

CATTLE

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But the labyrinthine market maze now means most of us are unlikely ever to eat beef raised nearby, or at least finished and butchered nearby.

In Collier and Lee Counties alone, with more than 3,000 square miles of land and a prominent and even predominant history of ranching, the cow business takes two forms. There are cows run on leased land by small-number ranchers, and cows run by cattlemen who own the land. All of them have to unravel a knotty complex of economic, technical and agricultural challenges to make money; no longer can they put their cows on good grass, then truck them to market without further ado.

One thing is certain, they all say: Cattle ranching isn't what it once was, even as recently as about 25 ago.

"When I was a kid, even big ranches had their cattle loaded on a truck and they hauled them to market, and that was it. You gave them a shot or two. It was kind of wild and fun. But nowadays it's a true business, and every single thing is recorded and documented," says Clint Raulerson, 41, ranch manager at the Half Circle L Ranch of about 10,000 acres in northeastern Collier County. He also manages another ranch and owns his own, with family members.

Nowadays, few or no ranchers in Southwest Florida exist solely by selling cows, either. Jack Johnson Jr., for example, the 56-year-old scion of a cattle family born and raised in the business, also runs a thriving retail business in Immokalee, a farm and feed store with lumber, hardware and building material — none of which he learned to do when he went up to the University of Florida to earn a degree in agricultural science.

In Mr. Johnson's view, "Land is the limiting resource, and there's a lot less of it available than there used to be. If you have land, you have resources, things you can do. If you had an adequate amount of lease land of any value, you might do better leasing than owning — but the problem is you don't know how long you're going to be able to lease it."

The good news for ranchers is that Americans, along with a lot of other people, continue to buy beef, so a steady demand persists.

"In the agricultural community now, beef production is probably one of the staples of a diversified ag operation, but you have to have diversification," explains Dane Scofield, 59, who grew up in the cattle and citrus business and is now an owner of the Half Circle L.

"You can't pick just one aspect of agriculture and expect to have a balanced book at the end of the year," Mr. Scofield adds. "So typically in South Florida now, it's a combination of beef cattle, vegetable crops and citrus, with some cane the closer you get to the Lake (Okeechobee)."

At the Half Circle L, about 8,000 acres are devoted to cows, he says — roughly 800 head at any one time, which suggests the important cow-to-acre ratio of grazing cattle, in this case roughly 1 to 10.

If you're from a place like Colorado or Texas where the ratio might be 1 cow to 40 acres or higher, that sounds mighty fine, suggests Mr. Raulerson. "People don't realize what Florida is — you can run a lot of cows on a little bit of land," he says.

Even so, the kind of sizeable operation he runs is now almost gone in Collier and Lee counties, and greatly reduced elsewhere.

Once upon a time grows up

Once, the Sunshine State defied the stereotypical notions of outsiders by weighing in as No. 2 in beef production in the United States, behind Texas but ahead of



COURTESY PHOTO

Working cowboys and cowgirls from the Half Circle L Ranch in northeast Collier County. From the left, Clint Raulerson, Paige Raulerson, Heather Raulerson, Gennifer Raulerson, Cory Keel, Ryan Howard, Clay Howard and Ronnie Keel

such cattle bastions as Oklahoma, or the Rocky Mountain West of Montana, Wyoming and Colorado, where big ranches were also the norm.

More recently, Florida has ranked 12th in beef cows (and 18th in total cattle, since dairy farming plays a significant role in the counts of some states), according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, with roughly 1 million head that rely on about 4 million acres of pastureland and another million of grazed woodland. (another 700,000 or so dairy cattle exist in Florida).

In Collier and Lee, where beef cows once predominated, there are now probably less than 30,000 beef cows, with less than 10,000 on the hoof in Lee, while another 50,000 come out of Hendry County, according to USDA statistics.

That's not the hundreds of thousands once run out of the region — many of them shipped out of Punta Rassa to Cuba, or butchered and sold in Florida or the South — but it's still a significant business.

With an emphasis on business.

Although men like Mr. Scofield and Mr. Raulerson can and do still ride horseback to reach and round up cows, and still possess the old-time skills (tight fence-building, tagging or branding), the business end of it, with the demands for scrupulous record-keeping and the government regulations designed to protect and enhance the quality of beef, require them to saddle up a desk much of the time, too.

In Lee County, where attorney Bruce Strayhorn headquarters his inter-generational cow operation on family land he owns in Lee, Collier and Charlotte counties (his grandfather, Guy M. Strayhorn, helped found the Lee Cattlemen's Association), business starts with the simple matter of finding good help.

But few people nowadays can claim to have grown up on ranches or learned the cow business thoroughly by working on them, nor can they successfully practice both the art and science of breeding animals that put on weight quickly and do well in the climate here.

"We have cross-bred Angus-Brahmas," Mr. Strayhorn explains. "The Brahmas sweat and add 'ear,' and that's worth a deduct at sale time, but they are better producers on our sorry grass and soils."

