

MYTHS ABOUT FIRST RIDES • TRAIL RIDING DESTINATIONS • MULE MANAGEMENT

WESTERN HORSEMAN

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PRESERVING TRADITION

Steering Florida's Ranching Legacy Forward

A herd of white cattle is grazing in a lush green field. In the background, there are large, mature trees heavily draped with Spanish moss, creating a dense canopy. The scene is captured in bright, natural light, suggesting a sunny day. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and pastoral.

Steering the Herd

STORY BY KATE BRADLEY BYARS • PHOTOGRAPHY BY FAST HORSE PHOTOGRAPHY



PREVIOUS PAGE: Jody Counts and "Sonny" (CSC Ol Son) move Brahman cattle out of the oak trees. **THIS PAGE:** Bringing crossbred commercial cattle into the corrals for sorting and doctoring.



Traveling Cracker Swamp Road in East Palatka, Florida, motorists might miss the gray bodies of the Brahman cattle grazing amongst the dense foliage, but they are there. For six generations, the Counts and Tilton family has ranched the Putnam County and St. John County line. Though the ranch faces different challenges today than it did when patriarch Woodrow “Woody” Tilton was at its helm, brothers Jody and Jett Counts are determined to not only see the ranch survive to the seventh generation and beyond but their management also has the ranch thriving.

With family roots sunk 14 generations deep in Florida, the brothers and their wives; their mother, Gina (Tilton) Counts; their father, Johnny Counts; and their two sisters all call the ranch home. Woody didn’t inherit the land — each acre was bought and paid for — but he passed it and a solid work ethic along to Gina and instilled it in the boys.

“Our family has ranched for what feels like forever,” says Jody, 32. “My grandfather started buying land up as other family members started selling out. He loved ranching; it was his passion. He pieced our ranch together. We worked and learned alongside him and our parents.”

Utilizing the knowledge gained in school and at the side of their grandfather and parents, the Counts boys are forging ahead into modern ranching while solidly sticking to tradition.

In the Blood

Growing up in a family of all girls, Gina was her father’s right-hand man. Woody was serious about ranching and passed on that knowledge to his daughter as the two worked side by side, daily, on the ranch in Putnam County.

“It was tough, but I loved it; it was a way of life for us,” Gina recalls. “My parents had all girls, and I was my daddy’s boy, so he worked me hard. Growing up, school holidays like Thanksgiving, Christmas, spring break or summer, we did not go on vacation. That was when we did the bulk of the cow work. We also worked after school, just keeping the ranch going.”

Gina graduated from Jacksonville State University with a master’s degree in guidance and counseling and began teaching school. She and Johnny married 34 years ago, and they started their family having four children. Gina’s mother watched the first two while she worked, but with the third, she decided to stay home, ranch and raise the kids. It eased the burden on some of her time, which was already spent ranching after teaching.

“I was teaching school, and every day after, I went straight to my dad’s, and he would have my horse saddled for us to sort cattle, or I’d jump in the truck with him to go check cows,” Gina says. “He didn’t have any hired help; I never got paid, I



was never on the payroll. As soon as I started having babies, I was still working cattle. I would have a baby in the saddle and would nurse them while I was rounding up cows. They would ride with me in the saddle until they rode their own horse beside me. They were practically born on a horse. They grew up at the cow pen."

While ranching and raising children on horseback was their lifestyle, Gina always hoped that her children, sons Jody and Jett, and daughters Casi (Hinton) and Cheyanne (Smith), would remain on the ranch. Her dream came true when the boys stepped in to manage the ranch following her father's passing in 2019. Today, all her children and their spouses live on the land.

It's not an easy transition for many families when it is time for the next generation to pick up the reins, but the Counts brothers were the logical leaders for the ranch's future in Flor-

ida. Johnny managed and ran his own trucking business, which was his focus while he helped on the ranch. But Jody and Jett had grown up like Gina, fully immersed in ranching life. After Woody's passing and the death of his wife, Frances, in 2020, the management of the ranch, known as the Cracker Swamp Cattle Company, was passed on to Jody and Jett.

"I kind of gave them the reins and let them go at it; they were ready for it," Gina says. "I am extremely proud of the way Jody and Jett are running the ranch. Their management skills are incredible. They learned a lot from my father and their father. They can run and operate any equipment, and they have so many skills. They complement each other, and though they have the same skills, each has their strengths. When they need to work cattle, they are both there. There is nothing the two of them cannot accomplish."



Born & Bred

Neither Jody nor Jett can recall their first memory of working cattle. More than likely, it is because they were practically raised on horseback. The boys rode horses and worked dogs bred and trained by their grandfather.

