

IRIS WALL: INDIANTOWN PIONEER “COW HUNTRESS”

“I am a true “Florida cracker” but with a little extra salt!”

BY
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Whether it is hunting “piney wood rooters,” parting cows, rounding up wild horses, hunting alligators or heading-up the six family owned W&W Lumber Yards, Iris Wall is at home in what she says “is the best town on Earth” Indiantown, Florida.

Looking across the pasture not far from her modest residence is Iris’ herd of thirty DNA tested and registered “Cracker Cows” who make a rowdy, bellowing entrance when Iris calls them for an extra treat of grain. There are several small herds of cracker cattle scattered across the state in an attempt to preserve them. These cracker cattle date back to the arrival of the Spanish Conquistadors near St. Augustine in the 1500s. After the Spanish left, “they turned loose cows, hogs, and cattle that the new settlers hunted down. You couldn't just go and lasso some cows roaming in open prairie; you had to hunt them out of hard to get places, the swamps, woods, and thick palmettos. This is how they got their name: ‘cow hunters.’ The early pioneers of the 1800s gathered the horses and cows and sold them to the Confederacy and the Union. The ‘cracker cattle’ are tough; they are adapted to Florida’s climate and are able to live on nothing.” Iris Wall is a long-time member and Vice President of the Florida Cracker Cattle Association.

Following her intention to “support the best of Florida” Iris Wall also is a member of the Florida Cracker Trail Association, a non-profit organization that supports the

preservation of the old cracker trail from Bradenton to Fort Pierce; the old trail that “cow hunters” used to herd thousands of cattle to market from coast-to-coast.

Iris is also on the Board of Directors of the Cracker Horse Association. She says “People like ‘cracker horses’ because they aren’t affected by the heat, they run like a streak of lightning, have a calm nature, and are easy keepers.” Riding her own cracker horse, “Abraham,” Iris has participated in the Great Cracker Trail Ride of 1995, celebrating Florida’s 150 years of statehood and the “Great Florida Cattle Drive of Ought 6” that got underway in Osceola County and ended in Kenansville. Standing firmly on her belief to “keep old Florida alive,” she says “agriculture is disappearing.”

Born in 1929 as a fifth generation Floridian and Native daughter of Indiantown, Iris’ was born to Lois Roland and Cecil Pollock. Her grandparents, Anna and Alonza Roland moved to the little community from Chancy Bay near Canal Point.

At 77, Iris Wall is still a working “cow girl,” or what she prefers to be called a “cow hunter,” “It’s what I have been doing all my life. When I was just a little girl in the 1940s, I remember the screwworm epidemic. I used to ride with some benzene in my saddle pockets. I would squirt it in the cow’s naval to get the worms to work their way to the surface. Then you had to take some palmettos or anything to scrape them out. There were hundreds of maggots that hatched from flies. After you got out the screwworms, you painted the wound with a tar-like substance called ‘Smear-X.’ Anytime there was fresh blood on an animal, the fly would lay its eggs and they would hatch into worms. In

the early 50's, the University of Florida sent out a bulletin saying that they were going to turn loose millions of sterile flies from an airplane. Many old 'crackers' laughed, but it worked."

From her earliest memories, Iris learned to nurture and work the land and helped her daddy gather up and part cows/calves during the calving season. We drove more than 100 head of daddy's cattle from Indiantown to Palm City. We would get up before the cows 'got out off the bed.' After the calves nurse, the 'baby sitter cows' take the calves away so the mother can feed. At a certain time, the cows walk to water, then they go to rest and lie down."

"As a young teen, I worked cattle alongside 'cow hunters' who trusted me like a Queen. My dad worked for Mr. Williamson during my early teens and I would ride thirteen miles out to their ranch and be there by daylight to go cow hunting. However, there is one story that Mr. J. C. Bass tells on me when I was parting cattle. There were a bunch of cows in a crevasse when one of them broke out and I got thrown on my back. Daddy just rode over, looked down at me said, 'Gal, you can do better than that!'"

"Sometimes we would gather cattle weeks at a time and with no fences, the gathering was much different from today. After we gathered about 100 head, the children would hold the cattle while the men rode out to the sides and gathered more cattle and drove them to the herd. When we heard the whips and dogs ahead of us we knew to speed up, but when they were behind us, we stopped and waited. We had a man that would lead out 'on

point' and we had an old black cow that we called 'old lead cow' that would follow the point man and lead the herd. My dad always said, "If you learn to think like a cow you don't need a rope, and you never let a cow take a step except in the direction you want him to go."

