

FARMERS

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Daniels also draws from with a state-of-the-art "Microjet" water-saving system to irrigate his citrus.

"Whooping cranes, we call 'em, but I guess they're sand cranes," he said.

Seemingly in the time it took those cranes to cross the near sky, or more accurately in the time it took Daniels to grow from young to old on Persimmon Ridge a couple of miles west of the Lee-Hendry County line, farming and ranching have changed almost completely in Lee County.

Once it was huge, of course — cattle dominated in the inland portions of the county, and food crops, citrus and gladiolus flowers covered much of the cleared land that wasn't devoted to grazing.

In a county with 804 square miles of land — that amounts to almost 515,000 acres — more than 80 percent served agriculture in some way when Daniels was a boy, and about 30,000 people lived here.

But by the beginning of the 21st century, agriculture had shrunk to roughly a quarter of the original commitment in acres and earth. In 2001, the Lee County Property Appraiser's figures showed that about 87,000 acres supported cows, 16,500 held citrus trees, and there were 7,000 acres planted in vegetables (down from 9,000 in 1992).

In a seven-year period, the figures have changed dramatically, again. Now the county population has jumped well above 600,000 and density is determined at 678 people per square mile (compared to 152 people per square mile in Collier and 227 per square mile in Charlotte County).

And now, reports the Property Appraiser, only 52,200 acres of county land still serve cattle, with about 15,280 acres in citrus, and 3,300 in vegetables (another 710 are planted in field crops and about 2,200 in potatoes). All of it together amounts to about 16.3 percent of county lands.

Variety and pressure

But what happens on those lands is remarkably varied: farmers harvest field crops, a variety of vegetables, potatoes, timber, cows, citrus, mangoes, grapes and other fruit, bees, fowl, fish (raised on inland fish farms), horses, swine, goats, and nursery products.

The entire effort together is held in 3,337 parcels, the data shows, and Daniels points out immediately what is evident to anybody who looks.

"Once, a lot of people owned the land they farmed," he said. "Now you have more who lease, from owners who try to hold their taxes down with the greenbelt."

That is especially true of cattle, which are listed in the agricultural rolls on lands designated as "improved," "semi-improved," "native," or "pasture."

The greenbelt, of course, is a term for agriculture exemptions on property, a designation that can mean huge savings to landowners, and for some small farmers the difference between surviving economically to keep their land in production, and losing it.

The pressures on Comer Taylor, for example, include not only finding land to lease for his cows, but the huge costs of fuel to transport them to sale in Arcadia, along with the costs of facing down new pests, weeds and diseases.

"There's too much of that, it seems now — canker and other problems for the citrus folks, and something new I've never seen before called 'Creeping Charley,'" says the 71-year-old cowman, who arrived here from Georgia in 1956, and now owns about 400 head of cattle.



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO ROGER WILLIAMS

The Ritcheys grow their own tomatoes and sell them in their bustling market facing State Road 80 near Buckingham Road in Alva. They are, from the left, Betty Ritchey, Robert Ritchey, Dalacy Ritchey, Gidget Ritchey, and her son, Dillon Ritchey.



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTOS ROGER WILLIAMS

Left, Comer Taylor and his wife, Loleta tend to 400 cows on land the couple leases in Bonita Springs. Right, James Daniels, 79, farms citrus in Lee County. When Daniels was a boy, more than 400,000 acres of Lee County was farmland. Today, only about 70,000 are used for cattle grazing, citrus trees or vegetable crops.

"It's a weed, and it just takes over. I lease 4,000 acres down in Bonita east of I-75, and I'm going to have to go down there today and start spraying, I guess. I'll try that, at least. It's already captured 100 acres, but nobody really knows what you do with it."

He was spraying early this week, not with a plane, but with tractors over his 100 acres of weed-invaded land. More fuel costs.

Taylor's view of the cattle industry is that nobody in it who doesn't sell cows in huge volumes — in the numbers that encourage buyers to come to the ranches and ship beef away themselves, a form of ranching mostly gone in the region — is going to get rich in Lee County.

"You can't make much of a living on cows now, not and pay for fuel and feed. You have some profit on the cows, yes, but now I have to go spray. Will this thing (cattle ranching) be viable in years to come? Not if the economy comes back, because then these (land owner/developers) will sell their land or develop it, again."

