



**FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND CONSUMER SERVICES**  
**COMMISSIONER ADAM H. PUTNAM**

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**THE**  
**FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND CONSUMER SERVICES**  
**FLORIDA CRACKER CATTLE AND HORSE PROGRAM**

**By: Stephen Monroe**

In the year 1521 Juan Ponce De Leon brought a small herd of Andalusian cattle and horses with him on his second expedition to the New World. He landed near current day Fort Myers, Florida. These were the first cattle and horses to ever set foot (or hoof) on what is now the continental United States. The Spanish explorers were forced back to their ship by the Caloosa Indian warriors, and Ponce De Leon received a mortal wound. There is no record of what became of the explorers livestock, so it is imagined that these were the first cattle to ever run wild in Florida.

The challenge to conquer Florida went out, and other conquistadors soon followed. These explorers brought cattle, swine, and horses. Each expedition party certainly would have arrived with horses for transportation. Like the early cattle, these horses were the product of selective breeding, and many were of Andalusian lineage. These cattle and horses played a tremendous role in Florida History.

In 1540 Don Diego Maldonado brought a large herd of Spanish cattle and horses to the Pensacola Bay area to supply the expedition of Hernando De Soto. Don Diego was unable to make contact with the conquistadors and it was reported that many of the cattle were lost to run wild in the timber of north Florida or left with the Indians.

In 1565 Pedro Menendez De Aviles founded the city of St. Augustine and soon had cattle and horses shipped from Spain to begin producing beef for the garrison.

Ranching was born when Jesuit and Franciscan Friars (missionaries) set up a system of missions across north and north-central Florida. Their mission was to convert Indians to Christianity but the Friars also used Indian labor to tend livestock and crops. These were the first established ranches in North America. Historian Doyle Conner, Jr. points out that the pilgrims who landed at Plymouth Rock had not yet been born.

By 1618 Florida's Spanish Governors were seriously expanding cattle production on local ranchos. The Spanish herds, as well as those kept by the Indians and many cattle running wild, flourished on the immense prairies and rangeland of Florida. The result of this herd increase was

that Spanish Cattlemen in Florida began to ship cattle to the large trading center of Cuba. This was the first industry to develop in the New World and trade with Cuba would continue for the next three hundred years.

By 1700 there were over thirty privately owned ranchos in Florida. A census ordered by Spanish tax collectors reported over 20,000 cattle on the ranchos. Mission herds were exempt from reporting, cattle owned by individual chiefs and those running wild would not have been counted. Persons born in Florida to Spanish parents were known as Criollas. Many Criolla men worked as vaqueros on the ranchos of Florida. Vaqueros and natives clashed during the Indian revolt of 1647. These were probably the first fights between cowboys and Indians in North America.

In the early 1700's Britain, France and Spain were all vying for control of the peninsula state. James Moore, British Governor of South Carolina led a raid into Florida and took back several thousand cattle and horses to sell to Carolina and Georgia settlers. Raids of this type continued for many years. Because of their speed and endurance, these horses were in great demand by soldiers, officials and stockmen.

In the early 1800's many individuals, including Andrew Jackson, bought cattle from the Indians of Florida and drove them back to Tennessee, Kentucky and other states to crossbreed with their European type herds. As time passed, British, Spanish and French in Florida mingled and fought, separated and fought, traded and fought until the Spanish and French mostly left. The influence of Spanish Occupation remains in Florida in the bloodlines of our livestock and the names of many landmarks.

During the War Between The States Florida was the leading supplier of beef for troops on both sides. The Spanish horses were highly prized for transportation. These sturdy horses could travel in Florida's rough conditions where other horses failed. After the war Florida was one of the first states to establish a viable economy. This economy was built by pioneer families who were exporting cattle to Cuba. The cow men, who had been left with worthless Confederate dollars, insisted on being paid in gold coin. The Cuban trade became a lucrative enterprise for such early pioneer families as the Roberts, the Carltons, the Lykes, the Summerlins, the McKays, the Hendrys, the Aldermans, the Wells and many others. During reconstruction, millions of Spanish gold doubloons poured into Florida's post war economy as a result of this trade. Thousands of "Cracker" cattle were shipped from the docks of Tampa, Manatee and Punta Rassa.

Records show that in one ten year period (1868-1878) 1.6 million head of cattle were loaded on ships bound for Cuba, Nassau and Key West. Most of these went to Havana. At this time Florida was America's leading exporter. It would be impossible to overstate the importance of this financial boom to the state. This was the foundation of Florida's vast agricultural economy. Many of Florida's oldest and largest business began as cattle ranching operations. These operations depended, of course, on the cattle and the horses which were necessary for their care.

In the late 1800's, purebred beef and dairy breeds of northern European origin began to be imported into Florida. These cattle would have influenced the genetic makeup of what we

now know as Florida Cracker cattle due to their being crossed with the Spanish cattle of the Florida range. The importation of Brahman and Brahman crossbred bulls in the 1930's and later significantly changed the genetic makeup of herds where they were introduced. Implementation of the Florida Fence Law brought changes to the open range and opportunity for improved animal husbandry practices which made it possible for these new breeds to survive in Florida's conditions. Crossing the hardy cattle of old Florida "Cracker" cows with other breeds, especially Brahman, became very popular. Pure Cracker Cattle were quietly, almost without notice, being bred out of existence.

