

PIONEER CATTLE HUNTER BOBBY ROBERTS  
BUILDING A RANCH IN THE HEART OF THE EVERGLADES  
By Nancy Dale

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A year before Baron G. Collier used his own money in 1923 to stretch the first road across the wild and intrepid Everglades that would eventually link Naples, Miami, and Tampa, Robert Roberts, Jr. and his pioneer family had already planted deep roots in an even more remote part of South Florida's Big Cypress swamp in a town, yet to be named, Immokalee. Located thirty-five miles northeast of Naples in what is now Collier County and forty-five miles from Ft. Myers, the county seat, there was nothing in between Immokalee but tangled tropical wilderness, alligators, bears and the unknown. Lee Mitchell, Manager of the Immokalee Pioneer Museum at the Roberts Ranch said Immokalee was known by trappers as far back as 1869 as "gopher ridge" for the numerous land turtles that burrowed in the soft dark muck, yet even by the 1900's Immokalee was little more than a trading depot for cow hunters, a few families and a Seminole Indian encampment. Not many people trespassed into the dense hardwood forests and swamps except those who dared to fashion a dream of opportunity in the promise land of black gold soil, prairie, and fresh water.

It wasn't until the first post office opened on October 9, 1897, twenty-five years after William "Billy" Allen, a Confederate War veteran from Arcadia built the first log cabin on forty acres in 1872 that the sprouting village took on the moniker of "Allen's Place." As the settlement grew, "Aunt Jane Brown" as she was affectionately called, suggested a more pleasant sounding name for the village translating the Miccosukee-Seminole word "Immokalee," into "my home" or "his home." A decade later in 1927, pioneer rancher Bobby Roberts, Jr. born in New Zion, Florida in 1894 gave birth to his last son, Bobby and daughter Mildred in a hand-built log cabin in Immokalee, the place he adopted as "his home."

The Roberts' family history in Florida began with Robert Roberts, Sr. who fought throughout the Civil War in Georgia and Florida with the 6<sup>th</sup> Corp, 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry of the Confederate States of America and moved after the war to New Zion near Wauchula. Robert Roberts Sr. started out in the cattle business rounding up ancestral wild "scrub cows" left behind by early Spanish explorers that became the foundation of Florida's cattle industry.

Following in his daddy's footsteps, Robert Roberts, Jr. continued the cattle business in Hardee County but wanted to expand the herd on more open range. Discovering the little

hub of Immokalee during a long cattle drive to the west coast, Roberts, Jr. recognized the opportunity he had been seeking; he envisioned Immokalee as an expanse of wide open prairie that could provide both water and land for his herd to graze and grow. Negotiating a swap of eighty acres of land and ten acres of groves in New Zion with Charles W. Garner who had purchased Allen's Place and wanted to return north, Bobby Roberts, Jr. packed up his wife Sarah "Henri" Cordell and their seven children, as young as three months, onto a couple of wagons and traveled with three hundred head of scrub cattle, hogs and the family cat, more than one hundred miles through the most treacherous part of the Everglades to homestead in Immokalee.

The Roberts' first home was a "double-penned" log cabin with "pens" or rooms that could be added onto as needed. The first "pens" consisted of four rooms, a porch, living area with fireplace, and long hall running down the middle. Bobby Roberts and his sister Mildred Sherrod, now 86, are the last two siblings born in the old log cabin. "My daddy started the family with a boy and ended with a boy," said Bobby Roberts, one of seven sisters and an older brother.

Growing up as children in the wilderness, Bobby, his brother and sisters worked as a team, toughing out the intimidating Everglades environment. Bobby's daddy applied his natural-learned wisdom, knowledge, and love of the land to live in harmony with the snakes, alligators, bears, and panthers, fighting off hordes of mosquitoes and other pesky critters. Roberts, Jr. cut through jungles of Old World climbing vines, thorny tropical soda apples, trudged through floating islands of Chinese Tallow trees flashing spiky stalks of small yellow flowers and hardwood forests that had to be hacked away for human habitation putting to good use the logs and thick, hard sap of the long leaf pines.

In the early 1900's, Immokalee was sparsely settled with a dozen families. Some of the neighbors in the proximity of the Roberts' were Uncle Bill and Aunt Jane Brown, the Hadleys and a few other families that settled near the Smallwood Store in Chokoloskee. Henri Roberts helped along side of Aunt Jane Brown delivering babies, everyone helped with funerals and the community built the First Baptist Church in 1916.

Communication with the outside world was sparse except for the welcomed arrival of John Surrency who delivered mail on horseback to the little post office opened in the Roberts' house.

