How Deseret Ranches built the nation’s largest cow/calf herd
Each year, when the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association publishes its list of top cattle operations, the curiosity of ranchers in the West is piqued by the sheer number of cows raised in the Sunshine State. In fact, seven of the top 25 ranches in terms of cow/calf numbers are in Florida. It’s an incredibly interesting factoid, but truth is that most of these operations remain a mystery to the Western rancher.

Among those seven Florida ranches, Deseret Ranches is the biggest. Headquartered in St. Cloud, one of the biggest cow/calf operations in the United States literally exists between Orlando and Florida’s famous Space Coast. Figuratively, though, the ranch occupies a space somewhere between family and corporate, modern and traditional, all while being surrounded by a booming central Florida population.

By Bob Welch

All photos courtesy of Deseret Ranches
DESPITE BEING AMONG THE FURTHEST-EAST RANCHES IN AMERICA, the Deseret Ranches of Florida origin story—being carved from wilderness—occurred about 100 years later than most of the well-known, historic ranches of the American West.

In 1947, two leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Henry Moyle and Heber Meeks, toured the Southeast, meeting with Church members and considering land acquisition for agricultural pursuits. In 1950, the Church selected Central Florida and purchased 200,000 acres of cut-over timberland. Years later, Gordon B. Hinckley, the president of the Church from 1995-2008, explained how the Church has viewed investment in ag land, which speaks to the motivation behind the purchase.

“We have felt that good farms, over a long period, represent a safe investment where the assets of the Church may be preserved and enhanced,” he said. “While at the same time they are available as an agricultural resource to feed people should there come a time of need.”

Before Deseret Ranch could yield any resources, though, the land had to be transformed. Meeks began the monumental task of clearing and taming the land. He’s quoted as saying, “So here we were with 200,000 acres of undeveloped land, no cattle, no equipment, no improvements of any kind, but fence line 18 miles one way and 28 miles the other way.” He and his wife moved into the only home on the entire parcel.

After two years of clearing land and beginning to develop drainage systems, Meeks was relieved of his duties under doctor’s orders due to fatigue. But others soon followed his lead.

The word Deseret comes from the Book of Mormon and means honeybee. The Church chose this name for the ranch because the bee represents individual industry and hard work committed to the common good. No wonder, then, that the beehive is the ranch’s brand.

In that spirit, Moyle, along with Henry Jorgensen, developed a plan for the ranch’s next evolution. First, Jorgensen would be the next general manager. Moyle had big ideas for the ranch, including developing communities, even suggesting a site for a university. But he knew that ranching enterprises were the first step, so he convinced twelve Nevada ranching families to come to Florida. Like honeybees leaving the hive for far-flung nectar, these families shaped the ranch immediately—and their descendants still do today. While land clearing and draining came first, right on the heels of those activities came seeding improved grasses and planting citrus groves. The native “Cracker” cattle were crossbred and developed into a more modern type. Infrastructure began to take place in the form of housing, fencing and corrals. Within 10 years, the ranch began to take shape—and grow. During the 1950s, over 100,000 acres were added, bringing the ranch—more-or-less—to its current size.
WITH WESTERN EYES, IT’S DIFFICULT TO SEE THE RANCH. While there are good roads everywhere, the terrain is remarkably flat. Trees and other vegetation grow along nearly every public right-of-way, blocking the view. There’s nowhere to get up above for a comprehensive vista, though studying a map helps. The ranch occupies most of the land in a triangle from the outskirts of Orlando, east nearly to Cocoa, and south to the outskirts of Melbourne. The eastern boundary is the St. Johns River, which, oddly, flows south to north. Just across the river to the east is Cape Canaveral and the John F. Kennedy Space Center.

General Manager Clint Richardson—when he was working as a cowboy on the ranch—remembers sitting horseback watching a space shuttle launch into orbit with one eye and watching out for alligators with the other. In some ways, that helps explain what the ranch is: domesticated cows and wild gators hemmed in by one of our nation’s most technologically advanced and fastest-growing areas.

Lacking the opportunity for an airborne view of the ranch, the St. Johns River—and an airboat—is an exciting alternative. Barreling down canals built by the men who originally worked the ranch, cows dart away from getting a drink. In a shallow spot, a deer bounds from one thicket to another. Birds of all sorts squawk and flap as the noisy boat disturbs their tranquility. Once on the river, alligators splash into the water from thickets and beaches where they laid sunning themselves. For a Westerner, so much of Southeastern ranching feels foreign. The main reason? The prevalence of water.

In the West, water is a limited resource. At Deseret, with over 50 inches of rainfall annually, water is abundant but still has to be managed carefully. Being so close to so much population, water quality is always at the fore. Though imperceptible, the ranch slopes from west to east, and all the water makes its way across the ranch through canals and ditches, eventually ending up in the St. Johns River. Because the slope is so minimal, nutrients have time to settle out of the water and be utilized by vegetation and wildlife. Two retention reservoirs also exist on the ranch, which both improve water quality and provide habitat for wading birds and other wildlife.

