

# FAR REACH

Depending on the length of the whip being used and the skill of its user, the crack it produces can sound like a .22 caliber shot, a good brush rifle, or even a peacemaker Colt. It is the sound itself that is the tool of the Florida cowman, earning him the nickname "Cracker."

The sting of the whip is generally felt only by the novice attempting to master this valuable skill. On this particular day at Far Reach Ranch near Kenansville, Fla., the cowmen are gathering momma cows and their newly born spring calves. Today's bunch is a little more than 200 head. They're scattered across a large pasture with plenty of hiding places. The crew of five is helped by three cur dogs, which can

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*Words and photos by Tracy Schumer.*

do the work of another five men.

It is first light. The bright sharpness of the rising sun is subdued by a heavy mist that hangs low and thick. Streaks of sunlight filter through clumps of cabbage palms and mossy oaks. The crack of cow whips rocket across the open pasture. The sounds hit the tree line and are ricocheted back as powerfully as they were sent out. This supersonic percussion awakens the cows from their

early morning dozing. They answer the call of the horseback Crackers and begin to stir. With calves in tow, they lumber towards the creek. These cross-bred Brahma cows are well adapted to their climate. It's early spring, yet they're already slick coated and fat.

The Tucker family purchased Far Reach in 1966, a hundred years after their ancestors first came to Florida from Georgia to escape the tyranny of postwar carpetbaggers. The family has been ranching in Florida for five generations. Three Tuckers have served as president of the Florida Cattlemen's Association, the only family in the association's history to do so.

Their colorful past has been documented by Gilbert A. Tucker, now age 90, in his mem-



***Bert Tucker leads the crew of Far Reach out to gather momma cows and their spring calves. From left to right behind Bert: Justin Heaberlin, Eldon Lux, Herb Harbin and Jamie Brothers. Bert is part owner and manager of the Far Reach. He says if he had to run the outfit from a desk, he would have quit years ago. If he had his way, he would never leave the ranch. It is his paradise.***



***Eldon Lux squirts a blast of wormer on a cow as it passes by. Using cow pens instead of open corrals to work cattle is traditional for Florida cowmen and allows a small crew to get through a large herd in a short time.***

oir, "Before The Timber Was Cut: Life and Memories of a Florida Cracker." In it, he describes the exploits of his father, Andrew Franklin Tucker, who along with Gilbert and his seven brothers, ranched and worked a land that was as wild, woolly, and unforgiving as any found in western cowboy lore. These men never left the home place without being well mounted and well armed. The cattle they ran were rank and wild, descended from Spanish herds long gone feral. Today the Tuckers make their living with modern cross-bred cattle, but the techniques they use are much the same.

The ranch's name, Far Reach, was thought of by Gilbert's wife Ruth. The family had pooled together every dime and had taken a large loan. The ranch was too far out to be fully serviced by the power grid. It had no phone service and straddled three of the most rural counties in central Florida. In Ruth Tucker's word's, "This is truly a far reach."

Bert Tucker, one of Gilbert and Ruth's three sons, is part owner and manages Far Reach today. The family's other ranch property is located in Cocoa, near Florida's east coast. Unlike many of Florida's larger ranching operations, but have morphed over the

years into sod farms and other agricultural businesses with cattle on the side, Far Reach has changed little. In fact, it has hardly changed at all in 42 years, except that these days, they no longer rely on generators and there is phone service.

A shell of an old Cracker house, left by a previous homesteader, still stands bent and twisted but defiant against the elements much like the people who live here. When hurricane Jeanne struck the ranch in 2004, the storm flattened the stock barn. With steel cables, tractors and come-a-longs, the Tuckers hitched to the structure and simply pulled the whole barn back up again. In true Cracker frugal tradition, the barn was repaired rather than rebuilt. It did end up a few feet from where it was originally, but it stands today, no worse for wear.

The toughness of the people here is not so much displayed on the surface as it is lying quietly just skin deep. Bert is a gentle soul. At six foot five, he could intimidate easily if he chose to, but this is not his nature. If he had his way, he would simply not leave the ranch. It is his paradise. Spending just a day at Far Reach, I can see why a person could feel this way. There is

natural beauty everywhere; deer, turkeys, and other wild game are plentiful.

On its eastern side, the ranch borders the Kissimmee Marsh, a large natural wetland and state conservation area, "a great place to lose some cattle," says Justin Heaberlin, Bert's son-in-law who works and lives on the ranch with his family. "We've got about 25 head out there now that we can't find."

It's the dry season, and the men are not concerned about stray cattle this time of year. There are plenty of grazing and dry spots. Come hurricane season, however, it will be a different story. "An average hurricane here can drop 20 inches of rain and raise the water level in that marsh by five feet," says Bert.

Water is what the state of Florida is made of and a resource Florida cattlemen enjoy in abundance. The location of Far Reach is one of the special features of the ranch. The aquifer in this region is on a shallow descending shelf. The result of this unique geology is that on most any part of the ranch, a well can be drilled that will flow water under its own pressure.

