

# A History of the Rise of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Florida

## **Sources**

**Church History Library**

**History of Deseret Ranches of Florida, 1950-1989; Donald Delos**

*Anyone with historical information about the rise of the Church is invited to share that information by sending it to this website and it will be added. Thanks. Hal Pierce*

## History of Deseret Ranches of Florida

This was the first land purchase by the Church as an investment and it has become one of the largest cattle ranches in the United States. It truly has become an excellent investment. The original land purchase occurred on 26 January 1950 and included 52,141 acres from Peavy-Wilson lumber company and the cost was \$6.70 per acre or \$350,000.

**Heber Meeks** was serving as the Southern States Mission President during 1947 when he was asked by **Henry D. Moyle** to investigate where the Church might purchase a large tract of land in the south. It would become part of the church owned Deseret Land & Livestock Company. Some on the board of the company felt the land would be under water much of the time and not suitable for grazing cattle. Land near Melbourne Florida was also recommended by Heber Meeks.

Heber Meeks located this large piece of property during 1949 southeast of Orlando and three men from Church headquarters came by train during January 1950 to look at the possible purchase. These men were Henry D. Moyle, **Joseph L. Wirthlin** (Church Presiding Bishop) and Lawrence McKay. President George Albert Smith approved the purchase. The property was at first purchased by Henry D. Moyle and the Church purchased it from Elder Moyle.

The land has become profitable for cattle and citrus production but extremely valuable as an investment because of the growth in the area which has included a large purchase of land west of Orlando by the Walt Disney Company.

It grew to 300,000 acres later before 16,000 acres were sold bringing the ranch to 284,000 acres. The land had no fencing or roads and included swamps, lakes, wiregrass, palmettos, trees, very large snakes and alligators among other things.

Henry D. Moyle who later became a member of the First Presidency under David O. McKay was the person responsible for instigating the purchase of the property.

When Heber Meeks was released from his mission call (1948) he was asked to remain in the south and later became General Manger of the ranch. There was one good home on the property and it became the Heber Meeks family home. In February 1952 Heber Meeks was replaced by **Henry C. Jorgenson**.

One of the first employees on the ranch was James R. Crosby whose son Gene later worked for the ranch.

The ranch's first cattle of 7000 head were purchased from "Whiskey" **John Parin** of Kissimmee Florida for \$75 per head. They were weak and sickly but had

become accustomed to the hot humid weather of the area and gave birth to calves most anytime of the year. 4000 head were purchased from the original owners of the property.

During the spring of 1952 12 families arrived from Wells and Elko Nevada which was the largest cattle growing area in the United States at that time. They had been recruited by the ranch for their experience but told they must leave everything behind when they moved and expect to stay. The family names were **Opal Hammond, Wilford Hutchinson, Golden Hyde, Gayle Hyde, David Hawkins, Morris Justesen, Dean Bake, Alfred Bake, Albert McGinnis, Ernie Daniels, Eural Bake, and Arnold Paskett.** They arrived in July 1952 but within 2 years all but the Justesen and Hawkins families had returned to the west with the ranch paying their expenses to move back.

A new General Manager from Queen Creek Arizona named **Leo Ellsworth** had decided to reduce the number of men working with the cattle from 23 to 5 which resulted in a dispute that helped drive some away. Some had not sold their property in Nevada as instructed to do. Some years later **Michael Justesen** was transferred to a new Church owned ranch in Oklahoma.

A small new Branch of the Church was organized during the mid-1950s with **Thurl Tew** as the first Branch President. They met in a warehouse near the office at the ranch. Later this Branch became the Ellsworth Ward.

An effective public relations effort has been an on-going steak barbeque with local ranchers and town officials invited.

For a time two interim managers have been Henry D. Moyle and **Walter Dansie.**