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Cracker Country

Getting to know the wild folks who tamed Florida

Inside:
America’s first cowmen: dodging bullets on the rough, tough Florida frontier
Novelist Patrick Smith recalls his journeys to the heart of the state
Singing to preserve the land and a ‘Cracker state of mind’
FEEL LUCKY TO HAVE STUDIED Cracker culture at the feet of two of the masters, Frank and Ann Thomas. While working at a public radio station, I met this husband-and-wife music duo and watched as they hosted a program called “Songs of Florida.” This is where I got my first taste of Cracker culture: the songs and the stories; the literature and legends; the unbridled, unabashed passion for Florida.

Their songs, along with those of such guest stars as Will McLean and Bobby Hicks, introduced me to a Florida I did not know existed, a Florida where cowmen roamed the open range and proud pioneers wrested a living from the scrub.

In addition to being a Cracker chanteuse, Ann, who died in 2004, was a librarian at the Lake Wales library. One day she handed me Patrick Smith’s book A Land Remembered, a novel that chronicles three generations of a Florida pioneer family, the Maclveys. “If you want to understand Florida, you need to read this,” she said. I did, and since then I’ve never looked at Florida the same way. Every time I drive the back roads of Florida, I think of Tobias and Emma and their son Zech existing on fried coon and cowrie-four biscuits, fighting off deadly swarms of malaria-carrying mosquitoes capable of killing herds of cattle.

Florida’s pioneer past, complete with cattle rustling, range wars, and gun slinging, rivals anything that went on in Deadwood or Dodge City. But, while cowboys became near-mythic figures in Texas, our Florida cowmen have been largely ignored in legend and on the silver screen. While Little House on the Prairie captured the stories of the Midwestern homesteaders, the equally courageous lives of Cracker settlers are missing from our country’s pioneer narratives.

All of that is beginning to change, however, thanks to many of the writers, scholars, and photographers whose work appears in this issue. Historian Mike Denham separates the fact from the fiction about our Cracker ancestors, while anthropologist Dana Ste. Claire explores the legacies of our Cracker heritage. Historian Joe Akerman examines how Florida became one of the leading cattle-producing states in the country. And Pete Gallagher introduces us to Frank and Ann Thomas— as well as to other colorful Florida songwriters who celebrate Cracker heritage through their music.

The breathtaking photographs of Julie Kahn and Carlton Ward capture a Florida landscape and a way of life that is quickly vanishing. But if you drive the rural highways instead of the expressways, you will see that Cracker culture is still alive in some corners of our state. Drive from Arcadia to Fort Pierce on Highway 70, or from Haines City to Clewiston on Highway 27, and you will see cowmen still herding cattle through the early-morning haze. You will come upon the crumbling skeletons of Cracker houses. And you will experience a landscape so vast and majestic that you can imagine Zech Maclvey still racing his marshmallow pony across the prairie.

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Key legislators honored for supporting humanities

Florida State Sen. Mike Fasano of New Port Richey and Rep. Don Davis of Jacksonville were honored by FHC recently at events in their respective districts. These legislators were responsible for helping FHC secure and increase its state funding in 2005.

Fasano is the appropriations chair of the Transportation and Economic Development Committee of the Florida Senate, and Davis chairs the same committee in the House of Representatives.

NEH awards third major grant for St. Augustine workshops

For the third consecutive year, FHC has received a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to conduct teacher workshops in St. Augustine. The grant, about $250,000, will fund four weeklong summer workshops for an estimated 200 teachers from across the United States. Led by distinguished archaeologists, historians, and other scholars, the teachers will delve into the history and heritage of the nation’s oldest permanent European settlement. These active, hands-on workshops are entitled, “Between Columbus and Jamestown: Spanish St. Augustine.”

Since 2004 when FHC created this program, 346 teachers—some from as far away as Alaska and Maine—have attended the workshops, which focus on America’s Spanish colonial experience 55 years before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock.

Participants examine historical archives, archaeological artifacts, and the wealth of national landmarks and preserved buildings that make up St. Augustine’s historic quarter.

Seminar alumni say they were especially enriched by this experiential focus. Said David J. Genk, a Hillsborough County teacher: “I can now share my new understanding of the history of this great old city from a perspective that could only be developed by peering down a centuries-old well, standing atop the weathered fortifications of Castillo de San Marcos, or gazing over a rise in the wetlands north of the city that was once Ft. Mose, established by the Spanish for runaway slaves.”

Teachers stay at the historic Flagler College and receive stipends to cover food, lodging, and travel. For more information contact Monica Rowland at (727) 873-2005 or mrowland@flahum.org.

FHC Board awards grants to four Florida projects

FHC’s Board of Directors awarded four major grants recently to projects promoting Florida’s history and heritage:

- $8,550 to Flagler College to present “Palaces in Paradise: The Gilded Age of Henry Flagler,” a look at the creation and impact of the Flagler empire;
- $6,579 to the Tallahassee Museum of History & Natural Science to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Tallahassee bus boycott;
- $13,042 to the DeSoto National Memorial to create programs about the diverse history of the Manatee River area; and
- $7,547 to the Brevard Library Foundation in support of a reading festival entitled “Rocketing into the Future with a Blast from the Past.”

The next grant deadlines are February 20 for mini-grants ($2,000 and under) and May 8 for major grants ($2,000 to $25,000). Please log onto the FHC website for applications and guidelines: www.flahum.org.

A photograph (c. 1880s) of the Cordova Hotel, on King Street in St. Augustine. The building is constructed of coquina in Spanish and Moorish architectural styles.
Two animated red-and-yellow clown shoes squeak and crunch across your computer screen, leading the way to a cramped workshop lined with worn sewing machines, sanding wheels, saws, and dozens of jam-packed shelves.

There, Wayne and Marty Scott and their son Allen are measuring and making wildly colored, bulbous shoes for circus clowns.

Click on a different icon—and suddenly you’re walking down a shade-dappled stone path to the front yard of Taft Richardson, a man who talks about the biblical beliefs that inspire him to create elegant sculptures from the bones of animals killed on the road. You watch as he engages the children and parents from his Tampa neighborhood in their own art projects.

Another click, and you meet Ginger Lavoie, who shows you how to smooth a leaf-green fabric onto a quilt. She describes a Polynesian man who shows you how to form delicate shells from the bones of animals killed on the road. You watch as he engages the children and parents from his Tampa neighborhood in their own art projects.

These are a few of the people you can meet on FolkVine.org, the Internet world of Florida folk art, a vibrant place of colors and sounds and surprises that takes you on a journey of artistic expression. With clicks and choices, you enter a Florida that few people ever see—and you meet folks who express their lives in unique ways. By viewing videos, looking through art galleries, and listening to conversations, you experience the artists and their artworks in the contexts of their cultures.

FolkVine.org, perhaps the first scholar-created website of its kind, is designed to bring the local, the idiosyncratic, the individual expressions of art to a world with no geographical boundaries. FHC funded the creation of this website with grants awarded in 2003 and 2004 to the University of Central Florida Cultural Heritage Alliance.

The website’s creators include Florida humanities scholars from several disciplines who combined their talents and knowledge to create an exceptional public humanities program. These experts in folk life, art, religious studies, nonfiction and creative writing, communication, and e-media studies collaborated with the folk artists themselves to design the website.

Their undertaking was inspired in part by a realization that technology can help humanities disciplines reach and communicate with the public, said Susan Lockwood, FHC’s director of grants.

“The FolkVine collaboration charts new territory,” Lockwood said. “It attempts to move humanities research online and is becoming a model for e-scholarship in public folklore.”

The website is accessible to all ages and does not use social-science jargon or scholarly prose. Its color and irreverence reflect its subject matter. The homepage is an old-time roadside visitor center fronted by a weathered sign: “FolkVine.org.” Step up on the porch, click on the door, and a bell tinkles as you enter. Once inside, you can choose among picture postcards that revolve on a metal stand (which needs oil), or you can pick up one of the tour guidebooks on display among the pink-flamingo kitsch, tree maps, key-chain ornaments, quilts, pictures, and other items for sale. Choose among these to enter the lives and the creations of the folk artists.

One click and you can meet Ruby Williams at her roadside produce stand where she sells fruit, vegetables, and hundreds of homegrown paintings on plywood scraps. Her painted images and words are in primary colors and express her thoughts, her imagination, her beliefs: “Hi Smart mouth took my man Payday is coming,” one says. With other clicks, you can meet Diamond Jim Parker, a former circus clown and circus historian, who is shown constructing elaborate, miniature model circuses; Kurt Zimmerman, who paints expressionistic images of UFOs, fantastic animals, and his view of Space Coast life; Lilly Carrasquillo, who draws on influences and folk traditions from various Hispanic cultures to make masks and ofrendas (Day of the Dead altars), mostly from paper-mâché.

Scholarly information can be found on the website, too, of course. After all, the website was created by scholars. But they don’t take themselves too seriously. On the lower display shelf in the FolkVine.org visitor center, you see a half-dozen bobble-head figurines that bear strong resemblances to eminent Florida folk-art historians and other scholars. These figurines are on sale for 2 cents. Or, is it their 2 cents you can buy? Click on them and their heads bobble as they tell you all about the philosophical underpinnings of the art and artists you are experiencing.
What cracker is this same that deafes our ears with this abundance of superfluous breath? Indeed, what Cracker is this that William Shakespeare describes in King John in 1594? Surely not the Cracker of today, but the reference is very telling of the age-old history of the word, one that spans at least five centuries. The Bard used the word to describe someone who was full of hot air... a braggart, a boaster, a big shot. Back then it was a character trait, and not a likeable one; today it is the name given to a people and their culture.

The once-lowly Cracker has come up in the world. Festivals now embrace the Cracker tradition, and literary workshops pore over the colorful history of the people. Bona fide scholars have launched the Cracker into the academic world. In colleges and universities around the country, Crackers are now recognized for their important contributions to the making of Florida—and much of the South. Architects have given formal definition to the Cracker style. It seems that the curse of the ignorant hayseed faction, as they once were labeled, has been lifted. Being Cracker is no longer a social burden; it’s downright fashionable.

The study of Cracker history and culture has taught us much about who these tenacious settlers were and are. But we still have more to learn—such as exactly when the Cracker culture emerged in the South and diffused into Florida. We do know that by the early 1700s, the first of the Cracker frontiersmen had already entered La Florida as illegal migrants. It was probably during this period that “cracker” or a similar form of the word began to be used to describe a class of people rather than a character trait. By the 1760s, “cracker” in its new form was commonly employed by the gentry, especially those in the coastal regions, as an ethnic slur for Scots-Irish frontiersmen in the South. Eighteenth-century documents describe these renegade settlers as rootless, unruly, stubborn, and corrupt. To some, “cracker” and “criminal” were synonymous. During the 1760s, the term identified loosely organized gangs of horse thieves, counterfeiters, and slave-nappers—surely one of the first criminal syndicates in America.

In 1767, the Rollesstown settlement near present-day Palatka was described by Henry Laurens as “Mr. Rolle’s Crackertown,” a poke at founder Denys Rolle’s attempt to form his colony using English riffraff, mostly vagrants, debtors, beggars, and pickpockets. As Ronald W. Haase, author of Classic Cracker, aptly puts it, “The first-generation Florida Cracker was not a pillar of society.”

No doubt this rough-and-ready quality was an asset on the wild Florida frontier. Life in the backwoods was tough. These early frontiersmen spent most of their time finding food and other necessities required for survival. They had to make do in a subtropical wilderness without such modern luxuries as air-conditioners, refrigerators, indoor plumbing, electric lights, window screens, bug spray, motorized vehicles—or even towns, for that matter. There was a time when they had to eat anything they could get their hands on, including gopher tortoises, freshwater turtles they called “cooters,” frogs, snakes, raccoons, and opossums. They also searched out wild “poke weed” and eventually were able to grow corn, greens, and other vegetables.

They sheltered themselves in a mix of structures, from their early makeshift campsites in the woods to wooden houses with colorful architectural names like Single-Pen, Saddlebag, Dogtrot, and Shotgun (a shack in which all rooms are in direct line with each other, so that a shot fired from the front porch could exit through the back door without hitting anything in the house).

