

King of the Crackers

By LAWRENCE E. WILL

You folks, of course, know all about those western cowpokes from seeing them on your TV screen. You know how they spent their days chasing badmen in the hills and rescuing pretty damsels in distress and shooting up the Red Dog Saloon. They didn't scarcely have time, it seems, to do much riding herd. Now you'd never learn it between commercials, but right here in Okeechobee Land we've had our cowboys too, though they didn't dress so fancy or operate just like those western guys, but they were tending their cattle here long before Jim Bowie ever whetted a knife or Bat Masterson conked a desperado, and not only that, Florida cowboys are still working at their trade on those same old ranges that their grand pappies rode, and they are raising up their own boys to keep the good work going on.

Where their first cows came from is most anybody's guess. The departing Spaniards left some. Quite likely some were left behind when English settlers skipped out to the Bahamas after Spain took over Florida a second time, and we know that the Seminoles had cattle which they had to abandon or which were stolen from them in the Indian wars. Anyway, plenty of cattle were roaming wild when the first settlers migrated down to this part of the state. Many a man got his start by catching a wild horse or two and then rounding up those loose cows. As far back as the Civil War big herds were ranging on the Arcadia prairies and they helped keep the Confederacy in meat. The biggest stock raiser at that time was Jacob Summerlin, the King of the Crackers.

Some of Summerlin's cowmen were described by Colonel George F. Thompson, who had been sent here right after the war to arrange for homesteading the newly freed negroes. He visited a camp on Pease Creek (near Arcadia) where these cow hunters lived in log houses built a couple of feet above the ground, and which had neither windows nor chinking in the cracks. Their diet, so he said, was pork fried until it was like tough hide, cornbread tasting like baked sawdust, "Haiti potatoes" boiled till they were

mostly water, and with everything, an ample supply of grease. Yet in spite of their repulsive diet he had to admit that these drovers were as active and hardy a class of men as could be found in any northern clime, "not like most lazy southerners". Their cattle, he said, were small, netting 500 or 600 pounds, and when sold in a batch they brought only \$6 a head, though an extra fine one might sell for \$14 to \$18. At that time some were being shipped to Savannah or Charleston, but most were sold in Havana.

From those early days right on down till Flagler built his railroad to Key West, cattle raising on the north and west sides of Lake Okeechobee didn't change much till recent years. Cattlemen didn't have to own their land. The whole wide world was there for them to use. The cattle roamed the prairies, woods and swamps, wild as any deer. Although the cattlemen would ride the range and knew each cow at sight, yet they didn't have much work to do till time for the big drive in the spring. Then each owner, or maybe six or a dozen together with all their cow hands, would start on the roundup and the drive, which would last for several weeks. With wild whoops and hurrahs the riders would set out from their starting camps, while their supplies followed in two wheeled carts pulled by a yoke or two of oxen. Mules were no good for this, since they couldn't stand those pesky flies and mosquitoes as the oxen could, besides their small hooves got stuck in boggy places. Each man's equipment was nothing much but a mosquito bar, a blanket and a slicker, and of course, a rifle or shotgun, for after the dried beef and biscuits which the women had prepared had been used up, the cowmen got their meat by hunting game.

These rangers were called "cow hunters" for that's exactly what they were. Every man, with his short handled, 18 foot whip or "drag," and his well trained "catch dog", would scour the swamps, palmetto thickets and piney woods, rounding up each scattered cow and steer and herd them to the nearest pen. This drag was the main tool of the cow hunter's trade. He could wrap it around the neck of a running calf, or with a rifle-like crack that could be heard for miles, kill a horsefly on an ox's rump and never put a blister on the hide. It was from their skill with these noisy whips that the cowmen got the name of "Crackers." A catch dog was a mongrel with some bull dog strain which had been trained to rout a cow from the densest brush, then hold her until the ranger could take over. He was a cow hunter's most necessary helper. He was, that is, until the screw worm came to Florida. Then every scratch in a cow's hide was quickly filled with squirming maggots, so now the poor catch dog has done lost his job.

