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OPEN-RANGE CATTLE-RANCHING IN SOUTH FLORIDA: AN ORAL HISTORY

by John S. Otto

From 1842 to 1949, south Florida was the scene of an open-range cattle industry, which supplied beef steers for the Florida and Cuban markets. Cattleowners, or “cowmen,” purchased small homesteads, but they grazed their cattle on the unfenced public lands, or “open-range,” at no cost. Once or twice a year, cowmen gathered up their cattle on the open-range, branded the young calves, and selected beef steers for market. Between the 1850s and the 1940s, they drove steers on the hoof to Florida cities for local butchering or for shipment to Cuba. But in 1949, the State of Florida required stockowners to fence in cattle on their own property, thus ending over a century of open-range ranching in south Florida.1

Open-range cattle-ranching was more than an industry, it was also a way of life for its practitioners. Yet surprisingly little is known about the cattle-ranching techniques, the working conditions, and the lifeways of the open-range cowmen.2 The south Florida cowmen lacked the time or inclination to describe their lives in personal documents such as diaries, letters, or daybooks.3 Though a handful of cowmen did write autobiographies and reminiscences, their recollections of cattle-herding techniques tended to be superficial and incomplete.4 Numbers of travelers also described cattle-ranching practices in south Florida, but these biased outsiders often misinterpreted what they saw.5

Given these inadequacies in the written record of cattle-ranching life, it is necessary to turn to oral history. Open-range cattle-ranching ended almost forty years ago, but it still exists within the memories of those who once participated in the system. By interviewing older men who worked in open-range cattle-ranching as children, youths, and young adults, it is possible to recover first-hand oral testimonies which describe working and living conditions as far back as the early 1900s. If carefully collected, these oral histories can provide the most detailed and most reliable evidence about cattle-ranching life in south Florida.6

During the course of an historical study of cattle-ranching in south Florida, the writer met J.P. Platt, a resident of Hardee County, whose family has been involved in cattle-raising for over a century.7 Born in 1921, Mr. Platt worked with his father, Marion Platt (1881-1949), on their open-range cattle operation during the 1930s. Relating his first-hand experiences to the writer in a taped interview, Mr. Platt’s oral history included detailed accounts of cattle-ranching techniques, working conditions, and lifeways during the last years of the open-range in South Florida.8

The Platt family owned a 160-acre homestead, but they treated the surrounding public lands as their open-range. On their customary range, the Platts grazed about 1,500 head of “scrub” cattle—the diminutive descendants of stock introduced by the Spanish and British colonists of Florida:9
Well, they [scrubs] were. . .not very big. Cows weighed about 400 pounds. The bulls [weighed] about 600 pounds. . . The steers would weigh about 500 pounds. . . Most of them had long horns. They were fairly wild cattle.

Although they were small and skittish, scrub cattle subsisted on forage so sparse that heavier blooded cattle literally walked themselves to death trying to find enough to eat. During the brief winters, when blooded stock required supplemental fodder in order to survive, scrub cattle browsed in the hardwood stands, or “hammocks,” which dotted the South Florida landscape:

Cows loved the hammocks in the winter. Cows would go in the hammocks on windy days to get out of the wind. In winter-time, a cow browses rather than grazes. They’d have to browse on oak leaves. They’d eat [live-oak] acorns. . . A lot of people don’t think cows eat acorns, but they do eat acorns. And, of course, they ate the [Spanish] moss and air plants and things like that.

Hammocks offered browse and shelter, but most of the south Florida range was pine flatwoods—tracts of leached, sandy soils which supported little more than pine trees, saw palmettos, and seasonal grasses. The flatwoods soils were so leached, and the grasses contained
so few minerals, that cattle suffered mineral deficiencies, or “salt sick,” if they grazed too long in the flatwoods. But if burned in late winter, the flatwoods offered nutritious spring grasses for cattle:

You could burn [the flatwoods] and use it. . . . When the grass was real small and fresh, it had a lot of protein in it, and it didn't seem to hurt them. . . . February was best [for burning]. This was because winter was pretty well over by February. You wouldn't be burning up the protection that you had. The old dead grass [was] protecting what green was down under. . . . But in February, winter would be about over, and it would be a good time to burn. And in the spring, the grass would grow real fast.

