

Ranching in  
Florida's

# Cattle Country

A Florida ranch family blends environmental diversity with time-honored traditions.

Article and Photographs by Jennifer Denison

**R**ays of sunshine slice through the early-morning coastal fog and a canopy of lush, emerald foliage. A white-sand path cuts through the tropical terrain to a peaceful ranch house shaded by a panorama of palm, palmetto, cypress and oak trees. Although the sun's barely up, Larry Barthle is headed out the front door to jumpstart the day's work.

There's always plenty to do on the Barthle Brothers Ranch, but this particular spring day is exceptionally hectic. In addition to recordkeeping, checking cows, monitoring mineral levels, fixing fence, rotating pastures and other chores, Larry is also hosting a media tour of his four-generation family ranch and expecting a video-marketing crew to come shoot footage of calves for an upcoming auction.

On another section of the ranch, Larry's brother, Randy, puttters along the brood-mare-pasture fence line in his pickup, looking for newborn foals. With one hand on the steering wheel, and the other holding a cell phone, he discusses ranch business with other family members. He parks beside the corral, where niece Lauren introduces a day-rider who'd like to buy a couple of ranch-horse prospects. ➤



The Barthle family's commercial-cattle herd thrives on the flat woods and cypress swampland of Florida's cattle country.





Big Fish Lake, home to native fish and fowl and which holds the unofficial record for the largest fish caught in Florida, has dwindled from 500 to 40 acres due to well-field drilling.



The superior genetics and uniform quality of the Barthle's purebred Brahmas make them an international commodity.



Brothers Larry (left) and Randy (right) Barthle, along with their families and siblings, work to preserve a long-standing ranching tradition that started with their grandfather.



With three generations of the Barthle family living on or near the 8,000-acre horse and cattle ranch, the operation flourishes from family teamwork. Brother Mark, a barge-company worker in Tampa, Fla., helps handle the conservation side of the business with the entire family, while sister Jan Dillard manages the ranch's bookkeeping and ensures that the venture stays financially afloat. Brother Steve is the mechanical genius, and another sister, Kathy Paige, is an elementary-school teacher in Clewiston, Fla., who grows sugar cane with her husband, Steve. At the helm of the ranch is the Barthle matriarch, Jeanette Barthle Sutton. Although each family member has a specialty, they all stand united to manage all aspects of this environmentally conscious, multifaceted entity.





The ranch stands two foundation-bred stallions: Sugar Flit Bill (above), a 1988 sorrel that traces to Sugar Bar Flit, and Hancock Flit Bar (below), a 1997 stout red roan who's linebred back to Joe Hancock.

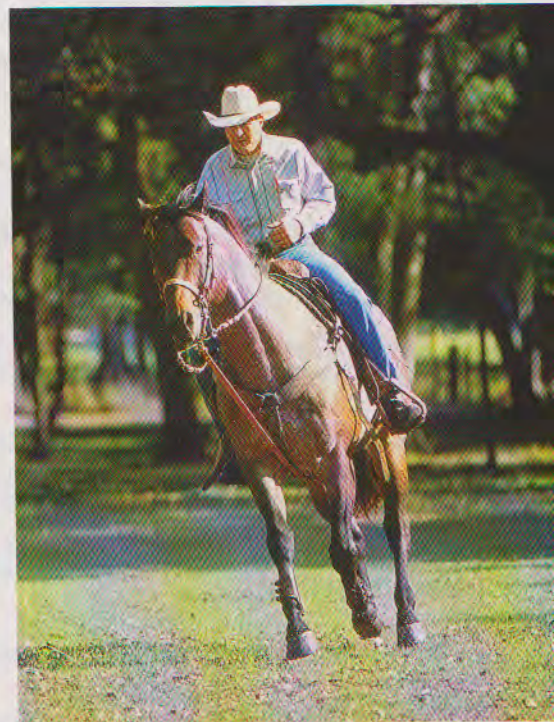
## Settling San Antonio

The Barthles are among the pioneering ranch families in Pasco County. In the 1890s, Charles Barthle moved from North Dakota to San Antonio, Fla., a Catholic colony established a decade before. The ranch dates to the 1930s, when his entrepreneurial son, Joseph Albert, launched a venture that'd shape the lives of future generations.