Their payoff for pioneering Florida was personal independence. To Crackers everywhere, a restraint-free life was far more important than material prosperity or work. This outlook was often viewed as laziness by outsiders who did not understand the Cracker way of life. Cracker families did not amass possessions. The few goods they owned were usually homemade, rarely “store-boughten,” because Crack-
ers seldom had the money to buy things. Typically, items like cloth, tools, and cooking pots were used until they wore out, which explains why little of their material culture has survived today for study.

But Crackers did value cattle. By the early 1800s, they started to round up and brand herds of cattle that foraged in the Florida wilds. Many Crackers were attracted to the cowhunter lifestyle, which was lonely and hard, but well suited to the rugged existence they already knew well. Cattle drives lasting months meant forays into remote marshes and dense scrub forests and encounters with snakes and wolves, stampedes, torrential thunderstorms, searing heat, and swarms of mosquitoes.

Cattle ranged free of fences across endless miles of Florida swamps, palmetto prairies, and woods. The cattle—direct descendants of Andalusian cows brought by Spanish explorers in the 1700s—were hardy, gaunt, and mean. They were bred to withstand tropical heat, insect bites, and sparse native forage. Even Cracker ponies, called marshtrackies, had bloodlines going back to the Andalusian breeds of the Spanish conquistadors.

Cracker cowmen developed cattle-raising into Florida's first industry. To this day, many people believe that Crackers got their name because of one of the techniques cowhunters used to herd cattle: "cracking" long, braided, rawhide whips in the air. Appropriately enough, Robert O'Hara, a linguistics professor at the University of South Florida, refers to these convenient word associations as "horseback etymologies."

The meaning of the word "cracker" changed for the better by the beginning of the 20th century. Perhaps because of the success of the cattlemen and the other pioneer settlers in Florida, it became a regionally affectionate term. It was even used to name several baseball teams in the South. Around 1914, the Deland Crackers were among Florida's earliest and best baseball teams; and the longtime nickname of a minor-league team in Atlanta was the Crackers. The naming of Crackertown in Levy County was a riposte to nearby Yankeetown by a proud group of Crackers on the coast.

The positive connotation for "cracker" continued through the first half of the century. But by the 1950s, the term once again became a pejorative, ebbing into a racial slur for bigoted backwoods Southern whites. In many areas, the term is still generally thought an offensive one and, in some cases, is considered a racial epithet that is a violation under the Florida Hate Crimes Act. In 1991, the Highlands County School Board was embroiled in controversy over the proposed name of a new school, Cracker Trail Elementary. Many locals took offense at the name, claiming that the word "cracker" was an insult. Whites complained that it was a disparaging term for poor whites, and one black parent suggested that it was anti-black. In the end, the board decided to keep the name, pointing out that it had been derived from an important part of the community's history, the Cracker Trail, a route used by early Florida cowhunters to drive their cattle.

"Cracker" has long been a racial slur used by African Americans as a contemptuous term for the Southern white. In the early 19th century, Southern slaves and free blacks used the African word buckra to refer to whites, but by the mid-century "cracker" had become the preferred term.

Today, there are many Floridians who call themselves Crackers with great pride. In the 1970s—especially after the election of Georgia native Jimmy Carter to the presidency in 1976—many "reborn" Crackers emerged, all proud to claim and express their Southern heritage. Lawton Chiles, a Polk County native who served as a Florida legislator throughout the 1960s and as a U.S. senator through the '70s and '80s, celebrated his Cracker heritage during his two terms as governor of Florida, 1990-1998.

This heritage has also been celebrated in the arts. Florida novelist Patrick Smith is renowned for his many books, especially A Land Remembered, which chronicles three generations of a Cracker pioneer family. Florida's rich repository of folk music abounds with references to Crackers and what they stand for.

Still, there are places in the state where the word "cracker" should be used with care. Abraham Lincoln once made a statement to the effect that no matter how much you respect the common man, never call a man common to his face; and I imagine the same thing applies to Crackers in some areas. Allen Morris, longtime clerk of the Florida House of Representatives who wrote the syndicated, statewide newspaper column Cracker Politics, suggested that it might be prudent to accompany the nickname with a smile.

But no matter how you catalogue them or in what manner you explain them, Crackers will always be the people, the cultural group, who provided the very foundation on which rural Florida was settled. Their colorful legacy endures.

DANA STE.CLAIRE, author of Cracker: The Cracker Culture in Florida History, is national director of museums for Historic Tours of America, Inc.
Cowmen drive a herd at the Batacck Ranch, near Fort Myers. Photo by Carlton Ward, Jr.
America's first cowmen rode the Florida frontier

By Joe A. Akerman, Jr.

Long before western cowmen drove their endless herds over the Chisholm, the Goodnight, the Sedalia, or the Bozeman, Florida cowmen were trailing their cattle across the Suwannee, the St. Marys, the Apalachicola, and the Black rivers. Before western cattlemen clashed with the Comanche, the Cheyenne, and the Sioux over grazing rights, Florida's rancheros and Cracker cowmen had challenged Florida Indians over the use of rangelands. But while the cowboy of the sage and mesquite has received his well-deserved plaudits from American admirers and historians, the Florida cowman has been all but overlooked.
IT IS IRONIC that the story of Florida's frontier isn't as well known as that of the Wild West, which has been romanticized in novels and Hollywood productions and become part of our national folklore. North America's first vaqueros (cowboys—known in Florida as cowmen) appeared on our southeastern peninsula in the mid-1600s, years before others worked the great mission herds of California and drove those remarkable Texas longhorns through the western plains. Life on the wild Florida frontier was every bit as colorful, dramatic, and violent as that in the West—complete with cattle-rustling, gun-slinging, range wars, border disputes, long trail drives, cattle barons, and cow towns.

Relatively few people are aware that Florida was—and still is—one of the most important cattle states in the country, producing some of the best beef. Modern-day Florida is better known for its beaches, amusement parks, and retirement villages than for its 5.5 million acres of land still used as pasture for nearly a million brood cows at any one time.

Cowmen still ride the Florida countryside, using loud cracks of their 12-foot-long whips to herd cattle. Some of the whips are different now, made of nylon instead of braided cowhide or deerhide; but the spirit of the cowmen has not changed. Their love of working cattle is the same as it has been over the centuries in Florida.

The first working rancho in La Florida started operation in 1605 near the settlement of St. Augustine. Franciscan friars and Spanish rancheros established the first cattle and horse herds primarily with Andalusian livestock descended from those brought a hundred years before by Spanish conquistadors. During the 18th century, Indians became the most important stock raisers in Florida. And during the 20-year British occupation prior to the American Revolution, a number of British planters started cattle herds, particularly along the St. John's River Valley.

But it was the pioneering Cracker cowman of 19th-century Territorial Florida who expanded cattle production, making it an important part of the state's economy. By the 1830s, the operating patterns of Cracker ranching appear to have been established. Some of the earliest Cracker cowmen led a caravan existence, herders more than ranchers, and always seeking better rangeland. They moved steadily southward, as did the Indians, searching for new pastures.
The cattle raised during the 19th century came from the same Andalusian stock that was left to forage in the wild some 300 years before. This was a hardy breed—sometimes referred to as scrub, woods, native, or cracker cows. Preconditioned in Spain by centuries of environmental extremes and selective breeding, they were tougher than any other European stock. While other breeds vanished, the Spanish foundlings survived. These cattle were small, but reproduced rapidly in the wilderness; they soon spread over many parts of the peninsula and over parts of the Southeast.

The early Cracker pioneers had to be as tough as the cattle in order to survive on the Florida frontier. They had a labor-hard existence in a hot, subtropical wilderness fraught with panthers, wolves, bears, hordes of mosquitoes, and the occasional outbreak of Indian hostilities. Perhaps for this reason, they didn't make the best of impressions on some observers: "...a rude, uneducated class," wrote Bishop Whipple in 1853; "...dirty, ragged, and dasy, scented upon long-tailed and short-eared horses, with the deadly rifle in front...and the broad brim hat," wrote John T. Sprague during the Second Seminole War (1835-1842). But others saw them differently: "...plain people in this area who lived simply and roughly...but never wanted or went in debt...all had cattle which represented a cash crop," wrote Richard Daniel in the 1850s.

Journalist James Sterling explained in the 1850s how these early Cracker pioneers were able to acquire cattle herds so quickly with such little effort:

Having established himself on a land of his own or a patch of Uncle Sam's, he...may become a grazier at small expense of labor or money. Having borrowed or bought a few head of cattle, he simply marks them and turns them out into the woods. In the spring he collects the calves and puts his brand on them...In this way some of these Florida squatters accumulated vast herds of cattle...

These pioneers also caught wild horses, which became key to herding and ranching. The horses, like the cattle, were direct descendants of Andalusian livestock. Frenchman Francis de Castleman, who traveled in Florida in 1837, described the "Florida horse" this way: "It is called generally Indian pony and is small, long haired and bright-eyed, lively, stubborn and as wild as the Indians themselves; it has a wonderful endurance of fatigue and hardship; it has a singular instinct in finding its way in the dense woods." Over the years, the horses became known as "cracker" ponies or "marsh tackies."

Dogs also became essential to the work of Florida cowmen. There were several breeds of cow dogs, but most were mixed-blooded. Some mixes included hound and bulldog; others have included the Australian Blue Heeler (part dingo) and the so-called Leopard breed. It is said that the Leopard dog was derived from a combination of Florida's native black wolf and the Spanish war dog used by the early conquistadors. The dogs and the horses helped find and round up cows that were foraging in the deep woods, snake-infested marshes, and dense brush.

There were no fences, so the differ-
Herds sometimes mixed. Ownership was determined by the cows' brands and distinctive ear-crops. Rustlers took advantage of the open range and altered or duplicated brands in order to claim cattle that didn't belong to them.

Rustling was a problem in Florida as far back as 1702, when British colonials and their Creek Indian allies took cattle and slaves during invasions in Spanish Florida. Rustling continued throughout the centuries, worsening during times of war; it was particularly rife in Florida during the Civil War. Union patrols and Confederate deserters often took cattle from Cracker settlers for their own needs. During Reconstruction, some merchants even specialized in stolen cattle.

Stealing cattle was one of the infractions that often led to violence on the Florida range. In the 1890s, an epidemic of cattle thieving broke out in the Arcadia section. On one occasion, a quartet of rustlers stole 200 head of cattle in DeSoto County and drove them as far as Titusville. A posse of cowmen eventually overtook the four, killed two of them in a shootout, and hanged the other two from a large oak tree. This was an example of frontier justice, vigilante style, which was widely accepted at the time. Lawmen frequently endorsed such killings. It was a way of trying to establish some order in a violent, lawless territory.

Castleman, the French visitor to Florida, described the atmosphere of violence, noting "the universal practice of men carrying arms and the amount of lawlessness, drinking and gambling" that prevailed. "It often happens that men of responsible position are found rolling drunk in the streets...I have seen two hostile planters meet on horseback in the street and immediately start fighting with pistol and bowie knife..."

The lynch law was invoked in dealing with horse thieves. Fights were commonplace, and differences were often settled with guns and knives. Gun dueling was as common among cowmen in Florida as among those on the Western Frontier. In 1832, the problem of dueling in Florida was so bad that the Territorial Council voted on a law that would have made it illegal. The dilemma of trying to impose law in a lawless territory is illustrated by a clause that was written into and then struck from the Territorial Constitution in 1838–39: It "would have rendered any man ineligible to a position of honor or involvement under the government who was a duelist, a bank director or a minister of God."

Judge E.C. May gave one of the most vivid accounts of the Florida frontier at the turn of the century in his book, Gators, Skeeters and Malary. He wrote of thousands of Winchester rifles ("Winfries") in the state at this time and how "they were turned loose on the community whenever the owner had enough money to buy ammunition." He described one gunman named John Fields who shot three cowmen from their horses as they attempted to ride into a saloon he owned. (It was strange Fields became angered, because this was a common way to approach the bar in Florida.)