In spring, when grass was most abundant, about half of the cows dropped calves. At this time, the Platts gathered up the new-born calves and mother cows and penned them in a fenced field, or “cow-pen,” for protection. The practice of “cow-penning” also fertilized the sandy soils for food crops:

If you wanted to grow a sweet potato patch, you’d fence up three or four acres of land, and then you’d put the cows on that. You separated the calves in the cowpens, so the cows would come back [after grazing in the flatwoods]. . . . They’d come back there
every night, then they’d sleep there at night, and that’s the way you got a lot of droppings from the cows [on] the next morning, when they got up.

You’d keep them about two months [in the spring]. It would take about that long [to fertilize the field]. The cows tromping down the dirt would help stamp down the grass and make it easier to plow. Usually, you planted sweet potatoes on the new land, and then after you had that crop, you could plant corn the next year.

The Platts placed these cow-pens on their homestead, “because they owned this land, and they wanted to keep all their possessions...on their land.” In addition to cow-pens, the Platt homestead contained a pine-log house, a log barn, a smokehouse, storage cribs, and an orange grove which they fertilized with cows:

A lot of times, we used to put the cows on the groves...It would be a small grove—a ten-acre grove or something like that...The problem was taking care of it. There wasn’t much equipment...If you could plow out a ten-acre grove with horses, you done pretty good.
By raising oranges as well as cattle, the Platts guarded against price fluctuations in the citrus and beef markets. “Usually, when the oranges were high, the cows were cheap, and then vice versa.” In spite of their orange grove, however, the Platts’ income was derived largely from the scrub cattle which they raised on the open-range.

To aid them in raising cattle for market, the Platts employed five to seven cowboys, or “cow-hunters:”

They called them their cowboys. They didn’t call them ranchhands. . . . But ‘cow-hunter’ was used more than anything else. They’d say he’s a ‘cow-hunter’. . . [Cow-hunters received] their board and thirty dollars a month. . . . [They ate] mostly beans. . . sweet potatoes, biscuits, and white bacon.

Each fall, the Platts and their hired cow-hunters gathered up the range cattle for market. Since these round-ups, or “cattle-hunts,” lasted several weeks, they packed provisions:

On cattle-hunts, where you’d go and hunt cattle, you’d carry saddlebags. In the saddlebags. . . you’d have your white bacon. . . . You’d cook it with a stick—usually a
palmetto stick—and you’d stick it up to the fire. And you'd have your coffee boiler. . . .
A tomato can was your coffee boiler, and you’d put some wire in that for bails. You’d
hang that on your saddle. . . . [Also], you’d bake up a lot of sweet potatoes. You’d have
your sweet potatoes and biscuits and white bacon. . . . And usually you took along some
syrup in a. . . whiskey bottle. . . . This was about the diet you’d have, and this would last
for about three weeks.

Meeting on the open-range, the cowmen and cow-hunters gathered up the herds, or “bunches,”
which ranged within a known territory:

We’d have the bunches named. . . . Like if they were down on ‘Three Mile Gulley,’
you’d call it the ‘Three Mile Gulley Bunch.’ Or, if there was a bunch that ran a lot, you
might call them the ‘Running Bunch.’ That was the way we identified the bunches.

Mounted on “Florida cow-ponies,” armed with rawhide “cow-whips,” and accompanied by
“cow-dogs,” the herders drove wary range cattle into pens:

They just drove them. . . . You’d run your horses around them. When you’d ride to get
a bunch of cows, you wouldn’t point your horses’s head at them, because they’d run.
You’d go kind of sideways and ease around them. Somebody else would be going the
other way, coming around a bunch. Then you’d just gather them in. . . . Usually, you
had a bunch of good cow-dogs [with you], and if a cow ever left the bunch, these dogs
would put her back, and she wouldn't want to leave no more.