During the Great Depression, native cattle, also called Florida Scrub or Cracker cattle, introduced to the area by Spaniards in the 1500s, grazed the open range of south-central Florida. Resembling Texas Longhorn cattle, except for a smaller frame and shorter horns, these feral cattle thrived in the heavily wooded lowlands. Around the turn of the century, large manufacturing companies had bought large tracts of land for timber to support the turpentine-industry boom that spanned into the early 1900s. Once the turpentine ran out, the land started to be sold. Joseph took advantage of the opportunity.

Although times were tough, the young rancher envisioned the demise of open grazing and pieced together 18,000 acres of forest and pastureland over the course of a decade, forming the J.A. Barthle and Sons Ranch. To pay for his land, he logged the landscape's vast pine trees.

As his land holdings expanded, Joseph's livestock numbers increased. He began crossing his native cattle with a couple of Brahman bulls he'd purchased, producing cattle that thrived in the subtropical climate. ➔







Ranch yearlings are raised in a natural environment until they're ready to be trained.

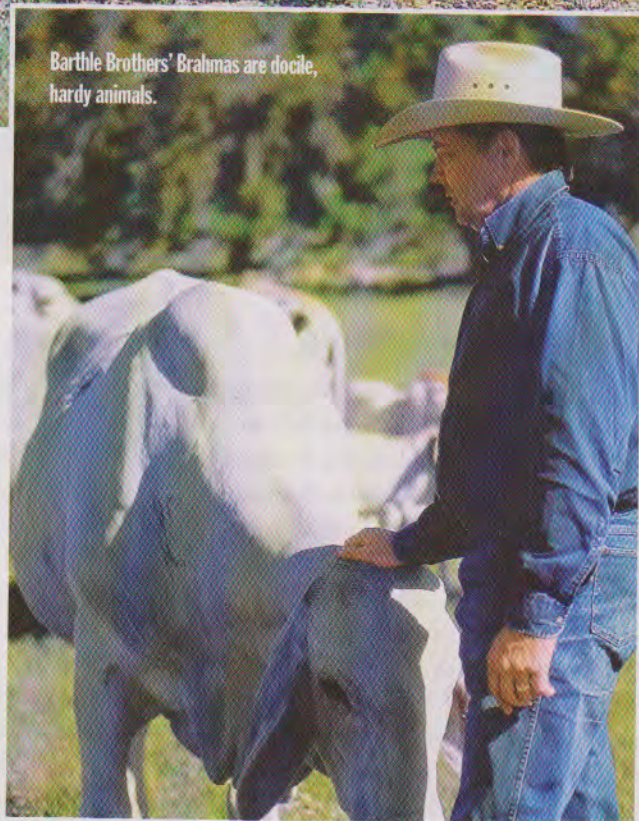
As with many family ranches, the original J.A. Barthle Ranch has been divided into smaller parcels through time, and the name changed to Barthle Brothers Ranch. Despite the changes, one constant remains: Descendants of Joseph's two sons, Albert and Joseph William ("Joe"), continue to see that the operation prospers.

Just like his father, Joe had a deep appreciation for land, cattle and ranching, and worked until his death in 1999 to preserve his family's ranch and ensure its betterment and profitability for future generations.

Today, Joe's wife, Jeanette; sons Larry, Mark, Randy and Steve; daughter, Jan; and their families reside on a portion of the original ranch. Extended family also continue to ranch throughout the county. Although Jeanette and Joseph sent their children to pursue college degrees at the nation's top agriculture schools, most returned to the ranch to preserve its precious bounty.

## Cattle Traditions

The Barthles' ranchland, which is comprised of flat woods, cypress swampland, and sandy, oak ridges, serves as prime grazing ground for 1,000 head of commercial cows. The



Barthle Brothers' Brahmas are docile, hardy animals.

family is committed to producing hardy, efficient cattle with consistent quality and frame size.

"When you sell large loads of cattle, consistency is key," Larry says. "We breed solid, functional cattle that can be used by a lot of buyers."

