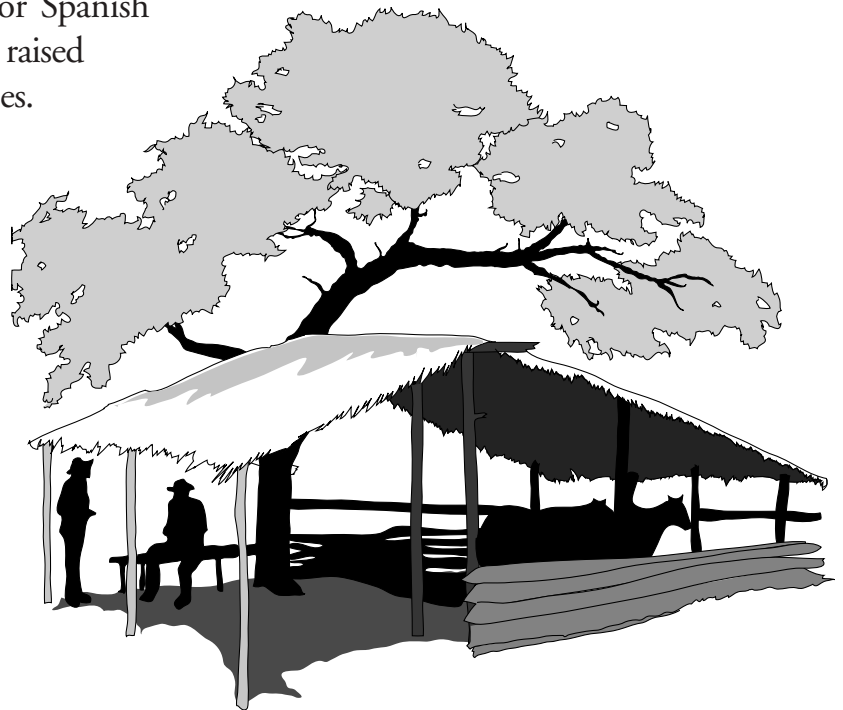


Cattle and Cowboys in Florida

Hundreds of years ago, long before tourists or even cities, there was another Florida. When the Spaniard Ponce de León discovered it in 1513, Florida was mostly wide, green spaces. In 1521 when he returned, he brought horses and seven Andalusian cattle, the ancestors of the Texas Longhorns. He knew he'd found pastureland. Spanish explorers turned Florida into America's oldest cattle-raising state.

The early cattle-raising days were rough for Spanish settlers. The St. Augustine missionaries who raised beef also fought Indian raids and mosquitoes. Despite the cattle fever ticks, storms, swamps and snakes, before 1700 there were already dozens of ranches along the Florida Panhandle and the St. Johns River.

By the 1800s, the Seminole nation possessed extensive herds of cattle. Most Florida settlers raised beef for food. As Indian and white settlers moved south, so did the cattle. They moved through Alachua county into the Kissimmee valley and on to Lake Okeechobee. The search for new pastures was the reason for the migration south.



Railroads reached into Florida. Because trains could ship cattle, the beef industry grew. New towns sprang up around the ranches, and more people arrived from other states. There was work for blacksmiths, shopkeepers, and cowboys in these settlements. During the Civil War, Florida became a chief supplier of cattle to the Confederacy, both for meat and leather.

The herds ranged in size from 5,000 to 50,000 head. Rustling was prevalent throughout the state. This was because Florida was an open range. There was not a fenced pasture anywhere in the state and cattle roamed freely. The early cowboys would round cows up over miles and miles of open plains, in the hammocks, and by the rivers and streams. Then they would drive them to market.

Florida's old-time cowboys had a unique way of herding cattle. They used 10- to 12-foot-long whips made of braided leather. Snapping these whips in the air made a loud "crack." That sound brought stray cattle back into line fast and earned cowboys the nickname of "crackers." Many rode rugged, rather small horses known as "cracker ponies."

Cracker cowboys also counted on herd dogs to move cattle along the trail. Their tough dogs could help get a cow out of a marsh or work a hundred steers into a tidy group. For those rough riders of Florida's first ranges, a good dog, a horse, and whip were all the tools a true cracker needed.



By the 1890s, cow camps were located in most sections of the state. One such camp was located near Lake Kissimmee. It was known as “Cow Town.” The area’s cattle were referred to as scrub cows, ridiculous in appearance. They were once described as “no bigger than donkeys, lacking quality as beef or milk producers.” They were valuable because the animals could survive in wilderness areas. By the 1920s, however, the quality of Florida cattle had improved greatly.

Raising cattle is still one of the biggest businesses in the state. Florida's ranchers raise the third largest number of cattle of any state east of the Mississippi. Their herds represent many centuries of dreams. They link the sweat and success of ancient Spaniards and hardy pioneers with today's modern cattle ranchers.

Cracker Cowboys of Florida

By Frederic Remington

Frederic Remington was an American painter, sculptor, and writer. He is famous for his lively scenes of the Old West. This is the beginning of what he wrote in Harper Magazine, August 1895. His illustrations of Florida cowboys accompanied the article.

One can thresh the straw of history until he is well worn out, and also is running some risk of wearing others out who may have to listen. So I will waive the telling of who the first cowboy was, even if I knew; but the last one who has come under my observation lives down in Florida, and the way it happened was this:

I was sitting in a “sto’ do” (store door) as the “Crackers” say, waiting for the clerk to load some “number eights” (lumber), when my friend said, “Look at the cowboys!” This immediately caught my interest. With me cowboys are what gems and porcelains are to some others.

Two very emaciated Texas ponies pattered down the street, bearing wild-looking individuals, whose hanging hair and drooping hats and generally bedraggled appearance would remind you at once of the Spanish-moss which hangs so quietly and helplessly to the limbs of the oaks out in the swamps.... They had on about four dollars’ worth of clothes between them, and rode McClellan saddles, with saddlebags, and guns tied on before....