The drive began on that part of the range farthest from the final shipping point. The first day or two would be spent in rounding up all cattle in that vicinity, which were put into a log fenced "holding pen" of a half acre or so in extent. Here each calf was cut and marked and branded with its proper owner's brand, for herds were usually mixed. Cows, calves and bulls then were turned loose. Steers or "beef cattle" meanwhile were "minded" by a few riders to prevent them from straying. On the following day these steers were moved on to the next holding pen, a day's drive, some ten or fifteen miles further on, where a new batch of cattle were hunted from the woods and the process repeated. After all cattle had been rounded up the herd might number from a few hundred to a couple of thousand head.

These were then driven to the shipping point, Tampa or Ft. Pierce. In the early days of the Cuban market, the cattle had been driven to Punta Gorda for shipment. Later they were driven further south, the Caloosahatchee River being forded at Ft. Thompson, near LaBelle, and the drive continued along the river to its mouth, at Punta Rassa. Here the animals would be loaded onto the waiting schooner or steamship for Havana.

The loading, once started, kept right on even into the night. By the flickering light of bonfires and lighted torches, bearded, big hatted riders drove the cattle, a dozen at a time, down the long high-boarded runway and wharf amidst whoops and shouts, the clattering of hooves, the bellowing of cattle, the barking of dogs and the pistol-shot cracking of drags, while more bawling steers kept pouring from the darkness of the backwoods. That must have been a sight to see.

When the ship returned from Havana it would be met by settlers from as far as Bassenger, Ft. Mead or Ft. Drum with their oxcarts to load up with supplies from civilization. The cattlemen were paid in Spanish gold, usually one dubloon, worth \$15.60, for each steer. A peck or more of these shining coins might be stuffed in saddle bags and left carelessly around until the owner was ready to start home. Dr. Lykes once was paid with an Octagon soap box plumb full of gold. He guarded it by spreading his saddle blanket on top and using it for a pillow that night. As one old cowman told me not so long ago, "Everybody used gold money in them days, but there wasn't much of anything that you could buy, excusing flour and sugar and coffee. People left their money laying around in cigar boxes or corn sacks or tied up in some old shirt sleeve. Most every baby's rattle was some gold dubloons

in a sody tin. Thar was a heap of men who'd put their brand on other people's calves but hit seemed like thar weren't nobody so sorry as to steal that gold. Hit's agin the law to own no gold now, but I reckon thar's some folks who've got some hid away till yet."

One of those old time cattle barons and the first one to run his cattle south of the Caloosahatchee, was Francis Asbury Hendry, who had come to Ft. Myers in 1868, then moved to Ft. Thompson up the river. In the 1880's, when a man with only 1000 head wasn't scarcely rated as a cattle man, Hendry and his family were considered to be the biggest owners in the state. He had first come to Ft. Myers as a dispatch bearer during the Indian war. In the Civil War he was a Confederate captain. In later years he served in both the Senate and the House of the State Legislature and was on the first Board of County Commissioners, but he also worked to get the county divided later on, though he didn't live to see Hendry County named for himself.

Another cowman who was getting his start at the same time as Hendry was Dr. Howell T. Lykes, who had married the daughter of Captain James McKay, Sr., of blockade running fame. His seven sons, under the name of Lykes Brothers, now own 300,000 acres of pasture and citrus land, to say nothing of their 54 ocean going steam ships.

One of the most famous of those old cattle barons was Ziba King, who stood six feet six, weighed 225 pounds, could out-eat any competition and was unbeatable at poker. He was quite a man. Born in Georgia in 1838, he came to Tampa thirty years later, then moved to Ft. Ogden where he ran a store and began to accumulate some cattle. In 1900, of the 452,000 head of cattle in Florida, he owned 50,000 himself. Besides being an official in three banks, he had, like Hendry, served in both the House and Senate in the Legislature, and too, he'd been a county judge. Once when the school board had been unable to pay the teachers, he paid them off himself, all in Spanish gold.