"He started our line of cow dogs in the early 1950s, and his bloodline is still what we are using today," Jody says. "We don't have any of the horse bloodlines he had anymore, but we are continuing to raise the horses we need on the ranch."

While many things are the same, much has evolved to fit today's ranching industry. One tradition that Jett is continuing is the use of Cracker horses on the ranch. Known for their agility, endurance and cow sense, Cracker horses are a heritage Flor-

ida breed well-suited for working cattle. Jett purchased a pure Cracker stallion, "Dickerson," and bred him before gelding the horse to use day-to-day. Now, that offspring is siring half-Cracker horses.

Florida's dense foliage and varied terrain ensure that working cattle dogs and native Cracker-type horses are necessary. The breed originates from Spanish horses brought to Florida in the 1500s. A gaited breed, they are known for agility and speed.

"The Cracker horses are a lot tougher and handle a rougher environment, the heat, swamps and bushes," Jett, 25, explains. "They are a hardier breed. I don't have many problems with their feet; you can work hard without affecting them too much. They are a smaller breed than a regular Quarter Horse."

The brothers are breeding horses that fit their needs with the help of Jody's wife, Emily, an equine veterinarian with her own

“I respect them a lot, what they’ve done
and what they’re doing,” — **Chance Clay**





Jett and Jody sit in the sunset, letting a herd of cattle settle.

practice, Iris Equine. The couple raises Quarter Horses, some of which head to the show pen through neighbor Topline Training.

"She loves breeding, and we love horses, so our Quarters have been multiplying," Jody explains. "We have a mix of registered mares, so we can cross and play the genetics game to make a better horse. I like a horse that isn't too big because we have to get a lot of gates, but a 14.2 or 14.3 horse that is stout with good feet. They have to be able to stand in water most of the year; a lot of horses, their feet will just fall apart. Our pastures will be wet and soggy for months at a time. They have to be good-minded with a lot of cow."

Jett and his wife, Katlynn, a dental assistant, are also raising Cracker-bred horses, crossing them on the Quarter Horses to achieve more muscle with the same hardy traits.

"They have a lot of heart, the Crackers do. They don't give up," Jody says.

That sounds a lot like a rancher and fits the Counts brothers. Jody graduated from the University of Florida with an animal science degree focused on beef cattle, knowledge that aids them daily in managing and improving their operation. While Jett obtained his associate degree and followed in his father's footsteps, learning to weld and drive a semitruck, both skills necessary for running a cattle operation.

Both boys did their share of day-working around the state, using it to build skills, see how other outfits operated and make valuable connections. Jody says they wanted to soak in as much knowledge as they could.



"Going and day-working, you get to see the good and the bad of what everybody else would do," Jett says. "You go to a ranch, and they think it's working perfectly, but when you step on a ranch for the first time and see it clearly, you can see what might work better. We would take that back, put everything we had seen, and implement it in our own place."

Their shared experience, unique interest and knowledge have created the ultimate management of the ranch, Gina says.

"They've made a lot of improvements to take the ranch to the next level," Gina says. "For instance, they've done more cross-fencing, allowing us to rotate the cattle more, which is very beneficial. They've cleared a lot of timber areas and have been in the process of making more pasture for grazing. They have completely torn down and rebuilt cattle pens. I was so proud of them."

Running 1,300 acres home to a purebred herd of Brahman cattle, multiple herds of crossbred cattle, and housing 250 to 300 yearlings keeps the boys busy but not too busy to help their fellow Floridians or family.

Coastal Cowboys

Wild cattle catching might bring to mind Arizona's rugged, rocky land, but don't discount the wily, long-eared cattle in the Florida swamp prairie. The Counts brothers can recall story after story of chasing down cattle, whether a neighbor or their own.

"Everywhere we go, people ask if we are from Texas because we have cowboy hats, and our spurs jingle when we walk through places," Jody says with a laugh. "We tell them we are from right here, at home in Florida. We raise cattle right here. People can't see us from the road and don't know we raise a lot of cattle in Florida. At gas stations, people are always looking at the dogs, the horses or the cattle. We try to present ourselves the best we can, and hopefully, people will respect ranching more."

According to the Florida Department of Agriculture, though nearly half of Florida's agricultural land is used for cattle production, representing about 15% of the state's land, ranching isn't the first thing people relate to the Sunshine State.

The boys enjoy neighboring with fellow ranchers, like Chance Clay, who appreciates the help.

"I respect them a lot, what they've done and what they're doing," Clay says. "We have a great work relationship. When I need help, they come to help; when they need help, we go there, and that's the way neighbors should be. We all have a common goal: to be successful on our ranches and keep the tradition alive while having a successful business. Working together is a large part of that. Having two fellas like them to help us and vice versa makes a big difference."

