

CHAPTER 7

“I never take this land for granted and I never dream of doing anything else with it.”

Dewey Fussell – Polk County Rancher

In 1700, the Fussell family traveled the long route to America from England eventually homesteading in Georgia. “In 1875, my great granddaddy George W. Fussell made his way through the flatwoods, down to what is now known as Polk City,” said rancher Dewey Fussell who lives upon the land cultivated for over 130 years.

Traveling today to Polk City on Highway 27 over the paleo-islands of Florida’s Lake Wales Ridge, the fragrant rolling hills of orange groves have been transplanted with towns. Traveling down Deen Still Road, one could easily miss old State Road 33 with its new identity, “Commonwealth Road.” But familiar Florida gradually returns along winding curves declining into flatwoods, sprawling myrtle, cypress and oak hammocks, just as it was when George Fussell ventured south.

“My great granddaddy heard about this area through correspondence from relatives living around Eagle Lake. He was an avid hunter and liked distance around him, he even kept a meticulous ledger recording every deer he ever killed. With better hunting grounds in the Green Swamp area, he decided this was the place to homestead. However, after the long, rugged journey to Florida with his family by horse and covered wagon, little baby Lewis, my granddaddy, had to learn how to walk all over again.”

“My granddaddy first homesteaded a little north of Polk City. He raised 17 kids, 9 boys and 8 girls, everyone helped raise each other.” Lewis Fussell purchased more land and

later some of his sons bought land for \$1.50 an acre or less. “These prices may sound cheap,” added Dewey, “but they said the land was hard to pay for. A lot of land was bought for its taxes at that time.”

“In the 1870s, this part of the county had only a few original settlers: The Knowles, Robertsons, Judys, Combees, Costines, and Sullivans who lived across the Pea Atlees about 10 miles away. During those times, families drove cattle together, everybody knew everybody and their cows. Cows cost \$8 to \$12 per head and were mostly scrub type cattle. During the year, they rotated cattle from the flatwoods to the sand hills, it was all open range. During the tick epidemic, everyone helped out. Three of my uncles were ‘Range Riders’ hired by the State to round up and dip cattle in arsenic. Cattle were marked with paint so they could distinguish the ones that had been dipped; those found without paint also had to be penned and dipped. My daddy and uncle hunted deer during the tick eradication program. Come winter they were in a hurry to get the cows dipped so they could get back to their deer hunting,” said Fussell. Hunting continues to be a family tradition.

“My granddaddy and daddy, Albert W., had a slaughter pen in the 1920s where they killed, butchered, and quartered beef then took it to market in Bartow or Lakeland. During the war, they sold meat to families based on a government coupon quota. Because there was no refrigeration, they covered beef with palmetto fans to avert flies, threw it into the Model T truck, and took it to little stores that provided dry ice for brief storage.”

“In 1942, my daddy bought 2,000 acres for \$1.50 an acre. He and myself bought more property in later years. My daddy and his brothers cleared their land, planted watermelons, then grass.”

“During the calving season when we were in grade school, daddy picked us up after school to catch and doctor calves affected with screw worms. A big majority of baby calves or any cows with an open wound became infested with screw worms; if not doctored, they could eventually die. The eradication of screw worms was the most beneficial thing that happened to the cattle industry. Most ranchers today couldn’t deal with that type of epidemic because of the time involved and number of cattle in Florida today,” Fussell added.

Thinking about the past and the rugged individuals who survived Nature’s challenges in the early days of the cattle industry, Fussell said the people he most admires are his parents. “In my generation, we were brought up different from kids today. There were no timeout benches, or your parents didn’t count to three, you knew to do what you were told to do. If you got a whipping at school, you knew one was coming when you got home; but, today, there is none at school or most homes. It was tough in 1907 when my daddy was born but he always said to look at the bright side of life as it could always be a lot worse.”

