

History of the Florida Cattle Industry

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The Spanish conquistadors were Florida's first cowmen.

Ponce de Leon brought a small number of Andalusia cattle on his second voyage which landed near Ft. Myers in 1521. The expedition failed to establish a colony after numerous conflicts with Indians. The few cattle were abandoned as the remnants of the expedition fled hastily from Florida. These cattle either were killed by the natives, died of diseases, or as some suspect, may have been the forerunners of the Florida "scrub" or "cracker" cattle, but this is highly improbable.

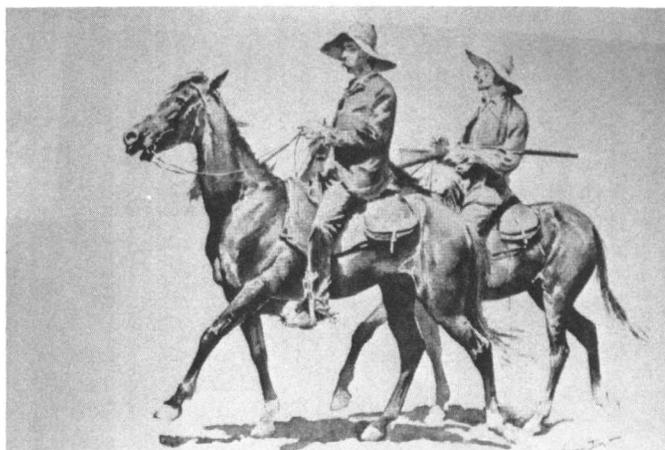
Other attempts at colonization soon followed, by DeSoto and DeLuna who reportedly brought cattle, and these efforts likewise failed. It was prophesied by Sir John Hawkins in 1565 that Florida would someday become a great cattle raising region, based on his earlier experiences in the Caribbean area. Judging from these and earlier accounts, it could be that Florida has had cattle longer than any of the other states.

The period 1655 to 1702 was a dramatic era of cattle ranching in Florida. Spanish settlers, proud of their heritage and wishing to follow the tradition of the Spanish rancho and hacienda, established four distinct areas of cattle raising—the present areas of Tallahassee, Gainesville, St. Augustine, and along the St. Johns River. The primary purpose of these ranches was to furnish beef to the Spanish military garrisons.

Sufficient records were being kept by 1700 to calculate the approximate number of cattle on these early Florida ranches. A tax of 10% was imposed on each owner and was payable in cattle. The tax role for the year 1698/1699 indicated 25 rancheros with 1620 head. The largest, with 770 head, was located in the Gainesville area and utilized the grazing resource on nearby Paynes Prairie. Research in the archives in Madrid, Spain, indicates that the headquarters of these ranches was on the site of the present University of Florida campus in Gainesville.

In 1792 Spanish ranching ended abruptly when the English began armed attacks on Spanish garrisons in an effort to gain Florida. The next 70-80 years were totally disrupted because of small wars between the Spaniards, Indians, and northern colonies. During this time, Chief Micanopy, a Miccosukee Indian, acquired a herd of several thousand head and set up his headquarters in the Gainesville area.

By 1820 many settlers were coming into Florida to buy land. Cattle raising was an important part of their operation, perhaps as a result of John Bartram's travels. It was Bartram who fully described the richness of north Florida flora and fauna in the 1700's just as Ferdinand Roemer in Texas and Lewis and Clark in the West described in detail the natural resources of those regions. Cattle raised in Florida were trailed to markets in Georgia and Alabama. Cattle were also trailed to Tampa and Punta Rassa (near Ft. Myers) to be shipped by boat to Cuba, where payment was made in gold.



Two early day Florida cowboys are pictured by Remington as wild looking with drooping hats and a generally bedraggled appearance.

In 1840, about 30,000 head of stock were shipped out of the Punta Rassa port. Another route began in the vicinity of the present location of Disney World - Epcot Center and terminated near Ft. Myers. Other drives occurred, both to market and better grazing areas. Unfortunately, a few drovers were



Drovers of early day cattle drives were often relieved of their gold before returning to ranch headquarters. Remington pictured such an event. The robbers are hiding behind palmettos ready to ambush the cowboy.

relieved of their gold before returning to ranch headquarters!