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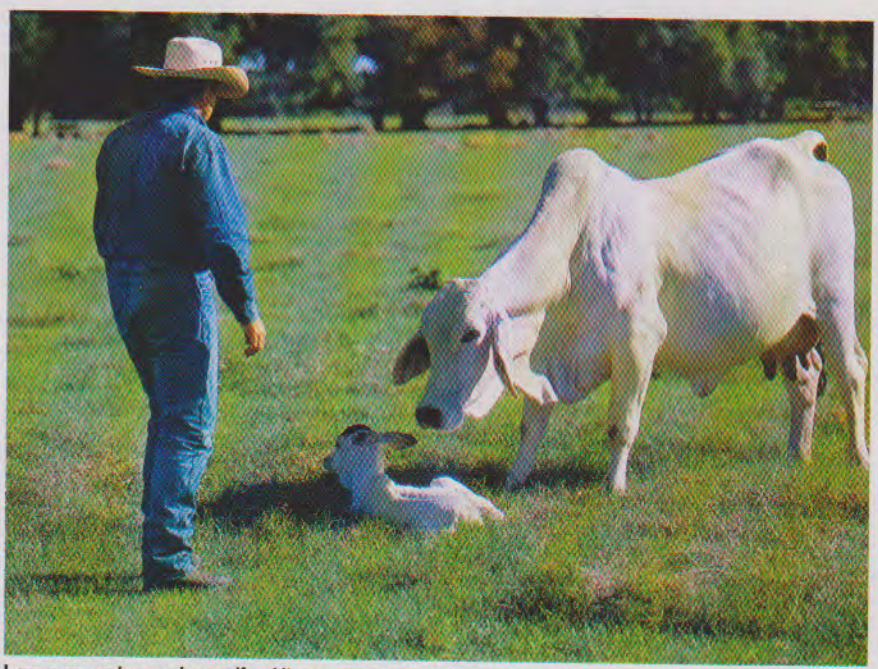


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Larry eases up to a newborn calf and its mama to ensure both are doing well.

(expected progeny differences). A rotational breeding system that consists of Angus, Brahman and Hereford cattle incorporates the best of the breeds into the offspring. Introduced in 2000, Charolais cattle add a new dimension to the herd.

The Barthles also have a herd of approximately 75 registered Brahmans. The backbone of the Florida cattle industry, Brahmans are well-adapted to the state's subtropical climate.

"Brahman cattle have loose skin, which helps control their temperature. Their sweat glands also keep them cool," Larry points out.

Buyers with keen eyes for livestock appreciate the uniformity of the Barthles' Brahmas. In fact, the cattle have become an international commodity. While judging Brahman and horse shows abroad, Larry has networked with international cattle buyers who export the family's bulls to Asia and Central and South America.

"Breeders like to buy genetically superior stock in the United States and take it back to their countries to improve their herds," he explains.

"Of course, once they see our cattle, they also want to buy good ranch horses

from our string," Randy adds.

Calving takes place from December through April, and calves are shipped in the fall. In an era of mad-cow disease scares and health-conscience consumers, keen marketing and producing premium beef have become important tactics for producers who wish to remain solvent in a fluctuating cattle industry. Caches of calves are sold via video auctions, expanding the buying base. To encourage premium cattle prices, the Barthles retain ownership of "short" or "cull" calves.

"If the calves were sold at weaning, their prices would be heavily discounted," Larry notes. "By retaining ownership, we regain the so-called 'discount' at weaning, plus make money on their gain. We also receive carcass information that helps in bull selection."

During weaning, the calves are grouped together on the ranch for approximately 30 days, where they adjust to the weaning process. Then they're shipped to the King Ranch feedlot in Kingsville, Texas, where they remain until slaughter.

"Most of the calves qualified for a premium through a marketing niche for Brahman-type calves," Larry adds.

As part of their enduring loyalty to agriculture, the Barthles also stay active



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*In the city or in the saddle.*

in their community and livestock organizations. Various family members have served as leaders of their industry. In addition to being involved at the local, county and state levels on various committees and boards, Jeanette also is a past president of the American National Cattlewomen's Association and the Florida Cattlewomen's Association. Larry is a past president of the Florida Cattlemen's Association and past chairman of the Florida Beef Council. Randy has been chairman for the Florida Farm Bureau Beef Committee and currently serves on the Florida Beef Council, representing the Farm Bureau. Other memberships include the American Brahman Breeders Association, American Quarter Horse Association, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association and the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association.

