

Cracker Cowboys

by Kim Gilbert

USF student journalist Rachel Turner rides horses over ranch land to photograph Florida's "Cracker" Cowboys as her non-thesis project.

The documentary of the "Cracker" cowboys, photographed at one of the Adams's Ranches in Kenansville, is the final project to complete her master's degree in journalism studies. The project began on Jan. 30 and will be completed by April 24. She plans to do follow up projects on the "Cracker" cowmen after the non-thesis project ends.

"The 'Cracker' cowmen have been a part of Florida's history since Florida was purchased from Spain by the United States in 1821." said Joe A. Akerman Jr., a retired professor of North Florida Community College in Madison and Florida historian. There are various theories surrounding the origin of the "Cracker" nickname. According to the Florida Cattlemen's Association, the term "Cracker" is derived from the sound the cowwhip makes as it drives the cattle. Cowboys, cowmen and cowhunters are all references to the "Crackers" that herd cattle.

Turner participates in the "Cracker" life while documenting the daily lives and activities of the "Cracker" cowmen through her camera's lens. Audio is streamlined into the photo documentary.

A day in the life of the documentary for Turner might start out at 2 a.m. as she drives three hours from her home in Safety Harbor to the Adams Ranch in Kenansville. After her arrival, she begins her day by photographing the feeding and gathering of the horses. She must gather her designated horse "Josephine" and saddle her up in preparation for the day's duties.

As the first cowman arrives, she photographs him catching, brushing and saddling up his horse. This is one of the best times to take photographs, “early morning, the sun rising makes for good pictures,” Turner said. There are 8 to ten cowhunters at the ranch. After some idle conversation, the foreman gives out the task orders of the day shortly after 7 a.m., which may include: loading up horses in a trailer, driving the horses out to the pasture, moving cattle from pasture to pasture, branding, vaccinating or medicating the cattle.

The workday ends between 5 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. On some days, after a hard day’s work, they may gather up unbroken horses in a make-shift rodeo which “makes for some good bucking pictures,” Turner said. In the evening she may head home or stay the night in the “bunk house”. “Work all day, tired, dirty... go to the bunk house and sure enough I get my best sleep up there,” she said.

Turner credits her father, Russ Turner III, as being the inspiration behind the idea for her Florida “Cracker” cowman project. In preparation for the project she contacted the Florida Cattlemen Association and spoke with their public relations department. The FCA guided her to Akerman, author of: *Florida Cowman: A History of Florida Cattle Raising, American Brahman, Jacob Summerlin: King of the Crackers*. Akerman referred Turner to Alto “Bud” Adams, owner of the Adams’s Ranches in Kenansville, and he allowed her to document the cowmen on the ranch that his son, Lee Adams, runs.

The desire to be a part of an experience such as this formed in her youth. Turner said she grew up with horses and they were a huge enjoyment for her. Her dad had worked on ranches and she hopes to get a chance to go “cowboying with her dad someday.”

Turner graduated from Clearwater Christian College in 2004 with a B.A. in physical education, focusing on exercise science. She wanted to have a background in science first but photo journalism was always her goal. She will reach that goal in May, “If you really want it, you can do it,” she said. Turner said even in our busy lives “Go after your dreams, go after your goals, you can do it,” she said. She said that a good part of being successful is having people skills: “Everything is based on how you relate to people.” “It’s how to make them feel good about themselves,” she said.

For the last month Turner has been working on another project involving the Florida Sheriffs Youth Ranch in Safety Harbor. The program teaches children from difficult backgrounds about life skills, family, responsibility and work ethic.

Turner, a full-time USF St. Petersburg student, works as a graduate assistant for Mark Walters in the Department of Journalism and Media Studies. She also runs two businesses in the Tampa Bay area. She operates Cultural Expressions, which is divided into photography and foreign language tutoring branches. She also owns RTI Enterprises, a marketing company. Turner is one of the staff photographers for USF St. Petersburg’s newspaper *The Crow’s Nest*.

Turner has explored a distinctive way of life, learned how to “crack” a cowwhip, tasted authentic “Cracker” cuisine and as one old- time “Cracker” said to her “hang around us for awhile and you’ll learn about marriage, kids, whatever you want to know about life.”