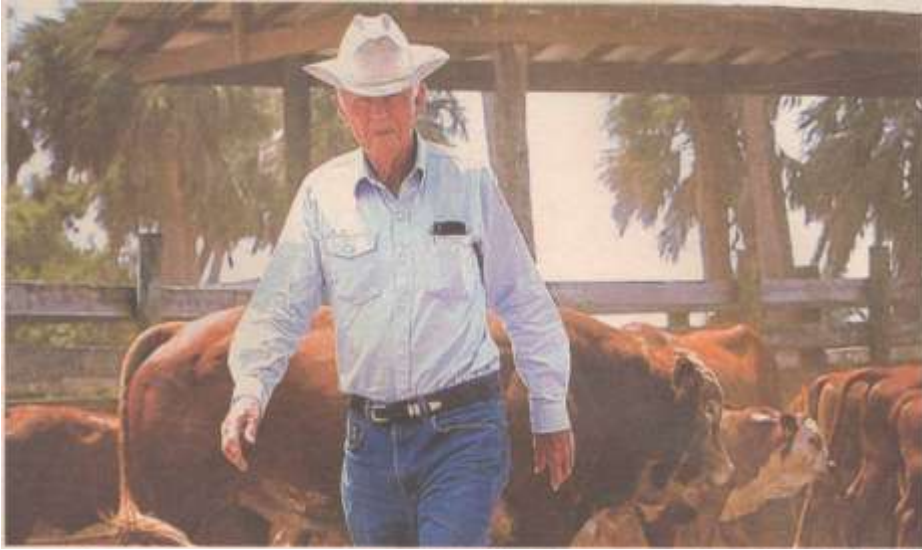


Luminaries

Where the Stars Come Out Every Monday

Cover Story



Treasure Coast Cowboy -- Bud Adams at 80

BY BILL CHURCH Special to Luminaries

In virtually every community, one or two men or women stand out as "larger than life." Few would argue that on the Treasure Coast, Alto "Bud" Adams, Jr., leaps immediately to mind.

Bud is the legendary proprietor of the Adams Ranch, 17 miles out Orange Avenue Extension (County Road 68) from downtown Fort Pierce. Not many city dwellers have ever seen a real cowboy, but even at the age of 80, Bud Adams fits the picture we all have in our minds. Tall, slim, tanned, with legs that tell of many years astride a horse, Bud still has the self-confident gait of a man who both knows his way around a ranch and who has accomplished much in life.

Cattle breeding expert, citrus grower, successful businessman, environmentalist, philanthropist, educator, loyal Florida Gator, husband, father of three, grandfather of 12, and unabashed booster of Fort Pierce - Bud Adams is all of these.

Bud and Dot, his wife of 57 years, continue to live on the Adams Ranch, the 15th largest cow/calf ranching operation in the United States. They also spend a lot of time in Fort Pierce, however, bridging the rural and the urban scenes and giving back to the community.

Bud and Dot provided funds for the arena at the county fairgrounds. As major believers in education, they have given funds to support University of Florida research centers in St. Lucie County, Ona, FL, and on the main campus at Gainesville. Bud has contributed extensively to and chaired the Indian River Community College Foundation and served on the boards of the Backus Art Gallery, Heathcote Botanical Gardens and the United Way, as well as the old

Fort Pierce Memorial Hospital Board before the hospital was bought.

"Fort Pierce is my hometown and I'm happy to see it doing well," Bud says. "It's had a number of old families working in citrus and ranching, with three or four generations living there."

When Bud saw the historic P.P. Cobb building on Indian River Drive for sale, he was afraid it would be torn down. His answer - he walked into the bank and bought the building. Bud is also quick to provide his ranch, especially the famous tree house area, as a spot for charity and community group events. He and Dot also attend virtually every Main Street Fort Pierce event.

"Bud and Dot are such humble people, very generous, very nice," says Main Street executive director Doris Tillman. "Bud is quiet about what he does for the community."

The Adams Ranch includes the 26,000-acre St. Lucie County ranch and 65,000 acres in total, including ranch land in Osceola and Okeechobee counties. At any given time, more than 10,000 mother cows, 500-600 bulls and 16,000-18,000 calves populate all the Adams ranch land, with about a third of these roaming the vast expanse of western St. Lucie County, unbeknownst to the majority of county residents. When ready for market, the cows are shipped mostly by truck to Texas, Kansas, and Colorado.

Bud comes and goes as he pleases today - his son Mike is president of the family corporation, son Lee runs the big ranch in Osceola, son Rob runs the citrus operation and Buddy Adams, no relation, manages the St. Lucie ranch.

Bud lives in the same house he had built in 1949-50 for his new bride. It's a one-story, three-bedroom home nestled among towering live oak trees about a minute's drive from the ranch office.

Why didn't this prosperous rancher ever build a mansion somewhere on his vast acreage as his fortunes improved over the years?

"I love my house, I don't need a different one," says the ever-unassuming Bud. "It was designed by a young architect from the well-known Fort Pierce firm of William Wesley Hatcher and he did a great job. He made it hurricane proof with a flat roof and he designed the porch so that the sun never hits it in the summer and always warms it in the winter. The breezes blow through so that we only need one air conditioner in the master bedroom."

