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**Florida cattle drive offers father-daughter outing;
*History and environment highlighted for posterity***



Ellison Hardee (left) and his daughter Robin Hardee McCracken are seen during the cattle drive.

Photo from Suzy Holder's Facebook Page

By Jeff M. Hardison © Feb. 1, 2016 @ 5:57 p.m

OSCEOLA COUNTY – Two Levy County horse riders involved with the once-a-decade Great Florida Cattle Drive of 2016 enjoyed the weeklong trek as a father-daughter outing, and they had a blast.

Robin Hardee McCracken and her 78-year-old father Ellison Hardee were among the 400 to 500 riders who went on the 55-mile trip.

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McCracken, who is the executive assistant to Levy County Sheriff Robert D. "Bobby" McCallum Jr., took her vacation time to enjoy the weeklong outdoor adventure with her father.

The purpose of this cattle drive every 10 years is to draw attention to Florida's deep cowboy history at a time when some visitors may view the state as more for Disney World fantasies, South Beach flashiness, Panama City Beach spring break rowdiness and Cape Canaveral rocket launches.

This past week's cattle drive was the third of its kind since 1995.

It ended with a celebration at the Silver Spurs Arena in Kenansville (Osceola County) on Saturday (Jan. 30) after a start at Whaley Ranch in St. Cloud (Osceola County) on Saturday (Jan. 23).

"We try to remember the way it used to be and draw attention that the cattle industry was the first industry in America," said Doyle Conner Jr., who is chairman of the cattle drive.

His father Doyle Edward Conner Sr. (Dec. 17, 1928 – Dec. 16, 2012) served as Florida Commissioner of Agriculture for about 30 years, and also served as Speaker of the Florida House of Representatives.



This photo by Carlton Ward shows cow-hunters in yellow rain slickers riding through the pines.

Photo from Carlton Ward's Facebook page

Current Florida Department of Agriculture Commissioner Adam Putnam also spoke at the final celebration, McCracken said.

McCracken, a sixth-generation Floridian who considers herself to be "a Florida cracker," said she went for the experience and to support the history of Florida cow-hunters and cracker horses.

A cow-hunter in Florida is like a cowboy out West. The Florida cow-hunters of old, McCracken said, would round up their cattle from the woods because that was in a time before fences.

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A Florida Cracker, by the way, is a native of Florida. The “cracker” part of the name comes from the crack of a whip as the tip of that device breaks the speed of sound and creates a small sonic boom. The sound of cracking whips is something used to move cattle.

McCracken also said she wanted to create memories from this experience with her father.

“This is a once-in-a-lifetime thing for us to do as a father and daughter,” she said, “and it was an amazing experience.”

Hardee and his daughter are both avid horse riders, although they spent eight to 10 hours in the saddle each day on this weeklong cattle drive to capture history, and that is more than normal for either of them.

McCracken was happy to say they both rode Florida Cracker Horses. Now, these horses are not just born in Florida to earn that “Cracker” title.

The Florida Cracker Horse Association (FCHA) was organized in 1989, and tasked with searching for the remnant herds of Cracker Horses. A registry was established and foundation animals were registered based on their history and external type, according to the FCHA website.

There were 31 cracker horses were registered and blood typed for the foundation stock. A stringent application of the rules has resulted in a very consistent breed. Today, the Florida Cracker Horse is promoted as a valuable and vital part of Florida's heritage and is still quite rare. Today over 800 horses have been registered.

The Florida Cracker Horse Association (FCHA) was chartered in 1989 as a non-profit Florida Corporation. Its purpose is the preservation and perpetuation of the Cracker Horse as a distinct and unique Colonial Spanish breed of horse.

The Florida Cracker Horse, the FCHA notes on its website, like the cattle breed of the same name, traces its ancestry to Spanish stock brought to Florida in the 1500s when Florida was discovered by Spain.

Preparing to return to Spain, the Spanish left some of their cattle, horses and hogs to make room for their collected treasures, the FCHA notes. The genetic heritage of the Cracker Horse is derived from the Iberian Horse of early sixteenth century Spain and includes blood of the North African Barb, Spanish Sorraia and Spanish Jennet (gaited). Its genetic base is generally the same as that of the Spanish Mustang, Paso Fino, Peruvian Paso, Criolla and other breeds developed from the horses originally introduced by the Spanish into the Caribbean Islands, Cuba and North, Central and South America, the FCHA noted.

McCracken said the Florida Cracker Horses on this ride have bodies and legs built for the terrain they covered, including through palmettos and pines and through some swampy areas that resulted from rain.