But the first, and for a long time the biggest, of all the big cattlemen was Jacob Summerlin, a Cracker to be sure, in fact he was known far and wide as King of the Crackers, a title of which he was right smart proud. He bragged that he could ride a horse and crack a whip when he was only seven years old, and that he had been the first white child born in Florida after it became U. S. territory. That had been in 1821, in Alachua County, right

on the Indian border. As a boy he was friendly with Osceola and other Seminoles, but that didn't prevent him from almost being ambushed a couple of times by his old time friends after hostilities began. As early as 1859 he began to ship cattle to Cuba and before the war broke out he already had shipped thousands of head. Then he agreed to furnish the Confederacy with badly needed beef, hides and tallow by delivering 600 head a week during the months from April to August, by driving them from the Arcadia prairies to the railhead at Baldwin up near the Georgia line, a trip of forty days. After two years of this he decided on a better way to help the cause. Teaming up with Captain James McKay and his son Captain James, Jr., he began to ship again to Cuba. These cattle were smuggled through the Union blockade by the McKays in their steamers SCOTTISH CHIEF and SALVOR and their sailing brig HUNTRESS. The Yankees finally burned the SCOTTISH CHIEF, captured the SALVOR and imprisoned Captain McKay and his son Donald, but Summerlin kept on exporting beef. In Cuba his \$8 steers now brought \$25 to \$30 in gold with which he bought wheat, flour, bacon, sugar, salt and tobacco for the hungry soldiers and the folks back home. Yet after the war old Jake was not as rich as he might have been, for a good share of his money was in Confederate bills, and besides the cattle market then was "shot." However, it came to life again during the Cuban Ten Year Rebellion from 1868 to 1878. Summerlin had been shipping cattle from his 800 foot pier at Punta Gorda, but now he moved and built a pier at Punta Rassa, at the Caloosahatchee River's mouth where there was not a crying thing to be seen but a government warehouse at the end of the submarine telegraph cable to Cuba. A newspaper writer, here in 1883, described Punta Rassa as "a desolate, wind swept cape, which, with its neighboring island (Sanibel) form a very good harbor. It would seem," he says, "that nobody would live on such a spot from choice, but here, in this desert-like place, in that ugly old building, with only the bare necessities of life around him, lives one of the richest men in Florida, who could, if he would, live in princely style anywhere in the state. Owning, as he does, the wharf at Punta Rassa and 1000 acres of land adjacent, houses and orange groves elsewhere, and tens of thousands of head of cattle, I could not realize that the little old man I found next morning engaged in cutting up a slaughtered beef, was the King of the Crackers, whose name is known throughout Florida and Cuba."

Jake Summerlin was uneducated, but that didn't prevent him from contributing land and money to start Summerlin Institute in Bartow. He already had donated money for the erection of a court house in Orlando, partly to

prevent General Sanford from moving the county seat to his own town. Summerlin also helped lay out the water route from the head of the Caloosahatchee to connect it with Lake Okeechobee. When Hamilton Disston wanted to open the river to the lake he got those old cattlemen, Captain Hendry and Jake Summerlin, who knew that country better than most anybody, to lay out the best route through the lakes and marshes that lay between. Partly at his own expense, Summerlin got together a party and led it himself from Ft. Thompson to Lake Hicpochee. Although he then was about sixty years old, he and Hendry waded through sawgrass in waist deep water, taking three or four hours to advance each mile, sleeping in an open boat and it plumb full of hungry mosquitoes, to set up tall flags for guiding Captain Menge's dredge as it dug the canal that we are still using till this day.

Summerlin used to be a mystery to those Cubans, for although to do business with them, he had to bribe them from the highest right on down the line, yet they couldn't cheat him, he wouldn't gamble and he never drank, and his wealth sure didn't go to his head. All his life he lived, dressed, acted and talked just like his poorest cow hunters. He bragged that for twenty years he'd never worn a coat and he didn't even break that rule at the dedication of his Summerlin Institute, although he did go so far as to put on shoes. "I'm just a plain old sun baked Florida Cracker" he used to say.

It seems as if most of those old cattlemen, regardless of their wealth, were plumb satisfied to live just as they had done when they used to ride the range. There was Joe Peeples in recent years, who would drive in a beat up Ford from LaBelle to Tallahassee to sit in the legislative halls in his rumpled clothes smoking a corncob pipe, although his estate was appraised at a million dollars. That was just the way of a Cracker cowman, but I don't reckon there was any man who could beat the record of old Joe Bowers of Indiantown. He had come from North Carolina to the Bartow-Wauchula area, but when the freeze in 1895 killed all his orange trees, he moved clear over to the Seminole settlement at what's now called Indiantown, the first white man who ever lived there. He camped among the Seminoles, hunted with them, got adopted into their tribe and took to wearing a long tailed, striped shirt just like a blooming redskin. After awhile Joe bought 80 acres in a hammock and planted out some citrus trees, eleven varieties before he got through. Those trees now are sixty years old but they still bear fruit as good as ever, better than some of the newer groves out there, so folks tell me.