One of Florida's many shootouts took place in Branford in 1890 between the nephew of the legendary Kit Carson (the nephew's name was also Kit Carson) and a man named Garner who had shot Carson's best friend. While a mob of over 200 looked on, Garner retreated to the second story of a store while firing two pistols. Standing in the middle of the main street, Carson seemed oblivious to Garner's bullets kicking up dust near his feet. Garner was finally flushed out and was almost lynched by the mob, but he
lived to stand trial for murder. Carson later became a deputy sheriff and was killed while trying to make an arrest.

Arcadia was described by a local historian as being as rough and tough as any town in the Old West of the 1890s. "There were as many as fifty fights a day. Four men were killed in one fight alone." Some Desoto County cattlemen reported sleeping on the trunks of trees "so that if someone took a shot at them they would be hit in the foot instead of the head..."

In the last decades of the 19th century, because of the wave of pioneers flooding into Florida after the Civil War, the competition for better range-land grew. This sometimes resulted in violence, and some conflicts grew into cattle wars. One such conflict occurred in Orange County between two of Florida's pioneer Cracker cattle families—the Barbers and the Mizells. It began when the Mizells, part of the Reconstruction government, attempted to collect exor-
bitant taxes on the Barbers' cattle. Before the smoke had cleared, at least eight people had been slain.

Range wars remained common over much of the state into the early 20th century. Generally they were engendered by conflicts over fencing, grazing rights, and cattle ownership.

Throughout this time, the cattle industry in Florida kept growing. Its viability depended upon finding new markets as political and economic conditions changed. Over the centuries, ranchers sold their cattle to Native-American, Spanish, British, and American markets. Until the railroads were brought to Central and South Florida, the biggest stimulus to cattle sales was the West Indies connection, especially Cuba. Beginning as early as 1856, Cracker cattle were shipped out of embarkation sites such as Tampa, the Manatee River, and especially Punta Rassa (a tiny spit of land near the mouth of the Caloosahatchee River).

A.H. Curtiss, reporter for the Florida Dispatch, wrote this description of busy Punta Rassa:

Long before we came in sight of the wharf, we could see the roofs of the upper works of a steamer, which proved to be the Guillierme awaiting a load of cattle for Cuba. About sunset we came abreast of the great steamer... The Guillierme was painted black with stripes of red. This and the rough jargon of the Spanish crew made her seem just a little piratical.

On shore there was a bedlam of sounds, the bellowing of penned cattle, the cries of drovers, the barking of dogs, the cracking of whips—sometimes 18 feet in length with a short handle. The cowboys were very expert in using and cracking it and have acquired the sobriquet of "crackers." As night drew on the noise increased. Bonfires and torches flared in the darkness. Bellowing herds came pouring in from the back woods, until at nine o'clock 500 cattle were ready to be transferred to the steamer. From the cattle yard to the steamer extended a long and narrow passageway... through which the cattle were driven. A dozen at a time were started, then with loud cries, blows and clatter of the hoofs of cattle and drivers [they] came rushing down to the steamer... This process was continued until late at night.

The men who drove the cattle in Florida were described this way by Gov. Ossian B. Hart (1873–74):

Cracker cowmen were larger than life heroes who roamed the woods for weeks and months on end, camping in the wilderness, independent of spirit... They communicated a lust for life and a deep affection for Florida's natural environment because many of them were more content with their lives, however miserable they may have appeared to others.
A bond still exists between those early Florida cowmen and the cowmen of today. The times are certainly different now, but some things are the same. Early ranching problems such as rustling, disease, drought, and fluctuating markets are still a problem. Modern technology has brought improvements in such areas as marketing and animal husbandry. But it wouldn’t take long for the 19th-century Florida Cracker cowman to fit right into a modern cattle operation, because the spirit is the same.

JOE A. AKERMAN, JR., who teaches history at North Florida Community College in Madison, is author of Florida Cowman: A History of Florida Cattle Raising.

Perhaps no one has personified the Florida Cracker cowman more than the legendary Jacob Summerlin, Jr. In fact, he was generally known as the “King of the Crackers.” This early-Florida cowman loved the nickname because of what he thought it implied: “one of careless comfort who is close to the earth and who is of independent thought and totally unpretentious.” He told a New York journalist in the late 1800s: “I am nothing under the sun but a native-born, sun-baked old Florida Cracker.” At the time, he was one of the wealthiest men in Florida.

Like most of the 19th-century Florida pioneers, Summerlin started out with little except determination and grit. Born in 1821, he served in the Florida militia during the Second Seminole War from 1836 to 1842. Two years later, he married Frances Knight Lipperer, a widow with one child. He and his new family settled in the wild piney woods of south-central Florida near an old Seminole camp named Itchefuckassa. At first, they lived in a makeshift shelter. Summerlin eventually built a house there and, with his family, raised food and worked hard to carve a life out of the wilderness.

Even before he built his house, Summerlin acquired a few head of cattle. He trailed a small herd from Columbia County and South Georgia to his family campsite and turned the cattle loose on “a part of that vast stretch of expectant acreage…on the Spanish borderlands.” His cattle, which foraged along with wild pigs and deer, soon mixed with the native wild cattle. Before too long, Summerlin had a large herd. By 1854, he was paying taxes on 2,000 head of cattle.

Summerlin became part of a heroic saga that was played out many times on America’s frontiers during the 19th century. Except for his in-laws, the only other people for many miles were Indians. One visitor described the area around his small settlement as “a trackless waste of open prairies, scrub palmettos, tall pines, and scattered hammocks.” But to Summerlin and a few pioneers, it was a Cracker cowman’s Canaan with plenty of grass, good water, and game.

By the beginning of the Civil War, Summerlin had acquired a herd of over 11,000 head of cattle. Later he would lay claim to 20,000 head that ranged over an area as large as the country of present-day Israel.

When the war started, Summerlin was awarded a two-year contract to supply the Confederates with cattle on the hoof at $8 to $10 per head delivered. By drawing on his own herds, which ranged all the way from Bartow to the Caloosahatchee, and by contracting with other cattlemen, Summerlin provided the Confederacy with 25,000 head of beefes. It was a service, he later explained, for which “…I was not given a copper.”

Yet he remained a wealthy cattle baron and, after the war, sold Florida longhorns to the Spanish government. During this time, he lived “like a poor man” in a deserted U.S. Army barracks at the shipping port of Punta Rassa, one journalist reported. Another observer, D.B. McKay, wrote this of Summerlin in Pioneer Florida: “The Spanish buyers who came from Cuba in their fancy dress regarded him with wonder. He was known as a man that couldn’t be cheated, who wouldn’t gamble, and who never drank.”

During his life, he was also known as a philanthropist who donated land and money to churches, schools, local governments, and widows and orphans.

JOE A. AKERMAN, JR., is the author of Jacob Summerlin: King of the Crackers.
Patrick Smith's journey to the heart of Florida

Novelist Patrick Smith is "the Margaret Mead of backwoods Florida," says Dana Ste. Claire, who recently interviewed Smith for this issue of FORUM. Like an anthropologist, Smith immersed himself in the Florida pioneer culture that he chronicled for more than four decades in his novels. He trekked down dusty roads to remote homesteads where he visited with folks, sharing their food and their memories, and learning about their lifestyles and beliefs.

Smith has been showered with awards for his seven novels. He is perhaps best known for A Land Remembered, the story of three generations of a Florida pioneer family. This novel has been reprinted numerous times, translated into dozens of languages, and studied by thousands of Florida school children as part of their history curriculum.

In 1999, the State of Florida bestowed its highest, most-prestigious cultural honor on Smith by inducting him into the Florida Artists Hall of Fame. In 2002, the Florida Historical Society named Smith "Greatest Living Floridian."

Ste. Claire—himself an anthropologist of the Cracker experience and author of Cracker: The Cracker Culture in Florida History—traveled to Smith's home in Merritt Island and interviewed the 78-year-old novelist. Following are excerpts from this interview, which took place Nov. 7, 2005:

**STE. CLAIRE:** When you collected the background for A Land Remembered, how much of this was research and how much was life experience?

**SMITH:** Some was true life, but here in Florida, most of it was research. Of course, I read a lot of books first. I wanted to really know what happened, like that Great Freeze of 1895, the birth of the cattle industry, the citrus industry, the coming of the railroad, that hurricane that hit Lake Okeechobee in 1928. Well, I wasn't really interested in the historical aspects of those things. I wanted to know how this affected people. How did they survive? What was life really like back in those days? So after that book research, I started going around Florida. I put the word out on the grapevine that I'd like to sit down and talk with anyone. People said, "Oh, go there," and I would. For about a year and a half, I went around Florida finding these old pioneer families, sitting down, listening to their tales...I had one kind of little ace up my sleeve: My wife's family came to Florida in 1830. Her grandma was the second non-Indian, white child born in what would later become Orlando. Her grandpa's name was George Self. This is before there was an Orlando. Later on he became the first United States Marshal for that area of Florida. That was back when Florida was filled up with cattle rustlers and all kinds of outlaws. And then he moved to De Land and became a dry Baptist preacher. He rode a horse from De Land down to West Palm Beach, preaching in the woods along the way. So I learned a lot of tales about Florida a long time ago that passed down through her family. Florida was such a wilderness, and I wanted to know why those people came here. What were they looking for? What were their dreams? And I got a lot of that from talking to the old pioneer families.

Did any of your childhood experiences in Mississippi go into the novel?

I learned then, a long time ago, how to write descriptions of nature. Some of that was bound to seep over into A Land Remembered. How I really described the land, what was on it, cocoa plum bushes and lancwood trees. Back when I was a kid growing up in the 1930s Depression era, the only thing we had was a campout in the woods. We spent all our lives out there, so I became really attuned to nature. And I described nature, and I put this in A Land Remembered.

Do you remember some of the Florida families you met during your research, the ones you really connected with?

Dozens. And there are at least a dozen families in Florida now that will swear that that novel is about them. They'll call here or write a letter and say, "That was my family. That's exactly the way it was!" I always say, "Thank you." But it's not based on one family. It's a composite of all typical Florida pioneers.

Do you worry that the culture itself and the people you wrote about are not going to be here for future generations?

Yeah, I don't think it will be around 50 years down the road. So many cattle ranches are going to be sold out for developments. So there might not be very many left; and right now most of the Cracker culture is found inland in Florida, not...
along the coast. You still find some of it in places like Fort Pierce and cities that were once heavily Cracker. But now most of it's inland. I don't think you will find much Cracker culture in Miami anymore, or Fort Lauderdale.

And those areas used to be Cracker strongholds. Those were real Cracker settlements at one time. Most of the Cracker folks, while they were once dispersed throughout the state, are now part of the cattle industry, and that's probably their last stand. As the cattle land gives way to development, I think you're right.

To me, anymore, Cracker doesn't relate to the cracking of a cattle whip. It's a way of life. Some of them still go by all of those things that were important to them a long time ago, but it's disappearing. It's not as prevalent as it once was.

It makes you sad. But at the same time, you must feel good about documenting the Cracker culture when no one else even thought to do this. You're kind of like the pioneering anthropologist of the Cracker culture, Pat! You were the first to go out and document the Crackers the way that you did. Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings wrote about one location and a handful of households. You were actually going out and doing field ethnographies of Crackers across the state. And by doing this, you captured and preserved a great deal of the early-to-mid-20th century Cracker traditional life. But it must be really sad, too, to know that what you wrote about isn't going to be here in a half century.

Yeah, it's sad.

Did you ever reside with any of the Cracker families? When you were doing your research, did they ever allow you to live with them and experience the Cracker existence firsthand?

No, I never spent that time. I'd spend the day with them and enjoy a Cracker meal and talk
to them, you know. But I never stayed with anyone, no.

Do you remember some of those Cracker meals? Do you remember some of the things you ate?

Oh yeah! Collard greens, they had salt pork, hamb hocks, black-eyed peas, corn bread, biscuits, barbecued pig.

Do you have a favorite Cracker food?

Swamp cabbage! I love swamp cabbage... One of my favorite meals over at Cedar Key is fried mullet grits. I'll tell you something else you probably had, too. We used to rent a little house every year right up on the dunes at New Smyrna Beach. This was in the late '40s and '50s, and that beach was just covered with periwinkles (coquina clams). My wife's brother would get those periwinkles and boil them in water and make kind of a broth and mix that with grits and fry it. It was fried periwinkle grits. It was delicious!

