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What are Cracker Cattle and How Did They Get Here?

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Many people have heard of Florida Cracker Cattle but they are unaware of their place in Florida's history. Florida cracker cattle are cattle that are the direct descendants from Spanish cattle that were brought to the New World with Ponce De Leon in 1521. Some of the cattle may be crossed with other milk cows from the early colonists. Early pictures of the cattle date back to as early as 1908 showing cattle were more solid in color. It is believed that the spotting patterns seen today were from the influence of the milk cows that cracker bulls would breed with.

The first cattle to enter the New World came in 1521 on De Leon's second voyage to the new world. De Leon received fatal wounds in an Indian attack and his explorers returned to the ship leaving the cattle behind. Other conquistadors followed bringing more cattle, along with swine and horses. The horses were used for transportation. Don Diego Maldonado came to the New World in 1540 to supply the expedition of Hernando DeSoto with a herd of Spanish cattle and horses. Landing in the Pensacola Bay area he was unable to make contact with DeSoto. The herd was lost to the wild and Indians of North Florida. Other explorers continued to come to Florida bringing with them herds of Spanish cattle to supply the expedition party with beef.

Jesuit and Franciscan Friars came to the New World on a mission to convert the Indians to Christianity. In doing so they also used the Indians as labor to tend the livestock and crops. It is believed this is how the first ranches in North America were born. Cattle ranches were expanding in 1618. As a result, herds were expanding and cattle were beginning to be shipped to Cuba, developing the first industry in the New World.

30 privately owned ranches were in Florida by 1700 with over 20,000 cattle reported by Spanish tax collector report. However, several cattle were exempt from being reported. Those not reported were owned by individual chiefs, mission herds and also those cattle running wild. In 1647 during the Indian revolt were some of the first fights between cowboys and Indians.

During the Civil War Florida became the leading supplier of beef to both the confederate and the union troops. During the war many individuals came to Florida to purchase Spanish horses which were highly sought after for their use covering rough conditions where other horses would fail. Due to Florida's cattle industry, they were one of the first states to establish an economy after the war. Exporting cattle to Cuba once again resumed with the pioneer families requiring that they be paid in gold. These cattle were exported through the ports of Tampa, Manatee and what was then known as Punta Rassa. Cattle ranching operations were the beginning of many of Florida's oldest and largest businesses, some still in operation today.

With the importation of European cattle to Florida in the 1800's we began to see cross-breeding with the cracker cattle. Once the Brahman cattle were introduced to Florida even more cross-breeding was taking place to produce a more tolerant breed of cattle for the environment. As this was happening, the cracker cattle were being cross-bred out of existence. Members of the Florida Cattlemen's Association begin having discussions with the Commissioner of Agriculture about the cracker cow becoming extinct in the late 1960's. In response the Durrance family of Fort Bassinger, donated 5 heifers and a bull to the state to develop a state herd of Florida Cracker Cattle to preserve the breed. The Durrance family had some of the purest of the cracker cattle still in existence. These cattle were kept in Tallahassee at the Agricultural Complex and the Department began to build a herd. Over the years other cattle were

donated for the same purpose. As the numbers increased, state herds were established at the Withlacoochee State Forest, Lake Kissimmee State Park and at the Paines Prairie State Preserve. In 1985 a selection panel was established for the state herds to ensure the cattle met strict breed criteria. Those animals that displayed evidence of cross-breeding were culled from the herd.

Some of the guidelines established were based on size, bone characteristics, coloration and spotting pattern, muscling, head type and horn structure. Since cracker cattle were descendants of Spanish cattle they should carry similar characteristics. The size of the cattle should be small to moderate with animals weighing between 600 and 1000 pounds. Some animals are known as Guinea Cracker Cattle which are the smallest of the breed weighing only about 500 pounds when mature. The cracker cattle have a light bone structure and are most commonly variations of black, red, brown, brindle or yellow. Some spotting is accepted unless it is similar to that of a Holstein cow. They tend to be light muscled which would not be desirable for commercial beef production. However, their meat is said to be very palatable. The horn structure of cracker cattle is unique and is what sets cracker cattle apart from the Texas Longhorn. Cracker cattle horns point up from the base and tip back. A Texas Longhorn's horns grow out before growing up. It is thought that from the cattle maneuvering through the brush of Florida their horns developed in this shape.

Cracker cattle hold a special place in Florida's history. Not only was Florida the first territory of the New World to have cattle, but they were also the first to have cowboys. We were also the first to develop industry in the New World providing many of the early settlers with a very lucrative income. Some of the earliest of pioneer families owning cattle were the Carltons, Lykes, Hendry's, Aldermans, and the Wells.

In order to thin the herds of Cracker Cattle, the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services holds an annual FCCA Cracker Gatherin' at the Withlacoochee State Forest near Brooksville. This event was first held in 1989 and is still in existence today. The event includes a sale of cracker cattle and horses so interested parties can own a piece of Florida's history.

Resources:

Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, *Cracker Cattle and Cracker Horse Program*, <http://www.florida-agriculture.com/business/commerce/cracker/>

Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, *Characteristics of Cracker Cattle*, <http://www.florida-agriculture.com/business/commerce/cracker/characteristics.html>

Florida Cracker Cattle Association, *What are Cracker Cattle?*, <http://crackercattle.org/what.shtml>

University of Florida IFAS Extension, *Florida Cracker Cattle*, <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/an240>