

# **The "Range Cattle Station": Hardee County's Gift to the Florida Cattle Industry**

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Up until the 1940's, most of south Florida was open range and cattle were run on native pastures with no fences. Most cattlemen had long observed problems in cattle production on native range and a few recognized that it would require an organized research program to solve the many production problems they faced. Among that few were residents of Hardee County with support of cattlemen throughout central and south Florida. In the mid to late 1930's cattle producers in Hardee County worked with their State representatives to initiate legislative action in 1937 to develop an agricultural experiment station in Hardee County. Florida legislative action in 1939 appropriated the funds needed to open the experiment station. Cattlemen in Hardee County purchased 2840 acres of land near Ona and donated it to the State of Florida for the experiment station as part of the University of Florida's Agricultural Experiment Station system.

The research unit was first named "Range Cattle Station" because it was originally designated to work primarily on problems associated with cattle production on open range, the commonly used practice of raising cattle at that time. During these first years of research, a mineral mixture was developed that cured many of the mineral deficiency problems that affected cattle in South Florida. That mixture called the "Ona Range Mineral" is still manufactured and used by many south Florida cattlemen some 60 years later.

With the event of the second Florida Fence Law passed by the legislature in 1949 it was required that ranchers build fences to keep their cattle off all roads and highways. This immediately resulted in major changes in beef production

practices in south Florida. Since they were required to put up fences, cattlemen became very interested in better management practices. These practices included rotational grazing, winter supplementation, planting improved grasses and legumes, pasture fertilization, controlled breeding seasons, and using superior breeds of beef cattle.

The "Range Cattle Station" also changed its research program to address the many problems related to modern beef production practices. Researchers were heavily involved in the initial work which developed citrus pulp into an excellent cattle feed. They also worked extensively with molasses to demonstrate its value as a feed supplement for grazing cattle. Both of these feeds were considered waste by-products at that time, with little value. Today, dried citrus pulp is a major cattle feed, and molasses is the primary component of liquid feeds, the most popular feed supplement used in the U. S. cattle industry.

The first research using pure bred Brahman bulls to cross with Florida native cattle was conducted at Ona. This one practice revolutionized Florida beef cattle production. Crossbreeding systems with purebred Brahman bulls and the development of Brahman derivative breeds like Braford and Brangus, have become mainstays of the Florida beef industry.

All improved grasses and legumes use by ranchers in south Florida were developed or evaluated at Ona. The major ones include bahiagrass (now 80% of the industry), pangolagrass, stargrass, hemarthria (limpograss), rhodesgrass, white clover aescynomene, carpon desmodium (begger weed), and Savanna stylo.

The Range Cattle Research and Education Center has worked extensively on improved fertilization practices. Today's ranchers are using less fertilizer with no reduction in forage yield or cattle production. Fertilizers cost has been reduced 75% from what it would be with fertilizer recommendations used 15 years ago. Also, the reduced use of fertilizer nutrients on pastures has a very positive effect on the Florida environment, especially water quality.

The old "Range Cattle Station" now called the Range Cattle Research and Education Center has played a major role in developing the cattle industry throughout Florida. Many south Florida cattlemen call the Range Cattle Research and Education Center their research station. Thanks to the foresight of Hardee County cattlemen, with support of cattlemen throughout central and south Florida, for making this possible.

For questions or comments regarding this publication contact



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