

Florida Cowboys: Keepers of the Last Frontier

Carlton Ward Jr.

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The Sunshine State is best known for its beaches and theme parks, but it is also home to 1.75 million head of cattle. In *Florida Cowboys*, photographer Carlton Ward, Jr., gives the Florida rancher's lifestyle and landscape a long and loving look.

The book includes hundreds of vibrant and revealing photographs, along with essays by historians, ecologists, and other figures from the ranching community. In "America's First Cowman," Joe A. Akerman, Jr., describes the early ranches in La Florida, the first of which started operation in 1605. Cattle production expanded in the 1800s when ranchers bred their own cows with wild cattle descended from the original Spanish breeds. The result was a hardy breed, sometimes known as Cracker cows, and the book includes a photo of them.

Akerman goes on to explain that early ranchers had to be tough to survive the "subtropical wilderness fraught with panthers, wolves, bears, hordes of mosquitoes, and the occasional outbreak of Indian hostilities." With no fences, frequent cattle and horse theft often led to gun fights. Life in the 1800s is reenacted at Kissimmee State Park and Arcadia. Ward mixes photos of these actors with historical images like Remington's 1865 painting, *Fighting over a Stolen Herd*.

A large section of photos depicts the hard work that goes into a successful ranching operation. In a two-page spread, five men drive a herd across the fields of their family land. In another charming image, Sean Moss carries a tired calf across his saddle as he moves cattle across the Adams Ranch.

It may surprise readers to know that conservation of habitat is intertwined with ranching. Ward frequently turns his attention to this issue, dedicating the last section of the book to wildlife. Shots taken by motion-sensing cameras show black bears moseying through a ranch's palmetto groves.

Both black bears and panther rely on ranches for habitat. "Their population cannot be sustained by parks and protected areas alone," Ward writes, but "Florida has been losing 200,000 acres (or 313 square miles) of rural and natural land each year to development." Several ranch families have placed conservation easements on their land and take pride in the animals that call their property home.

Ward holds graduate degrees in anthropology and ecology. His photography and writing have appeared in *Smithsonian*, *Popular Photography*, *African Geographic*, and *Outdoor Photographer*. In *Florida Cowboys*, he successfully depicts little-known facets of Florida: ranching and conservation, game hunting and preservation. (January / February 2010)

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