“When my granddaddy and daddy came here there was no drainage, just virgin timber. When there was a storm or heavy rains, water would get deep enough that yearlings would have to swim to get from one high spot to the other. Since the land has been drained, there are now houses in some of those places. My daddy felt it was important to leave the land in better condition than when it was acquired. He dug ditches and drained water. In his lifetime, my daddy saw many changes, from kerosene lamps to electricity, driving cattle to hauling them in a truck and trailer, riding a wagon to driving a car, and watching on television the first man walk on the moon. My daddy passed away in 1987 at age 80. My mother, Nellie Judy Fussell, passed away in 1999 at age 88.”

The Florida landscape has changed since the birth of the cattle industry. “At one time in Florida, there were seventeen or eighteen livestock markets but the cow population has decreased and some markets such as Kissimmee and others have closed. There were also many slaughter plants but now only one large plant remains. Florida cattlemen today are involved in cow-calf operations, raising calves to about 500 pounds and selling them. Most of these calves leave the state and are put in growing lots out West. When they reach 750-800 pounds they are moved to feedlots, then sold to packers. Today, an independent cow-calf operation can survive but now the land has a higher development or investment value than raising cattle. In the late 60s, there was over 7,000 acres sold at auction for \$71 an acre. In 1975, we bought a piece of it and in 1994 I bought another section of it that cost more than what the 7,000 acres originally sold for. It’s a story of being ‘land rich and cash poor,’” said Fussell.

“People today are less attached to the land, as most didn’t buy it, they inherited it. If they sell the land, they will have more return in dollars than in cattle. To keep the land agricultural, we sold some of our ‘development rights’ to the State. When you sell the rights you are assured that no houses will be built on the land and the land will always remain in agricultural use. In 1976, the government took a piece of land by eminent domain for the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) to construct a dike to protect the Hillsborough River from flooding into Tampa. The property was appraised and paid for. The 85,000 acres with public access is now the ‘Green Swamp Wildlife Management Area.’ The dike was never created.”

“The key to maintaining a successful cattle ranch is management,” said Fussell. He sells cattle at the Cattlemen’s Livestock Market in Lakeland and to brokers which send them out West. “Today, there is no way to buy a piece of property and get into the cow business, as land, equipment, fertilizer and food is more costly. You can’t teach people the cattle business. People with money can buy a few acres and have two head of cattle, two dogs and three horses, mostly as a hobby. But, please tell people to stay north of the state line, go into town where there are developments.”

“It’s also hard to find good help,” he added. Mimicking this thought, Kevin recalled an old “cracker” saying: “‘Never hire a man who rolls his own cigarettes or wears a straw hat, as he won’t do anything else but roll cigarettes or chase his straw hat.’ Ranching is like gambling, it takes a long time to find out if you win or lose.”

With more than two centuries of ranching heritage, Dewey Fussell said his “contribution is to protect the land as agricultural and keep it that way. We could have sold cypress but it is still here saved as part of the wetlands for the wildlife, deer, turkeys, sandhill and whooping cranes. Although we haven’t seen a Florida panther in about 10 years, there are plenty of coyotes and bobcats. We lose about 3 or 4 calves a year to coyotes, but a cow can take one on. When a cow is distressed, more cows will come along and join in to protect the calf. The wildcats are no problem; they eat the small stuff.”

Dewey and Myra Fussell have two sons, Ray, 38, Kevin, 20, and one daughter Brenda 35, who work cattle everyday alongside their daddy. “Everyone contributes, it’s a family cattle business,” added Fussell. Kevin, a soft-spoken young man, who attended school in Auburndale and Polk City, lives on the ranch. He said in high school, he was about “the only person who knew anything about a cow. Some students thought I was sort of a ‘John Wayne,’” Kevin said with a laugh, “they just didn’t understand, but they got used to it. I am blessed to have been brought up on a ranch. I wouldn’t want to have it any other way. Most people who live in the city, or are from a city, can’t ‘make’ a rancher.”