What's the most unusual Cracker food you've tried? During your field research, did you ever have someone pull a skinned raccoon out of a brine barrel on the front porch of a Cracker house and offer it up to you for supper? Were there any strange foods that were offered to you?

Yeah, well raccoon, I've eaten that. 'Possums are one thing I don't care to eat. It's greasy, and a 'possum will eat anything, including a dead cow. I would as soon avoid that.

I imagine that if you were invited into a Cracker house for dinner that you would pretty much have to eat whatever they put on the table.

That's right, even if you had to swallow real hard.

When you were doing your research, did any of the Cracker families refer to themselves as Crackers?

Yes. One man I talked to was Pershing Platt. I know you've heard of the old Platt family. Pershing was the last man to drive a herd of cattle in 1937 from the east coast of Florida around Melbourne to the west coast and never came to a fence. I talked to Pershing a lot about the old life. In all the travels I have done in Florida, I have only run into two Crackers who had a problem with the name.

What do you think of all this Cracker hoopla that you've created?

I never dreamed when I wrote that novel that it would almost become a cult book. (It) was published 21 years ago next month, 1984. And that novel picks up every single year and gets bigger and bigger.

Why do you think that is?

Well, I have two or three different theories. People that are new to Florida are fascinated by what it used to be. They had no idea that this state was like that portrayed in the novel. For some people, it is the way people used to live, the family values and things like that. There's so much action that young kids like it. I don't know. It just kind of pushed a button.

I think it is all of those things. People want to connect with old Florida and the old way, and they are fascinated with the land they're in. You have given them a strong connection.

I've had a lot of people write me that have these book clubs in community centers—gated communities in Florida—and they tell me that the first thing any family that moves there from the North has to do is that they are required to read A Land Remembered. So they'll know something about Florida. And they'll read it and like it and tell someone else. It just goes on and on.

Everywhere I go I run into people who praise your books and your writing. It's amazing how many people you have reached. A true mark of a good author is when he or she has touched the reader through their words. And you have done this so incredibly well. Are there any feelings about the Cracker culture—where it has come from and where it is going—that you would like to share?

I just hope it doesn't die. It's what really made the country strong in every state, not just Florida. It's a way of life, and I hope it survives.
When fiction becomes fact, a black cowman comes alive

When his father recently interviewed novelist Patrick Smith, 11-year-old Casey Ste. Claire went along. Casey, who is studying *A Land Remembered* in middle school and aspires to be a writer, was thrilled when given the opportunity to ask Smith some questions about the book. (Excerpts are below.)

After the interview with Casey, Smith said: “One thing that has really pleased me about that novel is people Caseys age and younger who read it, and they all say that it has changed their lives. They never realized what family values meant, that families long ago used to live together, work together, laugh together, cry together, die together. How much family meant. Back then it was all family.”

CASEY: Skillit, Frog, and Bonzo, cattle herders working for Tobias, all had strange personalities. Do these and other characters in your book relate to anyone you've met?

SMITH: I knew a lot of people like Skillit. I never knew any Bonzos and Frogs who were cattlemen, but I had a lot of fun with those characters, especially Skillit and Frog. You know, they really liked each other, and Skillit, as you know, became a beloved member of the family. It didn’t matter that he was black; he was loved. What people liked so much about Skillit was not his race, but his character. They just had a lot of fun together. Skillit and Frog, they liked to kid each other, but they were never serious about it. There was a real man like Skillit in Florida, but at the time I wrote it, I didn’t know. I was in a little festival down in Yeehaw Junction and I was talking to an old fellow who read *A Land Remembered*. He asked if I wanted to see Skillits grave and I said “What?” He said, “There was a man exactly like you described in that novel. He was a black man who was adopted by a white family. He saved his money, he bought his own cattle ranch. He was very successful and everyone loved him, and he's buried five miles from here in a cemetery.” He took me out there and showed me this grave. Of course of the name Skillit wasn't on it, because that wasn't the man's name. But he lived the identical life that I had written about in the novel and didn't know it.

What character in *A Land Remembered* are you drawn to the most?

Probably old Tobias—and Emma, too. You know, back in the 19th century, it was the women who were the strongest and did the most work without complaint. They cooked the meals, they washed the clothes, they kept house, they did everything. Emma was one of my favorite characters. But of course I liked Zech, too.

Which character in the book saddened you most to kill off?

I think probably Zech, the way he died on that horse crossing the creek. But of course it saddened me to kill off any of the characters, because I became very good friends with all those characters, you know; I felt like I really knew them. I was right there with each one of them every step of the way. Of all the letters that I’ve gotten from young people who have read that book, the first thing they’ll say is: “Why did everyone have to die?” “Why did you kill everybody?” But in real life, people die. It happens. So they all had to die... I wasn't happy with any of them dying, but it just had to be.
Ridiculed, maligned, misunderstood, yet Cracker settlers kept on going

By James M. Denham
ne week after Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox, Col. John Wilder of the Union occupation forces visited Cedar Key, Florida. Located near the mouth of the Suwannee River, Cedar Key was an important rendezvous point for refugees, Federal troops, Confederate deserters, and unionist sympathizers. On April 20, 1865, Wilder wrote his mother that when he arrived, there were about 2,000 white refugees, a “great curiosity; crackers most of them—that is poor whites, not more intelligent or virtuous than the negroes.” They were “pale, cadaverous, ignorant, and many of them fierce.” Some of the group had joined the Federal army. “Most of them,” he wrote, “have been persecuted by the Rebels and are very implacable. They are splendid rifle shots and go about all over the state. They talk of killing this man or that, when they go out as a matter of course—not in fight, but in murdering him.”
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Their sense of individualism and resolve came

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acted on their own authority, often showing
little respect for governmental laws or judi
cial rulings.

Other scholars have refined the definition further, offering their own observations. In Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South, Grady McWhiney wrote that Crackers were products of their Celtic ethnicity and antecedents: They came from a culture that emphasized leisure rather than work, a pleasure ethic rather than a work ethic, a value system based on the enjoyment of life rather than on the accumulation of property. McWhiney's Crackers smoked, drank, danced, sang, and defied anyone to challenge their right to do so.

Florida residents who are even vaguely familiar with the state's history and culture may assume that the term "cracker" came from the whip-cracking Florida cowmen who drove herds of unfettered cattle across the state. But the term first appeared in an English dictionary in the 1760s. Englishman Samuel Johnson's dictionary defined "cracker" as a "noisy boisterous fellow." (Phrases that derive from this include "cracking a joke," making a "wisecrack," and exclaiming, "By cracky!") At the time of Johnson's writing the Scots-Irish were known to their British counterparts for their violence and ungodly qualities. His references to these qualities are certainly relevant to the Florida experience, because at that time large numbers of Scots-Irish were migrating to America. They came first through the ports of Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Charleston; then through the Great Valley of Virginia to the Carolinas and Georgia.

By the American Revolution these frontier folk were already pushing their cattle and hogs into Spanish Florida, where they were considered illegal immigrants. They perplexed and frustrated Spanish officials who were ill equipped to deal with this influx. In 1790, Don Vizente Manuel de Zéspedes, governor of East Florida, wrote to his superiors in Spain about the Crackers. They are skilled in hunting and tracking, he wrote, and they "exact Indian-style hurts in the first unpopulated space fit to grow corn that they stumble upon in order to give shel

ter to their wives and children. Once done, they move again, always keeping themselves beyond the reach of all civilized law. In the land vacated by these Crackers, other less antisocial groups take their place. But like their predecessors, these individuals are also enemies of all civil control and generally lack the rudiments of any religious morality whatsoever."

The Spaniards found it impossible to keep the Crackers out of La Florida. So not long thereafter, they changed their policies to allow legal immigration to Florida, with restrictions. The Crackers continued to migrate to the state—all the while serving U.S. purposes, even if they did so unknowingly. At the start of the 19th century, U.S. officials were already casting covetous eyes toward Spanish Florida, and the Crackers would serve their interests. In 1800, President Thomas Jefferson confided to an administration official: "Gov. Quesada, by order of his court, is inviting foreign

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After the United States acquired Florida from Spain in 1821, Crackers moved into the peninsula ahead of surveyors and squatted on the vast and inviting tracts of the public domain.
Seminole cowmen in the 1940s (at left) are shown working on the Brighton Reservation Ranch northwest of Lake Okeechobee. Indians raised large cattle herds for some 100 years in Florida, starting in the early 1700s under Spanish rule. But in the early 1800s, Cracker pioneers migrated into the area, displacing Indians from some of the richest pasture land in Central Florida. The Indians moved farther and farther south. Cattle rustling by both sides was said to be one of the causes of the Seminole Wars. After the U.S. government relocated Indians to reservations, the Seminoles gave up raising cattle until the 1930s. At that time, a government-sponsored program brought "Dust Bowl" cattle from the Midwest to South Florida and sold them at nominal prices to the Indians. The Seminole Tribe is now a major Florida cattle producer at Big Cypress and Brighton Reservations.

A cowman is checking his fence. Fences became important after passage of the Florida Fence Law in 1949.
if he comes to assert his authority, does not receive more response than a bullet from a rifle.” Achille Murat, Napoleon Bonaparte’s nephew and Middle Florida settler also observed these qualities. He described the Crackers as “poor citizens usually not very industrious, who not possessing the means of buying lands, live upon those of others, and work them until they are expelled by the proprietors... For the most part, they have a wife and children, some negroes, and sometimes very numerous flocks. They rarely raise two crops from the same land; on the contrary they quit a district as soon as it becomes peopled.”

As Florida moved toward statehood, the inflow of Crackers continued. Frank Hatheway, a clerk in a Tallahassee dry goods store, often witnessed Crackers on the move during his afternoon walks on the “Augustine Road.” On one occasion in the winter of 1846, Hatheway recorded in his diary that he had encountered family members from Baker County, Georgia, on their way to East Florida. Hatheway must have wondered about their future. As their spokesman informed him, “They had no specific destination, but would ‘sit down’ at the first place that pleased them.”

When they did settle in a place, they took pleasure in socializing. Many were adept at making music and dancing. Parties flourished in backwoods villages. Col. Wilder described the Cracker mode of dancing not as “cotillions,” as in Massachusetts, “but regular break-downs, where two only dance at a time as fast and as long as they can stand, when two others take it up.”

Crackers and their observers fondly recalled such celebrations. In one account, Enoch Vann in his Reminiscences of a Pinewoods-Cracker Lawyer describes attending a backwoods dancing party that was also attended by his political adversary. He had hoped to address the crowd, but fiddling, dancing, and drinking dominated the evening. Vann was smoking his pipe and watching the dancing from a doorway when a Cracker girl, breathing heavily and in full perspiration, asked him if he was almost finished smoking.

“I apologized,” remembered Vann, “and was about to pocket my pipe when she informed me that she would like to smoke a little herself. I again apologized for not offering my pipe before—carefully wiped the stem on my coattail and handed the pipe to her with a polite bow. She puffed away until she had to move up [when it was her turn to dance]. Then she wiped the stem under her arm and returned the pipe to me and then galloped off. Of course, I commenced smoking right off—for I do not know how many voters were looking on, whose votes I would have lost.”

Observers also noted the talents of Crackers for rough country humor. Bishop Henry Whipple, who visited East Florida in 1843, recounted a scene that took place during the meeting of the circuit court in St. Augustine: “Some of these Crackers have a good deal of humor and have a happy faculty of making doggerel poetry... A lawyer named Burritt was the other day teasing one of these fellows for rhymes. After a while, the cracker commented: ‘God made a man & called him Nelson Burritt. After he saw his face he was sorry for it.’ Thus turning a good joke on the lawyer, his tormenter.”

As they had been generations before, Crackers were in the forefront of the Lower Peninsula’s first settlers in the decades following the Civil War. By that time, two successive Indian wars had pushed the Seminoles out of Florida or else deep into the Everglades. Crackers were among the first settlers of southwest Florida’s interior, in what would become Hardee, DeSoto, Highlands, Glades, Charlotte, Lee, Okeechobee, Collier, and Hendry counties. Their influences on the economic and social lives of their communities are still apparent.

