had been vindicated, however, even though he did not number among the millionaires created by Spindletop. Within a year more than 400 wells had been sunk; in short order between 500 and 600 oil companies were chartered. Not all lasted, and as the field's production peaked in 1903, a gutted market drove the price of crude oil down to just three cents a barrel. Fortunes were more easily lost than made, and by

1908 many felt that Spindletop had played out. It had not. In 1925 the little-known Yount-Lee Oil Company of Beaumont brought in a successful well on the flank of Spindletop and over the next five years pumped some fifty million barrels. In the late 1940s the formation began to be tapped for vast sulfur deposits up to then ignored. Gas too was harvested.

From Spindletop grew some of the world's greatest petroleum companies. Guffey's oil company later became Gulf. Magnolia Petroleum became Mobil, the Texas Company Texaco. Sun Oil still keeps its original name. Exxon, the largest, also traces its ancestry to Spindletop. Spindletop and other places like it were destined to make the production of petroleum the biggest industry in Texas. In West Texas it became possible to ride for 150 miles and never lose sight of oil derricks. In the east, gas flares turned night to day. Texas led the nation in oil production by 1928, pumping a quarter-billion barrels; by 1951 it pumped a billion. And despite the corporate giants that flourished here, so did many independent producers of modest means who were responsible for eighty percent of new discoveries.

The ultimate effect it all had on Texas is apparent in a city like Houston and the brash free-swinging confidence of the men—many of them oilmen—who have built it. "Wealth is meant to be used in calculated risks," writes Joe Frantz, "and if it's lost, so what? The once-wealthy entrepreneur who is broke knows he will rise again, and (uniquely) his acquaintances also think he will. . . . He may own them next month."

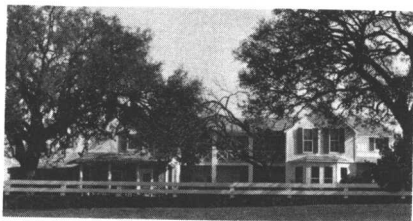
It is not therefore really so great a distance from the weathered wooden shanties and oil derricks of the reconstructed Gladys City Boomtown to Houston's sleek glass towers and booming business activity. Both sprang from Texas' special windfall: oil. Oil clearly made Texas in the twentieth century a different sort of place from the one it was becoming in the nineteenth. It also made the state even greater in the eyes of the rest of the nation than its size alone ever had. Some Americans no doubt resented that. But for Texans used to spaciousness, it seemed natural enough.

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# Lyndon B. Johnson Sites

## *Johnson City*

★ One of the most enduring and endearing beliefs about America is that the path to the highest office in the land is open to all comers, no matter how lowly their origins. We are proud that in America power is not re-



*Texas White House*

served for members of a privileged caste, class, or party. Neither wealth nor family name, we believe, is a relevant qualification for the presidency. On the contrary, humble beginnings bestow special favor. The president who has moved from log cabin to the White House is proof that opportunity is real, and that character and performance can transcend early hardship. Probably the most popular image of this deeply held national faith is that of the young Abraham Lincoln reading by the light of a fire in his family's wilderness cabin.

There is much truth in the image. Except for the "Virginia Dynasty," a ruling aristocracy if ever America had one, few American presidents have come from families whose wealth, education, and influence might be expected to produce figures large in public life. Though in recent times those who have become president have been men of some financial substance, their backgrounds generally have been anything but privileged. The log cabin and the firelight may be gone, but other symbols of ordinary origins have been an important part of the modern president's public image. Many nations routinely enshrine their great men, but America's fascination with their birthplaces and boyhood homes is something special.

Lyndon B. Johnson, the thirty-sixth president of the United States, was born and raised a Texan. The places in Texas where he was born and grew up and where later he kept his home reveal something both about the private man and about the nation he served as a public one. The Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park and the Lyndon B. Johnson State Historical Park, two separate locations fourteen miles apart, together document Johnson's lifelong connection with Texas. In

Johnson City the National Park Service maintains Johnson's boyhood home and the Johnson Settlement, which traces the president's heritage among the early settlers of the Texas Hill Country.

