

Florida Trend

SUBSCRIBE



May 19, 2023

The Church's Ranch

Cynthia Barnett | 12/1/2001

Just after a September dawn on the Deseret Ranch in central Florida, cowboys on horseback crack long leather whips to set hundreds of calves charging toward a sprawling complex of pens and runs. Once corralled, the animals let loose a cacophony of moos and bays. The cowboys, too, holler out as they position themselves along a tall, wooden maze to sort calves by size and type into one of five pens.

One cowboy prods calves quickly through a gate. As each calf thunders down a narrow alley, another cowboy calls out a number, one through five. This tells the next cowboy, positioned atop a "turnaround," which of five doors to swing open to direct the calf into the right pen. From the pens, the calves will be run through another alley onto a huge scale for weighing. Then they'll be rushed along again onto 18-wheel cattle trucks idling nearby that will haul them to feedlots or pastures in Texas, Oklahoma or Kansas.

By 9 a.m., the men have sorted 500 calves. By the end of the day, they'll have moved a total of 1,944 calves weighing 963,710 pounds onto 20 trucks. "This is payday," says Kevin Mann, the cowboy atop the turnaround. "This is what we work toward all year long."

The ranch won't disclose financial information, but last year it moved more than 16 million pounds of calves -- they are sold by weight, not by the animal -- which translated into about \$16 million in revenues. For a cattle ranch, those numbers are huge, and not just by the standards of central Florida or even the cattle industry statewide. Deseret Ranch is the largest cow-calf operation in the U.S., with 44,000 head of cattle on 300,000 acres. Seen on a map of Florida, the sprawling ranch dwarfs neighboring metro Orlando, stretching 50 miles long and 30 miles wide over parts of three counties: Orange, Osceola and Brevard. Its northwestern tip is 10 miles from Orlando International Airport. Its southeastern tip stretches almost to Palm Bay.

But despite its size and its stature in the nation's cattle industry, most Floridians have never heard of Deseret Ranch. "We like to keep a low profile," says general manager Ferren Squires.

That profile is in keeping with the business style of the ranch's owner, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints -- the Mormon Church. The fastest-growing church in the U.S., with a 4.7% annual growth rate, the church is also by far the richest per capita. While its media guide states innocuously that "the church has a limited number of commercial properties and investments," a Time magazine financial analysis of the church in 1997 pegged its assets at a minimum of \$30 billion. If it were a corporation, the magazine found, the church would fall in the middle of the Fortune 500 -- below Union Carbide and PaineWebber, but bigger than Nike and the Gap. Among others, the church runs

The
Me
Cit
of
nec

of
:f
t
ar
Ac

re
nt
nt

Hospitals create police forces to stem growing violence against staff
DeSantis signs 3 bills bringing major change to Florida universities

farms, factories and railroads. As they struggled through the Great Depression, they also began to build their famous welfare system, the largest non-public venture of its kind in the nation.

The
me
bui
its
its

t
r
r
an

om
r;
in

Lik
Des

tic
Here we add, have buyers are struggling to pay. Analysts believe that Memorial Day will precede a lull in mortgage rates weekend

the return of Jesus and that church members must prepare for self-reliance, storing long-term supplies, including food. In the future, Squires says, beef from the ranch could help feed people in case of a catastrophe. "The c have on hand one year's salary and one year's food su e preach," he says.

Church-going cowboy

Deeply tanned and covered in frangler jeans on skinny hips and drives his Ford F-250 at of the ranch. Down-to-earth and quick to smile, Squires s wears many other hats: A father of six, Squires speaks on to Japan as a young man. He holds a master's degree in er official with the Mormons' massive welfare headquarter dential council of the church's Cocoa "stake" -- a M ese.

Granting a
of palm tree
is still dense
its own com
as well as o
February ar
"payday" th

FOR SUBSCRIBERS
READ THE MAY ISSUE »
ACCESS AN ISSUE

with stands
hns River,
cows and
computers
January,
the

In the midd
rs, a stone

FLORIDA TREND MAGAZINE

couches, al
Cowman" s
a handsom
hymns. On

SUBSCRIBE NOW:

- BUY A SINGLE ISSUE
- GET DIGITAL ACCESS



Florida
room holds
to Mormon

After a visit to the Sunshine S
became convinced that Florid
industry, as uncomplicated as
ranch to fellow members of th
council. The council bought th
sold their homes out west and
forests into roads and pasture

It took nearly 50 years, but D
cows for speedy growth, goo
grasses for central Florida, th

h leader Henry D. Moyle
raise cattle. (The key to the
ched his idea for a Florida
' worldwide leadership
52, a dozen Mormon families
turn wetlands and tangled

e right. By cross-breeding
y developing and perfecting
ghts -- and therefore some of

the highest profits in the industry. Deseret Ranch's average weaning weight -- a calf's weight at nine months, when it can be weaned and sold -- has increased from 300 pounds in 1981 to 546 pounds last year. Statewide, the average is closer to 450 pounds, says Jim Handley, executive vice president of the Florida Cattleman's Association.