The brothers are handy on horseback, but part of what aids them is the longstanding cow dog bloodline bred by their grand-



OPPOSITE PAGE: Jett prepares to doctor a calf. **THIS PAGE:** Jett riding his Florida Cracker horse "Little Richard" and leaning over to pet one of his working cur dogs.



Jody rides in front of crossbred cattle in a swampy part of the ranch.

father. Many use Catahoula or leopard dogs with cur lines, but the Counts' dogs are a breed of their own.

"They're 'OG' Florida Cracker dogs," Jett says with a smile. "A lot of what you see out West, with heelers or shepherd dogs, their purpose is to move the cows. Ours is to stop them. When a cow runs off here, she's headed to thick bushes, and we need to stop her before she gets there. Our dogs, when we send them, they need to get ahead and stop them right there."

Aboard a horse that is best suited to ranching in tight quarters — either a slim Cracker or a 14.2-hand Quarter Horse — the brothers can maneuver into a spot with ease, whether threading through a swampy stretch of land or easing up on a cow. One way they ensure their cattle are not the focus of one of their wild stories has been to cull down the herd to the cattle that work best.

"Florida gets a bad rap for having bad cattle, but most people don't cull for temperament," Jody says. "My grandfather

was mostly a very good cowboy, and he didn't mind a bad cow because it kept the crew on their toes. He said if we didn't have bad cows, we wouldn't be cowboys. Culling down has made very good cattle and cattle easier to sell to the public these days; they want gentle cattle. Not many cowboys left these days that want to work bad cattle."

"Everywhere we go, people ask if we are from Texas because we have cowboy hats, and our spurs jingle when we walk through places." — Jody Counts



Family First

The family ranch is thriving, but the landscape of St. Johns and Putnam counties is changing as more developers gobble up rural lands. Recently, a 500-plus home subdivision was approved to be developed one-half mile from the ranch's eastern border.

"One of the biggest challenges in growth and development is moving in closer and closer to us," Gina says. "Some of the farmers have been selling out in our area. We work hard to protect our agricultural land, our wildlife and our way of living. Our roots are planted deep out here; we don't ever want to go anywhere else."

It's a concern for ranchers everywhere, especially when it is on your front doorstep. Clay sees the pressure put on ranchers, though his family land was enrolled in the Rural and Family Lands Protection Program in 2017.

"I'm not as concerned about [development] with our ranch because where we are geographically, the pressure is not on us right now, not to say it won't be in years to come like what Jody and Jett will start to see right quick," Clay says. "We are protected from this place being developed, but we can see the pressure from neighbors that sell. They have the pressure east of us."

St. Johns County has experienced a more than 60% increase in population growth in the last decade, which, compared to the growth rate for all of Florida at 18%, is a telling sign that ranching may be evolving yet again in the area. However, Jody and Jett aren't deterred from their plans to continue the family tradition.

"Rural, beautiful Florida is dying every day. It is sad," Jody says. "We want to hold on to this life, do the best we can raising cattle and hold on to this life as long as we can. Our goal is to keep the ranch efficient and keep paying for itself so we can keep ranching."

Jett agrees. He and Katlynn welcomed a daughter in May 2025, the eighth generation, alongside her cousins.

"It's something we thought about, how our kids will grow up like us, working cows younger than they will be able to remember," Jett says.

With the family fully invested in the land they love, the Counts won't be going anywhere anytime soon. Day-working, helping neighbors while raising horses, dogs and cattle, just like the generation before, keeps the brothers and their wives busy. It's a lifestyle that might be rocked by storms, but one that they feel sure is the course for the future.

"There is no better feeling to ride a horse you bred and a dog that was bred and trained," Jody says. "It makes you feel almost so good you want to cry to be able to carry this on. We were so fortunate to inherit this and have this opportunity." 🐾

Docile cattle comfortable being led on horseback with dogs make the work easier. In fact, Jody and Jett have been called on to train herds to be worked by dogs, a skill increasingly valued on ranches looking to improve efficiency. Jody says the dogs actually become a calming presence on most cattle, helping keep the herd steady and responsive. As more outfits look to reduce stress on livestock, it offers a smart solution.

"It takes a lot of training on the cattle, but one man with a few dogs can move any of our cattle," Jody says. "Florida cattle, with that Brahman in them, they can get out of hand easily. We train the cattle to stay in a walk, stay grouped together and hold up at a gate. We never let them haul butt through a gate and then lose them. We are always training on the cattle, and the dogs help so much. Jett and I can do anything we want to do by ourselves with the dogs. My grandfather used to say he could put his cattle on the front steps of the courthouse they were so gentle."