

## THE CATTLE INDUSTRY OF OSCEOLA COUNTY FLORIDA

The Spaniards brought the first cattle to America in 1571. They were with them as they explored what is now known as Florida. The cattle ranged in areas that were hard to reach, such as swamps and thickets, and as settlers from other states began to move into Florida they found and captured these “scrub cows”. By the 1860’s, the crack of cowboy’s or cow-hunter’s whips could be heard in our area as groups of riders rounded up and moved the cattle. Hence, the Florida “Crackers” name was started. There were so many cows in Florida by this time that they were sold and shipped to Cuba and other islands to feed the people there as well as driven north for people in these states. During the Civil War, Florida was a major food supplier for the South.

For the major part of the 1800’s and early 1900’s Florida’s cattle and citrus industries were so big that our state was one of the largest suppliers of these foods in the nation. Florida’s ample grasslands, water supply and warm weather made these foods a natural match.

Until 1949 the cattle and other animals could roam long distances without any fences to impede them. Homes regularly had fences around them to keep animals from damaging any flowers or plants the owner might want to protect. Then the state legislature created a Fence Law which required animal owners to put fences around their lands in order to keep their animals on their property. We can be sure that home-owners’ and automobile drivers’ and businesses’ complaints brought about this law. A common site was groups of cows and horses feeding along roads and even downtown. Wherever they found grass was where they went! Some local cattle owners had large herds that roamed as far north as Gainesville and east to the St. John’ River.

This open range required several cattle owners to ride together to find their cattle, brand the new calves and treat diseases. Neighbors, family and friends usually did this together and required cooperation. If a calf was not found with its mother, the men had to agree it was more likely one that belonged to one of them. Another questionable calf would then be given to a different owner. This cooperation preserved friendships.

While we may think of our western states when we hear the word cowboys, there were cowboys in the eastern states before the western expansion. Florida was known for its cattle industry and cowboy or “crackers” round-ups before western states existed.

“Crackers” got their names from the crack sound of the cowboys whip. A horse, dog and whip were the tools needed to round up and direct or drive cattle. A lariat rope or two was carried on the saddle along with a whip. The rope was used to catch and subdue a cow with help of a well-trained horse and dog. The whip was a very necessary item used so expertly by the cowboy that he could lay it rather gently across a slow moving cow’s back or stop a very stubborn one from its attempted escape. An occasional rattlesnake was cut into pieces by this whip.

By the 1950s, Florida was such a good place for cattle-raising that the Church of Latter-Day Saints saw an opportunity to invest some of the Church's income in land, cattle and citrus in Osceola County. In 1950 they purchased over 54,000 acres of land in Eastern Osceola, Orange and Brevard counties. Today it has grown to 312,000 acres, the largest calf/cow ranch in the U.S. Beside cattle they have produced citrus and been protectors of the land, water and wild animals on this land.

Today the cattle and citrus industry is being replaced by housing development and population growth. Many of the Osceola ranchers have moved their operation to other states and are having some difficulty because it takes more land to support their herd and they do not grow and reproduce as well as they did in Central Florida.