History records the first large-scale cattle rustling in Florida about 1865. Officers of the garrison at Tallahassee smuggled cattle down the Suwannee River into the Gulf of Mexico and then by boat to Cuba. Cattle raising boomed during the early part of the Civil War. The Confederacy



Three riders armed with shotguns patrol woods in Wakulla County, Florida in search of cattle rustlers (circa 1890).

needed beef for their armies, and cattle were bought and trailed north from Florida into the other Southern states. When the Confederacy was no longer paying in gold, Florida cattlemen turned to the Cuban market, and those with an intimate knowledge of the Florida Keys ran the Federal blockade. As the Civil War continued, the economic status of Florida settlers and their livestock became critical. The Confederate army needed beef and food supplies. William Davis reported that "herds of cattle and cribs of corn in the valley of the Chattahoochee made that area a valuable source of food." When the cattle populations in Georgia, Alabama, and other Southern states had been depleted, Confederate agents were authorized to seize food products and cattle at no set price and paid in Confederate notes.

The results of the Civil war had a lasting effect, and the Florida cattle industry remained at a low level until about 1920 despite much land speculation. Nutritional deficiencies and tick fever were monumental problems. The tick fever eradication program began in 1920, and control was finally completed by 1935. The program had an additional benefit, as fences were essential to separate the various herds. This led to the beginning of improved pastures, breeding programs, and nutritional research.

The era of improved pasture had a great impact on the cattle industry beginning in about 1921. Early research on

grazing was based on cleared forest and prairie land. The base grasses were carpetgrass, common bermuda, and common bahia grass. The open range existed in Florida until 1949, at which time the fence law was passed and land owners were required to maintain cattle under fence. Prior to that, livestock were free to graze highway rights-of-way in addition to marshes, flatwoods, and sandhills.

During the late 1950's and the following decade, cattle numbers increased and beef production made rapid gains. Elaborate water control and seepage irrigation systems with grass-clover mixtures were installed in parts of central and south Florida.

In the 60 years since the first pasture program was started, many imported grasses were researched. The native grazing resource was still available but being used to a lesser degree. The earlier pasture grasses were finally replaced by higher producing species, including Pangola grass, star grasses, and Hemarthria. The favorable carrying capacities reported tended to set the trend for future research in the state. Improved pasture was in, and native range was not considered as an alternative resource. Meanwhile, forestry was gaining in north Florida.

Although Brahma cattle were brought into Florida about 1890 and English breeds were well-established by 1900, it was not until the improved pasture program began that

cross-breeding was initiated. The native "cracker" cow was the foundation of the Florida beef cattle industry. These cattle possessed a hardiness necessary to withstand difficult Florida conditions. The use of purebred bulls with native cows produced calves of higher grade and greater market values. Today, herds of three-way crosses are evident from Brahma, British, and crossbred foundation bulls. Over the past 40 years, calf crop percentages have risen from a low of 40 to 50% from a 600-pound native cow to as high as 80 to 85% from a 1,100 to 1,200-pound crossbred cow.

A successful screw worm eradication program was completed in 1959/1960 by the Florida Livestock Board and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Elimination of the pest resulted in an estimated savings of \$15,000,000 annually to the Florida livestock industry.

Inflation in all facets of beef production began to seriously impact the industry about 1970. Costs of production, including labor, fuel, fertilizer, materials, and machinery, began to rise sharply. Maintenance of improved pasture programs was also becoming costly. The industry began turning to the native forage resource during the 1970's, although many had already recognized its value during the 1960's. The blue-stems of the flatwoods and maidencane of the marshes were being successfully managed by the establishment of modern range management practices. No longer were ranches depending on a single forage resource, but rather programs were developed which coordinated the use of improved pastures and native range resources. In addition, programs were established to integrate management of forest lands for both grazing and wildlife use in Florida and throughout the Southeast.

The current Florida cattle industry is characterized by high levels of management on both pasture and ranges, reporting a total cattle and calf inventory of 2.2 million head in 1984. Controlled breeding programs, crossbred herds, high calf crop percentages, and computerized recordkeeping are highly visible signs of a strong industry.

The Florida Cattlemen's Association (FCA), organized in 1934, celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1984. The FCA has been a driving force in the development of the Florida ranching industry, exerting its leadership in such fields as taxation, imports, marketing, disease control, and research needs. Members of the FCA have been presidents of the National Cattlemen's Association in addition to serving as committee chairmen and members on national boards. The FCA stands ready as in the past to face future problems of the industry. Some of these include inflationary land values, and federal, state, and local land-use regulations, particularly for wetlands and water use. Adversities may prevail in the coming years of Florida's growth, but Florida cattlemen and the ranching industry will face these new problems as they did old problems in the past.

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