

# The Historical Quarterly

of The St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.

Vol. 41 No. 4

Fall 2023

## Science and fence law tamed Florida's open-range cattle industry

By Rick Modine

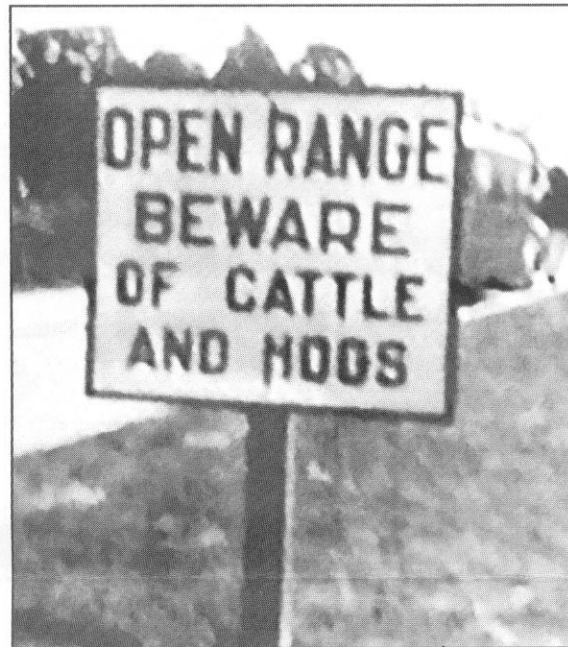
Florida was the wild and untamed West before there was a Wild West. Thanks to the Spaniards who brought these things to Florida first, the New World got citrus, hogs, horses and cattle. The animals as they reproduced were of great benefit to the Seminole Indians who managed their stocks for many years until the end of the third Seminole War when the pursuit from the U.S. Army made them give up their herds in exchange for their escape into the swamps.

When the pioneers brought stock and bred them with the native breed, they were able to feed off an abundance of grass.

The cattle could range from the Atlantic Ocean to the southern Everglades and to the Gulf of Mexico where many were then shipped to Cuba for Spanish gold.

The early settlers pushed down from the northern areas after the Seminole wars and the East Coast that had been fortified for protection. The great interior with its lush grass and rivers was one continuous pasture. Cow hunters moved their herds to where the lush grasses would fatten them up before pushing them to market at Punta Rassa or to Tampa for sale.

With the settlers came the railroads. **Henry Flagler** and **Henry Plant** laid their steel rails so people could come and populate paradise. After the rails had been pounded into the ground, the pioneers needed more roads instead of trails. The Sunshine State was exploding with people and commerce. The Cow hunters were still able to enjoy open areas to let their cattle move to the free grassland. This was long before developers and Disney. On the horizon, a new day



*Open Range warning sign along a Florida highway during the 1930s. This is an illustration from a book, "Four Centuries of Florida Ranching," published in 1940.*

was coming, and these old ways were starting to set.

Problems started with stray cattle moving into the settled areas and eating the citizens' flowers or getting into their vegetable gardens. The railroads started putting "cow catchers" on the front of their locomotives. A V-shaped ram was designed to throw the stray cattle off the rails instead of head-on collisions with the "iron horse." Soon the barnhouses everywhere were filled with pioneers and cattlemen claiming damages for awhile until the railroads said "enough!" It was decided that legislation would be needed to

solve this problem.

Florida was the last state to require fence laws. In 1949 Gov. **Fuller Warren** approved Senate Bill 34 that required cattlemen to erect fences to avoid the new penalties for their roaming livestock and change the old way of life to the new laws made for protection, lawsuits, and the money from future lawsuits. Even though this law was painful for some cattlemen, it was a blessing in disguise.

After the Spanish-American War and the decline of the Cuban beef market, America wanted a better quality of beef. The railroads were shipping to the markets where it was needed, and producers had to adapt. A lot of cattlemen put up fences decades before it became law so they could plant better grasses and rotate their herds. Scrub grass was replaced by Bahia, Pongola and St. Augustine grasses to name a few. Fences were made of "lighter" trees and later by commercial post. This also made it easier to drive

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## Welcome - New or Returning Members

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Peter & Miriam Charles, Brad Keen, Monique & Scott Bruhn,  
Scott & Dana Miller, Bernadette Kennedy, Karen & William Tyler,  
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Joanne & Fred Humphries, Linda & Owen Chastain, David & Joy Keen,  
Lily Chen & Bo Wang, Roger A. Priest, Sandy Thurlow

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## The President's Message

by Nancy Bennett

Welcome back for another exciting season of activities. We hope everyone had a pleasant and relaxing summer.

Expect another series of entertaining and informative guest speakers for our monthly dinner meetings. Also, we'll participate as usual in the "Sights and Sounds" Christmas holiday parade through downtown Fort Pierce.

On Saturday, Jan. 13, the annual Treasure Coast History Festival will move from its original downtown Fort Pierce site to our museum at 414 Seaway Drive. Our society is hosting the event in cooperation with Indian River Magazine. The festival is expected to include exhibits and demonstrations, guest speakers and re-enactors, music and a fish fry.

