

## Two Hundred Years of Tradition: The Great Florida Cattle Drive of Ought 6

By

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The 1800s cattle drives are carved deeply into the legends of Florida history when “cow hunters” drove their herds over hundred of miles on the old “cracker trail” to markets in Punta Rassa, shipping them aboard paddle boats to Cuba and Key West to replenish the beef supply after the Civil and Spanish American Wars, and by train from Ft. Pierce north to the breadbasket of the country.

Marked by long days over rutted, dusty trails, through swamps and across Lake Okeechobee and the Kissimmee River, skilled horsemen along with their faithful cur dogs, gathered together in the annual round-up to minister to their trade. Working thousands of cattle across Florida, camping along the way for weeks at a time, the “cow hunters” settled down nightly in encampments, greeted at dusk by the welcome waft of hot vittles (sometimes entrails) cooked up on an open fire minded by the chuck wagon “chef” that lured their tired and dusty bones back to the cow camp to hunker down for the night beside their brooding herd. The clank of tin cups and the lowing cows echoed into sunset as the glowing embers slowly sank into nightfall and the “cow hunters” marked the close of day. Resting upon saddles and blankets, the great story tellers began their art of warming the spirit, weaving together an oral history of humorous stories collected along the way, spun around the campfire with some songs, as the sun melted into the horizon and night settled over fading embers into a canopy of stars.

In the fast pace of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, those long ago years were once again revived and relived as participants gathered together to memorialize the “cow hunter” heritage and bring to life those deeply etched pages of history across the long Florida “cracker trails.”

Commemorating the drive of 95 and the cow culture history, the Great Florida Cattle Drive of Ought 6 began in Osceola County December 5<sup>th</sup>, and wound up at the final watering hole in Kenansville, December 9<sup>th</sup> with more than 480 native “cracker” cattle and 600 “cow punchers” of all ages and occupations guided in by handpicked “Circle Bosses,” (identified by their colored bands assigned by geographic regions in Florida) to the Silver Spurs Arena. As the crew came into sight along a tree lined horizon on the last leg of the ride, the snaps of cracking whips, scrambling hooves and guttural mooing cows were greeted by the hoots and hollers of fans, families and curious onlookers as Cow Boss, Mike Wilbur and Seminole Tribal Leader Andrew Bowers led the herd home on the fifth and final day of the trek.

Booming over a loudspeaker across the prairie, pioneer rancher and cattle drive organizer Doyle Conner, Jr., provided a colorful dialog of history and noteworthy events that filled in lost memories of those by-gone days when the trail ride was a means of livelihood for pioneer cow culture families who gave birth to the Florida cattle industry. “You can hear the whips in the distance, three cracks, you’re in a hurry; a pause, and three cracks and you’re in trouble; or, a family rhythm might develop that just means it’s time for lunch, but, the ‘cracker whip’ is a tool of the trade,” said Conner. And, as the cattle weaved

across the prairie to the last “encampment” there were plenty of expert “whip crackers” who demonstrated their popping skills, said to exceed the sound barrier at the end of the snap.

The Cattlemen’s Frolic, celebrating the end of the ride, included historical reenactments of the past, cow camp exhibits, vendors selling cowboy paraphernalia, pioneer books, and there were good old fashioned barbecue ribs. For a variety of entertainment, there was the bank robbery, cowboy poets, cracker crooners and an art auction featuring artists from the Cowboy Artists Association of Florida. Among many others were Benjamin Dehart a.k.a. “the Cracker Crooner” from Orlando who camped along the trail and provided old Florida tunes, as well as fifth generation Winter Haven resident, Jerry Mincey singer/and “cracker” song writer. Long time cowboy poet Hank Matson, attired in his full regalia, and whose native history is deeply embedded in Florida, brought to the foreground a barrage of collected stories masterfully presented with a unique “cracker” humor reflecting the lifestyle of the early pioneers. Gary McMahan from Colorado was on hand to “wow” the crowd with his songs, poems, stories, barn burning yodels and his great new song “Okeechobee Joe” inspired by former FCA President, Joe Pearce. This first class entertainer was sponsored by the FCA.

As part of the historical tradition at the nightly encampments when riders spread their blankets on the ground, a depiction of the “way it was,” included reviving Florida’s historical past from the times of the early Timucuan Indian culture, the Spanish Colonial possession, Seminole and Civil Wars, lest those times be forgotten.

The Cowboy Artist Association of Florida had many of its members displaying original artwork of Florida's cow culture. Storytellers, re-enactors and demonstrators at the old-fashioned 'FROLIC" gave visitors a first hand look into Florida's ranching heritage and cow culture traditions. Dismounting from the ride, wearing a buckskin skirt and fringed vest, Desiree Mufson of Stuart, expressed her strong sense of appreciation for the traditions of the early pioneers and her connection to the past, after her first experience on the trail. "I felt a sense of history, as if the present did not exist." Long time rancher, Iris Wall, owner of the Seminole Inn in Indiantown and lifelong friend, Mildred Sherrod of Immokalee, reminisced about their lives and experiences that they said have given them humor and calamity surviving in the cattle industry. In a setting far off the beaten path of the Orlando urban corridor, the Silver Spurs Arena at Kenansville is the home of the Heartbreak Hotel, the old bank and post office that was plucked down again at its old site after a preservation respite on the Adams Ranch in Ft. Pierce.

The success of the trail ride is attributed to many sponsors and supporters, said Conner. The Seminole Tribe provided the cattle power and colorful traditions for the event wearing their customary hand made attire. Besides visitors, there was not a "green horn" in sight as buckskin, chaps, boots and hats were the traditional dress of the day. There was no T-shirts, tennis shoes or ball caps allowed at the historical event. Doyle Conner tipped his hat to the many participants and sponsors including the Florida Agricultural Museum, The Florida Cattlemen's Association, Eli's Western Wear, Florida Ranchland Realty, The Property Owners, Seminole Feeds of Ocala, and the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

At the end of the day, as the orange glow of the sun once again settled behind the scrub prairie, the guttural sounds of cows, the occasional whine of a horse, and the waft of fresh vittles cooking on an open fire closed the gap of time from those olden, golden days when the “cow hunter” his horse, and his dog, rode into the night along the wide open range across Florida.

*The echo of a bard owl wafts upon the wind,  
Silence descends like dew on tall cabbage palms,  
Silver clouds shadow the Moon.  
Silhouetted beneath the stars is two hundred years of heritage,  
As the “cow hunter” hunkers down beside his brooding herd.  
Here, Time stands still...  
Lingering upon the precipice of the Future.*