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THE GRADUAL EXTINCTION OF THE FLORIDA COW HUNTER

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The cattle industry is made up of a certain type of person whose character is expressed in a quiet reserve, a dedication to family, God, and the Land that they honor as a source of Life. Probably one of the least known progressions in Florida's history is how the cattle drivers tamed and cured the land for the production of agriculture. It was the pioneer cattlemen who macheted through the entangled foliage of Everglades jungle, tramped horses, oxen and wagon through razor sharp saw grass, swamp and heat that sucked the fat from the bones. Since the 1800's, buckboards followed the herds loaded with meager staples used by creative women to cook possum, squirrel, biscuits, and whatever else the land provided to support their little families. With a tough survivalist Spirit, they bore their children on the trail and kept on going no matter, what until they were able to carve a homestead from the land. It was the cattle pioneers that contributed to agricultural development.

Fifty years ago in Florida, an acre of land sold for \$40 or \$50.00. As the cow herders began to buy the land and homestead, they gradually sold small corners off to dairy farmers to further develop and improve the fertility of the land. Then as the land was cured and fertilized, it was drained for the growth of farms and eventually sugar cane. Today, Pete Clemons, pioneer cattleman and owner/manager since 1961 of the Okeechobee Livestock Market, says it took the cattle to tame the land by pounding down the muck before vegetables and cane could be planted in the uncured slush. This natural progression from cattle to sugar cane still occurs today. When Pete Clemons operated the livestock market in Belle Glade there were eight slaughterhouses in Florida, now there is one. Today, most of the South Central Florida area cattle industry is involved in a feeder calf operation. There is one slaughterhouse in Florida with two packinghouses in nearby North and South Carolina and two in Georgia; three meatpacking companies Cargil, ConAgra, and IBP control 81% of the cattle raising market in the U.S.

The cattle business is small and underrepresented in Tallahassee and Washington, D.C. Pete Clemons says that most cattle people run mom and pop businesses that require 24 hours 7 days a week with little time left to

lobby in for the interests of the industry. Although Pete Clemons says, “cattlemen need to do a better job,” Florida “crackers” have survived the ups and downs of a vulnerable and unpredictable business.

Clemons’ dad worked for Irlo Bronson (who sold some land in Kissimmee to Disney) and helped develop the land at Venus where Pete Clemons was raised. He was brought up on the Bronson ranch and rodeoed 15 years around the country. Bronson later became a State Senator, but early in his political career made a fortuitous prediction regarding the impact of economic development on the topography and hydrology of the land. He said that before they would finish channeling the Kissimmee River, people would say that it was a bad decision and it would end up being a political football. Another powerful legislative voice and a heritage of 150 years of ranching in Glades/Highlands County, Joe Peeples, Jr. reiterated the same belief in the 50’s. Joe Peeples, Jr. at that time served in the Florida legislature and on the Southwest Florida Flood Control Board. These statements continued to echo further south as the first cross country road, the Tamiami Trail (meeting at a “mistake” on 40 mile bend) from Miami to Naples began a contagion of interstate commerce. Later, Alligator Alley was “carved” across the heel of the Everglades linking drainage points further north, east and west across the peninsula that disrupted the natural flow of water from Lake Okeechobee.

Clemons predicts that the past is indicative of the future, as urbanization encroaches on agriculture interests with no turning back. A jaunt up Highway 27 to Clermont, now an extension of Orlando, reveals a “Stepford Wives” community taunting a million dollar country club, narrow lot lines where houses are separated by a “sneeze” on a warm night. New domed pool houses circle along groomed and heavily fertilized fairways with huge ponds spreading into the horizon transplanting rows of citrus trees and their fragrant orange blossoms rolling over the hills, lost to a freeze, grabbed up by urban developers.