"Daddy would go to Carry's Cattle Auction in Tampa and buy every old horse to give us kids and he would say, "Go to it!" That is exactly what we did. I learned how to 'gentle-down' a horse, so I guess I was the first 'horse whisperer.'"

It was about the sixth grade that the self-described "strong willed redhead" met her lifelong partner, Homer, who was born in Montana and moved to Indiantown when he was a toddler. However, when Homer and Iris began courting at Martin County High School, "charming" her, she said "wasn't all easy going," even though, unbeknownst to him, "I had my eye on Homer since the first time I saw him." Perhaps it was the sixth grade play, *Aunt Drusilla's Garden* that turned the glimmer in his eye into romance when Iris starred as Aunt Drusilla and Homer, the Gardner. "We used to fuss and fight" but near the end of high school Homer somehow got up the courage to gingerly ask Iris, in his own special way, for a date: "Do you think you might be able to get a dress for the prom?" In her usual manner, Iris had already made up her mind and the rest led to their marriage in 1948 after high school, graduating in a class of 38 students. They were eighteen years old and "we spent the next forty-seven years in a marvelous life. "We cow hunted together with two hound dogs, rode the woods, hunted, and fished. It was wonderful."

The young couple also had their adventurous close calls. “On the night Terry was born, we were on the way to the hospital at West Palm Beach and Homer was driving after he had gotten bit on his finger by a hog. I told the doctors to take care of Homer and the baby. Hogs have a very infectious bite.” Then there was the time when Iris was threatened by the largest specie of Florida snake, the Diamondback rattler. Iris and Homer were feeding horses under some cabbage palms where there were a lot of dead leaves. “I heard the dogs yelping then I heard the rattle. Homer shouted, ‘Don’t move!’ The rattler was moving under the palmettos. Homer pushed me hard, hit the snake on the head with a big stick, and killed it. It was a huge!” Iris was also confronted by some daring moccasins that caught her off guard. “I was pulling along a corn sack behind some others who were gigging frogs and putting them in the bag. I suddenly had an eerie feeling as I walked along so I looked behind me. There were two big moccasins following me and the sack. I hit the bank and left the sack.”

“In 1994, as a last effort to fight Homer’s cancer, I took him to a clinic in Mexico but it was futile. In his last words he said, ‘Don’t feel sorry, Iris, we had all this time to tell each other how much we loved one another. This is not the end. What we’ll have in Heaven will be better than what we had here on Earth.’”

Today, Iris Wall manages a sprawling 1,200 acre ranch where she not only works cows, monitors the water levels, and pastures but retreats into the woods from the creeping urbanization along the fringes. Referring to herself as a “woods rat,” it is amidst the tall

pines, oaks, and scrub that Iris replenishes her mind, body, and spirit strengthening her strong faith in God. As one of the founders of the Family Worship Center in Indiantown, she is a Sunday school teacher for adult women “whom I have known for more than fifty years.” One of Iris’ three daughters, Eva Edwards, says her mother is the “family glue and epitome of a ‘cracker,’ she never gives up. With her love of Nature, mother is an example of appreciating what God put on Earth.” All three daughters Terry Gilliam, Jonnie Flewelling, Eva Edwards and their husbands, who manage the W&W Lumber Yards, work in the family business. Iris and Homer started the lumber business in 1962 with a partner whom they bought out three years later. Homer sold lumber around Lake Okeechobee and Iris ran the lumber yard with baby Eva slung on her hip. “We started with nothing and eventually bought the business.” Today, there are six regional W&W Lumber Yards in Florida.

Besides her business accomplishments, Iris says she is most proud of our children and grandchildren. One granddaughter, Whitney, a hair stylist, maintains Iris’ well-coiffed appearance whether she is getting ready for the trail or preparing to give one of her many talks. But, despite the demure appearance of her brood, Iris says their “kids were raised to shoot an alligator in the eye, hunt wild hogs, and appreciate Nature.”

Iris Wall’s life is inseparable from the land. “Everyday I ride the pastures not just to work, I come here to rest.” Along an almost hidden path off a rutted road, Iris says “this is one of my favorite spots.” Climbing over a couple of fallen trees nestled into native brush, she steps onto a small rise and pauses “to listen” to utter silence; the only lingering

sounds are the trill of birds and little critters rustling beneath the leaves. “This is old Florida and this is what I want to preserve. At one time in Florida, the water was so pure you could drink from a gator hole. But, today, the habitat is threatened by development everywhere in Florida. In the last fifteen years, I’ve seen only two Florida Panthers. It was one time when Judge Bailey, his wife, Carol and I were riding on the grade at the ranch in a cool, rainy mist and I said, ‘There’s a cat!’ Carole said, ‘I think it’s a Florida panther!’”