“On our ranch, we still drive cattle as they did one hundred years ago with horses and dogs. On some ranches, horses and dogs have been replaced by ATVs and Jeeps, but we use a couple of dogs and a few men on horses to round up and work the cows. We do, however, use a hydraulic squeeze as it’s easier to manage them.”

Ray is married and also lives on the ranch. His wife, Ronda “moved to a different life, but likes it. Ranching is something I wanted to do. What I like best is going out and planting a new field and the pride I feel when it comes up knowing I did a good job, or raising a calf, weaned heavier than before, improving our cattle,” Ray commented.

“People want to buy, enjoy, and hold onto the land but ranches have been getting smaller and smaller over the past 10 years.”

Kevin believes in preserving the land, the heritage, and way of life. “Someone has to do it,” Kevin stressed. “I don’t want to see the day when we get our beef from South America and food from Mexico. The U.S is in a bad situation when we have to import cattle and food. Cattle raised in Argentina and Brazil is not as good as beef from fed cattle in the United States. There is a lot of cheaper beef from cattle produced in Brazil but their beef is grassfed and used in potted meat,” Dewey commented. “However, if those countries get feedlots, U.S. ranchers are going to have a hard time as their beef could be cheaper than U.S. beef. Already there are American owned ranches in South America,” Kevin added. Ray further emphasized that “beef needs to be labeled with the country of origin. We don’t want to depend on another country for our beef. We already have foreign investors in Florida who own fertilizer plants and other agribusinesses.”

“You can’t live on the land as it was twenty years ago, you would starve to death,” Dewey Fussell commented. “Now there is improved genetics and heavier calves. We used to keep steers about two years until they reached about a thousand pounds then sent them to the feedlot for ninety days before slaughter. You can’t keep a steer for near that

long anymore as it is too expensive. We keep some calves until they reach 650-700 pounds then they go to a feedlot.”

“The future of the cattle business in Florida is to be determined; it’s based upon improving the breed and improving the grass. In twenty years, there may not be many cows left in Florida. With land prices and operating expenses getting so high, some ranchers are selling land to developers. A few years ago, there was more money left over from a \$350 calf than a \$500 calf today. If calves ever fall back to \$350, there will be more land for sale because ranchers today cannot stay in business on those prices. In 1962, I sold 1,000 pound steers for \$250 a head; I bought a four-wheel drive pickup with 13 head of steers. At today’s prices, 13 head of steers would not even pay for the options on a new vehicle.”

Planning for the future, Dewey Fussell, who serves on the Board of Directors of the Polk County Cattlemen’s Association, said they promote "Ag in the Classroom," a project that teaches fourth grade students about the agricultural business. Buses take them to the Agricultural Center to learn about agricultural products. The State Association also sponsors the Young Cattlemen’s Conference. Last year, Kevin participated in a statewide program along with other young ranchers, spending a week at several Florida ranches.

“It is important that the younger generation learns the importance of the beef cattle industry in Florida,” stated Dewey.

Although both sons graduated from high school with honors, Dewey Fussell attained a “practical” education and offers this advice to young ranchers: “If you enjoy the work and life, stay with it, if not, it’s best to get out of it. You can’t take someone not interested in ranching and make a rancher out of him.” “You can’t ‘make’ a person do something he doesn’t want to do; it’s a waste of time,” Ray added.

If there is one lesson Dewey Fussell contributes to his family heritage, it is the logo of his own lifestyle: “Enjoy what you do, you will be happier, and never say the word ‘never.’”

Polk City on Lake Agnes in Polk County is part of the Lakeland-Winter Haven metro area. The town was founded in 1922 by Isaac Van Horn and named after President James Polk. In 1895, Polk County’s population was 10,983; a hundred years later: 510,458. Between 2000-03, Polk County was the 35th fastest growing County in Florida. Polk City population: 1,516.