By the late 1960's there were only a handful of pure Cracker cattle left. These few cattle were scattered across the state on the ranches of families that had been stubborn and smart enough to hang onto some of the old stock. Perhaps nostalgia but more likely, the practical utility of these cattle caused the ranchers to maintain these genetics in their commercial cattle herds. Doyle Conner Sr., a great historian and Florida's Commissioner of Agriculture, urged members of the Florida Cattlemen's Association to preserve cracker Cattle as a heritage breed. Leaders in the industry decided to take action.

In 1970 Mrs. Zona Bass and Mrs. Zetta Hunt, daughters of pioneer cattleman James Durrance, donated five heifers and a bull -- descendants of their father's original cattle -- to the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services on behalf of the Florida Cattlemen's Association. The old Cracker cattle of this ranch were regarded by many in the industry as the purest of the pure. With this small herd known as the "Durrance Line" of Florida Cracker Cattle, the Department was entrusted with the preservation of the breed.

The Department used these donated cattle to begin building a herd. The cattle were kept at the Agricultural Complex in Tallahassee and as numbers increased, a herd was established at the Withlacoochee State Forest near Brooksville in 1979. Separate herds of Cracker cattle were also established by the Department of Natural Resources on the Lake Kissimmee State Park and the Paynes Prairie State Preserve+ during the 1970's. The Lake Kissimmee State Park herd was established from cattle of Durrance bloodlines and cattle obtained from the Hal Chaires family of Old Town. The Paynes Prairie herd was established with animals from the herd of Woody Tilton in addition to cattle transferred from Lake Kissimmee. Also, during this period of time, a few small privately owned herds were being maintained. Occasionally, the Department used "Durrance Line" cattle from other cracker herds to broaden the genetic base of its herd and to avoid inbreeding.

In 1984 the family of Mr. John Law Ayers donated a small herd of Cracker horses to the Department. Mr. Ayers had maintained a herd of pure old Cracker stock and resisted temptations to cross them with other breeds. From this stock, horse herds were established at the Agricultural Complex in Tallahassee and on the Withlacoochee State Forest near Brooksville. The Ayers family and other families including the Bronsons, Boals, Partins, and Saspers continued to maintain small herds of Cracker horses.

Beginning in 1985 attention was focused on the FDACS herds. A selection and screening program was developed and all cattle that did not meet strict breed criteria were culled from the

herd. The Department continues to maintain the Durrance line of Cracker Cattle and the Ayers line of Cracker Horses. Breeding stock from these nucleus herds is made available to interested parties through the annual sales. Animals are transferred between the herds to keep the genetic base broad while maintaining the pure bloodlines. Stallions, of the Ayers bloodline, have been added from other herds to broaden the genetic base.

Through efforts of the Department, the Florida Cracker Cattle Association (FCCA) and the Florida Cracker Horse Association (FCHA) were formed in 1988. The associations have grown steadily. The associations adopted breed standards and appointed evaluation committees to select cattle and horses to be registered as foundation stock for the preservation of the breeds. In 1989 the historic first annual Florida Cracker Cattle Association Gatherin' was held at the Withlacoochee State Forest. This event was hosted by the Department and the FCCA. Since 1990 the annual Gatherin's have included a sale of Cracker Cattle and Horses to allow interested parties to purchase animals and join the preservation effort. Cattle and horses from private and state herds are included in these sales. Those wishing to own a "living link" to Florida's past can purchase animals. These are public auctions and all are welcome to participate or just to come and watch and learn. The Florida Cracker cattle are prized as living, tangible links to our history. The Florida Cracker Horses enjoy widespread popularity as they can be trained for all riding disciplines. These cattle and horses are recognized as important "heritage breeds."

The Florida Cracker Horse Association meets at least twice each year and has trail rides and other events in conjunction with their meetings. Members of the Cracker Horse Association host the meetings and trail rides at various locations statewide.

The Florida Cracker Cattle Association Annual Gatherin' and Sale is held during the Fall each year. A tremendous amount of Florida's cattle industry history has been shared at these "Gatherin's." This meeting was the origin of the Great Florida Cattle Drive of 1995. The Association also sponsors other historical events and exhibits. The public auction of Cracker Horses and Cracker Cattle allows breeding stock from foundation herds to be shared with all who desire to participate in the preservation efforts. The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services coordinates and hosts these events which are held at the Withlacoochee State Forest near Brooksville, Florida. The Departments' Cracker Cattle and Horse program manager serves as a resource for persons who want to become involved with preserving these living links to Florida's agricultural heritage.

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Additional information is available on the Breed Association web-sites:

Florida Cracker Cattle Association: [www.floridacrackercattle.org](http://www.floridacrackercattle.org)

Florida Cracker Horse Association: [www.floridacrackerhorses.com](http://www.floridacrackerhorses.com)