“We manage and monitor the water all the way across the ranch,” says Richardson. “There’s a lot of testing done by the state and the water districts. Everything that we’ve ever discharged to the river has been cleaner than what’s already there. We’re really, really proud of that record. We recognize the value of the water as a natural resource for our pastures, for our wildlife population and for the region as whole.”

Just as important to a cowman, though, is what the amount of water does for the grass. All the forage—primarily bahia and limpo—for the Deseret cows is standing in the pastures; they don’t put up any hay. In fact, so much vegetation grows that mowing and fire brush control are also common practices. The grass varieties at Deseret, while plentiful, are nutrient deficient, so protein and molasses supplements are still necessary—particularly through the winter months.

The abundance of water is also evident in the simple task of cow hydration. In the West, wells may have to be drilled hundreds of feet—not to mention generating the power to pull the water up. At Deseret, while much of the cow drinking water flows through ditches, if a particular pasture needs a water hole, they find a location that won’t impose on wetlands and wildlife habitat, then just dig it. The water table is mere feet below the surface.
FROM A BROADER PERSPECTIVE, THOUGH, WHAT THE PREVALENCE OF WATER DOES is allow Deseret management to use efficiencies that are harder to find for many ranchers in drier climates.

Today, the ranch is 300,000 acres—468 square miles. While the size is impressive, the key to Deseret’s large herd is the stocking rate. On grazable acres, they figure four acres to an animal unit. What that breaks down to is 45,000 mother cows (not every acre is grazable; some is in citrus production, some in tree production, some under solar panels and some are wetlands).

With over 70 years under the same ownership, Deseret has learned how to maximize its resources. Unlike a family ranch, emotion plays less of a role in decision-making. The ranch has seen twelve general managers. Each supported the company vision, but each also had their own stamp to put on the ranch. The consistency of ownership and institutional knowledge allows the ranch to try new ideas without making the same mistakes twice. Add that to a well-educated management team and steady improvement through the years to create high efficiency that is easy to observe.

The ranch is divided into 18 cattle units—including heifer development and seedstock divisions. Each cattle unit has three dedicated employees to run 3,000 cows. Three area managers then supervise six units each. Most of the 100 or so employees live in housing provided by the ranch.

“We like to be at 1,000 cows per employee,” says Richardson. “Each unit is set up, basically, the same. We’ll have a truck and trailer, and tractor and mower and feed wagon, and all the things that they need for the unit.”

The genetic program—another highly developed system at Deseret—is largely a closed system. At its genetic base is Brahman, and the ranch leans on their neighbors, the Kempfers, for some of their purebred Brahman genetics.

“The old saying is that on a really good year, you wish you were just a 1/4 Brahman,” Richardson says. “On a really bad year, you wish you were as high as 3/8ths.”

Regardless, there’s no way to abandon the breed based simply on their heat and insect resiliency. There are three seedstock herds of about 1,000 head each: one is mostly a Red Angus-Brahman cross, some of the Red Angus genetics coming from RA Brown Ranches; another they call the Deseret Red, which is a South Devon-Brahman cross; and the final is Simbrah, which is a Simmental-Brahman cross.

“We have our own internal selection index,” Richardson explains. “And our overarching genetics plan revolves around adaptability, average daily gain post-weaning, marbling, tenderness and residual feed intake. We select on that, and we bring in new genetics through artificial insemination and embryo transfer. We reverse sex sort the semen, so we create all females with our embryos to build the cow herd.”

Out on the ranch, the cows are grazed on an intensive rotation system—rotated using horses. Each unit runs about 15 herds of 200 cows that are on their own rotation system. Each herd is rotated on a weekly basis, so there’s plenty of horseback work to be done. In fact, Deseret runs a remuda influenced by modern performance horse bloodlines.

Branding calves at Deseret is no small undertaking and each division is responsible for branding their own calves. They use a four-man crew and a hydraulic calf table and every calf on the ranch is branded within a two-month period.

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The next time the cattle are penned, it’s to strip, weigh and ship calves. Again, the idea is efficiency. Large corrals lead to a long alley that compresses to a central sorting hub. One man works in that hub, sorting cattle as many as four ways: steers, feeder heifers, replacement heifers, and cows. The calves are weighed and shipped within a few hours of being gathered.
At this point, the cattle flow into Deseret’s larger beef production cycle—broadly under the umbrella of a parent company called AgReserves. While Florida ranching has its advantages in stocking rate, one of the major disadvantages is feeding and finishing cattle. The heat, humidity and insects make that part of the beef production cycle inefficient in comparison to other climates. AgReserves has other ranches in North America, from Florida to Canada.