Mr. Strayhorn still trucks his cows to the big sales events at Arcadia or Okeechobee — unless he can put together 100 or so who are uniform in size, in which case he can sell them directly to buyers through video displays on the Internet.

Why 100? "That's what a possum-belly semi-trailer holds," he explains — the big over-the-road hauler in which they'll be shipped west to a feedlot or to a buyer to fatten, before being shipped again to a slaughterhouse.

At the Half Circle L, Mr. Scofield explains the process in depth.

Much of what happens both in ship-

ping and the market is directly influenced by the grain market. And that was lately tipped on its ear not only by hard weather in the Midwest — "grain is not an option in this climate," says his cattle manager, Mr. Raulerson — but by competition for grain from producers of ethanol, driving up prices and ultimately reducing the



COURTESY PHOTO

Heather Raulerson deworming a beef cow on the Half Circle L Ranch.

profit of cattlemen. The going price now can range between about 40 cents and 80 cents a pound for cows, depending on a wide variety of factors.

"We've had very stable prices for six years, but this year is the first downturn in the market we've seen — that's grain driven," Mr. Scofield explains, noting a drop of about 35 to 40 percent. "If we have a good grain year, we should see stabilization of calf prices coming back to where they have been."

The grain engine

Grain lies at the heart of the cow business now, since calves can gain weight so quickly on a daily grain diet. Mr. Strayhorn's cows, for example, can go from 400 to about 800 pounds in 90 days on a feed lot, he points out.

Counterintuitively, perhaps, it's cheaper for ranchers to ship their cows to the grain belt than to ship grain here, where they could "finish" the cows, instead. The reason is that it takes more than four pounds of grain to add a pound of weight on the hoof, so moving cows north and west means moving less weight than moving grain south and east.

But across the market, including in export markets, demand for beef has been steady or on the increase, while herd numbers in the United States continue to drop.

In Mr. Scofield's youth, cows were sold at about 300 pounds, and shipped out to the processing plant at that weight. That was before he graduated from the United States Naval Academy and flew helicopters off destroyers for a career, and before he came home to help run his family's ranch, kicking off that effort by earning a degree in plant science from Florida Southern College to help him

manage citrus production.

In the 1980s, adds Mr. Johnson, many ranchers went into citrus in the region, and a lot of old-time cattle pasture was lost.

But lately buyers, who were habitually getting the family's cows at about 500 pounds and fattening them to 1,000, want a 550 pound animal at sale, because the rancher has to carry the cow for that much longer, reducing the buyer's burden, Mr. Scofield explains.

Most of his cattle sales don't go to the Arcadia or Okeechobee sales barns anymore, either. Instead, he employs a marketer who films the cows and puts the video on a satellite broadcast seen worldwide, selling them directly to a buyer.

He aims for cows of good weight with a uniform color, because that sells better, he says.

And the technology of tracking cows from the U.S. producer to the plate has become startling in its efficiency, relying on tags with microchips that Half Circle L intends to introduce in the next year or two, when all cattle will be instantly scanned, the ranchers say.

"So if any animal shows up sick or diseased, they can track it right back to its origin," Mr. Scofield explains — which ultimately will protect U.S. cattlemen.

With all the high-tech innovations and government requirements to monitor medicines and care of animals going to market, there is still the nature of the work and the tough, affable temperaments of the people who do it.

That part hasn't changed.

"Branding is still definitely one of the jobs, and I still horseback a few days of every week," says Mr. Raulerson, the cattle manager at Half Circle L.

The yearly cycle has never changed much, either. Calving takes place in Florida between about October and the end of the year.

"I put my bulls in with the cows January 1, I bring the bulls in to test, we give them medications, and put different breeds with different herds," he explains.

Branding occurs about the end of February, a week-long roundup that would have looked somewhat the same in the 19th century.

"We bring the calves back in mid-May and give them a booster shot, and after that we come in at the end of June or the first of July and, depending on how my calves are looking and the weights, we'll ship them. They'll sell over the Internet auction on a later delivery, but we won't ship them for another month. They're sold on a projected weight."

So about July 1, the big trucks come in, load the cattle, and ship them out. Then in September, the cattlemen bring all their animals in to check their health and, as Mr. Raulerson puts it, "run an arm in every one."

All of which is why beef remains such an opportune food, the ranchers point out.

"If I could say one thing to people, I'd say, buy U.S. beef, and realize that this is not only a part of our everyday life now, but this is part of our American history," says Mr. Raulerson. "Cattle is what this state was built on."

And while you're doing it, suggests Mr. Johnson, respect the land and the property of those raising the beef. Too many people with four-wheelers cut fences (a felony crime), and a lot of others just throw trash into cow pastures.

And meanwhile, the capable people who raise cows will keep raising them.

"You have to be flexible, because agriculture is a combination of art and science," says Mr. Scofield. "But you're dependent on the blessing of God. You pray for good weather. I've always had a love for the land, and it used to be a simpler way of life, but it no longer is. I spend half my life doing paperwork, not out in the field."

But even at that, there's no place he'd rather be, he concludes. ■