GOOD NEIGHBORS: E.L. STRICKLAND

All Hat, All Cattle

E.L. Strickland has been managing On Top of the World’s Circle Square Ranch for 41 years. And we’re not talking about the health spa, but the bona fide Florida cattle ranch that inspired the name.

By JoAnn Guidry • Photos By Steve Floethe

Out West, there is a phrase used to describe wannabe cowboys who think simply wearing a cowboy hat makes them the real deal—all hat, no cattle.

That would not be Ernest Lloyd Strickland. With his ever-present cowboy hat, simple Western shirt, faded blue jeans, Western belt sans any flashy oversized belt buckle, scuffed boots, and slightly bowed legs, E.L. is the real deal. His weathered face and hands tell of decades working cattle, not sitting behind an office desk.

In fact, E.L. was born a cattleman. Literally.

“My father worked for the Norris Cattle Company, which for a time was the largest cattle operation in the state. They had several large ranches and my father moved around working on all of them,” says E.L. “But we just happened to be on Circle Square Ranch here in Ocala when I was born. I had a horse before I had a bicycle. Her name was Lady Belle and by the time I was five, I was riding the pastures all day long with my father, checking cows.”

In 1975, the late Sidney Colen purchased the Norris Cattle Company’s 13,000-acre Circle Square Ranch. On 4,000 acres, Colen developed the On Top of the World Communities while leaving 9,000 acres for the cattle operation. In 1977, E.L. became the manager of Circle Square Ranch. For Ken Colen, president of OTOW Communities, his family’s 41-year association with E.L. has been a very good one.

“Without a doubt, E.L. is one of the most interesting and capable people I’ve ever met. He is humble, honest, and given to pursuing excellence in all he does,” says Colen. “E.L. is a supremely fine cattleman, having a keen eye for beef cattle. He knows the economics of cattle ranching inside and out.”

LAND SALES, including 1,500 acres to Del Webb which developed Stone Creek and the expansion of On Top of the World Communities, have whittled Circle Square Ranch down to 8,000 acres. But that’s still plenty of land for cattle to roam. To put it in perspective, Circle Square Ranch, flanked by 80th Avenue and 80th Street, extends all the way northwest to just south of U.S. Hwy. 40.

Sholom Park was carved out of a corner of the ranch and those walking in the park can spot the Circle Square Ranch cattle grazing in the pastures. Many OTOW and Stone Creek homes back up to the ranch—double sections of barbed wire fencing keep the cattle from getting too close to backyards. But residents love the view, placing backyard chairs and benches facing the pastures so they can watch the cattle grazing.

“Oh, yeah, people love seeing the cows,” says E.L., 73, with a chuckle. “And they get to thinking that those are their cows. When we move them to other pastures, we always get asked when their cows will be back.”
Ah, the cows. E.L. is not a particularly chatty man, but if you ask him about his cows, you’ll see a sparkle in his sharp blue eyes. Now that’s something worth talking about, especially if you climb up in his pickup truck with him to see them.

“We run a herd of 1,200 cattle, mostly Hereford and Brahman,” says E.L., deftly steering his truck, windows rolled down, over well-worn ruts around and through the rolling hill pastures. “We breed Brahman bulls to Hereford cows and get Brahford cattle. They are considered the best beef cattle in Florida. We have some Bran-gus and even have had a couple of Watusi cows over the years. We have a 20-year old Watusi cow with huge horns and she can still jump a fence. Just then E.L. spots a couple of Bradfords, noting their striking orange brindle coloring and says, “We call them ‘tiger-stripes cows’ because of that coloring. You can’t miss a Brahford.

E.L. AND HIS TWO-MAN CREW, including Junior who’s been there 39 years, start their day at 7:30am and work until 6:00pm, seven days a week. There is no natural water source on the ranch, so the water tanks run on wells that have to be checked first thing every morning. The only irrigation on the ranch is in the hay fields—the hay is baled and fed to the cattle in the winter when Bahia grass is sparse. Winters are grassed and planted for seasonal grazing and the cows are fed high-protein cottonseed pelllets. There’s 25 miles of barbed wire fencing to be checked, mowing in the summertime, springtime vaccinations, and branding. Every cow bears a subtle brand, a circle with a square inside it, on its hip. More than 600 calves are born in the pastures November to February. “I love seeing the new babies every year,” says E.L., just then noticing a still-wet newborn calf being licked dry by its mother who’s urging it to stand to nurse. He stops the pickup alongside the pair and with a small smile, says, “Now that’s a good momma doing just what she’s supposed to do.’

E.L. knows all his cows by sight and they know him, surrounding the stopped truck and poking their heads in the driver’s side window for a head scratch. “I do things the old-fashioned way, write everything down with pen and paper,” he says and then tapping his temple with a finger, adds, “And it’s all in here.”

One old-fashioned thing E.L. does miss is doing ranch work by horseback. “My last good cow horse was Slim—he was exceptional—and he did all the work for you,” E.L. says. “I started riding him when he was two and rode him for 25 years. After you’ve had a cow horse like Slim, you know you’ve had the best and there’s no point getting another.” With a pause, he wistfully adds, “Now we do everything in pickup trucks, but there’s nothing like a good cow pony.”

Besides cattle, Circle Square Ranch is home to wildlife aplenty. The pastures are interspersed with stands of oaks and pines, great for the cows for shade, shelter, and windbreaks. It’s also great habitat for wildlife, including endangered species such as scrub jays and fox squirrels, as well a multitude of bird species. The more open areas are home to burrowing owls and gopher tortoises, the latter even has a special 300-acre fenced-in area. “The wildlife co-exists just great with the cattle,” says E.L. “The ranch is their home, too.”

THE CURRENT PRESIDENT of the Marion County Cattlemen’s Association, E.L.’s sterling management of Circle Square Ranch hasn’t gone unnoticed. Just a sampling of his recognitions includes being inducted into the Marion County Agricultural Hall of Fame and receiving the prestigious Florida Cattlemen’s Association’s Lifetime Achievement Award in 2010. That same year, Circle Square Ranch was given the FCA Environmental Stewardship Award for the Southeast Region. In 2016, E.L. was named the FCA Outstanding Rancher of the Year.

The awards are on display on shelves and on the walls of the 100-year-old house E.L. lives in on Circle Square Ranch. True to his modest nature, he says that the awards mean more to “my daughter Jenni— and my granddaughter Alora.” A 17-year-old junior at Belleview High School, Alora spends every weekend with her grandfather at the ranch. “Sure, the awards are nice, especially coming from your peers,” says E.L. “But the relationships you build through the years are the most important thing in the cattle business. And the Colen family has been wonderful to work with all these years. Life’s been good to me.”