As everywhere else in Florida's 1900's pioneer settlements, drinking water was hand drawn in buckets from a well and there was no electricity. A wood burning stove in the kitchen was where Henri Roberts spent most of her time bending over a vat of rice, beans and sweet potatoes she cultivated from the rich black gold earth that provided sustenance for the hard working family. Besides the difficulty to endure everyday life in 1919, to make matters worse, a severe tick infestation hit the cattle herd imposing a halt of cattle sales to Cuba with a statewide quarantine. Cattle prices dropped and you could get as much for a cow hide, at about fifty-five cents a pound, then you could get for the cow. With resiliency, the Roberts' family "did with or did without," recalls Bobby from very early childhood memories.

But the tick crisis was not the last of the cattle epidemics that threatened the Roberts' family survival. Florida's boom days and land values took a downward spin during the Depression as the "screw worm" epidemic plagued cattle statewide. The parasitic larvae killed hundreds of cattle despite arsenic dips conducted every two weeks. At one point, the Roberts' had to mortgage their home, eventually rising above the debt and conquering another impending disaster.

Today, eighty-five years of character is etched upon Bobby Roberts chiseled face. The staunch assuredness in the way he walks and talks through steadfast eyes, reflects a depth of enduring hardship, discipline, forbearance and endurance. "We worked everyday, there wasn't a day off, except for Sunday when we all went to church," reminisced Bobby, far away from those days as he settled into a well-deserved, soft cushioned couch overlooking the serenity of Marco Island beach at the June 2005 Florida Cattlemen's Association Convention. Life in Immokalee, buried deep within the Big Cypress swamp, was harsh and unforgiving.

The new pioneer ranchers were not alone in the Big Cypress swamp as it was also the adopted home of the Seminole Tribe. A mixture of Georgia, Alabama and other southern tribes removed from their land by the Union Army during the Civil War, escaped bounty hunters in the refuge of the swamp, a place that U.S. soldiers would not penetrate. It was said by one Union soldier that "if I had to choose to live in the Everglades or Hell, I would rather choose Hell!" The swamp provided protection from the dangers of the outside world with the Everglades creatures and the unforeseen challenges of Nature far less threatening than the law of the land during those early periods of "civilizing" Florida.

Continuing to expand his holdings in Immokalee, Roberts, Jr. purchased another ten acres for a seedling orange grove and another ten acres for a budding orange grove with some grapefruit which meant additional responsibilities for young Bobby Roberts. "One of the worst jobs I had was weeding the orange groves with a hoe; it was hard work," recalled Bobby. He also had to crate the citrus and haul it over to his daddy's General Merchandise store run by W.D. or "Dius," Bobby's older brother. Anointed with an unusual name, Dius, a religious man, not favoring gambling and other non-Christian vices, was sometimes angered when people mistakenly called him "Dice," said Bobby, but the General Merchandise store he managed served as a supply depot and meeting place in Immokalee for those who lived and passed through the area.

On the isolated working ranch, all of the Roberts' children performed a specific daily chore. Bobby was charged with not only helping in the citrus groves but he had to feed the horses, hogs, bulls and chop wood for the woodpile. When asked about the consequences for not doing an assigned job, Bobby chuckled, "Well, if you didn't do the job you were told to do, you got a whippin'."

Just as stern in his belief in discipline, Bobby's daddy insisted that the children go to school and "get an education." Bobby attended Immokalee schools through the 9<sup>th</sup> grade and graduated from LaBelle High School

As Bobby was completing high school, World War II was brewing in Europe and the Pacific. Roberts, Jr. did not want his son to have to go to war so he sent Bobby to Georgia Military Academy north of Atlanta. Bobby said GMA was known as "the West Point of the 'cracker South'" but he joined the Army ROTC and did not have to go to war.

At the Immokalee homestead, life never settled into an easy pattern but the Roberts' family continued to breathe life into the small growing community. In the family home, the children learned strict discipline from their father to survive the natural forces that each day offered up another challenge that had to be met with strength and fortitude "We had to do without before we had to do with," said Bobby; there was no book of guidelines and little law enforcement leaving families to protect their own. Bobby remembered one incident when his daddy confronted a stranger that attempted to move onto their land. Instead of the usual "Southern hospitality," Roberts Jr. greeted the man with a double-barreled shot gun, point blank in his face. Needless to say, the "intruder" hastily took leave back into the swamp in search of a more hospitable settlement.