As the 20th century dawned, the sights, sounds, and work habits of the Industrial Age were already altering the lower Florida landscape. Some Floridians were already fondly recalling simpler times. In 1918, a correspondent to the Lakeland Evening Telegram who called himself “Jackercrack,” wrote that Florida Crackers “are satisfied with enough of this world to give them what they think is a comfortable home, a living, with opportunities to gratify a few personal tastes.” He went on:

The Cracker is good natured, self possessed, generous, honest, friendly, cheerful and hopefil. He worries but little. Envy and jealousy are unknown to him except in rare cases... He is fond of home, wife, and children, as are of him. He is thoughtfull to his old father and mother, respectful of them and kind. They are welcome to the last thing he has if they need it. He treats strangers the same; he is glad to accommodate them if he can. When they stop at his country home and ask if they can get dinner, or stay overnight, he don’t turn them off if there is any possible way to remain. It is common for him to answer as follows: “I guess so, if you can put up with our fare.” He concluded: “The original undiluted Florida Cracker is a fine gentleman. It is a pleasure to meet him and a privilege to know him.”

Florida’s Cracker pioneers didn’t leave many of their own records or observations behind. But the many descriptions recorded by others over the centuries help to shed light on our state’s most apparent, yet elusive, social group.

JAMES M. DENHAM is professor of history and director of the Center for Florida History at Florida Southern College in Lakeland.
Cattleman Tom Johnson is shown holding the reins of his horse in Orlando in the 1890s.
POLK COUNTY—Down near the back end of Rattlesnake Road, in a patch of woods beyond sight of the citrus smokestacks, barely in earshot of the big rigs rumbling down Highway 60, stands an aged cypress wood house with a contended paint job, wide clapboard porch, a couple lazy curs tail-swatting the dog peter gnats, well water drip drip dripping in staccato beats, and rocking chairs creaking harmony to the plaintive howl of an old man strumming a guitar.

"Cracker cow pony, long horn scrub cow, relics from bygone days," sings a seventh-generation Floridian in a voice richer than a fresh round cowturd on a sunny Frostproof morn. And the old brindle cur dogs, there's a few still around, they too are fading away...

This legendary three-bedroom house was first nailed together in 1913 about 20 miles west of here, in Bartow. Five years ago it was hauled onto this high ridge east of Lake Wales. The owner is songwriter Frank Thomas, a bull gator of a man who can charm a bee away from its honey with a love song and set everyone a-rage—from the Klan and the skinheads to yuppies and Yankees—with his pointed musical reflections on life in today's Sunshine State. Until her death last year, wife Ann Thomas shared this house and the stage with her husband, thumping a grandaddy stand-up bass and crooning perfect froggy accompaniments to Frank's feral bellers.

Their signature album, "Just Another Day In The Life Of A Florida Cracker" is a Florida music classic, featuring titles such as "Cracker Cowman," "Cracker Love Song," "The Flatwoods of Home," "Florida's Native Sons and Daughters," and "Florida Used To Be Green," among its 18 cuts. In 1997, the duo was awarded the prestigious Florida Folk Heritage Award.

His beard may be stubble like a cut over sugar cane field
His clothes may be dirty but the look in his eye lets you know he won't heal
He's from a breed that is dying, he has survived
The world he once knew is gone
He's an old Cracker cowman existing a long way from home

—from "Cracker Cowman" by Frank and Ann Thomas

To true disciples of Florida Cracker music, the Thomases' "Cracker Palace" is Mecca (Music Every Cracker Can Appreciate), a veritable living museum, a subconscious retreat from all the screwed-up people, places, and things that threaten to completely chew up the old original Florida and spit it out in a glob of shopping centers, golf courses, houses that all look alike, and landfills the size of Connecticut. For sure, the absolute mother lode of the Florida Cracker music that survives today runs through these parts. It rears its head, every so often, at cattle drive reenactments, small-town Cracker events, and, of course, at the Florida Folk Festival (Memorial Day weekend).

And dirt bikes scream over land
That used to be scrub cow trails
And interstate highways have taken the place
Of ol' Mr. Flagler's rails
And condos rise from the land and space shuttles fly
And the old Cracker cowmen don't know
How it all passed them by

—from "Cracker Cowmen" by Frank and Ann Thomas

I DON'T KNOW IF THERE'S SUCH A THING AS FLORIDA CRACKER MUSIC. THERE ARE SEVERAL OF US WHO ARE WRITING SONGS ABOUT THE CRACKER LIFESTYLE, ABOUT THE OLD FLORIDA, HOW IT USED TO BE AND HOW IT WILL NEVER BE AGAIN. BUT IF YOU DON'T CALL IT CRACKER MUSIC, I DON'T KNOW WHAT IT WOULD BE.

—Frank Thomas
What is Florida Cracker music? Everyone has a different answer.

In Florida's post-Civil War days, Cracker music was what it was: “music played by Crackers and listened to by Crackers,” says Bob Massey, an ol' flatlander cowboy who stopped at the Cracker Palace recently to reminisce about “the real Cracker times,” when Florida was filled with screw worms and skies were black with vultures feasting on the cattle killed by the worms. You know—Florida before the armadillos got here, before the fences went up, before the turpentine faded out, before the railroad trains hauled all the lightered stumps away. ("Well now, not all of 'em," whispers Massey's wife, Sandra. "We know where there are a couple.")

"Square dances, with fiddlers playing 'Old Joe Clark,' 'Soldiers Joy,' and the 'Chicken Reel.' That was Cracker music in those days," said Massey, whose whole life has been lived within spirtin' distance of Kissimmee Island, a bend in the rural flatlands where he was born. "I remember folks'd go to Kenansville to do their jukin' at the ol' Heartbreak Hotel. People'd gather up on a weekend and have a big frolic-dance and fight—you know, with just Cracker people."

"Cracker music was what you weren't supposed to be doing. Back then, if it wasn't about God, it was the devil's music," says Frank Thomas, who traces his Florida heritage back to the late 1700s in St. Augustine. "So it went into the dance halls. Chubby Wise told me that is where he started. He found he could make a living playing Cracker music with Crackers dancin' to it. I did the same thing. But we never called it that. We didn't have to. We were all Crackers, and we were all from here, and you never had to say it. You just knew."

"We made the music our own, you see. Every region does that—takes some of the basic old tunes and kind of adapts them to whatever is goin' on in that particular area. Adapted it to the lifestyle. Around here it was a Cracker lifestyle and it is something I lived through. I was raised up living in those times and to me it was nothin' extra. Just a way of life."

"The first time I knew anything about Crackers was the early '50s when my grandfather laid a Florida Cracker wab-kesh-bahl-te (Seminole for cow-whip) "cross my ass," remembers former Seminole Chief and songwriter Jim Billie, who winces as he recalls the teaching techniques of Brighton Seminole cowboy Morgan Smith. "Wow. That hurt. That's my earliest memory. My grandfather told me that's what the white man known as wok-hah-puh-ye (Cracker or cow hunter) would use to herd the cows and bulls."

"So I always connected Cracker music with those cowboys. I felt like those songwriters like Frank Thomas and Bobby Hicks were singing Cracker music. Just look at those guys, the way they walk, the accent, the natural way they act. They sing about Bone Mizell and cowboys and flatwoods. My songs are all about alligators, legends, campfires, and some of the things the Indians do."

But the Indians also learned how to use the whip, recalls Chief Jim Billie. "The U.S. government figured the Indians might stay on the reservation if they had cattle, so around 1936, they brought trainloads of cattle to Kissimmee. The Indians had to walk those cows all the way back to Brighton and Big Cypress. Some of those boys got just as good with that
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whip as the Townsends, the McDaniels, the Hall brothers, and all the other famous Crackers in the swamp. These were Seminole Crackers!"

The Chief pauses. "Hey, now that's an idea. I guess I better write a song about that."

Several years ago I lived in a country where nobody wanted to live.

It was sawgrass swamp where the bull gators bellowed.

And the cotton mouth crawled at your feet.

Once in awhile some folks passin' by would stop at my place and visit.

They would all sit a spell but the shooters gave 'em hell.

They could not tolerate it.

But it was good to live, way out here.

With the birds and bees, otter, bear, and deer

—from "Way Out Here" by Chief Jim Billie

Famed Florida songwriter/storyteller Bobby Hicks puts a lot of stock in a birthright when it comes to Cracker music: "Crackers are the descendants of the people who pioneered this land. But I never called the music "Cracker music"—I call it Florida music. But even that is getting watered down with all these songs coming out from people who come down here and read a tourist brochure or steal someone else's idea," says Hicks, a Tampa native whose only CD, "I'm Florida, And The Need To Say More," still ranks as the genre's very best, more than two decades after its release.

Like a true Cracker, Hicks credits his forebears with his success: "To me, it is a given that Will McLean was the beginning of all this, the first to open the door for the rest of us. He made it popular to sing about Florida. He told wondrous tales about Florida. He influenced everyone, Gamble Rogers, Don Grooms, Whitey Markle, all of us."

McLean died in 1990, after a half-century as Florida's Black Hat Troubadour, roaming the state to perform his original Florida songs in bars, festivals, church picnics, even Carnegie Hall. Rogers was a master guitarist and comic-storyteller who traveled the country sharing his hilarious tales about the Crackers living in fictional Okla-waha County, Florida. He drowned, at the height of his fame, trying to save a swimmer in trouble off Flagler Beach in 1992. Grooms, a Cherokee Indian from North Carolina, was a University of Florida professor who wrote hundreds of Florida songs before his death in 1998.

Markle, a UF Professor who lives in Citra on the shore of Orange Lake, still performs with his band, The Swampprooters, and markets his Cracker recipe book. His annual (invitation only) Mullet Festival has been a signature Cracker music event for 27 years, saved from the tourist calendars due to the altitude of its hell-raising host. Markle's CD "Cracker Blue" is yet another Florida folk classic, a blue-grassy mixture of swamp and Florida Cracker music, all cooked into Markle's songs.

"Cracker music is the type of music the Crackers heard around here before rock and roll," says Markle.

They were listening to the Renfro Valley Barn Dance
and the Grand Ole Opry, then rock and roll dominated the scene. The Crackers long for those old days and that old music. I guess you could say my music is Cracker music. Just a different message and a different audience that aren’t all Crackers anymore. But hell, they all seem to like the music.”

I’m just an old Cracker boy borned down in the swamp
My little song’s gonna bring you joy, it’s called the Cracker Stomp
Late at night, when the moon comes out
I want to ramble and roam
My feet start to jumpin’, up and down
And it comes out the Cracker stomp
— from “Cracker Stomp” by Whitey Markle

Few Florida songwriters use the word “cracker” when describing their music. Benjamin DeHart dresses in old Cracker style and also has a sizable catalogue of what he calls Cracker music. Orange Grove impresario Jerry Mincey and Tampa’s Pat Barmore are protégés of Frank Thomas, borrowing from his “Cracker state of mind” to inspire much of their music. When modern pundits misuse the word “cracker” in descriptions of the Southern rock music of bands like Lynyrd Skynyrd and the Allman Brothers Band, it becomes yet another stereotypical Southern putdown.

For Bobby Hicks, the person who writes and sings the song is just as important as the song itself: “I sat there one day and watched Will McLean carve a fishin’ lure and then catch a warmouth perch. It doesn’t matter where you put guys like Will and Frank Thomas, they are going to survive.

“Drop ‘em in the middle of the woods and they know how to fix a place to sleep, find something to eat, wear palm fronds if they have to. Whitey Markle lived for years with no electricity beneath a thatched roof. He had a tree house with a glass roof 14 feet up in a tree because Dale Crider told him a mosquito can only go 14 feet up.

“Crackers do a little bit better than survive. A Cracker will prevail.”

Never been a secret Florida is my home
As I said I was born on Tampa Bay
Somewhere the inspiration came to write these Florida songs
Before the governor throws the whole damn state away
It’s easy to be proud when you’re a Cracker
Something deep inside you helps you find your way
Throw your shoulder to the load, shove it on down the road
Tomorrow they claim com’ a brighter day
— from “Cracker Prop To Be” by Bobby Hicks

Back on the porch of the Cracker Palace, Frank Thomas pulls out his Gibson guitar. He tells a story about a cow whip made recently by Bob Massey’s grandson. Frank pointed out that the whip was made with nylon. “That’s right, Frank,” Bob allowed. “Them old buckskin cow whips are a thing of the past.”