The St. Lucie County Fair will hold our attention in late February and early March. We always participate with a popular display of historical memorabilia. Naturally, we'll need volunteers to help.

Here's a big "thank you" in advance to our out-of-state members who arrive every winter and volunteer during our busiest time of the year. Δ

## Bulletin Boosters

Help support a lively and useful SLHS Historical Quarterly. A \$10 donation will add your name to the Bulletin Boosters roster for a full year of Quarterly editions. Please give your \$10 donation to Treasurer Bob Burdge. Many thanks. Names of current bulletin Boosters are listed below (with expiration month and year).

Maureen Ware -----	10/24	Ted Burrows -----	1/24	Bonnie Reynolds -----	10/24
Adele Lowe -----	10/24	Pommie Hardie -----	4/24	Jon & Maura Stanko -----	10/24
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# Peril at sea: overboard alone and far offshore

By Terry Howard

**Capt. Shayne Revels**, born Oct. 6, 1987 in Vero Beach, grew up fishing with his dad and uncles, “mostly bottom fishing in the ocean out of Fort Pierce.” Throughout high school he net-fished commercially in the Indian River and Atlantic Ocean. Shayne has dived commercially for lobster and grouper and today is a part-time captain on a large sport sailfishing boat for an out-of-town owner.



*The Revels family aboard the Seaweed - Olivia, baby Myles, Lily and Capt. Shayne Revels. Photo by Terry Howard.*

Shayne’s main occupation is fishing for king mackerel commercially, in his own boat, “Seaweed.” For several seasons he has followed the east coast commercial king mackerel fleet to fish the gulf coast of Florida and Louisiana where catches are often much bigger, especially in late summer and fall.

One year while returning alone in the Seaweed across the Gulf of Mexico from Louisiana Shayne fell overboard. The following is his account of that harrowing experience.

“I’ve been overboard alone one time in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico. I was going to add some fuel while I was on autopilot and I had a five-gallon jug and I stepped up on the gunwale and went forward on the

boat gunwale to pour in the diesel.

“I pulled it back to idle speed but I left it in gear, on autopilot, and I had to use two hands to tip the five-gallon jug up. And when I did that, a wave hit the boat and I went overboard. No other boats, no one on the boat with me.

“Luckily, I grabbed the back corner gunwale of the boat, in the stern. I did. I was probably pretty full of adrenaline and was able to pull myself back into the boat as it passed by. I think I did

it one-handed, I was so... I knew what the situation was. It was early in the morning; the sun’s just coming up. I was traveling back from Louisiana. I was probably a hundred miles from the west coast of Florida. I didn’t have a choice.

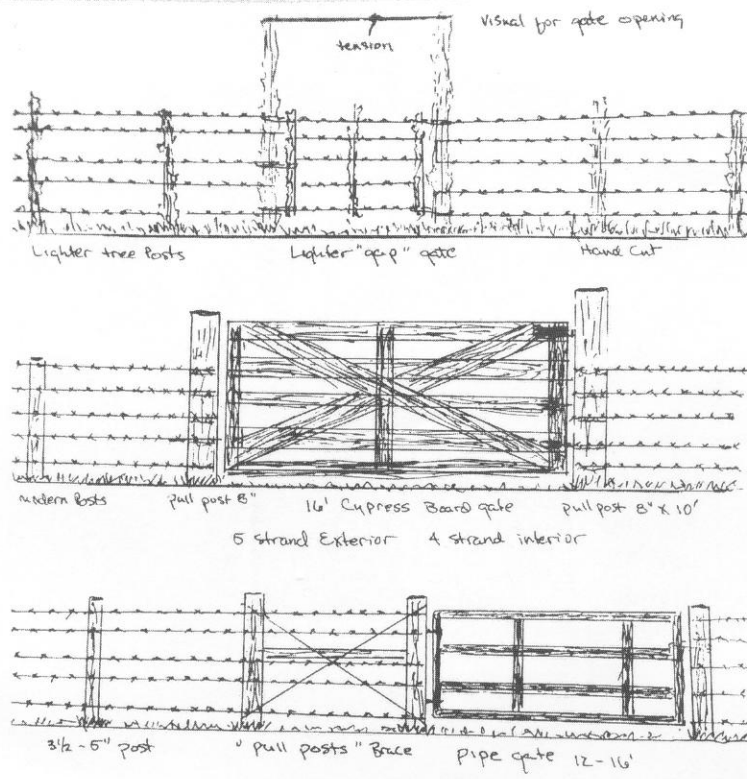
“I got back in the boat soaking wet, cold, and when I realized what happened, I puked. I was pretty shaken up. Yeah, my boat would have hit the beach on autopilot a couple days later, and I would have been long gone.”