The son of a lawyer, Alto Adams Sr., Bud was born in Fort Pierce in 1926. In 1937, when he was 11 years old, his father bought the 15,000 acres, which became the Adams Ranch. The land was open range, so the first job was to fence it.

In 1939, Bud's dad went on the Florida Supreme Court for the first time and sold his cattle, but not the ranch, to Irlo Bronson, one of the biggest cattlemen in Florida during the 1930s and '40s. Bronson owned cows in a 100-mile stretch from Orlando almost to Okeechobee. Just a teenager, Bud went to work for the Bronson operation, where he learned how to be a cowboy from the skilled ranch hands.

"I thought I knew everything there was to know about being a cowboy, but I didn't," Bud laughs. '

While his dad was serving on the high court, Bud graduated from Leon High School in Tallahassee in June 1944. One week later, he was called into the Navy for officer training at Emory University in Atlanta before serving in North Carolina as World War II wound down. Following his discharge, Bud sped through the University of Florida in just three years. Surprisingly, his major was not agriculture, but business administration and economics.

"I knew even then that the ranch was a business and would have to be run as a business if it was to be a success," Bud says.

Following graduation, he took over the ranch in 1948 in partnership with his dad, and has been involved with its management as partner or CEO and largest shareholder ever since. The ranch became a family-owned corporation in

1963, when his sons joined the business.

Bud's dad left the state supreme court to go into the insurance business but then was appointed to a second term on the high court. Although he liked living on the ranch and eventually retired there, he never really wanted to run it.

Bud, on the other hand, never considered doing anything else, and his dad was very supportive.

In all, four generations of Adams have gone to the University of Florida, including Bud's dad, Bud, all three sons and some of the grandchildren. When it came time for marriage, however, Bud strayed into enemy territory. In 1947, Bud met Florida State student Dorothy Snively, who was visiting a friend of Bud's at a fraternity house on the UF campus. Buds says Dot was from "civilized society" in Winter Haven. Despite her upbringing, Dot agreed to move to the ranch when they married in 1949.

Bud says they were the first white people in the area previously inhabited only by Seminole Indians.

The ranch has always made a profit, with every dollar going back into the business. Bud says the ranch is run just as it would have been in the late 1800s with all the cattle handled by cowboys on horseback and very little machinery.

"We want our investment to be in land and cattle, not machinery that can rust," Bud says. "We outsource- that kind of work."

They used to conduct cross-country cattle drives just as in the Old West, driving the cattle 35 miles to the Kissimmee River. The cows swam across and the cowboys from another ranch picked them up on the west bank and drove them cross country to Tampa. Those days are over now, and the cattle move mostly by truck and sometimes trains and planes.

Bud made a major name for himself early on when he came up with the idea for crossbreeding Herefords and Brahmans to produce Braford cattle in 1948. These cattle not only provide longevity, fertility and milking ability, they are very tolerant of heat, making them perfect for the Florida climate. The Adams Ranch Braferd herd was named the foundation herd for the entire United States, beginning in 1969. In 1990, the ranch began a new composite breeding program to produce a new type of beef cattle to provide even higher quality meat.

For environmentalists, the Adams ranch has become the gold standard for the industry, winning numerous awards for its land, water and wildlife management. For Bud, using nature and depending on biological control, rather than sprays, are both good for business and good for the environment.

It's all in the balance. The ranch keeps its waters very clean so fish thrive. The fish eat the mosquitoes so no spray is needed. Trees are not cut, so birds flock to the ranch and also eat insects. As a result, the grass thrives without spraying. Through the use of reservoirs which collect water when it's rainy and feed it out when it's dry, the grass is green even in drought conditions. The cattle eat the grass and keep' the brush down, reducing the fire hazard. Predators like foxes catch the rodents and the snakes.

The clean watershed Bud provides is good for the entire community by keeping clean aquifers and wells to feed the cities.

"As Florida grows, it's important to maintain good water," Bud says.

Deer are plentiful and reproduce fast.

To control the herd size and also provide another source of income, Bud has built several hunting lodges and grants hunting leases, again combining good wildlife management with good business.

The Adams Ranch will always be a ranch, thanks to a deal Bud has cut under The Rural Land Stewardship Act passed by the Florida Legislature to preserve agricultural lands, ranches and groves. In exchange for a developer being allowed

to create a new town on a nearby ranch, Bud and his descendents agree that their land can never be developed. They are paid the value of the land now, and the land loses its potential high speculative value for the future.

He is also well known as a skilled photographer. He keeps his camera in his truck at all times, ready to capture a few more award-winning shots around the ranch. He's published several books of his photos and currently he's working on a new volume about living on the same ranch for 69 years. It's a book of record, mainly for the family.

Why has he done it, living in the same place, staying in the same business for all these years? As always, Bud is straightforward.

"I like animals, I like family," Bud concludes. "It's a way to make money while doing what I enjoy."