

Q&A



# “MY OWN COWS, MY OWN LAND”

Huey Howard, one of Florida’s few Black cattle ranchers, has built a legacy over sixty years.

BY DALIA COLÓN

Photos by Benjamin Rusnak



ABOVE: Some of Huey Howard's cattle in Hendry County, Florida; OPPOSITE: Rancher Huey Howard, May 2023.

IN SOUTHWEST FLORIDA, NESTLED AMONG the citrus groves and strawberry fields off State Road 29, there's a white post-and-rail fence with a matching sign in all caps: HOWARD CATTLE CORPORATION. Beyond it are acres and acres of lush grass dotted with brown-and-white speckled cows. They belong to Huey Howard.

Howard was born in 1935 in Leland, Mississippi. He's one of seven children born to James and Mary Howard, who farmed cotton and beans. Howard came to Immokalee in 1953, following friends who had moved to the area because they'd heard about work opportunities in Florida's vegetable fields.

I visited Howard on an unseasonably humid February afternoon. Eschewing the heat in favor of his air-conditioned gray Chevy Silverado, Howard invited me to sit shotgun while we parked in the shade. I wanted to know how he became one of the state's few Black cattle ranchers. His nephew, Gerald Howard, sat in the truck's back seat and chimed in occasionally. Huey Howard is a hugger with pecan-brown skin. His soft white hair peeks from beneath a straw cowboy hat. In his voice I heard his native Mississippi and the

rural patch of Florida he has long called home. He's the father of three adult sons, granddaddy to more grandchildren and great-grandchildren than he can count, and widower to Dorcas Howard, the longtime principal of Village Oaks Elementary School in Collier County. She passed away in 2018. He keeps her work ID in his wallet.

Howard is the type of man who'll trick you into holding out your hand so he can drop a twenty-dollar bill into it. Gas money for the long drive back to Tampa, he insisted, when I fell for the ploy. I tried to return the cash, but Gerald warned me about the futility of arguing with his uncle. (I later returned the twenty dollars via mail.) After all, Huey Howard is a man who knows about perseverance.

When he wanted to start a ranch, around 1963, no one would sell to a Black man. So, Howard got a white friend to buy the land for him in Felda, just outside Immokalee and about thirty-five miles east of Fort Myers. The friend later signed the deed over to Howard. That's how Howard bought his first twenty acres for \$5,000.

Today, Howard and his family raise more than 400 head of cattle. They own several varieties.



ABOVE: Howard and his sons and nephew raise multiple varieties of beef cattle. OPPOSITE: A panther crossing sign on the highway near Howard's ranch. Florida panthers have been known to roam the area, killing donkeys.

Beefmasters are their bread and butter. According to the USDA's 2017 Census of Agriculture, there were 1,034 beef cattle ranches and fourteen dairy cattle and milk production farms in Florida run by Black producers, out of a total of 30,590 beef producers and 489 milk and dairy cattle farmers in the state. This puts Black ranchers like the Howards in a rare club, among only 3.3 percent of Florida's beef producers.

After nearly six decades of growing his ranch, teaching his children to herd and care for the animals—including sending his son Huey Jr. to sell cattle at the Okeechobee Livestock Market—Howard's legacy was finally recognized by his community. In 2020, the Howards were to have been honored at the Immokalee Cattle Drive and Jamboree as a “pioneer” ranching family, part of Florida's centuries-old cowboy history. But just a day before the roundup and parade were set to kick off, the event was cancelled because of the pandemic. It was called off again in 2021. When the Jamboree finally came back last year, the Howard family was there, including Huey, smiling, and waving to the crowd.

**Dalia Colón: *How did you get into cattle ranching?***

**Huey Howard:** I made myself a promise that one of these days, you are going to get in the cattle business. And I held my promises. I got into the cattle business. I had some friends that owned a bunch of cattle and I wanted to get into business also, but back then, they wouldn't sell me no land, or they wouldn't lease me no land [because] of me being Black. But we finally got where we could buy some land. Me and my son own 1,600 acres.

**DC: *How has your job changed since you started ranching?***

**HH:** We used to sell cattle cheap. I can remember selling cattle for fifteen, sixteen cents a pound.

**DC: *What would they go for today?***

**HH:** Probably a dollar and a half, two dollars and something today.

**DC: *What else has changed?***

**HH:** You know, we used to be able to go out and catch wild hogs and butch 'em and all that stuff,

but the panthers—we got such a panther problem until we can't hardly do that anymore. I put eighteen donkeys in my cow [pasture] over there. And the panthers killed all eighteen of my donkeys. And I know if they kill eighteen donkeys, they probably gonna kill forty or fifty cows.

**DC:** *Wow. I did see the panther crossing signs on my way here. How much total land do you have between the land that you own and the land that you lease?*

**HH:** 7,000 acres.

**DC:** *That sounds like so much work. Isn't there something easier you could do to earn a living?*

**HH:** Probably is, but I don't want to. I love to go out there and look at the cows. It's a full-time job to try to keep the fences up and everything. It's a lot of work involved, but I just love it.

**DC:** *When you were a kid, what did you imagine you would be doing as an adult?*

**HH:** Well, when I was a kid, I always wanted to be in the cow business. Why? I don't know. When I first started, I bought dairy cows. Every time I'd buy five or six dairy cows [we would get a] big rain, they'd get wet, they'd catch pneumonia and die. I'd go back and buy five or six more, and they would do the same thing. So, I quit buying dairy cows and started buying [beef] cows.

**DC:** *Have you thought about retiring?*

**HH:** I thought about it, but lemme tell you now. The first morning I wake up and can't get out the bed, I'm going to retire. Up until the end, I ain't gonna retire.

**DC:** *All right. How many kids do you have?*

**HH:** I got Ivan and Kevin and Huey. Kevin...he's the lawyer [in] San Francisco.

**DC:** *What does the future look like for the cattle ranch?*

**HH:** As far as I'm concerned, the future looks a little good for the cattle ranch. We're going to try to stay [here] as long as I'm living, and I imagine when I'm gone, we'll still be [ranching]. Ivan owns the ranch, and he's gonna be in ranching

for a long time. I'm sure he won't get out of it. He's going to probably turn the ranch over to his children when they get out of college.

**DC:** *This country has a rich tradition of Black cowboys, and you are carrying that on here in Florida. What does that mean to you?*

**HH:** It mean everything to me. I can get up in the morning and know that I can go to the ranch and look at my own cows and look at my own land.

**DC:** *What's it like today, interacting with the other predominantly white cattle ranchers? Do you feel like you're part of the club now?*

**HH:** Yeah. When we work our cows, we always have a bunch of cowboys to come in and work the cow—a bunch of white cowboys. It's not a problem.

**DC:** *What's your favorite way to enjoy beef?*

**HH:** I'll always eat a big steak. Well-done, with a lot of onions on it. 🍷



---

*Dalia Colón (@daliacolon) is a multimedia journalist in Riverview, Florida, specializing in food, travel, and the arts.*