The proverbial light bulb flashed in Frank Thomas’s mind. “I thought about that and said, ‘Well, that may be one more song to come along out of me,’ you know,” he said, after the crowd had finished their first round of applause.

Frank flubbed a few words over the next two verses. But that’s okay. It was all from memory. You see, according to Frank Thomas, real Florida Cracker music is never written down. Thomas estimates he has written more than 500 songs. Not a one has been set to paper with his pen. Computer files? Forget it. It’s all stored in the belfry of his brain, next to his craving for fat sirloin steaks, homemade biscuits, and non-filtered Lucky Strikes.

“Crackers are funny people. A Cracker may have a computer,” winks the quintessential Florida Cracker music man. “But he may not know how to use one.”

PETER B. GALLAGHER, a writer and musician based in St. Petersburg, co-hosts with Bobby Hicks the weekly Florida Folk Show on WMNF Radio (88.5 FM, Tampa Bay).
To survive in the Florida wild, Cracker pioneers had to eat whatever they could find, grow, catch, or shoot. This made for some eclectic additions to their basic Southern staples of grits, greens, and gravy. A meal might include gopher tortoise (known as scrub chicken), or soft-shelled turtles (known as cooters), or such delights as opossum, squirrel, raccoon, rattlesnake, or bear. A modern-day Cracker was quoted as saying: “If it walked and didn’t talk, we ate it.”

Of course, Crackers also had access to wild cattle, pigs, and rabbits; to Guinea hens, which were scraky and tough and nearly wild; and to lots of different seafood, fresh-water fish, snails, frogs, crayfish, and other creatures of the river, swamp, and muck. Although they hunted alligators to sell the skins, Crackers reportedly didn’t eat alligator meat until about the mid-20th century.

They did cultivate gardens and ate homegrown corn in many configurations, the main one being grits—a Cracker staple made from dried, ground corn. Edible wild plants, such as poke weed, were eaten along with mustard, collard, and turnip greens from their gardens.

A special Florida delicacy was “swamp cabbage,” also known as heart of palm, which was the white core of the young palmetto. Among other wild treats were nuts, acorns, berries, and the roots of various plants—including cat-tails, which were used at times for making flour.

As Dana Ste. Claire points out in Cracker: The Cracker Culture in Florida History, many social events were built around “perloos,” (pronounced pur-loos), pots of stewed meat cooked with rice—ideal for feeding a large crowd:

The Cracker women would bring large pots, lots of chickens, rice, and biscuits. The chickens were boiled over open fires until they were nearly done, and then rice was added. The feast was served with coffee made over the same fire. Around the cooking activities, Cracker folks would carry on in ‘all-day sings’ and contests. A similar event was the Florida Frolic, an all-day wild game feast. At a Frolic, the men and boys would arrive early, grouping at a predetermined location, and begin to hunt and fish. Their ‘catches’ were carried to the Frolic and cooked by the women, who had already begun preparing grits, swamp (palmetto) cabbage, and cornbread.

Cracker cooking was designed for basic sustenance. But in late 1928, when writer Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings left northern cities behind for the beauty and seclusion of Cross Creek, she applied her knowledge of gourmet cooking to Cracker dishes. Her recipes for “Coot Surprise,” “Jugged Rabbit,” “Pot Roast of Bear,” “Alligator Tail Steak,” “Blackbird Pie,” “Minorcan Gopher Stew,” “Cheese Grits,” and “Florida Backwoods Biscuits” can be found among many others in her 1942 book, Cross Creek Cookery.

Her chef’s sensibilities were also apparent in her book, Cross Creek, published earlier the same year. “Bear meat is good according to the condition of the bear and the manner in which it is cooked. A male in the mating season is almost inedible, like a boar hog.” The best bear meat she ever ate was at a church meeting in Eureka, she wrote. “It had been cooked as a pot roast, browned in its own fat, simmered half a day in an iron pot on a wood range... The flavor was that of the choicest prime beef, with an added rich gaminess.”

Rawlings created many variations of Cracker dishes—but was never a fan of the ubiquitous “gravy,” which consisted of drippings from fried salt pork or fat-back bacon. She wrote in Cross Creek: “It is solid grease, and it is poured over grits, over sweet potatoes, over cornbread or soda biscuits, and how country stomachs survive ten hundred and ninety-five servings of this a year is a mystery past my solving.”
When a Florida legislative leader says to his colleagues, "that dog won't hunt," he is not talking about a four-footed beast. He's saying they should forget about the bill or the idea that is being suggested, because it's going nowhere.

A Florida legislator who labels an opponent's argument "heifer dust" is not strictly talking about dust, but about everything that's left after a cow herd moves on.

These Cracker phrases are just a couple of many that surface any time Florida legislators meet. Some of the terms have developed over years of use and seem to be surviving the departure of old-time lawmakers and term limits. Most were developed when the Legislature was dominated by members from rural North Florida counties, and lawmakers frequently represented more pine trees than people. Those lawmakers were dubbed the "Pork Chop Gang," a name given them by a Tampa editorial writer during reapportionment fights of the 1950s.

Call it Cracker or "country," most of the terms are Southern by birth and best understood by men and women who have spent a lot of time in the woods. Several of the old sayings involve dogs. In addition to the dog that won't hunt, there is "Call off the dogs," a directive that signals the hunt is over; the votes have been captured or lost. There's also "I don't have a dog in that fight," declared by a legislator who doesn't see the need to take sides on an issue not affecting his district or interests.

Lawmakers also use "dog-and-pony show" to describe a committee that goes around the state soliciting public opinion before making a decision. Old timers refer to "yellow-dog Democrats," a description of Democrats so dedicated they'd vote for a yellow dog before voting for a Republican. And then there was the legislator who combined Cracker sensitivities with something not usually found in the woods: "We're caught between the dog and the fire hydrant on this vote."

In addition to dogs and cows, other animals associated with farming, ranching, or living in the woods are also brought into the debate. A lawmaker once said: "There is no education in the second kick of a mule." Former Senate President Dempsey Barron, among the most colorful characters to serve in the Legislature, often turned to his Panhandle cattle ranch for stories. Here's how he described medical malpractice legislation being considered in 1987: "It's like mixing sugar with manure. It doesn't improve the manure, and it ruins the sugar."

Gov. Lawton Chiles won election in 1994 over Jeb Bush after saying, "The old he-coon walks just before the light of day," essentially declaring himself the he-coon that would come from behind and win. Bush and many others were baffled by the country phrase widely known among "coon hunters.

Lawmakers also talk of "lick logs," a reference to logs covered with salt to attract animals to a single area in the woods. A legislative "lick log" is something that attracts all the lawmakers to a particular place or bill.

Certain rural areas of Florida have also been invoked in legislative deal making. Almost any lawmaker could tell you that "The Yellow River Code" means keeping your word. The term was introduced in the legislative process by former Sen. William Dean "Wig" Barrow, whose ancestors came to the Yellow River area in West Florida in the early 1800s. Barrow's code was documented by former House Clerk Allen Morris in Reconsiderations, one of many books Morris wrote on the Legislature.

Chiles once described "Cracker" as "a plain-spoken language of the coun-
try, spoken from the heart so anybody can understand." Such down-to-earth language seems to have taken root in Florida’s legislative process in many forms. "Loving a bill to death" is an oft-heard phrase that means lawmakers who oppose a measure are adding little amendments that are sure to kill the bill when it comes to a vote. When an appropriations bill grows out of control, it is likely to become known as "a Christmas tree," trimmed with far too many proposals.

Joe Six Pack and Joe Lunch Box appear frequently in legislative circles as lawmakers attempt to explain the effect a bill will have on the average Floridian. Sen. Richard Langley, a Republican from Leesburg, was credited with creating Mr. Lunch Box in the 1970s. Joe Six Pack is attributed to H.G. "Buddy" Davis, a former journalism professor at the University of Florida who moonlighted as an editorial writer for the Gainesville Sun from the 1960s through the ’80s.

Legislators often have a "going-home bill," usually something that would help them back home at election time. A really good lawmaker conceals the identity of his going-home bill, lest others discover it and hold it hostage in return for something else.

Many of the phrases used in state government circles have a biblical origin. Former Gov. Chiles frequently turned to the Bible for comparisons, such as the day he claimed victory over tobacco companies and said he "smote" them "with the jaw-bone of an ass."

Some of the reporters surrounding Chiles as he stood on the front lawn of the governor’s mansion had blank looks and furiously attempted to scribble down the mysterious phrase. Chiles knew he was comparing himself to Samson who boasted of slaying a thousand men with the jawbone of an ass. But some of the morning newspapers quoted the governor as saying he "smoked" the tobacco companies with the jawbone.

In more recent times, House Speaker Johnnie Byrd used a biblical phrase to toss an insult at Senate President Jim King. A few hours after Gov. Jeb Bush urged King and Byrd to settle their differences and agree on a 2003 budget, Byrd started quoting the Bible in the middle of a prayer.

"In those days there was no king in Israel and every man did the right thing," Byrd read from the book of Judges. Later, Byrd denied any intentional use of the phrase to insult King.

LUCY MORGAN, a St. Petersburg Times reporter for nearly four decades, was chief of the Times bureau in Tallahassee for 20 years. Prior to her retirement from full-time work last year, the Florida Senate named its press gallery after her.

DARRYL PAULSON, a professor of government at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg, contributed some legislative Crackerisms to this article.
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GATOR HUNTIN’

In the 1950s, JESSE OTIS BEALL, a Cracker fisherman from DeBary, illegally hunted alligators and sold their hides. This was the only way he could bring in enough money to support himself and his family, he told Dana Ste. Claire in a December, 1996 interview. Here are excerpts:

Ste. Claire: Jesse, you know you’re about the most famous Cracker in these parts and, among other things, you are a well-known Cracker alligator hunter. There was a time when you did this for a living?

Beall: That’s the only thing we had to do. I mean I worked for the Oxfire Brush Company when I was making 65 cents an hour, so we had to supplement some way, so I went to ‘gator huntin’.

And actually how do you hunt a gator?

Well, it all depends where I’m at. If I’m legal I can set hooks; I’ll set hooks for him. But where I couldn’t do that, I’d pulled him out of a cave with a pole and killed him with a hatchet.

Now you actually went back into the dens to get alligators?

Yes, just once. I went underwater. Went in the hole and hooked him and pulled him out. That gator was close to 12 foot long.

You actually swam under water into the den and hooked the alligator?

And hooked him. I had a rope tied to the pole and came back out and pulled him out.

I’d say that you were either brave, very brave, or very hungry.

Both! ’Cause I wasn’t scared of him and I think the alligators knew that I was not scared of him. I could wade in a hole with one and not be feared, no fear at all, and I think he was scared of me more than I was of him.

Well, now we should also point out for the record that you were hunting alligator for hides, only. You weren’t hunting them for the meat. That only happened later on. Florida Crackers really never ate alligator meat, did they? That became popular when, about the 1950s?

It was the ’50s and early ’60s. Yep, we ate some. Don’t get me wrong now, ’cause when we hunted, when we be out in the swamp five or six miles out in there, you could not tote that meat back out there ‘cause it was too much. Time you toted that hide out of there, you was so thirsty you would even drink out of a cow track. And to get it out, you just had to do what you had to do.

So you were taking the hides right there where you hunted the alligators. Were they bringing a pretty good price back then?

Three dollars fifteen cents a foot.

And you’d get a little more if you stretched them, right Jesse?

And I’d stretched them too, buddy! They got on me one time about it when I stretched them too much, you know, and they said, “You can’t do that” and I said, “You want my hides, you’ll take them.” Most of them, they took them… about four or five hide buyers. They said, “Just don’t stretch ’em or we just won’t pay you for ’em.” So I quit it.

Well, thank you for telling me about Cracker Florida alligator poaching and hunting. I know you did some of it legally too!

I done that for the meat!

