

# From our own backyard



Guy M. Strayhorn, grandfather of local attorney Bruce Strayhorn, and cowmen working cattle in Lee County in 1905. Florida was once the second leading producer of beef cows in the U.S.

Florida is neither a Democratic state nor a Republican state, consistently.

Instead, it's a consistent cow-calf state that ranks 12th in the U.S. as a beef producer, although most people don't realize it. Once, we were the No. 2 producer of beef in the nation, behind Texas.

Every time you buy a piece of beef you vote cow-calf, whatever your other politics may be. You don't even have to register to vote — you just buy the meat. And afterward, you get to eat your vote. That's a lot more fun than eating your words, which is often the case for both Democrats and Republicans.

Here's how a cow-calf state works. A cow produces a calf each year. Generally, bull calves are cut (castrated) to become grass-fed steers, then raised to a certain weight and weaned from the mothers. Then they're sold and shipped to a feed lot somewhere in or near the grain belt (Texas to Canada).

Sometimes heifers, the females, are kept for use as breeding cows, and sometimes the rancher decides not to carry them for two years before they throw their first calves, and he, or she, sends them to market with the steers, too.

I bring all this up because most people don't think about the process. But most people do buy beef from Publix, Winn-Dixie, Sam's, Wal-Mart, Albertson's or a similar place.

They vote cow-calf, in other words, without wanting to participate in party politics.

But lately, the cow-calf party has come under siege.

In the case of cattlemen raising beef in Lee and Collier counties, pastureland is disappearing like an ice cube in the sun.

Government property (80 percent of Collier) is usually off limits to ranchers who would otherwise lease it and graze cows, and that often doesn't make sense. Sometimes it may, but there ought to be a case-by-case assessment.

In addition, people have noted correctly that bovines emit greenhouse gasses, and some have even suggested taxing cattlemen for each cow.

Let me point out that people pollute, too, a lot more than cows. Maybe some

genius will suggest a tax for each new child in a family, based on an estimated pollution product per year, per child.

Here's how Clint Raulerson, cattle manager at the Half Circle L Ranch in Collier, weighs all that.

"If you go to any maintained ranch, you will see more and healthier wildlife than in the Brazilian pepper jungles that are created on a lot of government land after all the cattle are run out.

"Cattle get blamed for global warming and environmental damage. I would bet historically that the cattle industry has done a lot less damage to Florida's environment than Mickey Mouse, or the millions of people that flock to our state

and cover their lily white rear-ends in suntan lotion and sunscreen and jump in our waters to rinse it off!"

He'd be right, which raises the question of taste. If you like your meat, but you don't want to pollute, insist on grass-fed beef. That could cause an eating revolution.

Like buffalo, elk and deer, grass-fed beef can be delicious. If all of us required grass-fed meat, the consumer-created system that seeks fat or "marbled" meat — meat grain-fed on the order of four to six pounds per pound of weight gain in each cow — would collapse.

Grain would be raised for humans, and cows would not be shipped from Florida west to reach the grain. That would reduce our dependence on oil for shipping, and cut (castrate) our resulting pollutants.

As it stands now, says Bruce Strayhorn, a Lee County attorney who raises cows just as his parents and grandparents did, most cattle from here are shipped out to Texas. And why? Only because they can get there to grain-supplied feed lots in 18 or 20 hours — one long trip — the maximum range drivers and livestock are allowed to travel without resting out of the truck.

"Go farther than that and you get a tremendous shrinkage," he explains. "As it is, two or three cows usually die in a possum belly anyway, on each trip." A possum belly is a truck trailer that can hold 100 animals. Who needs such a behemoth? Not the cow-calf party, not if we want grass-fed beef and the government will agree to lease some of its vast holdings to ranchers for grazing rights.

Then we'll be eating just like in the old days, the days of Raulerson's or Strayhorn's parents and grandparents, or mine and yours — right from our own backyard. ■

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13000 S. Cleveland Ave.  
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