

**Cowboys Rule in Downtown Okeechobee  
Celebrating National Day of the Cowboy**

**By  
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On a blistering summer day when Highway 70 is usually bustling with traffic, road blocks were posted to temporarily halt the flow of cars and trucks to make way for a stately procession of cracker cows, cowboys, and wagons led by a “posse” of Sheriff’s Deputies rambling out of the pages of Florida history into downtown Okeechobee making its way to the Ag Center, the staging of the National Day of the Cowboy, July 28, 2007.

Kicking off the day sponsored by the Okeechobee Cattleman’s Association, the Seminole Tribe, Main Street, Eli’s Western Wear and other contributors, spectators lined the streets to watch “real” cowboys herding along cracker cows as children laughed, and cameras clicked with reporters scurrying ahead of the herd to capture scenes re-lived from Okeechobee’s early “cow town” days. Leading the procession of cowboys and cattle were Ephriam and Alfred Norman, Pete Clemons, Buddy Adams, Larry Rooks, Charlie Bronson, Haynes Williams and Roland Durrance.

After the procession ended at the Ag arena, events inside began. The legendary Gordie Peer demonstrated his whip cracking prowess and the crowd laughed along with Doyle Rigdon, cowboy poet and storyteller. The highlight of the day was the “ranch rodeo” where local ranchers teamed up to demonstrate their daily skills in a friendly competition. Everything from team doctoring, calf-branding, “wild cow” milking was part of the day’s agenda. At the end of the day, the Freedom Ranch with Elton and Angela Boney, Matt

Davis, Weston Pryor and Heath Crumb took away the top honor as winners of the Ranch Rodeo.

Outside the arena, visitors had the opportunity to stroll around at booths and talk to professional cowboys who displayed their special talents in making the everyday “tools of the trade.” Mike Wilder, who was honored as a “Cow Boss” in the 2006 Cattle drive across Osceola County, has been a cowboy all his life and has specialized for the past thirty years in making customized Western saddles. He had several hand-made saddles at his booth and provided visitors with insight into a vernacular vocabulary of the “swell,” “the tree” and the “standard bar” that Mike accesses in matching horse and rider to the saddle. Although Mike inherited his saddlemaking tools, he went to a South Dakota school for seven months to perfect the art. Mike also graduated from Texas Christian University (TCU) in Ranch Management.

There was the “Cowhunter Congress,” Florida history presented through a hands-on artifact collection of Joyce Rawlins and Sally Carlton Breaux. One of the well-worn cowboy hats on display still retained the shape and embedded rings of toil from its former owner.

Buddy Mills, whose “cow hunter” heritage dates back generations, learned the art of “building” cracker whips from his daddy. Buddy says his daddy made his first whip when he was 15 years old using the tops of tall discarded boots for leather strings to braid, then whittled the handles himself. Buddy said “as long as my hands let me, I will

continue making whips.” The one whip that his daddy did not finish, Buddy preserves as a special commemoration “to the master.”

One man, a living “cow hunter” legend and war hero, talked about the days of the Texas Rangers. Allen Adams, 86, was born in Friendship, Texas and worked cattle on the open range that he said was not too different from Florida. Adams fought in World War II, landing with the Second Infantry on D-Day in Normandy. There was a display of the many distinguished medals Adams received during five campaigns across Europe from 1943-45. In one particularly difficult time, Adams recalls almost drowning when landing on the beach weighted down with all the heavy gear; however, fortunately he survived that event and the war.

July 28<sup>th</sup> was an old fashioned “hootenanny” of barbeque beef, brisket, hot dogs, ice cream and cold drinks and a real-life education that reminds those who stopped here on this hot summer Saturday that the “cowboy way” is still alive and well, not only in Okeechobee and Florida but is part of America’s heritage honored on this day.