The Platts penned their stock within wire enclosures on the open-range:

I’ve seen some old-time pole corrals, where they cut these cypress poles and put them
up. But what we had [in the 1930s] was hog wire [pens]. Then you’d have what they
called a ‘crevice’. . . . Well, a crevice would be a holding pen. They’d put the cows in
the crevice the night before, and this [crevice] would probably be a hundred acres.
Then, the next morning, you’d get up and drive the cattle out of the crevice into the pen
—a few at a time. As you drove them into the crevice, you’d work that bunch out—a
hundred cows at a time. You’d work that bunch out, then go back and get you another
bunch out of the crevice, bring them into cowpen, and work that bunch out.

At this time, they “worked out” the new calves for marking and branding:

This was the time when the calves got big enough. . . .so everybody could identify them.
. . . They done what they called ‘mammying calves’. . . . Usually, there was one man
that was better at it than anybody else. He would just call them in the pen. He’d call
them out, ‘This calf belongs to so-and so cow!’ [He identified] them from the markings
of the mama and the color markings on the calf. . . . They was all colors. There would
be one cow that would be black down both sides and have a white stripe down her
body. Or, maybe she’d be red on both sides with a white stripe down her back. And
some of them would be what we called a ‘frosty’ cow—mingled white and red
together.
Because of cattle-stealing, cowmen carefully marked the calves’ ears and branded their flanks:

Now, most of the old-timers branded on the sides—on the ribs. In later years, they started branding on what they called the ‘cushion’—back on the rump. . . . The brand was for two reasons: one reason is pride of ownership to have your name or your initials on the cows; and then it was helpful for identification too. The ear marks was so you could see. You couldn’t see the brand in the winter, because a lot of hair would grow over in winter. . . . But you could read that ear mark way on out there—maybe 150 yards.

As they marked and branded calves, owners neutered most males, creating the next generation of beef steers, but they spared a few to serve as replacement bulls:

They castrated the male calves, except they’d keep some of the male calves from the best cows you had. A few big strong cows. A lot of the old-timers would say, ‘If this cow can pull out of a bog, I’m going to save the bull calf from it.’

Turning out the calves on the open-range, the Platts selected the “beef” for market:

That was a steer—about a four-year old steer. He was grown and as big as he was going to get then—about 500 pounds. A big calf weighs that now. . . . They dressed out about half—about 250 pounds [of beef]. . . It wasn’t too tender.

Using cow-whips to control the steers, the Platts and neighboring cowmen drove beeves to market. These cracking whips may have earned the cowmen their nickname of “Crackers”:\textsuperscript{14} A lot of people would just say, ‘I’m a Florida Cracker.’ And he was proud of it. . . . I think it comes from cracking cow-whips. Whenever the people drove their cattle into market, they’d come in cracking their cow-whips, and somebody would say, ‘Here comes those Crackers!’

Finding a ready market for their scrub steers, the “Cracker” cowmen felt little need to change their open-range cattle operation. They retained ranching practices and lifeways which differed little from those of their antebellum ancestors.\textsuperscript{15} Yet in the 1930’s, change arrived suddenly in the form of the Florida tick-eradication program.

The ticks which infested the Florida flatwoods were vectors for bovine piroplasmosis, a debilitating stock disease. Attaching themselves to cattle, the ticks gorged on blood, dropped to the ground, and laid their eggs. As they fed on cattle, ticks transmitted a protozoan pathogen, which invaded the cows’ bloodstream and destroyed red blood cells. The infected cattle suffered raging fevers and often died. Although scrub cattle developed a high degree of immunity to tick-borne fever, the presence of fever ticks in Florida prevented the introduction of blooded bulls from tick-free areas to improve the beef quality of local cattle.\textsuperscript{16}
The only means of eliminating tick fever was to destroy the ticks which carried the protozoan pathogens. Researchers found that repeated dipping of cattle in vats of arsenic solution killed the attached ticks before they dropped to the ground and laid eggs. By frequently dipping cattle to disrupt the tick life cycle, it was possible to gradually eliminate the ticks within a given area. 17

Seeking to eliminate the fever tick and thus remove an obstacle to livestock improvement, the Florida legislature enacted a compulsory tick-eradication program in 1923. In cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture, the state legislature divided Florida into a series of quarantine zones. Using barbed wire fences to isolate the zones, state and federal agents established local dipping vats, where range cattle were periodically dipped in arsenic solution to kill the attached ticks. After a year or two of dipping, the quarantine zone was declared tick-free.