One of the natural disasters characterizing South Florida besides the droughts, fires and floods that confronted early settlers with no warning was the onslaught of hurricanes. In the early 1900s, when Robert Roberts, Jr. joined one of the long cattle drives on the "cracker trail" across Florida to the market in Punta Rassa, the 1926 Hurricane was spawning life in the Atlantic. Using the saw grass blooms as a barometer, the Seminoles anticipated the onslaught of the deluge that would soon hit the Big Cypress and the cow hunters sensed the presence of an impending threat as the cattle began to bunch up. The Roberts' family worked as long as possible into the raging winds and torrential rains to secure the ranch house and brace against the unknown as the 1926 hurricane headed inland across the "river of grass." Surrounded by tall cabbage palms, cypress trees and oaks, there was natural shield for the house if the trees did not snap careening them onto the roof. Bobby recalled that as they worked to secure the ranch, his daddy and another cow hunter were hunting down hogs in the swamp around Owl Hammock. As the winds howled, rains blistered and lightning split through the hearts of tall pines, Roberts, Jr. had no shelter except what he could improvise. Maintaining calm against the storm, he burrowed himself like a gopher turtle into a patch of palmettos and covered up with the wildly fanning leaves to ride out the storm. In the meantime, the hand-built two story house they built in 1926, survived. The only damage, according to Mildred Sherrod was to the garage where the old Model-T was sheltered. "The garage was going up and down in the wind, but Dios got the car out just in time as the whole garage suddenly collapsed." Today, the old Roberts' homestead still stands majestically, rising above the little town of Immokalee.

Bobby's daddy, also called "Uncle Bob Roberts" favored the Red Poll and Devon cattle for his herd since they were hardy, good reproducers and could survive the harsh Florida environment. In 1939, he purchased the first characteristic "red" Santa Gertrudis bull east

of the Mississippi bred on the big King ranch later originating the “Red Cattle Company” that Bobby and his brother continued to build into one of the largest cattle ranches in southwest Florida. By the 1950’s, Bobby was married to Sarah McLeroy and had given birth to two children. He now owned or leased more than 150,000 acres that sprawled over and around Immokalee with the cattle herd numbering 5,000. When Robert Roberts, Jr. also called “Uncle Bob Roberts” passed away in 1963 followed by his wife Henri in 1966, Bobby Roberts and his brother took over the cattle business, struggled over difficult financial hurdles and continued to grow the business into an economically viable enterprise.

Also born in Immokalee, Virginia Raulerson, one of ten siblings and her brother worked with the Robert’s family in the pioneer cattle days; her own father a rugged individualist. Virginia recalled a memory from the 1930’s when her daddy, Robert Raulerson and Dius, skinned cattle with a pocket knife, hung them in the hide house to drain the blood and dry out, then sold them to leather craftsmen who tooled belts and shoes.

Virginia Raulerson has maintained her friendship with Bobby Roberts since their childhood. She said times were hard, but the imaginative children invented their own games and ways to have fun. Bobby even found time to translate his finely-honed roping skills into a brief “fifteen minutes” of fame in rodeo history. “I roped and tied down a calf in a record 22 seconds and won \$22.00 that was about it for my rodeoing,” Bobby reminisced. Remembering those days, Virginia Raulerson commented, “No matter how hard the families had to fight to keep their cattle ranch thriving, Bobby always maintained a good sense of humor.” Bobby added, “I always enjoy thinking about the past.”

As the good times peaked, Bobby Roberts remained true to his friends and those who worked with him. Bubba Whidden, who served on Bobby’s cow crew in the late 60’s, shared his stories that shape the nature of this pioneer cow hunter. Bubba Whidden said that one of the most interesting aspects of Bobby Roberts’ intimate knowledge of cattle was his unique method of rounding them up. “Bobby would ride slowly around and through the herd, then began “cooing” like a dove. After about thirty minutes, the cattle would start walking in formation, following the lead until they were rounding themselves up. I learned so much from Bobby Roberts, he is like a ‘college professor’ on cattle. Bobby always treated others like he wanted to be treated, although he was tough and stern.” Whidden said that one time an old long-horned Brahma cow, the last one to be caught in a round-up, was acting very stubborn; everybody was trying to catch her. Finally, Bobby, who had been quietly listening to the hootin’ and hollerin’, studying the situation, said in his unassuming manner, “When I was your age, I would have already had her caught and loaded her up.” Whidden said there were no “sissy cow hunters, you had to do it all yourself or you didn’t make it back on Bobby’s crew the next time.”

As the Seminoles began building their own herds from scrub cattle, some also served on Bobby Roberts’ crews. Barfield Johns worked many years on the Roberts’ ranch in the 1930-40’s, rounding up cows hiding in the thickets of palmetto and swamps branding them and shipping them to points east and west by rail.

Bobby Roberts is a legend in the Immokalee community of almost 20,000 that he and his family carved out of the rugged Everglades. Today, Bobby Roberts' children run the ranch and also raise Brafordts, a cattle breed originated by Bud Adams of the Adams Ranch in Ft. Pierce.

For the Roberts' legacy to live on, in 1995 the family donated five acres of the homestead to Collier County for the Immokalee Pioneer Museum, Robert Roberts Ranch. The ranch is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and open to the public. Lee Mitchell, who provided much of the insight into the Roberts' family history, walks the grounds of the old homestead with reverence telling the legendary stories of a rugged lifestyle that will never return but are the cultural roots of Florida's 200 years of cow hunter heritage.

The Museum location: Main Street at Roberts Avenue, W. Immokalee, Florida 34142.  
Ph: 239 658-2466.