Abundant water and nearly year-round grazing are two of the elements that make Florida ranch land the most productive in



*Justin Heaberlin swings his cow whip to drive the last of the cattle into the cow pens. It is the sound of the whip that drives the cattle—giving Florida cowmen the nickname “Crackers.” These momma cows and calves will both be worked in the pens and then be reunited to spend the warm spring on lush grass. OPPOSITE: Bert Tucker surveys the action as the crew drives the herd towards the creek.*

the country. Ranchers here can raise more cattle on less acreage than any other state except, perhaps, Hawaii. The average herd size in Florida is higher even than those in Texas. The human population, however, is concentrated along the coast, and is predominantly urban. This may be one reason why so few people who live here are even aware of Florida's cattle industry. They would certainly be surprised to learn that the largest singly owned cattle herd in the United States, belonging to Florida's mammoth Deseret Ranch, numbers 45,000 head. Far Reach is tiny by comparison, but it excels in its authenticity.

Like the crossbred cattle they're pushing, the day crew at Far Reach is a mixed bag: there is Jamie Brothers, a country singer turned cowboy, who once had a record deal in Nashville; Eldon Lux, a self-described “ole-

broke-down-day-workin' cowboy,” who is an accomplished western artist originally from the sandhill country of Nebraska; and Herb Harbin, a rancher with his own herd to tend to when he's not working at Far Reach.

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The crew have worked together long enough that not much needs to be said. They just go out and get the job done. The men work carefully and deliberately, moving cattle through the gates. They stop to dismount and help along some of the smaller calves. With the skill of the crew and help from the dogs, the gather lasts little more than an hour.

The herd is penned and sorted at the stock barn. The momma cows are run through a system of open chutes and wormed while the calves are put through a separate squeeze chute to be cut and vaccinated. Under the wide low metal roof of the barn, a net-

work of catwalks, alleyways, and small gates allows the crew to move cattle from one pen to another. The noise is overpowering as the cows and calves bellow relentlessly in an attempt to locate each other.

By lunchtime, over 200 head have been put through the barn, and the cows and calves have been reunited. Once together, they quiet down and wander back out to their pasture. In true Florida style, not a single calf was roped, and the horses snoozed by the fence while the men worked the herd on foot. It may not be romantic, but it is efficient. This process will be repeated many times over the next couple of weeks until the entire herd has been worked and all the spring calves have been sorted.

Cow pens are an essential tool of the Florida cattleman, a cornerstone of Florida ranching, even today. In rural areas, old sets of pens are everywhere the cattle are or have been. Standing as lone sentinels of the past, they're a kind of historic marker for passersby on their way to the theme parks or the beach. They originated out of Florida's long history as an open-range state, which didn't officially end until 1949. Historically, they were com-

munity property of a sort. Built from cypress and heart-pine timber, they would be repaired and maintained by whoever happened to be using them at the time. Even today, with modern cattle and the rise of the university-educated agribusiness specialist, there is hardly a rancher in Florida who does not still rely on a good set of cow pens.

Back at the bunkhouse kitchen, a traditional midday dinner awaits the crew—slow-cooked beef, black-eyed peas with rice and an old Florida favorite, swamp cabbage stewed with bacon. The men all sit down, say grace, and dig in. Swamp cabbage, the cooked heart of the cabbage palm, has a flavor much like sweet corn when it's prepared Cracker style.

Bert sits down with the crew. Working cattle and doing daily chores around the ranch with his men drives him. If he had to run the ranch from a desk, he would have quit years ago. Like most Florida ranchers, he feels a connection with ranchers in western states and sympathizes with the issues that make the western cattleman's life harder than it already is. At the same time, he's grateful for the things the Florida rancher gets to do without: having to chop ice; worrying about droughts and blizzards; keeping calves from freezing to death; and having to spend

months driving a tractor to put up and feed winter hay.

It seems almost decadent, but most Florida ranchers don't put up hay until January and only need to feed hay for two to three months a year. Florida agricultural researchers are now developing grasses that have no dormant period, producing year-round forage. The occasional hurricane seems like a small concern in comparison.

"What is magical about Florida ranching is the climate and the moisture," explains Bert. Far Reach generally records around 60 inches a year in rainfall. Although the grass here is plentiful, it grows so quickly that the plant itself is mostly water, leaving little protein compared to the low-moisture western grasses. Florida cattle are given supplements to compensate. It's not Eden, but it's close.

To see Bert Tucker at Far Reach is to see a man who is complete. "I have buddies I went to school with who went out and have done the same thing I've been doing but they made a hell of a lot more money and they're retired now. But none of them has enjoyed the life that I've enjoyed."

Being horseback with his cur dog alongside is Bert's idea of the perfect day, and

ranching Far Reach is his idea of the perfect life. He wouldn't change a thing. ■

*Fourth-generation Florida native Tracy Schumer is a Cracker and a writer from Ocala.*

WHAT FOLLOWS IS AN EXCERPT FROM GILBERT A. TUCKER'S BOOK, "BEFORE THE TIMBER WAS CUT." IT IS A PEEK INTO WHAT IT WAS LIKE RANCHING IN FLORIDA DURING THE 1920S AND '30S, BEFORE THE ADVENT OF MOSQUITO CONTROL:

*"Anytime it was wet or we had a strong easterly wind the mosquitoes and horse flies would be unbearable. We split big burlap bags and tied them under our horse's belly to help keep the flies and mosquitoes from killing them. Papa had a mosquito net to stretch over his bed and all of us boys put down our blanket so we could put our heads under his net. Even when it was hot in the summertime you had to keep your slicker over your body to keep from being eat up by mosquitoes. We would sweat most of the night but usually we were exhausted enough that we could sleep some. We suffered but the horses and cattle suffered more. We have had cattle ready to sell and the mosquitoes and flies would get so bad that each steer or cow would lose 50 pounds in three weeks' time from being bitten by bloodsucking insects."*