Florida Business News

2023 Atlantic hurricane season begins soon. The first system formed months ago.

Florida insurance costs are about to explode. ZIP codes closest to the coast will pay the most.

Today's going market price is around 85 cents a pound -- down from about \$1 a pound earlier this year but up from 65 cents during an industry slump three years ago. According to Squires, Deseret spends about \$2 million a year on research and development.

Osceola looking to fund \$2 billion in transportation projects aimed at easing traffic.

South Florida produces a record 30,000 new residents, census data shows

At the University of Florida in Gainesville, animal science professor emeritus Alvin C. Warnick says the church has achieved some of the highest profits in the industry because of its long-term commitment to the business.

Tampa's \$742 million question: How do we pay for profits?

Florida News Releases

lots of years. **Florida Trend Video Pick** "They have earned a reputation for calves that turn out good carcasses, grade well and do well in the feedlots," Warnick says. "Their buyers are repeat buyers from all over the country."

The ranch's size and success help it attract some of the top animal-scientist graduates in the nation, Warnick says. Several of the cowboys hold bachelor's or master's degrees. The church puts a premium on its workforce and manages with an employee-centered philosophy. Most of Deseret's 80 employees live on the ranch, which has 65 tidy homes scattered over its acreage. Pay is at or higher than the industry average, and the ranch offers profit-sharing as well as professional-development programs.

The Mormons, big on big families, are also big on family perks: The ranch hires employees' children

elaborate swimming hole with

to rope swings.

Squires says while a good po
portunity employer. Still, nc
by Mormons. There isn't a co
common areas. Single emplo
swimming hole's closed on S



the ranch is an equal-
opt a work culture dominated
No alcohol is allowed in
posite sex. And the

Back at the cattle drive, Kevir

on the ranch, says Deseret's

religious underpinnings made him leery of working there, but its reputation persuaded him to give it a try. Five years later, he says, he's glad he did -- as much for the career opportunities as for the community that his wife and two young daughters enjoy. "You wonder if they're going to hound you, but they never have," Mann says of the Mormons' reputation for proselytizing. "The best side to it is that they're very family-oriented, so it's a great place to raise your kids even if you're not Mormon."

We've all heard the term food desert, but in South
Florida this weekend, they are introducing a food
forest. It's all part of the Natural Food Festival at
Deuces Corner.

Video Picks | Viewpoints@FloridaTrend

Ballot Box

The ranch's neighbors, too, give it high marks. The ranch is among the biggest taxpayers in Osceola County. (The church pays taxes on all its private businesses and in fact has a policy of not accepting government subsidies, including farm subsidies. The policy is related to the church's welfare program, whose basis is "individual self-reliance, not a handout that might rob the receiver of self-respect.")

- DeSantis or Disney?
- DeSantis
- Disney
- None of the above

Osceola County Commissioner Chuck Dunnick describes Deseret as benevolent to the surrounding community, professional in its dealings with local government and a good steward of the environment. The ranch has its own staff of wildlife biologists and has worked with state and local agencies on a progressive wildlife-management plan, Dunnick says. "They've been very quiet over the years, but if they do want to talk about an issue, you know they're going to be highly professional and well-prepared," he says. "They're great neighbors. If you could pick your own neighbors, I'd definitely pick them."

Vote
See Results

Ecclesiastical entrepreneurship

While the church is committed to stewardship of the land, it is just as committed to squeezing profits out of its private companies. And eventually, those two missions are sure to clash on this prime central Florida property. Real estate sources estimate Deseret's spread is worth some \$900 million, though the assessed agricultural value is far lower than that. For decades, the family cattle ranches that once made up Osceola and outlying Orange counties have been gobbled up by housing developments -- a pattern that's repeating itself throughout Florida and the nation. But because the church is so rich, it has not yet buckled to pressure to sell any of its Florida land to developers. Ten years ago, the church backed off a plan to develop 7,000 acres near the Bee Line Expressway under sharp criticism from environmentalists.

Often at odds in other parts of the country over issues such as animal waste and grazing, the tree-

ranch. That area is also home to one of the largest bird rookeries in the state.

Contact Us

Terms & Conditions

Squires says the church's long-term plans for the majority of Deseret Ranch are to keep it

agricultural. But he acknowledges the business-savvy church will develop the fringes -- particularly

its property outside Orlando -- as the land becomes more valuable. "The pressure is here," Squires

says. "But we want to be responsible and be good neighbors." It's in his church's ecclesiastical and

entrepreneurial missions to do so, he says.

Sign Up
Circulation Services

Florida Trend Media Company
490 1st Ave S
St Petersburg, FL 33701
727.821.5800

Florida Trend

FREE News Alerts

Stay on top of Florida business by signing up for any of our free eNewsletters. They are easy to read on any device, and always filled with timely news, insights and analysis.



SUBSCRIBE and get a FREE GIFT!

Now you can read Florida Trend anytime and anywhere. Subscribe today for the format that suits your lifestyle best: Print, Digital or All Access!



© Copyright 2023 Trend Magazines Inc. All rights reserved.