This is an excerpt from Dana Ste. Claire’s book, Cracker: The Cracker Culture in Florida History.
listen to the
voice of the heartland

Article & Photos by Carlton Ward, Jr.
Every day before dawn, they saddle their horses, coil their lariats and whips, and ride out to work the herds. They are Florida cattlemen—living heritage of the pioneer days, legacy to the longest history of ranching in America, guardians of the landscape that has shaped them.

On this morning, fog blankets the moist pastures, enveloping the riders as they leave the stables. I follow close behind. The calls of frogs and birds ring out from nearby wetlands, echoed by more calls emanating from a stream in the adjacent oak hammock. White-tailed deer spring out of the mist and disappear into the shadows of the trees. By the time the sun breaks the horizon, we have reached the edge of the flatwoods. The pines glow orange above saw palmettos still shrouded in the blue light of the retreating fog. The brush of fronds against my horse forms a rhythm with the creaking of my saddle.
AS WE DRAW CLOSER TO THE CATTLE, the cowboys quicken their pace and fan out to gather the herd. Two riders lead and the others push from the rear, occasionally darting after a stray cow or cracking their whips to keep the herd together. Facing crisp light, they emerge from the pines as a tight group and begin their drive back through the pasture beneath a blue sky. The cowboys and their herd seem as much a part of the landscape as the gator and heron in the pond or the bald eagle that circles overhead.

This landscape has shaped me, too. Florida's heartland has been home to my family for eight generations—200 years. Though I grew up in Clearwater, my youth is filled with memories of riding out across the wild lands in Hardee County, where Florida's fourth generation of the Carlton family homesteaded in 1867. Between hunts or during Thanksgiving meals at the old ranch house, I would listen to stories from my grandparents about the early times, when they would ride for days without seeing a fence.

But today, sitting in my office in Tampa amid the flurry of new condos and new people, the buzz of modern life muffles the voice of the other Florida I know. It's unseen, overlooked, or forgotten by many of the people who now live here. And it's probably unknown to most of the 1,000 new residents moving to Florida each day. They know about the beautiful beaches, warm weather, burgeoning cities, and colorful amusement parks. But how many know about our ranching heritage?

I learned when I went away to college in North Carolina that people from other states didn't know we had ranches in Florida. They didn't know that Florida has three of the top six beef ranches in the nation.

Maybe that's why few people know what is being lost today as real estate development creeps farther and farther east of I-75 and west of I-95. Strip malls and traffic lights squeeze the county roads of my youth. New subdivisions sprout in plain view of the highway, with names like Panther Ridge, Cypress Landing, or Eagle's Nest—innocuous epitaphs to the nature they replace. And the pace of change is incredible. Entire new towns with thousands of new residents are being developed on land that was a natural treasure.

These changes have grown more apparent to me in the past few years. I was spending a lot of time in the Central African rainforests of Gabon, working as a photojournalist with the Smithsonian Institution. We were conducting research and promoting biodiversity conservation and, through my photography, I was showing the Gabonese people what was special about their natural heritage—what was worth protecting.

Between expeditions, I would come home to see Florida with new eyes. Months would pass, and, through my disanced perspective, I could clearly see the direction things were going. Florida was losing so much land so fast. This began to weigh on me. I began to feel guilty and even a bit hypocritical. I had spent years exporting an ethic of environmental stewardship to a developing African nation and, meanwhile, the nature of my own state was suffering. I knew I needed to come home to Florida to try to make a difference.

My heart led me to the ranchlands—the landscape of my heritage and the most pivotal landscape in the state. Florida is currently losing 200,000 acres (or 313 square miles) of rural and natural land each year to development. Envision an area larger than Pinellas County (280 square miles) and more expansive than one thousand 18-hole golf courses. That's how much irreplaceable green space is being consumed annually. And for the most part, Floridians don't know what's being lost.

We are losing some of Florida's best wetlands and wildlife habitats. We are losing rural economies important to the agricultural autonomy of our nation. And we are losing a way of life and a breed of people connected to a landscape they have been managing and protecting since before the Civil War.

One beacon of hope is provided by Florida's new Rural Land Stewardship Program. It sets up a way to use ranches to preserve natural habitat. A well-managed Florida ranch can provide the same ecological functions as a state or national park, without burdening taxpayers with the cost of management. For this reason, progressive environmental groups are embracing ranching as a conservation solution, and they are finding common ground with the typically conservative ranching communities.

Fort Pierce rancher, Alto "Bud" Adams, Jr., just put 15,000 acres of his land into conservation using this program. And now nearly 74,000 acres of the Babcock Ranch, near Fort Myers, may be protected using a similar approach.

I have been making photographs of the Adams Ranch, the Babcock Ranch, and other ranches across the state. My goal is to share a vision of what's at stake as we change the face of Florida. I would like people to feel what it's like to follow the tracks of a bobcat down a sandy trail, to gasp at the surprise of a buck bounding over a palmetto patch, to hear the call of the owl from a mossy oak, to marvel at flocks of cranes until they glide out of sight, or to look into the eyes of the Florida cattleman as he peers out over the land that has hewn him and that he, in turn, protects. Then maybe I can help others see that it's worth protecting.

CARLTON WARD, JR. is the great-grandson of Florida's 25th Governor, Doyle E. Carlton. Last year, Ward founded a nonprofit organization, the Legacy Institute for Nature & Culture (LINC), which uses communications to connect people to Florida's natural heritage.
Crackers were odd, but good, neighbors

BY BILL MAXWELL

I KNOW A LOT ABOUT FLORIDA CRACKERS from a personal point of view. When I was a child, my friends and I knew that a sure way to insult a white person was to call him or her a “Cracker.” Translation: racist.

To us, Cracker was the equivalent of the N-word. And, based on the reactions of whites, they apparently thought so, too. The first fight I had with a white boy, when I was 10, resulted from his using the N-word and my hitting back with “white Cracker.”

I didn’t learn until I was in college, when I first met future-governor Lawton Chiles, that for many white Floridians, Cracker isn’t a racial epithet. It is, in fact, a term of endearment. As governor, Chiles publicly bragged about being a Cracker and regularly infused his off-the-cuff and official remarks with memorable Cracker gems. Consider: “It’s a sorry frog who won’t holler in his own pond,” and “Even a blind hog will root out an acorn once in a while.”

When Chiles died in 1998, I was a columnnist and editorial writer for the St. Petersburg Times. His death made me realize that Florida Crackerdom, as a distinct culture, is morphing, if not disappearing, because of influences such as rapidly changing demographics and urbanization. A hard-core remnant of Crackers will endure; but their numbers, too, will dwindle as they die off and as sunshine, white sand, the Atlantic surf, and low taxes continue to attract outsiders.

While some may argue about the definition of a Cracker, I certainly know one when I see one. In Lake County, where my mother’s family lived across the pond from several Cracker families, I witnessed intra-Cracker fury between Georgia and Florida strains. These clans—men, women, and children—never used guns or knives. They beat the hell out of one another with fists, kicks, teeth, and clubs.

The infamous Sheriff Willis McCall and a deputy would drive out to the scene of the fight, but they would sit in the truck or the cruiser and simply observe. After the fighting subsided, McCall and the deputy would get out of their vehicle and have a good laugh with the brawlers.

We didn’t know what to think of these off-and-on enemies. Incredibly, they always stopped short of drawing too much blood or breaking so many bones as to hobble someone. All the while, screams of pain and profanities would echo across the pond. We were awed by the apparent ferocity of the fights and the combatants’ easy reconciliation. When the lawmen departed, the families broke out the moonshine, fired up homemade grills, played music, and frolicked into the night.

My relatives simultaneously feared and respected their strange white neighbors—and often did odd jobs for them. The two groups never socialized, but they had a symbiotic relationship during times of trouble or basic human need, and they often shared food.

I recall that during hog-killing season, some of the Cracker men would bring several yards of chitterlings (intestines) to us. Whenever we cooked chitterlings, some of my aunts would take large portions to our neighbors across the pond. Conventional wisdom held that while Crackers didn’t have the stomach for cleaning and cooking chitterlings, they loved to eat them, especially when they were deep-fried in lard.

During the 1980s, when I wrote a weekly column for the New York Times Regional Newspapers Group, I got a great laugh when a matriarch of the Cracker clan across the pond wrote a letter to me. She explained that they had the stomach to clean and cook chitterlings, but they simply didn’t want the “mess and the foul odor” in their houses. They let us “do all the dirty work,” she wrote.

When my uncle’s well went dry, he didn’t have enough money to get a new well drilled. He walked to the other side of the pond and asked the Cracker well-driller for help. After lighting his pipe, the old white man grabbed his “witching sticks,” brazen rods, and followed my uncle back around the pond. Within a few minutes, the old man had divined the perfect spot to drill. Two days later, my uncle had new water. He paid the man in installments and chores.

One of my aunts, a legendary midwife, delivered many of the white babies across the pond. Several years ago, I learned that she also had performed abortions for what she called “them fast Cracker gals.”

My grandfather, a no-nonsense, God-fearing farmer, described Crackers thusly: “If you treat Crackers right, they treat you right—no matter what. They ain’t mean like po’ white trash.”

Twelve years ago when I lived in Bronson, near Gainesville, my nearest neighbor was a grizzled, proud Cracker. Like author Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, who had a love-hate relationship with her Cracker neighbors in Cross Creek, I had an ambivalent relationship with my Levy County neighbor. He was the quintessential Cracker, as Rawlings describes them: “They are living an entirely natural and very hard life, disturbing no one. Yet almost everything they do is illegal. And everything they do is necessary to sustain life.”

Indeed, my neighbor, a heavy-equipment operator, hunted out of season and fished beyond the limit. Although he had a driver’s license, he didn’t believe in licenses of any kind. The land was his to pluck—without
government interference. He was a walking paradox: Using his bulldozer, he cleared the land for my house, charging me a negligible fee. For beer and my barbecued ribs, he helped me build my barn and the stable for my Appaloosa. He helped me fence my pasture and mow my acreage. At the same time, however, he routinely picked my apples, pears, tomatoes, and muscadine without my permission.

Florida historian Clark I. Cross realized that Cracker culture was vanishing as far back as 1975, when he wrote: “There is an Old Florida, call it Cracker Florida if you will, where a distinctive way of life and attitudes persist, where houses and barns seem little changed, but this Florida exists only in pockets and seems harder to find every passing year.”

Many Florida natives who have personally known Crackers—count me among them—regret to see their way of life vanish as a significant part of the state’s esprit de corps.

BILL MAXWELL is an associate professor of journalism at Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, Ala.

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**Watchin’ out for moonshiners in the ’glades**

**GLEN SIMMONS** made his living hunting alligators in the Everglades for decades, beginning in the late 1920s. He has been called “South Florida’s Davy Crockett.” His memories are preserved in the book, *Gladesmen: Gator Hunters, Moonshiners, and Skiffers*, which he wrote with anthropologist Laura Ogden. In the following excerpt, he recalls moonshiners in the ’glades.

**URING THOSE DAYS IN THE 1920S AND ’30S, you had to be closemouthed about moonshiners and everything else. Anyway, what they did was their business and none of mine. Although I came across many of these men in my travels, I knew to keep my mouth shut. If I’d been married, I wouldn’t have told my wife about them.**

From 1916, when they put the first part of the Ingraham Highway in, until 1933, there were lots of whisky stills in the Bill Ashley Jungles—at different times. This was a favorite spot for moonshiners, since they could put their scows in along the road and travel back into the mangroves and glades undetected. Whiskey-making off the Ingraham Highway started as early as Prohibition, or before. And that riverhead country suited the situation. Scows, sixteen feet long, four feet wide, and about a foot deep, could carry stills, sugar, and corn. I’ve been told that a lot depended on timing: meeting the supply truck, unloading, loading, and moving on. If they ever left their vehicles on the road, I never seen it.

How many stills were there at one time is hard to say. But if I was walking along the road, fishing for bass in the late 1920s, I could hear the sound of a pitcher pump pumping water in the condenser barrel. Some of the pumps could be noisy if you worked them too hard. I can’t write the sound, but if you ever heard a pitcher pump, you know the sound. Kinda like *wum-wum*... Much spirits were made closer to town. Moonshiners moved often, for the most part. This rockland county (pinewoods closer to Homestead) was spotted with old dried-up gator holes and hammocks, and most every one of them, at one time or more, had had stills in them...