*The Revels’ fishing boat Seaweed cruising off Fort Pierce. Photo by Terry Howard.*

Capt. Shayne Revels lives in St. Lucie Village with his young wife **Olivia**, daughter **Lily**, and their baby boy, **Myles**, born this past April. This year Shayne is headed back to Louisiana. Only this time he is pulling his boat there on a trailer. Δ

OPEN RANGE... continued from page 1



Typical plans for barbed wire fence and gate set-ups on Florida cattle ranches. Illustration by Rick Modine.

their cattle to the corral for branding, marking, calf castration and doctoring. Minerals were added to the pastures as well. Better nutrition makes a better beef yield.

Better genetics were also on the horizon with cattlemen phasing out the Brahman cattle that were more drought and insect tolerant for pure breeds to crossbreed with their herds. Fences kept their bulls and cows from mixing with native stocks. Angus, Herefords and Charolais were the new stocks in the beginning. Many other breeds were experimented with by cattlemen to produce better beef and yield.

Finally, one of the best fence law benefits was when tick fever hit the herds. This required containment and continual treatment in dipping vats where chemicals were added to kill the parasites. This was done every few weeks until there was no sign of the ticks or no more sick animals. At one time Florida had 3,200 vats spread out mainly across the central band of the state. Later there were other outbreaks of disease that had to be dealt with but the one that caused the cattlemen headaches was brucellosis. The state required every cow and bull to be tagged and a sample of blood taken by state workers for testing. If one animal tested positive, the whole herd had to

be brought back to the pens so the animal could be retested or sold. Fences kept them in areas where this was more manageable. These diseases would not have been manageable without the fence laws and the Florida beef Industry would have been no more.

Native cattlemen never used the term "cowboy". They always used the term "cow hunter". That term was used because cattle had to be hunted down and pushed out of the thick woods and palmetto patches. Even fenced-in areas of the back country were wild and thick so the use of dogs made the dirty work a little easier.

Potential liability and fines are still in use. A cattle owner can be sued if a motorist hits a cow. The owner is identified by the cow's ear mark, brand, or ear tag. Deputies are often called out when a stray animal finds a hole in the fence. They usually know the owners who come out and put the escapee back in if the deputies can't. Such is the reason ranchers run five strands of wire on their perimeters rather than four strands they run on their interiors.

Progress was painful and costly to the ranchers but in the end it produced better pastures, better beef quality and safety for the community and the state of Florida. Δ



*Workers applied a new roof to the museum in October, following several years of intermittent leaks. After heavy rainstorms, water would drip into the building, risking discomfort to visitors and damage to exhibits. The repairs are welcome and much appreciated.*

*Photo by Harry Quatraro.*

## Danish historian shares info about White City pioneer

A Danish scholar who visited Fort Pierce for historical research has given our society some valuable information about **Louis Pio**, an immigrant pioneer who helped to establish the White City community.

**Dr. Anders Bo Rasmussen**, a professor at the University of Southern Denmark, has been compiling information for a book on Danish emigration to the United States. He spent a week in Fort Pierce during December 2021 and visited other cities searching in libraries and archives for documents.

Pio was a prominent socialist labor reformer during the 1800s in Denmark, whose agitation so angered his government that he was sent into exile. After coming to America, Pio organized a group of Danish immigrant

farmers in the upper Midwest and led them to this area following the 1893-94 Chicago World's Fair.

Pio's White City efforts were brief, however. In poor health, he returned to Chicago and died June 27, 1894 at age 52. He was survived by his widow, Augusta H. Pio, plus one daughter and two sons. Records indicate he had \$72.61 on deposit in a Jacksonville bank but had "no other personal property of any kind." Augusta Pio received an Illinois widow's award of \$1,155.

Rasmussen located Pio's last will and testament and related documents in the City of Chicago Archives. He has sent copies to us for our own library at the museum, where they will be available to our members. Δ

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I/We wish to join the Society at the level indicated below.  
Membership is from September through August.

New  Renewal  Individual (\$20.00)

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Please make checks payable to:

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P O Box 578

Fort Pierce, Florida 34954-0578

For Information telephone: (772) 461-8020

**General Meetings are held at:**

**The Elks Lodge**

**635 South 5<sup>th</sup> Street**

**Fort Pierce, Florida 34950**

Society General Meetings are held on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Thursday of the month, from September through May. A meal is provided before the meeting at the price of \$14.00 per person. Reservations must be made for these meals no later than two days in advance of the meeting. To make reservations telephone (772) 461-8020 and leave a message. Reservations and your RSVP information by e-mail to: [dinner@stluciehistoricalsociety.net](mailto:dinner@stluciehistoricalsociety.net). Dinner begins at 5:30 P.M. and the General Meeting Starts at 6:00 P.M.

**Volunteers are Needed**

If you have 3 1/2 hours that you can give once a week either in the morning or afternoon, please consider volunteering at the Museum.

Admission, to the museum, for St. Lucie Historical Society members is FREE. So come and take a tour.

The latest exhibit is St Lucie Families-Crafters of Local History.

The Pineapple Patch Gift Shop has a large selection of books of Florida historical value, cards, handmade Seminole Indian dolls, and baubles made by volunteers.

**Museum Hours:**

Tuesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.