But in the 21st Century, environmentalists and Congress predict that restoring the vast Everglades “River of Grass” to its near pristine condition when Florida became a state in 1845 is possible. Already the move for Everglades Restoration is underway with the passage of an \$8 billion dollar, 30-year Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Project (CERP). There are pilot CERP construction projects to restore the natural flow of water into Florida Bay and the South Florida aquifer. CERP is designed to restore the health of Florida’s natural

ecosystems while maintaining the levels of flood protection and water supply required by society. CERP was designed to achieve hydrologic performance goals considered to reflect 'healthy' ecological conditions. (The definition of a natural system is stated as all land and water managed by the federal government or the state within the South Florida ecosystem including: Water conservation areas; sovereign submerged land, Everglades National Park; Biscayne National Park; Big Cypress National Preserve, and other federal or state land designated and managed for conservation purposes; any tribal land designated and managed for conservation purposes as approved by the Tribe).

However, Pete Clemons doesn't believe that the Everglades can ever be restored; it is an ideological fantasy. How can Florida be restored after having been carved up north, south, east and west over the past Century? If the Everglades are restored to its natural state as in 1845 will the agricultural land and urban areas be returned to marsh and swamp?

However, after two decades of political maneuvering, CERP has earmarked \$243 million in fiscal year 2003 for acquisition of 170,000 acres in the agricultural community around Lake Okeechobee (the primary source of water for agribusiness), a loss of an estimated 60,000 acres of productive agricultural land to water storage. CERP is budgeted to compensate the counties circling Lake Okeechobee for properties taken off the tax rolls due to CERP, state/federal water conservation projects. Neighboring Henry County is expected to lose as much as \$2 million in taxes. It is not known if land will be acquired by "eminent domain" should landowners refuse to sell river frontage property, the lifeblood of sustaining agriculture or cattle. However, even with the CERP expectations, aquifer storage and recovery is controversial because it has only been in limited use. It is not known how the technology will impact water quality stored and recovered from the aquifers.

In Florida, the conflicting needs for water supply are complex with vast urbanization dominating the most influential economic need for water, as well as access to inland waterways for sports fishing, critical to sustaining the growth of the number one ranking industry: tourism. The blue gold, "water" is in demand to supply the massive urban population explosion in South Florida expected to grow to by 12 to 15 million residents in the next 50 years. After two hundred years, the agriculture/cattle business is taking a backseat as the third ranking industry in Florida.

However, urban growth in Florida, with a thousand people a day migrating into the state is a primary concern in the future, as experts say that Florida's natural environment cannot sustain a fully urbanized State. "With the new census defining Florida as the fourth most populous state in the nation (15, 982,378) issues regarding the use of "sustainable natural resources," i.e. the ability for the ecosystem to recharge itself and maintain stability, is not a new question. In Florida, law designates the South Florida Water Management District with a Mission "to manage and protect water resources of the region by balancing and improving water quality, flood control, natural systems and water supply. Its Vision: To be the world premier water resource agency." The South Florida Water Management District is the regulatory body that determines how land and water resources will be prioritized and apportioned. The two most important natural resources in Florida are water and land. The three major economic sources in Florida competing for the non-renewable resources of land and water are: 1) Tourism 2) Construction/urban development 3) Agribusiness. Is there a solution to how these entities can co-exist?

Cattleman Pete Clemons is a reflective thinker with a wry sense of humor. He has his own way of looking at the influx of people into Florida and adds a biting quip as he concludes the discussion: "Newcomers come to Florida bring with them \$20, a change of clothes and never part with either of them."

Since the end of the Pleistocene era with the gradual melting of the glaciers 11 thousand years ago, Paleo-Indians settled in the peninsula, and people have been trickling into Florida ever since. The Florida cow herder, part of the small family owned farmers, whose heritage and lifeblood is ranching is becoming a myth. But, the small rancher and farmer is a disappearing breed across America. This year, 328 thousand jobs will be lost on ranches and farms across the nation. In Florida, the early settlers were agriculturalists and cow hunters. Today, urbanization is bringing the extinction of this hearty breed closer to reality.

Woven throughout the patches of remaining small farms across the United States, the population is a global mix of nationalities, cultures, and urban and rural dwellers with vested interests in differing lifestyles. Perhaps a retort for contemplation on Florida's future for small farmers and ranchers is

summed up applicably in a Pogo cartoon quoted by an anonymous agribusiness Sage: “We have met the enemy and he is us.”