Some moonshiners used six-barrel pots, which were preferably made of copper. The prohiss [agents who enforced Prohibition law] tore these pots up so often that many moonshiners used cheaper pots made from galvanized tin.

Of course, this galvanized tin was poison, so ’twas said, but the moonshiners didn’t care about this. They even started using car radiators instead of coils. From the stills I visited, most used up to about 40 barrels of ryeach. The word was if everything was done right, a barrel of mash or “buck” would turn out six gallons of sellable ’shine—more if you cut it weak. After Prohibition was repealed (in 1933) and legal spirits were available, most moonshiners dropped out, but some kept on. Old habits die hard...

Making moonshine was a rough business. So they were really hot to catch the moonshiners. I remember hearing about a shootout on the Ingraham Highway, near the Bill Ashley Jungles, where three men were killed. These killings took place about 1925. One lad, a neighbor of ours named Clyde Parrish, was about nineteen years old—and that’s as old as he got...

But I never made ’shine. I loved my freedom more than money. A year and a day in an Atlanta prison wasn’t for me, and that was the penalty for being caught. People were so hellish in them days, some of my acquaintances probably would have planted some ’shine in my Model A Ford if they hadn’t liked ’shine so well themselves.
In his delightful and educational DVD, Pat Smith discusses his life and writing, with an emphasis on how his Florida books were researched by his travels and work around the state. This DVD has the feel of personal contact with Florida's greatest living author. Will appeal to all ages.

In his best-selling novel, *A Land Remembered*, Patrick Smith tells the story of three generations of the Maclveys, a Florida family who battle the hardships of the frontier to rise from a dirt-poor Cracker life to the wealth and standing of real estate tycoons. The story opens in 1858, when Tobias Maclvey arrives in the Florida wilderness to start a new life with his wife and infant son, and ends two generations later in 1968 with Solomon Maclvey, who realizes that the land has been exploited far beyond human need.

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Lee Gramling, Rick Tonyan, and Jon Wilson

Bring you action-packed stories of the Florida frontier.
FREDERIC REMINGTON, the 19th-century artist and writer, was renowned for his portrayals of rugged, heroic American cowboys. Indeed, his depictions helped create the mythic icon of the noble, romantic cowboy who drove cattle in the West. But in 1895, Remington turned his eyes to the East. He decided to take a look at the Cracker cowmen of Florida, the nation’s first cattle state. “With me cowboys are what gems and porcelains are to some others,” he wrote at that time in Harper’s New Monthly Magazine. However, after visiting Arcadia this cowboy-connoisseur seemed to put Crackers in the category of cow parties rather than crystals:

Two very emaciated Texas ponies pattered down the street, bearing wild-looking individuals, whose hair and drooping hats and generally bedraggled appearance would remind you at once of the Spanish-moss which hangs so quietly and helplessly to the limbs of the oaks out in the swamps. There was none of the belligerent ferocity and rearing plunge which I had associated with my friends out West, but as a fox terrier is to a yellow cur, so were these last. They had about four dollars worth of clothes between them and rode [hornless] McClellan saddles, with saddle-bags, and guns tied on before. The only things they did which were conventional were to tie their ponies up by the head in brutal disregard, and then get drunk in about fifteen minutes.

Remington went on to discuss the ubiquity of cattle rustling in Florida, the lack of any “moral forces,” and the prevalence of the frontier law of “desperate men armed to the teeth.” “What happens in the lonely pine woods no one knows but the desperadoes themselves, albeit some of them never come back to the little fringe of settlements... Out in the wilderness, low-browed cow-folks shoot and stab each other for the possession of scrawny creatures not fit for a pointer dog to mess on.”

These “scrawny” cracker cows were “no bigger than a donkey,” wandering “half-starved and horribly emaciated” in search of grass, he wrote. The famed artist even looked with a jaundiced eye on the cowmen’s dogs as “large, fierce curreys, one of which accompanies each cattle-hunter, and is taught to pursue cattle, and even take [the cows] by the nose, which is another instance of their brutality.”

Remington did credit Cracker cowmen for establishing their own wild style: “The heat, the poor grass, their brutality, and the pest of the flies kill their ponies, and as a rule, they lack dash and are indifferent riders, but they are picturesque in their unkempt, almost unearthly wildness.”

In the conclusion to his Harper’s article, Remington allowed that Florida cowmen did have to deal with conditions that were much different than those found on the grand, open prairies of the West. But that recognition didn’t soften his view:

So this is the Cracker cowboy, whose chief interest would be found in the tales of some bushwhacking enterprise, which I very much fear would be a one-sided story, and not worth the telling. At best they must be revolting, having no note of the savage encounters which used to characterize the easy days in West Texas and New Mexico, when every man tossed his life away to the crinkle of his own revolver. The moon shows pale through the leafy canopy on their evening fires, and the mists, the miasma, and mosquitoes settle over their dreary camp talk. In place of the wild stampede, there is only the bellowing in the pens, and instead of the plains shaking under the dusty air as the bedizened vaqueros plough their fiery broncos through the milling herds, the cattle-hunter wends his lonely way through the ooze and rank grass, while the dreary pine trunks line up and shut the view.
"Moonshine—went to sleep and did not wake up."

That was written on the death certificate of "Bone" Mizell, Florida's most famous early cowman. The cause of death was just what he had predicted, although he thought he'd live much longer than 58 years.

Morgan Bonapart "Bone" Mizell, who died in 1921, was known as a hard-living, fun-loving, devil-may-care wit and a skilled cowman. He was the model for artist Frederic Remington's painting, "A Cracker Cowboy," and was immortalized decades later in "The Ballad of Bone Mizell." There's even a historical marker dedicated to him as "Desoto County's wag, prairie philosopher, cowboy humorist and prankster...beloved for his merrymaking."

This merrymaking, born of a freewheeling nature lubricated by strong spirits, was what made him the subject of stories told around cowmen's campfires, many of them recounted by Jim Bob Tinsley in Florida Cow Hunter: The Life and Times of Bone Mizell. One such story involved a traveling circus that once set up a tent next to the railroad tracks in Arcadia. When Mizell's exuberant behavior took attention away from the performers, circus officials escorted him out of the tent. He retaliated by tying one of the tent ropes to a waiting freight train. When the train pulled out of the station, the circus unexpectedly went with it.

Mizell was known to go through his money without much regard for the future, once spending all the proceeds from a cattle sale to charter a riverboat on which he hosted an elaborate party for his friends. He expressed his philosophy about money this way: "Them that's got, has to lose. Them that hasn't, kaint."

He was summoned to court several times on charges of cattle rustling or disorderly behavior, but he said that the one time he was convicted (for rustling) was the only time he really wasn't guilty. On another occasion, when a judge fined him $20 for walking into the courtroom wearing his hat, Mizell handed over $40, saying he was also going to walk out wearing his hat.

His cowboy friends occasionally turned the tables and pulled pranks on him. According to one story, after he passed out one night, the other cowboys put a ring of dry cow dung around him and set it afire. He awoke, sat up, and said, "Well, by ---! Dead and in hell!"

His most outlandish prank became the subject of a ballad written in 1939 by South Florida journalist Ruby Leach Carson. It was later put to music by Dottie and Jim Bob Tinsley. According to this legend, Mizell once substituted the exhumed remains of a close friend for those of a rich young New Orleans man who had drifted into Florida—and then Mizell shipped the casket to the young man's parents.

The young man, who had befriended Mizell, was broken in health and in spirit after years of travel and said he was sick of traveling and never wanted to go home. When the man died, Mizell buried him on rangeland north of Punta Gorda next to the unmarked grave of his cowman friend. After a few years, the boy's wealthy parents learned of their son's death and sent money to have his remains returned to them for burial in the family plot.

Mizell, hired by a local undertaker to dig up the young man's remains, decided to dig up the corpse of his cowman friend and ship it instead. He explained that the New Orleans man didn't want to go home and that his old friend had always wanted to travel but never had enough money. Mizell also liked the idea of his old friend receiving a grand funeral, with four white horses pulling the hearse, and a fine burial under a costly tombstone.

As the last stanza of "The Ballad of Bone Mizell" puts it:

So, instead of the Yank with his money and rank
Who'd been 'round and seen lots of fun,
I just dug up Bill Redd and I sent him instead,
For ol' Bill hadn't traveled 'round none.
OLA WATKINS

By Ray Washington

OLA WATKINS SAT SHELLING PECANS. She seemed to struggle, digging the meat out with the blade of her pocket knife.

“Don’t think it’s no easy job,” she said. “Shelling pecans ain’t like shelling peas. You got to watch close. You got to twist your pocket knife. Shelling pecans is right hard for me now.”

A lot of things had become hard for Mrs. Watkins, who claimed to be 115 years old and had letters from the governor of Florida and the President of the United States to prove it. Quilting had become too hard for her because her eyesight was going bad, and she had just about given up on it. A few years ago, she found that she could no longer spend the whole day hoeing, and she quit that too.

“I hate to say it, but I done got 50ft,” she said. She had been used to a hardscrabble life. When first married before the turn of the 20th century, she and her husband, Jackson Watkins, moved into an old cypress-and-cabbage-palm smokehouse that had the bare earth for a floor. After the children began to come, the family moved to another place where the children could be spread out, only two or three to a bed, on straw tick mattresses. Her routine for decades became full days back at the house, cooking, washing, making soap, and canning. It was the canning that she remembered most of all, every year putting up a couple of thousand jars of vegetables, eggs, chitterlings, venison, and backbone.

“That canning were right hard, but it were better to be up on your feet working than down flat on your back.”

She was never sick in bed much, anyway, except during the labor of childbirth, and even then she was working. In fact, she performed the delivery of most of her 10 children by herself.

The only time she had come close to being soft was just after her husband died. She was tired of working every waking moment, so she took up fishing.

But she drew the line at some things. Although she had some trouble seeing, she refused to pay good money for glasses. Although she had every single tooth extracted, her gums were good and hard and mashed the food all right, and she refused to be fitted for dentures. Although the winters got chilly in Gulf Hammock, she figured her wood heater was about all she needed. And although the deer flies and the yellow flies sometimes raised welts and the mosquitoes deviled her, she was not about to get fancy and have screens put on.

But finally she got sick, and her offspring insisted that she go to the hospital, which was another frivolity she had tried to avoid. The doctors said her heart was not the same as it had been when she was a young woman of 100. She would have to slow down some more.

Against her better judgment, she moved away from Gulf Hammock to stay with her daughter Estell. Mrs. Watkins had stayed put all her life, except for a trip to Georgia once; and the idea of living in her daughter’s house, clear over at Zubet, did not appeal to her. Zubet was faster-paced than Gulf Hammock. It had a blinking light. It was at least 30 miles away from Gulf Hammock.

“I knew it weren’t going to be as good as Gulf Hammock, just as sure as the vine grows ‘round the stump,” she said.

But, Mrs. Watkins, in her second century of living, adapted to the change. At Zubet she lived the good life. She still insisted that eye glasses and false teeth were unnecessary, but at Zubet she endured the screened windows and store-bought heat. She endured all the modern conveniences. She was the center of attention in the house, and her daughter served her meals of swamp cabbage and sweet potatoes, squash, fat meat, mustard greens, biscuits, and sweet tea.

Life for Ola Watkins was life in a fresh, blue bathrobe and red-knit slippers. Someone else combed her hair for her most of the time. Sometimes she dipped Railroad-brand snuff. Sometimes she sat in her own special rocking chair and watched “Gilligan’s Island” on television.

She finished the strenuous job of shelling pecans and shook her head. “Shelling them pecans is the hardest thing I do now.”

She knitted her face into a frown and a smile. “I don’t care if I don’t never go back to Gulf Hammock again,” she said.

RAY WASHINGTON, a fourth-generation Floridian, wrote a column, “Cracker Florida,” that was featured in several Florida newspapers from 1978 to 1982. This is an excerpt from the published collection of his columns, Cracker Florida: Some Lives and Times.
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