



Cowboys and Indians

When we think of cowboys, and large cattle ranches and Indians riding swift ponies, most of us think of the Wild West. Long before domestic cattle were brought to the western part of the United States, they were brought to Florida. In 1521, Ponce de Leon, the discoverer of Florida landed cattle in Florida.



Later vaqueros, as were called by early Spanish colonists, herded cattle on ranches between the St. Johns and the Apalachicola rivers. These early Florida cowboys were sometimes Indians, black men or descendants of the Spanish. (100 years later.... 1621) Like in the movies these Florida cowboys had to fight off hostile Indians. The cattle came from Spain and would sometimes graze alongside small native buffalo herds, which then lived in Florida.

Some descendants of these earliest cattle still roam over the Florida ranges. They are called [“cracker cattle.”](#) The horses used by early cowboys and Indians were also descended from Spanish horses.

They were also called [“cracker ponies.”](#) Between 1702 and 1704, the British soldiers destroyed most of the cattle ranches. Some years later Seminole Indians began to raise large herds of cattle near Payne’s Prairie...near Gainesville. Two famous early Indians who raised cattle were: [Chief Billy Bowlegs](#) and [Chief Cowkeeper](#). Some herds were over 1000 head. Dogs were also used by the Indians to herd the cattle. Today one of the best cattle ranches in the U.S. is owned and operated by Seminole Indians at the [Brighton Indian Reservation](#) near Lake Okeechobee. Land that these early cowboys wanted belonged to the Indians and soon trouble between the white settler and Indians developed over grazing rights.