The Cracker Horses have adapted to become a hardy, small horse that can move through palms and palmettos better than some other breeds, McCracken said.

McCracken said in addition to the heritage of the cattle trade from Florida's history, this ride promotes “saving Real Florida.” She grew up in the state's park system, and she sees the need to preserve wildlands wherever possible.

There were several herds of cattle brought together for this drive. The drive went through Osceola County, always on land that was state parks or private property where the owners permitted it, she said.

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This photo from Suzy Holder's Facebook page shows a line of cow-hunters in the distance as they helped guide the cattle.

Photo by Suzy Holder

There were occasions when roads had to be crossed, and there was a crossing underneath an Interstate, where the hundreds of cows and horses must have been a sight.

She said one objective of the group was to leave nothing but footprints and hoof-prints, to not disturb the natural surroundings through which they traveled.

The masses broke into groups with a leader, and the cow-hunters had different colored of

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kerchiefs to signify their group. McCracken's group wore blue kerchiefs, she said.

All of the participants enjoyed chances to mingle with people from all over, including from other states.

The whole sojourn through Osceola County was captured on video and in still shots by many different cameras, phones, from a helicopter and from a drone.

McCracken said the photos and video taken from the 'copter and the drone were from a distance where those machines did not spook the cattle or the horses.

Carlton Ward, a renowned nature photographer, was among the people taking pictures on the drive. Gil Williams of Tampa, Orlando and Lakeland was the official cattle drive photographer, she said.

During one of the rides, when McCracken was with Jeremy Swilley, a deer jumped up and caused a small stampede. The riders who knew what to do got in front of the herd and brought the cattle under control relatively quickly, she said.

McCracken said the herd was split for a short time due to that deer.

"That was probably the most fun I had working the cows," she said.

McCracken said there were a number of people from this part of Florida on the ride, including Emmitt Whitehurst, the Mitchell family of Trenton, Debbie and James Swilley, and many members of the Florida Cracker Horse Association.

There were other breeds of horses, donkeys and mules, she said.

Moving the people, animals and equipment was very coordinated.

Each rider's tent, clothes, saddle, tack for horse, and all that had to be transported or contained had to be within 60 pounds, she said.

Every morning, the riders would then pack up their tents. A trailer would come by to pick up stuff that would be taken to where the riders were to sleep at the end of the day.

Breakfast was every morning at 6 a.m. and all of the riders were on the trail by 8 or 9 a.m., she said. They enjoyed lunch around noon, when the chuck wagon would meet the cow-hunters at different destinations for lunch each day.

Riders would get off of their horses, grab a meal, and sit and eat.

Then, they would remount their horses to drive the cattle again. At the end of each day, they would find the big white tent, where they would get their gear and set up their own tents. People would gather in groups over what was always a very, very large and different camp area each night.

There was entertainment in the evening, including story-tellers, cowboy poets and musicians, she said.

This drive is reflexive of what happened after Spanish explorers brought horses and Andalusian cattle to the New World in the 16th century, making Florida the nation's oldest cattle-raising state.

Today, Florida's \$531 million cattle industry has 1.7 million cattle and calves, and it's the 17th largest in the nation, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Most of Florida's cattle are used for breeding and nursing, and they're typically shipped out West once they get near adulthood.

The advance notices for this event noted "It Ain't For Sissies," with primitive camping and 1850s style of dress.

No shorts, sandals, caps, or t-shirts were allowed. There were no horse trailers and vehicles allowed on the trail.

"Sleep on the ground," the notices said. "Bring a tent or sleep under the stars."

There were demonstrations and a living history camp. Participants were invited to learn the lessons, and "Live the Life."

"Experience the traditions and heritage of the nearly 500 year old Cattle Ranching History of Florida."

The cost was \$400 for children 12 and younger and \$600 for each person 13 years and older.

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The Great Florida Cattle Drive '16 sponsors were Syfrett Feed; Seminole Feed; Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services; Seminole Tribe of Florida; Ram National Circuit Finals Rodeo of Kissimmee; Florida Agricultural Museum; and the Florida Cow Culture Preservation Committee.

“I had a blast,” McCracken said.



Cow Boss Mike Wilder and grandchildren leading the Great Florida Cattle Drive '16. In addition to being a Cow-Hunter and Rancher, he is a well known and respected saddle-maker in Kenansville. Visit his Wilder Saddlery page on Facebook.

Photo From Great Florida Cattle Drive Website