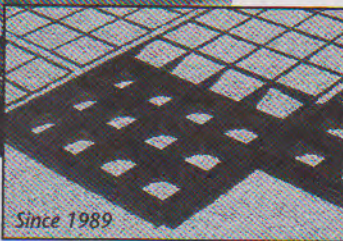
## Ranch Horses Deluxe

Although they're not the ranch's mainstay, horses have always been a huge factor in the livelihood of the Barthle Brothers ranch. Even during the ranch's grassroots days, Joseph Albert doctored his cattle on native Florida Cracker horses.

His son, Joe, began developing a Quarter Horse herd after serving in the U.S. Army during World War II. He paid \$500 for his first high-quality stallion, "Wrangler," a Hancock-bred colt sired by Joe C by Roan Hancock. His first mare was Mui Bonita L, a rope horse whose sire and dam traced to Hickory Bill by Peter McCabe. The mix of these two foundation-bred horses formed the present-day breeding stock.

The ranch presently runs 72 head of Quarter Horses, including 25 broodmares and two stallions, Sugar Flit Bill, a grandson of Cutter Bill and Sugar Bar Flit by Sugar Bars, and Hancock Flit Bar, who's linebred back to Joe Hancock through Blue Valentine and Red Man, with Sugar Bars and Flit on the bottom side. All horses are used for ranch work.

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Sugar Flit Bill has sired some of the ranch's finest saddle horses, and his progeny are solid performers in rodeo and other disciplines.

"Whatever we do on this ranch, we do it the old-fashioned way – horse-back," Randy declares. "We have horses to work cattle, yet they form a profit center of their own."

Although the ranch has modernized its breeding program, it continues to rely on foundation bloodlines.

"Foundation-bred horses produce strong, athletic mounts that have good minds and are attentive to cattle," Randy says.

Mares are pasture-bred or artificially inseminated in April, May and early June, and they remain outside year-round.

"We prefer that our mares foal in the spring in case we have a bad winter," the horseman explains.

Randy checks and cares for the horses daily. His familiarity with the string is evident in his ability to recite each horse's sire, dam, progeny, disposition, training history and breeding tendencies.

"We closely monitor our mares' cycles and we pick up on certain qualities as we do with cattle. That keeps us in touch with the mares. For example, we know which mares produce agility, speed and quiet dispositions," he comments.

At 4 months old, foals are branded, dewormed and vaccinated. They're weaned

and halter-broke at 6 months old.

"We wait until they're a little stronger and have learned to graze with their mamas. It makes weaning less stressful for the foals," Randy explains.

Foals are fed through their first winter, then they're turned out on ryegrass pasture in early spring of their yearling year, where they remain until they're 2. During those years, the youngsters are content just being horses, but the Barthles still take time to handle them at feeding.

"We want to raise friendly horses that come up to us and are easily caught," Randy says.

In the fall of their 2-year-old year, horses are started in the round pen and eventually become part of the saddle-horse string, or are sold via private treaty.

"I'm not in as much of a hurry as I used to be 20 or 30 years ago," Randy admits. "I take my time with the horses, because I've seen what can go wrong."

Gradual training methods and superb stallions have earned the Barthles a reputation for producing well-broke, versatile, cow-savvy horses. Barthle-bred horses have excelled in reining, cutting, jumping, speed events and roping.

Color is another commodity that drives buyers to the Barthles. Han-

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cock Flit Bar is a steadfast red roan who stamps his progeny with his tone and even temperament.

"He's a big, well-muscled horse. He's a pet, and his colts are colorful and quiet," Randy says.

## Natural Resources

It's said that ranchers are the original land stewards, and the Barthles attest to that statement. Their environmental efforts earned them the 2001 Florida Agricultural-Environmental Leadership Award, as well as environmental stewardship awards from the FCA and NCBA.

For decades, populations of fish, fowl and wildlife have benefited from the family's conservation projects. Located about 45 minutes north of Tampa, Fla., the Barthles feel the pressure

of encroaching urbanization. With residential developments sprouting up faster than spring pastures and wetlands being robbed by municipality, the Barthles' business and way of life are threatened.