Bumping along in Iris’s pick-up truck is like riding with a “cow girl” parting cattle over pastures, underneath trees, weaving in and out of languid cows and calves lulling in the cool afternoon breeze as the road intertwines up to a picturesque wooden cabin perhaps inclined to greet a couple of bone-tired “cow hunters” dusting off their boots to take a respite on the porch after a long trail ride. But, for now, the cabin is quiet until a young brood of grandchildren or school kids stop by to visit with Iris and hear her own stories about her unique experiences carving a life from the wilds of Indiantown. Based on her belief in educating youth about Nature and Florida’s native habitat, Iris addresses many young people. “I never turn down an invitation to speak to children. Recently, I brought a buckboard full of second graders from Warfield Elementary school here and took them on a tour. I showed them the cow pens, explained the brand on the cattle’s shoulders, and showed them the difference between a slough and marsh. We were raised on cowboy and Indian movies, but the cartoons children watch today are very unhealthy. One of the kids came inside the cabin and asked me if it was OK to jump up and down on the bunk beds,

I said ‘sure.’ I want them to experience life in the country and have an understanding of agriculture. I love children.”

“However, I didn’t come out here to this cabin for sometime after Homer passed away in 1994 but I finally decided I must go on with my life and began to fix the place up. I bring the children here to enjoy the way people used to live in early Florida.” Perched above an open pasture and a backdrop of tall oaks, the peacefulness of the cabin in the rustic setting inspires freedom. “One night my teenage grandson and I stayed up all night right here just talking. Isn’t that something that a grandmother can have this kind of relationship with a grandson with all these years in between us?”

But for years, the ranch with its entire family heritage, remained without a name until one day “my daughter Jonnie and I were headed from the house to the ranch when she turned to me and said, ‘Mom, I’m tired of telling people to just cross the railroad tracks, go two miles west of town on State Road 710, and make a right into the ranch. You need to give the ranch a name.’” As is her way, a woman of action with little hesitation, Iris recaptured the words of her beloved late husband, Homer: “The worst position a person can be in is when they have to climb off their high horse.” These words stuck and the ranch now welcomes visitors through wooden portals with the proud words “High Horse Ranch.”

The early Lower Creek Indians from Georgia were already settled at Indiantown when Iris’ grandparents discovered the rustic beauty of “real Florida,” a moniker for the

community today. The Lower Creek Indians migrated into Florida to escape the dominance of the Upper Creeks. The high elevation, 35 feet above sea level, was an ideal site to support their livelihood of fishing, hunting, and agriculture. Along with other Southern tribes, the Indians became known as “Seminoles” derived from the word “Myskoke” of the Creek language and “simano-li,” an adaptation of the Spanish word “Cimarron” which meant to Europeans: “Wild” or “wild men.”

By the 1900s and Florida’s “boom days,” the little settlement began to attract the attention of northern entrepreneurs with its ideal location 30 miles inland from the east coast and 30 miles southeast of the second largest fresh water lake in the United States. Lake Okeechobee. One of these visionaries, who recognized the opportunity for growth in Indiantown with the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers construction of the cross-state canal, was S. Davies Warfield, a Baltimore financier and railroad tycoon who wanted to expand the rails from Central Florida to West Palm Beach.

Solomon Davies Warfield was born in Maryland in 1859. During the 1880s, he established and built a Baltimore company to manufacture his invention of corn cutters (a small utensil to peel corn) and silkens. In 1898, he was associated with John Skelton Williams and started the Seaboard Air Line Railway Company in 1900. Warfield was also President of Old Bay Line, a passenger vessel on the Chesapeake Bay. In honor of Warfield, a steamer was christened: The S.S. President Warfield. In the 40s, the vessel carried trans-Atlantic passengers to the United Kingdom and later became part of the U.S. Navy. The vessel was involved in stowing immigrants into Palestine and was finally

moored in Israel. Leon Uris used the vessel in his novel, *Exodus*, but it later burned to the waterline and was scrapped.

However, after visiting Florida, Warfield's dream focused on Indiantown where he envisioned a resort community and central southern headquarters for his Seaboard Airline Railroad (or Seaboard Coastline), as well as the seat of Martin County (formed in 1925); thus, he began to buy up large parcels of land. Warfield masterminded a model city, laid out streets, built a school and houses, and the majestic Seminole Inn. With grand flair and drama, Warfield opened the Inn in 1927 with a celebrated guest list including his niece, Wallace Simpson, who became the Duchess of Windsor when she married the King of England. Edward abdicated the throne to marry the divorcee. The legacy of Wallace Simpson's famous words lasted longer than her royalty: "You can never be too thin, or too rich."

