

Florida Cracker Cattle¹

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Introduction

Cracker cattle are small to moderately-sized animals descended from the original cattle brought to Florida by the Spanish in the 1500s. Because of Florida's environment, the original stock developed into a smallish, long-lived and heat-tolerant breed that is quite resistant to parasites and can grow and reproduce on the relatively low-quality forage of Florida grasslands, swamps, and scrub habitats (Figure 1). The breed is superficially similar to others with like-origins such as the Texas Longhorns, the Pineywoods cattle of Georgia and Alabama, and several "Criollo" breeds of Central and South America.

The horns of the Florida Cracker cattle tend to point up rather than out as they do in the Texas Longhorns, and this is likely an adaptation for maneuvering among the multitude of low-lying tree limbs and branches of Florida brush and scrub habitats (Figure 2). They also have been called Florida Scrub Cattle and Florida Native Cattle.

Adult size varies from about 500 pounds in small animals known as "guinea cattle" to close to 1000 pounds in cracker cattle descendants bred for larger size and beef production. These larger animals are



Figure 1. Cracker cattle are well adapted to Florida conditions. (Photograph by Stephen Monroe.)

more common in the northern part of Florida and in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. Coloration varies widely. Early animals were likely solid red, black or brown; but brindle, spotted (similar to Holsteins), linebacks (dark body color with a white or pale stripe along the spine; white under the belly; and often white also over the tail, head, and legs), were probably also present. The spotted animals were likely the result of crosses between solid Cracker bulls and milk cows that were brought from the north by early colonists. Heavily speckled or spotted animals, roans, and very light colors also exist and are

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Figure 2. Cracker cattle horns point up rather than out. (Photograph by Dr. Tim Olson.)

acceptable. A spotting pattern, which some call "color sided" (Dr. Tim Olson, personal communication), was present in early animals and can still be seen today. It is similar to the lineback, with speckling along the toplines and bellies, and dappling or speckling on the face (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Group from the Paynes Prairie herd and friends. (Photograph by Dr. Tim Olson.)

History

The first herds of Spanish cattle and horses on record were brought to Florida by Ponce de León on his second expedition in 1521. It is not known what became of these animals, but it is assumed that they were left to run free after the Spanish were driven back to their ships by the Calusa Indians. After 1521, Spanish conquistadores often brought cattle and horses, many of Andalusian ancestry, to Florida. Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries became the first true Florida ranchers, and they used Indian labor to keep livestock herds throughout their system of missions. During the 1600s, the Spanish organized and expanded cattle production in Florida. Spanish, Indian, and wild herds flourished; and as a result, a profitable cattle industry with exports routed through

Cuba developed. This was the first true commercial industry to develop in the New World, and the link with the major trading center in Cuba persisted for more than 300 years.

During the Civil War, Florida's cattle industry was the major provider of beef for both sides of the conflict. After the war, Florida's economy thrived thanks to the cattle trade with Cuba by early pioneer families such as the Roberts, the Carltons, the Lykes, the Summerlins, the McKays, the Hendrys, the Aldermans, the Wellses, and many others. The thousands of cattle that were traded for gold currency during these times formed the foundation for Florida's agricultural economy.

Cattle of non-Spanish origin have been entering Florida since the early and mid-1800s. Since then, Shorthorn and Hereford (England) and Angus (Scotland) bulls have been crossed with the native Cracker cows, but these breeds and the resulting offspring were not as well adapted to the Florida environment as the original Cracker stock. In the 1900s, the American Brahman was developed from several cattle types imported from India, and American Brahman bulls began to be crossed with Cracker cows. These crossbred, Brahman x Cracker animals were well adapted to Florida conditions, and the cows resulting from this mixture were especially productive. These animals—when bred with bulls of other breeds such as Hereford and Angus—often produced excellent beef animals. Cracker bulls began to be eliminated in favor of the larger Brahman. In the 1970s, Florida Agriculture Commissioner Doyle Conner launched a campaign to save the Cracker cattle from extinction. He requested donations of animals to start a State-of-Florida-owned herd of Cracker cattle. He received several animals from the Durrance family of Highlands County with which he started the Department of Agriculture herd in Tallahassee. Additional herds were started at Lake Kissimmee State Park (Polk County) and Paynes Prairie State Preserve (Alachua County, Figure 3) from animals obtained by the Florida Park Service from the Durrance family and from the Chaires family of Dixie County. The Paynes Prairie herd also received animals from the Tilton family of Putnam County. The herd presently at Withlacoochee State Forest (Citrus, Hernando, Sumter, and Polk counties)

was later formed with surplus animals from the Department of Agriculture and Paynes Prairie herds. Foundation animals were carefully screened to assure that the historical characteristics of the cattle were preserved. In addition to the state-owned herds, animals from various private herds were also included as foundation Cracker cattle. Among the latter were animals from the Ezell herd of Taylor County, the Barnes herd of Southern Alabama, and the Durrance herd of Highlands County. Presently, Florida Cracker cattle are registered through the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy. Animals are transferred between the herds to maintain a broad genetic base.

Breed Characteristics

Detailed characteristics of Florida Cracker Cattle are provided by Dr. Tim Olson of the University of Florida at the Florida Department of Agriculture Web page

http://www.florida-agriculture.com/livestock/cracker_characteristics.htm. Dr. Olson was involved in the evaluation and selection of the cattle that were approved by the Florida Cracker Cattle Association as foundation cattle. A summary of these characteristics follows:

Cattle of small to moderate size with cows weighting 600 to 1000 pounds; light to moderate bone; and short, shiny hair of any coloration (Figure 4), except gray; and any spotting pattern except the S^H spotting of the Hereford (e.g. almost no white except in the face). Characteristics that reflect influence of other breeds such as the large ears, excess skin, evidence of a hump, and triangular-shaped head of the Brahman are not acceptable. Cracker cattle should have light to moderate muscling, a moderately long head, and horns that go up fairly sharply from the head and then tip back.

Beef

Cracker cattle produce very palatable beef and can be raised relatively inexpensively without the use of antibiotics, hormones, or antiparasitic drugs. However, even though there is widespread interest in "locally grown," organically produced foods, the market for natural beef from Cracker cattle has yet to



Figure 4. Cracker cattle coloration can vary widely. (Photograph by Stephen Monroe.)

be developed partly because establishing new beef markets is normally a very difficult undertaking.

Organizations

The Florida Cracker Cattle Association was formed in 1988. The association aims "to preserve these cattle that were so important to the agricultural history of Florida and that provided the foundation for today's agricultural industry and to educate the public, especially young people, regarding the role of Florida Cracker Cattle in Florida's history" (<http://crackercattle.org/>). They adopted breed standards, established the Cracker Cattle Registry, and directed the selection of foundation animals for preservation of the breed. The association supports educational efforts relating to Cracker cattle and cattle ranching in Florida. It also holds several regular activities including the annual "Gatherin' and Sale," usually held near Brooksville, on the first Friday and Saturday of November. Cattle sales and auctions during these events allow interested parties to become active participants in the preservation of Florida's cattle history.

The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services helps to coordinate some of the above events, maintains the state herds, and has an active information, education and promotional program about Cracker cattle and horses that can be accessed at http://www.florida-agriculture.com/livestock/cracker_cattle.htm

Contacts

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cracker_cattle.htm](http://www.florida-agriculture.com/livestock/cracker_cattle.htm)



Figure 5. A living link to Florida's history. (Photograph by Stephen Monroe.)

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