"Due to urban sprawl, Tampa is 15 miles closer than it used to be," Randy estimates.

Still, the ranchers hold firm to their heritage and rural values.

"Developers are always calling to see if we'll sell our land, but we tell them we're not interested," Larry asserts.

Rather than watching their precious resources be gobbled up by greedy developers, the Barthles have taken several proactive conservation approaches to save their lifestyle and the land. Well-drilling on adjacent land has decreased the ranch's surface water and drained its wetlands, including the historical Big Fish Lake, which used to cover 500 acres and contain seven islands. Now, the lake has dwindled to 40 acres due to well-field drilling. To combat the problem,

the ranchers installed several solar- and electrical-powered wells on their property to pump water for their livestock.

Wildlife also coexist with livestock on the ranchland. Working with the Florida Fish and Game Department and Florida Conservation and Natural Resources Department, the Barthles have cultivated valuable grazing grounds of Argentine and Pensacola Bahia, Bermuda and rye grasses and a suitable environment to manage the ranch's populations of white-tail deer, wild turkey, feral hogs, quail, dove, ducks, bobcats, panthers, gopher tortoises and other endangered and native scrubland wildlife. The wildlife-management plan imposes stringent hunting

regulations for a 10-member private hunting group that leases hunting rights from the family each year. The family also stages controlled burns to thin scrub and stimulate natural regrowth.

**"Developers are always calling to see if we'll sell our land, but we tell them we're not interested."**

—Randy Barthle

Other environmental endeavors not only improve the land, but also create agricultural enterprises. For example, rotational grazing allows the Barthles to reduce parasite populations and stimulate grass growth, plus harvest sod and grass seed. Planting 20- to 40-acre tracts of pine trees for 2 decades has created a logging resource. The profits are deposited back into the ranch in pasture fertilizer, which increases forage production. Logging 200 acres of pine trees provides another source of income, plus enhances the land's productivity, beauty and wildlife populations.

Ambassadors for the cattle industry, the Barthles educate society on their model of responsible ranching by taking conservation groups, environmentalists, civic groups and government authorities on ranch tours.

"Everything we do is scrutinized, so education is key to being successful. We



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As with ranching, rodeo is a Barthle-family tradition. Following in her uncle Larry and father Randy's footsteps, 16-year-old Sarabeth is an avid roper in the National High School Rodeo Association.

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want to expose everyone to our practices, so we can work together to protect the environment," Larry states. "We want to show people that we're not harming the property, but rather improving and protecting the environment. It's just being good neighbors."

## Deep-Planted Roots

For the Barthles, strength and longevity lie in blood. They try to maintain the tradition of working cattle together during the summer when possible. Doing so exposes the next generation to its abundant ranching and rodeo heritage.

The entire younger generation of Barthles has inherited their parents' love for the land. Jan and her husband, Ed, have three children: Nick, who works for Southern States Co-op in northern Florida, Brian a veterinary student at the University of Florida, and Lauren, a college student. Larry and his wife, Lynn, have two sons in college: Ben and Chris; and a 13-year-old daughter, Kayla. Mark and his wife, Tammy, have two high-school-age daughters: Megan and Molly; a seventh-grader, Beth, and a preschooler, Rachael. Steve and his wife, Jana, have two children:

Amanda, who's in the Air Force, and Joe, a high-school student. Randy and his wife, Patty, have three children: Clint, 27, a veterinarian in Kissimmee, Fla.; Brant, 23, a student at the University of Florida, obtaining his doctoral degree in pharmaceuticals; and Sarabeth, 16, who competes in FFA livestock judging and National High School Rodeo Association events.

"The kids want to maintain a connection to the ranch, even if they don't earn livings from it," Randy says. "Rodeo is one way they enjoy the lifestyle."

"Our roots run deep here," Larry adds. "Our goal is to preserve the ranch for the next generation, just as our grandfather did for us." 🐾

### Barthle Brothers Ranch

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## Web Extra

For more facts on the historical Barthle Brothers Ranch and the Florida ranch culture, visit [www.westernhorseman.com](http://www.westernhorseman.com), and click on "Tropical Trivia."