Florida's history on using open range for beef production is less known than that in western areas of the U.S. This is because of the glorification of celluloid cowboys by the U.S. movie industry located in California. In reality, Florida's use of beef cattle to graze native range pre-dates western uses by several centuries and has a more recent history on range utilization and associated range wars between cattlemen.

The major skirmishes were brought on by Florida laws in the 1920's that gave private land owners the right to put up fences. This inhibited the use of native land by cattlemen who considered all land to be free-range. Fences also impeded the movement of cattle between free-range areas.

Under this environment, in addition to a scarcity of roads, a harsh subtropical climate, an abundance of insects and diseases, two dedicated University of Florida animal scientist came to south Florida to take on the many production problems facing cattlemen.

Mr. Ralph Kidder took residence at the Everglades Experiment Station at Belle Glade in 1930 immediately following the 1928 hurricane that killed 3000 people south of lake Okeechobee. Following this hurricane the entire Everglades Experiment Station research faculty resigned and headed north.

At the time of Mr. Kidder's arrival all cows grazing Everglades organic soil pastures failed to reproduce after one or two lactations and all calves born died. In 1935, Dr. H.H. Hume, Assoc. Director, Florida Agriculture Experiment Station sent a letter to Belle Glade suggesting that research in cattle production
in the Everglades be discontinued and the area declared unfit for livestock.

Mr. Kidder discovered the problem was copper deficiency, and with copper supplementation the Everglades Agricultural Area became one of the best cattle growing areas in the world, producing a ton of liveweight gain per acre with yearling cattle. The Belle Glade Livestock Market developed into the largest auction facility in Florida.

Mr. Kidder was also involved in the development of molasses as a winter supplement, the discovery of Roselawn St. Augustinegrass as a premier pasture forage, the development of Everglades mineral formula for grazing cattle, and many other beef cattle production practices unique to organic soils around Lake Okeechobee.

In 1941 Dr. Gordon Kirk established residence on the 3000 acres of native land authorized by the Florida legislature to become the Range Cattle Experiment Station at Ona. The landscape was typical pine-palmetto flatwoods with limited drainage, no roads, no electricity until 1946, and no telephones until 1953.

Dr. Kirk was among researchers responsible for developing dried citrus pulp and cane molasses as a cattle feed. He conducted the first crossbreeding studies involving Brahman cattle in Florida. Dr. Kirk developed the Ona Station Mineral formula still used by many Florida cattlemen 60 years later.

Mr. Kidder and Dr. Kirk were pioneers in the truest sense of the word. They made many advances that greatly benefited Florida cattlemen under the harshest of conditions. Today's beef produces owe a debt of gratitude for the pioneering spirit that these two gentlemen brought with them when they hired on to do research for University of Florida/IFAS in south Florida.

For questions or comments regarding this publication contact Findlay Pate