Johnson's western frontier roots were real and enduring. His forebears first came to the region in the 1860s when his great-uncle Tom and his grandfather, Sam, began a cattle-driving business. Not farmers or ranchers themselves, these men drove other men's cattle north from the open Texas ranges over the legendary Chisholm Trail to the railheads in Kansas. Until the competition gathered, the profits were good. Later, as conditions changed, Sam Johnson's nephew and former ranchhand bought the property and made it into a working cattle ranch. To the original dogtrot log cabin he added a two-story frame house (destroyed by fire in 1918) and a smokehouse. James Polk Johnson died young, at forty, but his success and involvement in the local affairs of Blanco County lived after him; he was the founder and namesake of Johnson City. At the Johnson settlement, these and other buildings of the period and an exhibit center recapture much of what the Texas ranching life once was like.

In Johnson City itself, Lyndon Johnson's own boyhood home has been restored and with an adjacent visitor center preserves the actual setting of Johnson's growing up in the 1910s. It is a modest white clapboard house like thousands of others all across America. Johnson's parents, however, were exceptional: Sam Ealy Johnson, Jr., was a self-reliant and ambitious man who served as a Texas state legislator, from whom Lyndon learned some of his first lessons about political life. His mother, Rebekah Baines Johnson, was a rarity for that time and place: a college-educated woman. She was also a devoted mother who imparted to Lyndon, his brother, and three sisters the virtues of hard work and the value of education. Johnson's formal education began at the local schoolhouse in 1912 when he was just four. Later he taught high school and worked his way through Southwest State Teachers College in San Marcos.

From then on he learned by doing, and his record became increasingly a public one. He first went to Washington in 1932, as secretary to a Texas congressman, and quickly discovered that he thrived in public life. The mid-1930s saw him state director of the National Youth Administration, one of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal agencies, and in 1937 he was elected to a vacant seat in the United States House of

Representatives. Except for naval duty during World War II, he stayed in the House until 1949 and then moved up to the Senate. It was as a young senator in 1951 that Johnson and his wife acquired the house that over the next two decades became famous as the LBJ Ranch and the Texas White House.

Located along the banks of the Pedernales River fourteen miles west of Johnson City, it had belonged to Johnson's aunt and uncle. When Johnson acquired it from them, the "big house" needed much work. But over the years it was remodeled and expanded to meet the demands of a prominent public man. Henceforth Johnson thought of it as home; his widow still lives there. It is also the heart of the other unit of the Johnson historical park, which straddles the banks of the Pedernales.

Visits begin on the side of the river opposite the LBJ Ranch at a visitor center in the Lyndon B. Johnson State Historical Park. From there bus tours depart. Though it is not open to the public, the ranch house is on the tour route. It is not hard to imagine times in the 1960s when, as the Texas White House, this rambling wooden building was the scene of incredible activity. But when he came here as senator and later as chief executive, Johnson came to relax as well as to work. He made of the place a working cattle ranch and took much pleasure in tending it. He also took great joy in the rolling Hill Country itself, and the visitor here will not fail to see why.

This is also the site of Johnson's birthplace, a small farmhouse that has stood by the Pedernales since 1889. It was reconstructed as a guesthouse in 1964 just as he was beginning his presidency. He served in that office until 1969, through some of the most tumultuous years of American history, and when he retired to this lovely place he was older than his years and had well earned his rest. He died four years later and was buried in the family cemetery on the banks of the river beside his parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and family friends.

Together, the several parts of the Johnson historical parks tell the story of one American who made the trek from obscure and humble beginnings to great fame and power. To know that story is also to know something else. Though Johnson was born in the twentieth century, not that many years separated him from real frontier events. In 1908, the year of his birth, the last great cattle drive out of the Hill Country was just eighteen years in the past; the last Indian battle in



Blanco County, just thirty-six years; admission of Texas to the Union just sixty-three years. Johnson literally was close to the formative years of his community. Obviously, for someone from a place older than Johnson City, such ties were more rare. But the larger truth it points to applies as much to the native of Massachusetts or Virginia as to the man from the Texas Hill Country.

Americans like their presidents at least to appear to be people like themselves, even if in fact they are quite different. For years, to be like the people was to be or once to have been close to the land and the life of the soil. That has changed, but not the fundamental requirement that those who would be president must be close to the common experience of the nation—whatever that happens to be. However Johnson the president ultimately will be judged, Johnson the man was close to that experience for his time. For that reason there will probably be no more presidential parks quite like his—with its ranch house, log cabin, chuck wagon, and herds of Hereford cattle.