Already, Taylor has cows not on land he leases in Lee, but out in Hendry and even Glades County, too.

Increasingly, however, farmers and growers have turned to small, specialized operations that can produce income — and second jobs (for years, second jobs or businesses have been par for the course).

Smart niche farming

Some sell fruit or vegetables to niche buyers in or out of Florida — on Pine

Island, for example, a number of fruit growers have specialized for customers in the North or West. Some own and operate small feed or farm stores. In the case of the Daniels, both father James, and Son, Earl, have been longtime ministers at small churches.

And some, like the Ritcheys, grow large quantities of specialized produce on small acreage, and sell directly to buyers from roadside markets.

"My dad and grandfather did it, my uncle did it, and now I'm farming," says Robert Ritchey, born and raised in Lee County and now also defying the odds: in a county where the median age is mid-40s and the average age of a farmer is 55, Ritchey is a young man, a mere 37.

Seven days a week from November to June, Robert himself, his wife, Dalacy, his mother, Betty, and his sister Gidget, often joined after school by her kindergartner, Dillon, work in the bustling market facing State Road 80 a half-mile east of Buckingham road.

Arranged in a large pole-barn open to the north, the family lays out huge supplies of fresh vegetables and fruits, most of it grown either by the Ritcheys themselves, or someone else nearby.

There's honey from Walker Farms in North Fort Myers, for example, and potatoes from the Troyer Brothers' fields on State Road 80; with 2,000 acres under cultivation, the Troyers can produce and ship about 875,000 pounds of red, white and yellow potatoes all over the country every year, harvesting in the spring when no one else in the country has them fresh.

"I'm not kidding you," says Ritchey, admiring that operation, "the Troyers know how to do it right. And they have the best potato in America, in my opinion."

And Ritchey may have the best tomatoes in the state of Florida, if not the country, in the opinions of many who swear by them (tomatoes are subject to fierce loyalties and opinions by their apologists, who can be heard arguing the merits of produce from Michigan to Lee County on any given day in the market).

The produce comes right out of the family's fields a couple of miles east of the market on SR 80, where workers could be seen covering every single one of the thousands of tomato plants standing on about six acres, before a winter cold snap early this year.

Ritchey also grows two or three acres of sweet onions, and dabbles in many other vegetables from time to time — cabbages, eggplants, squash, cantaloupe and watermelon, peppers, beans and so on.

It's a life that doesn't let go for the holidays, or any other days. Out of season, Ritchey discs his fields, repairs his equipment, and gets ready for the next season.

In the market, his family hustles from morning to night, seven days a week, replenishing bins, sorting through day-old produce, and keeping the place as tidy as a living room and as pretty as a picture.

That's part of the farming life, nowadays.

"I've been told if you can grow a tomato here, you can grow anything," he says. "And tomatoes take a lot of everything. Plus, the cost of fuel is up, fertilizer is up, plastics are up, and growing a good product — well, you aren't gonna do it cutting corners. It has to be done when it needs to be done. Plants don't care if you're sick, or if your equipment doesn't work, or if you want a day off. You got to stick with them."

Although Ritchey graduated from Riverdale High School nearby and went straight into farming without attending an agricultural college (like some successful farmers here), his insistence on self-education keeps him abreast of changes in the industry.

Which is why he's been steadily going green, he says — not only is it what people want, but done right it can make a better product, he says.

"I've been using a lot of organic, from chicken manure to all the natural stuff, some of it even made from seaweed," he explains. "I'm not certified organic, yet — that takes a long time — but I use beaucoup of the organics."

And he uses a little heart. When his nephew, Dillon, wanders by with a bright green katydid newly captured and clutched between a thumb and forefinger, Ritchey stops the conversation.

"Go get him in the grass, let him go," he tells the boy. "Do it now and don't hurt him, he ain't doing nothing to nobody."

Young Dillon is happy to comply.

Is that the attitude of a future farmer?

Well, maybe. Back on Persimmon Ridge, James Daniels wonders if it can happen anymore in Lee County. Maybe, he surmises, but only the way the Ritcheys are doing it — not like he and his family did.

"Lord, it's got so expensive, I don't think you could much do it now, if you had to start up."

Looking down across the field toward his cows and those boyhood friends of his, the trees, he adds something else.

"And you know, it's drier than I've ever seen it. In my 79 years, this the first time, the last two years, that creek down in those trees has ever dried up." ■