

# Farm Bureau

## HIGHLIGHT

by Tracy Aiken

We don't often think of Florida when we think of cowboys and cattlemen, but the Sunshine State has a hardworking tradition in the cattle industry. Just ask Patrick Thomas, Hillsborough County Farm Bureau Board Member and son-in-law to Florida cattleman Dennis Carlton, "I'm married for three years now. My wife Melissa and I have a two-year old boy and a six-month old boy, named Tucker and Trent."

Working for and being a part of the Carlton family is a "blessing," Patrick says, as he gets to wake up every day and do the kind of work he loves. "Not everybody can say that, that's for sure." A typical week for Patrick usually begins at 7:00 am, sometimes with a meeting at the Carlton's spread in Dover, Florida. Lined with orange groves and beautiful tall live oaks, the winding drive to the horse stables is like finding an oasis in the middle of Florida's growing urbanization.

"This is where we keep the horses and dogs, and everything," Patrick explains, adding Mr. Carlton has two big companies, Audubon Ranch and Carlton and Carlton Ranches.

"Audubon Ranch is the Cone Ranch up off 39, it's 12,000 acres, and we have approximately 2,700 head of cattle up there."

"His other ranches, there's approximately fifteen other places, from Dade City to Arcadia, and that's what I focus on. I go everywhere." There are two types of ranch work that Patrick handles; the "cow work" and patching fences, building new cow pens, burning underbrush and older pasture grasses that are less than nutritious for the cattle. He says you need to burn off the old grass so younger, healthier shoots can be used to feed the herds. This speaks highly of the dedication and genuine love of the land and the animals that Patrick and the Carlton's have.

"About half of the year is cow work, because we're on a strict vaccination program with the cows, and we have to get every cow up four times a year, that's a big part of it." Rather than working with dairy cattle, which he did in 4-H as a kid, Patrick works a true cowboy's dream of managing open herds of beef cattle on horseback. Other important parts of the job include tending to the breeding program to replenish the herds, taking care of injured cattle, and assessing the calves



during the two breeding seasons per year.

"We don't use AI (artificial insemination) for our cows, it's all bulls, different types of bulls depending on the cows we're going to put them with." "We buy pure bred bulls, Brahmas, Angus, and Charlet bulls from breeders. The Charlet bulls come from South Dakota, the Brahma bulls come from here in Florida, and the Angus bulls are Jorgensen Angus."

Growing up on a ranch around Riverview, Florida, Patrick, now twenty-seven, was always in the company of cattle. Working with his father all through high-school, Patrick then went on to graduate from the University of Florida, Gainesville in 2007, where he earned his degree in Agricultural Operations Management. While at UF, Patrick also met his wife Melissa, and began working part-time with the Carlton's. After graduation, he came on board full-time, and has been "in the saddle" ever since.

As a board member of the Hillsborough County Farm Bureau, Patrick is privileged to see a wider range of the agricultural spectrum, saying it is "eye opening" to see how everything works in this great community. "When you are on a horse all day, or riding in a truck fixing fences, you have no idea of everything that goes on that affects your industry."

The skills required to manage a sizable herd of cattle on horseback, with the help of herding dogs, sometimes includes roping, but as Patrick states, "If you can get away with not roping anything, you don't. It causes stress on the animals, but sometimes it's necessary. We don't ever want a cow to get away, they're like people in that they have followers, so sometimes you have to put a rope on them."

Being a cowboy definitely suits Patrick. He loves the lifestyle, the hard work, and being able to bring his family along in the fresh air and adventurous places among the dogs, horses, and cattle. "I love horses," he says, "I ride colts for people, we do a lot of ranch rodeos, and Mr. Carlton has gotten me and his son, Dennis Jr., into showing Appaloosas." For the cattle industry he so enjoys, Patrick knows "we couldn't do what we do without them (horses)."

Though the work for a modern day cowboy is more complex and diverse than ever before, it still brings a strong sense of the adventure and tradition we all grew up with watching movies of westerns. As Patrick likes to tell it, "Simply being out on a horse, doing what I do, I am truly blessed."



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