Joe built himself a 12 x 16 board-and-batten store there in his grove where he traded with the Indians. He even owned a dairy and had the biggest herd of range cows in that part of the country, yet Joe loved best to roam the woods hunting and looking after his cow critters. He'd sooner sleep under a mosquito bar beneath a cypress tree than in bed in his palmetto shack at home.

Now Joe Bowers was blamed near 70 years of age when he got a new idea in his head. He'd tried his hand at most everything else, so now, he allowed, he'd try his luck at getting married. He picked a right pretty local girl only sixteen years of age to be his blushing bride. The wedding, there in his grove, attended by half a thousand bug eyed people, was a grand success. During the ceremony, Joe, just so he'd feel right natural, sat on a horse, and of course, the bride and the preacher did the same. And then, the rest of that day and all the next, Joe entertained his guests with tall tales of hunting in the woods and kept all hands well supplied with ample drinking liquor.

To be sure, Joe didn't expect his bride to be content to housekeep in his old palmetto shack, so nearby he built a house of red stained logs. It had a roof of tin, a porch across the front, glass windows, and to top it all, a real sure enough bathroom with running water and everything complete. Most any woman would have been right pleased to have a house like this, under old spreading oaks, among those fragrant orange trees, and with a loving husband rich as all get out, but this young girl, it seems, was just too hard to please. They only lived together for about a year and right soon afterwards old Joe Bowers up and died. Before he went he told a friend "There's no fool like an old fool!" I reckon he meant himself.

Those old range riding, cow hunting cattle barons are about all gone by now. I reckon about the last one left is old Jim Durrance up Bassenger way. He lives four miles back in the woods in a frame, dog-trot house which once had a coat of paint. There's not a wire of any kind running to his home. He can't see no good in having electric lights, and if somebody wants to talk to him, why what's to keep them from driving out? The road's not too bad. Looking at Jim Durrance's stocky figure and his almost unwrinkled florid face, even in spite of his shock of snowy hair and great white curled up moustache, you'd swear he'd never lived the 86 years he claims.

He can remember when only three men ran cattle in these parts, from Lake Okeechobee slam up to Canoe Creek near Orlando. One's range was from

the St. Johns River to Ft. Drum, another claimed all from there to the Kissimmee and the third all west of that, although it didn't take long for others to come in. That was when range wars started, and some men got shot and killed. Jim Durrance had first lived at Crewesville in Hardy County, near the head of Fisheating Creek marsh, where he had an orange grove. But, he said, his neighbors would steal his oranges while he was off cow hunting, and so he got married and moved to Bassenger. "We were both orphans," he said, "and so we had to work." He had taken part in many a drive to "Pinty Rosso", crossing the Caloosahatchee at Ft. Thompson until the rapids had been dredged out, after that the herds swam across at LaBelle where large "swimming pens" had been built on each side of the river to hold the cattle during the crossing.

I was talking to a man who knew him well. "That Mr. Durrance seems to be a mighty clever hearted man," I said, "but it's a shame that poor old man has to work so hard. There he was, on one of the hottest days in June, out in his pasture working on a fence and his wife told me he'd been grubbing some palmettoes the day before."

"Mr. Durrance is a right fine man," my friend replied. "If anybody gets in a jam all they need to do is to ask him, and he'll help them out, but don't start getting too sorry for that 'poor old man'. He isn't worth thousands of dollars. He's worth hundreds of thousands. He owns all this land hereabouts, twenty-one square miles of it, and every mile is stocked with cattle. But Jim Durrance doesn't care for money and the things that it will buy. He's lived that plain way all his life, and that's just the way he likes to live."

Well, there's plenty of things in this world that are better than money, though it most generally takes money to get them. Anyway, you'll have to give credit to those old time cowmen, the King of the Crackers and all the rest, they knew how to be happy though rich.