INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY

Florida Cracker cattle were the foundation of the cattle industry in Florida. Other names commonly used for Florida Cracker cattle are Florida Scrub or Piney Woods Cattle. These cattle were descendants of Spanish cattle brought to Florida from the islands of Hispaniola, Jamaica and Cuba during the 1500's. In addition to this Spanish base, Florida Cracker cattle probably also had some influence from what has been called North American Native cattle. The North American Native cattle were a mixed type of cattle which developed in the eastern part of North America from cattle brought from Europe by the colonists. The family milk cows which likely were brought into Florida by settlers from Georgia and the Carolinas, likely were North American Native cattle. The progeny of such cows, probably sired by Cracker bulls, probably were incorporated into the Florida Cracker cattle population. Additional non-Spanish germ plasm which may have been incorporated into these cattle was from Devon, Ayrshire and Jersey cattle which were brought into Florida in the late 1800's and early 1900's.

From this genetic base of largely Spanish cattle, but with some other influences, there developed a hardy animal which was able to survive and reproduce under harsh environmental conditions. These conditions included the hot humid weather, intense solar radiation, a lack of forage quality and quantity, as well as various insect pests such as cattle ticks and screw worms. Florida Cracker cattle must have developed a genetic composition which enabled them to subsist under conditions under which unadapted cattle were reported to die. One of the justifications for the efforts to preserve Florida Cracker cattle is as a genetic resource for adaptation to harsh climates, particularly subtropical ones. In the future, transfer of single genes will likely be feasible but many potentially useful genes may be lost due to the extinction of Florida Cracker cattle and other breeds which were historically important but now have been replaced by breeds which more closely meet current economic demands or requirements. Conditions change over time and a gene which currently has no economic value may become a valuable resource in the future. It is because of this possibility that the preservation of both animal and plant resources is becoming a high priority effort throughout the world.

Large numbers of Florida Cracker cattle existed in Florida until the 1950's. Numbers of typical Florida Cracker cattle, however, began decreasing in the 1930's with the introduction of Brahman bulls. The F1 progeny of Brahman bulls and Cracker cows were extremely well adapted to Florida conditions and were larger than the Cracker cattle. As a result Cracker bulls were replaced with Brahman bulls and bulls of other breeds, and by the late 1960's only a very few Cracker cattle existed that had not been crossed with some other breed.

EFFORTS TO PRESERVE CRACKER CATTLE

The effort to save the Florida Cracker cattle began about 1970 when Florida Commissioner of Agriculture Doyle Conner, polled members of the Florida Cattlemen's Association as to the existence of surviving pure Florida Cracker cattle. At that time, Mr. J.C. Bass of Bassinger donated five Cracker cows and one bull that he had inherited from his grandfather, Mr. James Durrance, to the Florida Department of Agriculture. Mr. Durrance had resisted the introduction of Brahman, Hereford, and Angus bulls into his herd and thus had Cracker cattle typical of those at the turn of the century. Descendants of these cattle formed a herd of Florida Cracker cattle in the Withlacoochee State Forest and continue to be on exhibit at the Department of Agriculture grounds in Tallahassee.

The Florida Park Service also established herds of Florida Cracker cattle during the 1970's. Cattle were purchased from Mr. Zeb Durrance, a son of James Durrance, and from the Chaires family of Old Town. These cattle founded herds at the Payne's Prairie State Preserve and at the Lake Kissimmee State Park. Cattle from a herd maintained by the Tilton family of East Palatka also contributed to the establishment of the Payne's Prairie herd. The cattle in the Payne's Prairie and Lake Kissimmee State Park herds have been evaluated periodically and those animals with distinctive characteristics of modern breeds have been culled. Particular effort has been made to remove evidence of Holstein, Hereford and Brahman breeding. The cattle remaining in these herds today appear very similar to those photographed in the early 1900's.

There are also some small private herds of Florida Cracker cattle in existence. Mr. Calvin Hutchins of Laurel Hill, Florida and Mr. Noah Oliver of Enterprise, Alabama each maintain herds of Barnes cattle - a line of Florida Cracker cattle maintained for over 50 years by the Barnes family of Florala, Alabama. Cattle of Florida Cracker type are also maintained by the Conway family of Richton, Mississippi. An additional small herd of cattle from the Ezell family of Taylor County, Florida is owned by Mr. Raymond Hamlin of Wilma and there are also some apparently "untainted" Florida Cracker cows in a herd owned by the Engelhart family near Clewiston, FL.

FLORIDA CRACKER CATTLE BREEDERS' ASSOCIATION

The Florida Cracker Cattle Breeders' Association was recently formed in an effort to promote the preservation of Florida Cracker cattle through the encouragement of private individuals to establish herds. This organization will evaluate individual bulls and cows for conformity to characteristics of Florida Cracker cattle of the early 1900's, and register those that are approved as well as progeny of approved parents.
Efforts are currently under way to bloodtype many of Florida Cracker cattle in the herds owned by the State of Florida. The purpose of blood-typing is to identify individual animals which have blood groups typical of modern day breeds of cattle such as the Hereford, Brahman, Angus, Holstein, Shorthorn, Guernsey, Jersey, etc. If an animal has a particular blood group at the B locus, Y,D’T’, for example, it almost certainly has a Hereford ancestor, as the bloodtype Y,D’T’ is found almost exclusively in Herefords. Other blood groups such as QQ’ are less useful as both the Shorthorn and Spanish-derived cattle possess this gene. In the state herds that are being blood-typed, only bulls with acceptable blood groups and a typical conformation and coloration will be used as herd sires.

The American Minor Breeds Conservancy (AMBC) has supported the efforts to blood-type the state herds.

This organization is dedicated to encouraging the preservation of North American breeds of poultry and livestock that are rare and/or nearly extinct. AMBC has a strong interest in Florida Cracker cattle, and is supporting their continued existence through sponsorship of semen collection of Florida Cracker bulls. The frozen semen not only provides a preserved germ plasm source but also makes semen from the Florida Cracker sires available to breeders. About 100 units of semen will be collected from each of five Florida Cracker bulls, of different lines during 1989. Further information regarding the Florida Cracker Cattle Breeders Association can be obtained from Stephen Monroe, FDACS, Warehouse/ Grounds, 3125 Conner Boulevard, Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1650.

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