Beginning on the Georgia-Florida border in 1923, the dipping programs and quarantine zones progressed steadily southward. In the 1930s, the dipping program reached south Florida. By 1944, south Florida was finally declared tick-free. 18

With the eradication of the fever tick, cowmen introduced blooded bulls to improve their scrub cattle herds. Brahman bulls were most favored, since they showed the greatest resistance to the
heat and humidity of south Florida. After breeding Brahman bulls with scrub cows, cattle-owners then mated the mixed-breed cows with Hereford and Angus bulls to further improve the beef quality.19

Such mixed-breed cattle could survive on native forage, but they prospered on improved pastures. As early as the 1920s, some south Florida cowmen were experimenting with artificial pastures, clearing flatwoods land and sowing Bermuda, Bahia, and other exotic grasses. Grazing on these artificial pastures, cattle recorded substantial weight gains.20 In spite of these successful experiments with artificial pastures, little could be done to improve the south Florida range as long as most of the land was owned by the state or by private timber companies.

In an effort to raise revenues, the State of Florida had sold much of its public land to timber companies. When the Great Depression hit in the 1930s, these timber companies folded, leaving many thousands of acres of tax-delinquent lands. In 1937, the Florida legislature passed the Murphy Act, empowering the state to claim all tax-delinquent lands. Under the terms of the act, Florida could sell these confiscated lands to the highest bidder. Since most of the land could be bought for the price of delinquent taxes, the Murphy Act permitted cowmen to acquire large tracts of land at relatively little cost.21
Among the south Florida cowmen who took advantage of the Murphy Act was Marion Platt, who purchased tax-delinquent lands in Hardee County:

During the Depression, it was still ‘open-range.’ About 1937, people started buying land. . . . We first bought 800 acres of land, and we paid $5.00 an acre for the land. The cattle that was on it was $25.00 a head. So you can see the difference. . . . Now, cattle are probably $400.00 a head, and land is $1,500.00 [an acre]. . . . But then. . . .land was cheap. You could borrow money on cows, but you couldn’t on land.

The Murphy Act had a great impact on traditional cattle-ranching life. In 1930, seven years before the act, the average cowman owned only 88 acres of land. By 1944, seven years after the act, the average cowman owned 870 acres of land.22

After World War II, the wealthier cowmen bought additional acreage, reducing the amount of open-range which was available to poorer cattlemen. In addition, truck farms expanded their acreage at the expense of the remaining open-range. And finally, urban areas impinged on the range, as thousands of retired northerners settled in the housing developments and trailer parks of south Florida.
A steer wandering the open-range near Moore Haven in 1939.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.
Open-range ranching was not compatible with city life and agribusiness. Range cattle trampled valuable fields of vegetables and sugar cane. Equally important, range cattle strayed onto public highways and streets, where they collided with cars and trucks.23

Complaints about traffic accidents and stray cattle prompted the Florida legislature to pass a law in 1949, requiring all stock owners to fence in their cattle. Owners who negligently allowed their stock to wander onto highways were fined or imprisoned. This law effectively ended the open-range era in south Florida.24

Since 1949, open-range cattle-ranching has given way to intensive cattleranching in south Florida. During the past three decades, investors have acquired thousands of acres, planted artificial pastures, and purchased blooded cattle. Cattle-ranching, which had once been a family enterprise utilizing the open-range, had become a capital-intensive agribusiness by the 1980s.

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4 Otto, “Hillsborough County,” 190.


8 Interview with J.P. Platt, August 26, 1982.


10 Stetson Kennedy, Palmetto Country (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1942), 216.


14 The word “Cracker” has become something of a pejorative; but during the early twentieth century, the term simply meant a rural, native Floridian. See Lucille Ayers and others, “Expressions from Rural Florida,” Publications of the American Dialect Society No. 14 (Greensboro: Woman’s College of University of North Carolina, 1950), 75.


20 Ibid, 74.


23 Ibid, 92, 96.