“That geographic diversity really is a huge advantage to us because when there’s a drought in the West, we can move cattle around to the Midwest, do some different things,” Richardson says. “That creates some synergies, so we can flow cattle into the yard, and either speed up or slow cattle down from a stocker perspective. But everything flows to our central feedyard. Then we’ll flow into a processor’s program.”

Because AgReserves maintains ownership of the cattle throughout the production cycle, they have the opportunity to examine their systems from a global perspective. They have the advantage to market cattle every week of the year—so they continue to tinker with calving timing across the company to maximize a flow that can be as efficient and profitable as possible.

“It’s just an interesting dynamic to try to figure out,” Richardson says. “To completely understand your costs, and then understand where the leverage points are in terms of profitability.”

And while all this sounds incredibly corporate and profit-driven—there’s a feeling among the employees that this isn’t just about money. They’re not working just to carve out their own little piece of the pie while their efforts go to buy some unseen executive another yacht.

“Because of our structure and how this is all organized, what a mechanic does, what a cowboy does, whatever profit we make goes for whatever our investor decides to do with it,” Richardson says. “But our investor is a religious organization. Because we’re affiliated with the Church, there’s a higher purpose in our work to bless the lives of people. I think it’s just become deeply ingrained over all these years in why we do what we do. Another reason we love our work is a passion for production agriculture.”
A MISSION-DRIVEN COMPANY WITH AN ENDURING SENSE OF STEWARDSHIP FOR THE LAND is tasked with examining its vulnerabilities as well as its fullest potential. “One of the things people ask is, ‘What keeps you up at night?’” Richardson says. “I don’t want to ever have an environmental issue or an animal welfare issue or any of those types of things that would embarrass our investor. The safety of our people is also something you constantly worry about in agriculture. Production ag has its hazards, so we’re proud that we have a very, very good safety record. We spend a lot of time, and energy and effort on safety.”

Taking that concept even further, AgReserves has developed a sustainability program that summarizes guiding principles into four main pillars: environmental, animal health and welfare, community and workers, and economic; all aimed at doing the right thing. A six-page overview of the program explains detailed practices to keep AgReserves thriving well into the future.

Richardson places particular emphasis on the company’s animal welfare policy. Not only are all employees Beef-Quality-Assurance-Program certified, they must also sign a document stating their unconditional commitment to humane treatment of all their cattle. They’ve even developed a cattle handling creed. Awareness of cattle’s flight zones, gaining the trust of the cattle, and accepting responsibility for actions taken are among the tenets of the creed.

For the land to reach its fullest potential, however, visionaries for the ranch don’t limit their thinking to cattle, horses, and cowboys. “I always tell people over the next 80 to 100 years, parts of this ranch will be sites for future communities,” Richardson says. “We want to be part of planning for those new communities, not only to protect the value and the use of our property, but also to protect what we all love about living in Central Florida. In that planning, we’ve identified large sections of the ranch that will be in permanent agriculture. And large parts of the ranch will be in permanent wildlife habitat.”

With population sure to come, ranch leaders have been mindfully considering a framework to guide long-term growth. In the meantime, there are approximately 2,000 acres in citrus production. Two 600-acre sites are home to enough solar panels to power 15,000 homes each. The ranch sells pine and cypress timber, as well as palm trees for landscaping. They raise and sell sod on about 2,000 acres. Two fossilized seashell pits provide roadbase not only for ranch roads but also for construction of new homes and roads in the area. Naturally, the ranch has beekeeping leases, too. Recreation and conservation leases are a significant enterprise, as well. While there is some hunting, Deseret’s wildlife managers focus mainly on monitoring the movement and health of all the diverse species in the ranch ecosystem. To support local public education, two hundred acres are dedicated to the Harmony High School FFA program to help students learn the basics of cattle production with their own herd.
IN 70 YEARS, DESERET RANCH HAS COME A LONG WAY from the untamed land Henry Moyle found and Heber Meeks toiled to make productive.

“I don’t know that they envisioned Central Florida becoming what it is today,” says Richardson. “But they certainly knew that there was something bigger to come.”

They knew the only way for it to become something bigger was to begin by tackling the first challenge in front of them. Each successive manager and generation have attacked the problems that presented themselves in the same way. Like industrious honeybees, they’ve worked hard to not only bring in more nectar, but also to protect what they inherited. At the same time, because of the stability of their organization, they’ve had the bandwidth to look up from the problems and think about the future for their land and the community.

In so many ways, Deseret’s story is aspirational. Because they’ve been so disciplined, businesslike and successful in their ranch management, the company culture is strong and very clear. The employees know they have purpose, and the guardrails of what is and isn't acceptable are literally written down. They have a history they’re proud of and happy to share. Though private, leadership has a plan employees can readily buy into. Plus, Deseret’s employees have something to live up to: a tradition of hard work and thoughtful decision-making. While they only make headlines once a year when the statistics are published, the value of the how the organization earned their status is self-evident. ★

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Crackers—the regional name for cowboys in Florida—penning cows. In Florida, they refer to their corrals as “cow pens.”