Warfield's dream of the wilderness resort town never came to fruition during his lifetime when he died the same year the Inn opened. With the Great Depression lurking across the country, the ornate 19th-20th Century Revival structure remained silent along State Road 710 for another decade with little success to revive it by a new consortium of investors who took hold of Warfield's interests as the "Indian Town Development Company" until 1953 when it was renamed "Indiantown Company, Inc." However, according to Iris, not known to many, "Indiantown" was formerly known as "Annie" after the revered Mrs. Annie Platt. The Platt's were old time Florida pioneers.

In 1970, Homer and Iris bought the Seminole Inn and renovated it. Today, Iris' daughter, Jonnie Flewelling manages the Inn, listed on the National Registry of Historic Places.

The Seminole Inn provides visitors from all over the world a trip back in time through its historic charm and ambiance. There's nothing like enjoying fried chicken and all the fixin's, fried green tomatoes, and Southern green beans in the stately Windsor Dining room where royalty were once served. Iris said they bought and restored the Inn "as a gift to the town." Part of Iris Wall's Mission today is to "encourage small owners to practice good stewardship with the increasing urbanization of Florida."

With all that Iris has accomplished in her lifetime, she still has more to do. Iris Wall believes in "stewardship" and most importantly her children but her growing concern is with the overdevelopment and urbanization of Florida. "Developers want the land. I will never sell one inch of it. They aren't making any more land and the government is not making it easy to hold onto. There is so much corruption in politics and money is so important. The politicians are unconcerned about a way of life. When Homer and I had no money, it was a small factor in our life."

"Today, real estate is out-of-site. People are building castles to live in. I tell some of the senior seniors I talk to that they live in a climate controlled environment. They have no knowledge of the weather. But I say when you start to see dust on your boots, you better think about saving water. These planned communities are providing an unrealistic way of life. Does every small community need a ball park, an equestrian center, and

expensive playgrounds? The whole nation needs to come off the ‘high horse.’”

“Developers are always interested in buying our land but I don’t want to sell one acre as it would mean more money to developers and less agriculture; the agriculture industry is going down the drain.”

“In the beef industry, Florida is the twelfth producer in the nation in 2006-07 but ranchers are being forced to sell in order to pay unrealistic tax bills or inheritance taxes. In order for ranchers to keep their property, they need to get a tax break and not be told by the government what to do. Ranchers have always taken care of the land. Today, most ranchers are land rich and dollar poor. It’s a hard life. My grandpa had a big garden and grew food; he had chickens and cows. But, I don’t know what to do if conviction to save agriculture isn’t deeper.”

“Life is not a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow, or success. Life is being satisfied every day. Life is having trust in people. Today, there is a conception of success that equals money, but the best and miserable have had money and fame, it does not bring happiness. I was born dirt poor but I know I’ve done my best and I have a happy life. I have the best friends all over the state and a family I love.”

Iris Walls optimism echoes through the whispering pines, the land, and is implicit in her genuine smile and determined nature. She is living proof of her philosophy: “Be whatever you want to be and keep you word.”

Acting on her convictions, Iris Wall is on the Board of the Martin County Farm Bureau and member of the Florida and National Cattlemen's Association. Next to the Indiantown Library in Kiwanis Park is the "Homer Wall Gazebo constructed from the trust funds of the U.S. Generating Company. Homer Wall was a founding member of the Indiantown Kiwanis Club and devoted his life to the community. Iris Wall was selected as the "Woman of the Year in Agriculture 2006" by Florida Agriculture Commissioner Charles H. Bronson.

Located on the Treasure Coast Indiantown is in unincorporated Martin County that has a history of exploration when in the 1700s, Spanish galleons carrying cargos of gold and silver were wrecked in hurricanes along the coast. Pioneers arrived by boat and land, planted pineapples, citrus, and raised cattle. By 1894, Henry Flagler constructed the Florida East Coast Railway from Jacksonville to Miami expanding the economy into tourism.

Martin County was named for John W. Martin, Governor of Florida from 1925 to 1929; the county seat is Stuart. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Martin County had a population of 126,731, estimated to be 139,728 in 2005, a 10% percent increase over five years compared to the State growth at 11.3% for the same period.

The population of unincorporated Indiantown in the 2000 census: 5,588. Indiantown is also the home of Payson Park, one of the top Thoroughbred horse racing facilities in the United States.