

CRACKER

By Dana Ste. Clair

Cracker: A self-reliant, independent, and tenacious settler of the Deep South, often of Celtic stock, who subsisted by farming, fishing, or raising livestock and, as a general rule, valued personal independence and a restraint-free life over material prosperity. Cracker settlers provided a spirited foundation for the peopling of the rural South and Florida.



What cracker is this same that deafes our ears with this abundance of superfluous breath. Indeed, what Cracker is this that William Shakespeare describes in *King John* in 1594? Surely not the Cracker of today, but the reference is very telling of the age-old history of the word, one that spans at least five centuries. The Bard used the word to describe someone who was full of hot air...a braggart, a boaster, a big shot. Back then it was a character trait, and not a likeable one; today it is the name given to a people and their culture.

The once-lowly Cracker has come up in the world. Festivals now embrace the Cracker tradition, and literary workshops pour over the colorful history of the people. Bona fide scholars have launched the Cracker into the academic world. In colleges and universities around the country, Crackers are now recognized for their important contributions to the making of Florida—and much of the South. Architects have even given formal definition to the Cracker style. It seems that the curse of the ignorant hayseed faction, as they once were labeled, has been lifted. Being Cracker is no longer a social burden; it's downright fashionable.

The study of Cracker history and culture has taught us much about who these tenacious settlers were and are. But we still have more to learn—such as exactly when the Cracker culture emerged in the South and diffused into Florida. We do know that by the early 1700s, the first of the Cracker frontiersmen had already entered *La Florida* as illegal migrants. It was probably during this period that "cracker" or a similar form of the word began to be used to describe a class of people rather than a character trait. By the 1760s, "cracker" in its new form was commonly employed by the gentry, especially those in the coastal regions, as an ethnic slur for Scotch-Irish frontiersmen in

the South. Eighteenth-century documents describe these renegade settlers as rootless, unruly, stubborn, and corrupt. To some, "cracker" and "criminal" were synonymous. During the 1760s, the term identified loosely organized gangs of horse thieves, counterfeiters, and slave-nappers—surely one of the first criminal syndicates in America.

In 1767, the Rollestown settlement near present-day Palatka was described by Henry Laurens as "Mr. Rolle's Crackertown," a poke at founder Denys Rolle's attempt to form his colony using English riffraff, mostly vagrants, debtors, beggars, and pickpockets. As Ronald W. Haase, author of *Classic Cracker*, aptly puts it, "The first-generation Florida Cracker was not a pillar of society."

No doubt this rough-and-ready quality was an asset on the wild Florida frontier. Life in the backwoods was tough. These early frontiersmen spent most of their time finding food and other necessities required for survival. They had to make do in a subtropical wilderness without such modern luxuries as air-conditioners, refrigerators, indoor plumbing, electric lights, window screens, bug spray, motorized vehicles—or even towns, for that matter. There was a time when they had to eat anything they could get their hands on, including gopher tortoises, freshwater turtles they called "cooters," frogs, snails, raccoons, and opossums. They also searched out wild "poke weed" and eventually were able to grow corn, greens, and other vegetables.

They sheltered themselves in a mix of structures, from their early makeshift campsites in the woods to wooden houses with colorful architectural names like Single-Pen, Saddlebag, Dogtrot, and Shotgun (a shack in which all rooms are in direct line with each other, so that a shot fired from the front porch could exit through the back door without hitting anything in the house).

Their payoff for pioneering Florida was personal independence. To Crackers everywhere, a restraint-free life was far more important than material prosperity or work. This outlook was often viewed as laziness by outsiders who did not understand the Cracker way of life. Cracker families did not amass possessions. The few goods they owned were usually homemade, rarely "store-boughten," because Crackers seldom had the money to buy things. Typically, items like cloth, tools, and cooking pots were used until they wore out, which explains why little of their material culture has survived today for study.

But Crackers did value cattle. By the early 1800s, they started to round up and brand herds of cattle that foraged in the Florida wilds. Many Crackers were attracted to the cowhunter lifestyle, which was lonely and hard, but well suited

to the rugged existence they already knew well. Cattle drives lasting months meant forays into remote marshes and dense scrub forests and encounters with snakes and wolves, stampedes, torrential thunderstorms, searing heat, and swarms of mosquitoes.

Cattle ranged free of fences across endless miles of Florida swamps, palmetto prairies, and woods. The cattle—direct descendants of Andalusian cows brought by Spanish explorers in the 1700s—were hardy, gaunt, and mean. They were bred to withstand tropical heat, insect bites, and sparse native forage. Even Cracker ponies, called marshtackies, had bloodlines going back to the Andalusian breeds of the Spanish conquistadors.

Cracker cowmen developed cattle-raising into Florida's first industry. To this day, many people believe that Crackers got their name because of one of the techniques cowhunters used to herd cattle: "cracking" long, braided, rawhide whips in the air. Appropriately enough, Robert O'Hara, a linguistics professor at the University of South Florida, refers to these convenient word associations as "horseback etymologies."

The meaning of the word "cracker" changed for the better by the beginning of the 20th century. Perhaps because of the success of the cattlemen and the other pioneer settlers in Florida, it became a regionally affectionate term. It was even used to name several baseball teams in the South. Around 1914, the DeLand Crackers were among Florida's earliest and best baseball teams; and the longtime nickname of a minor-league team in Atlanta was the Crackers. The naming of Crackertown in Levy County was a riposte to nearby Yankeetown by a proud group of Crackers on the coast.

The positive connotation for "cracker" continued through the first half of the century. But by the 1950s, the term once again became a pejorative, eroding into a racial slur for bigoted backwoods Southern whites. In many areas, the term is still generally thought an offensive one and, in some cases, is considered a racial epithet that is a violation under the Florida Hate Crimes Act. In 1991, the Highlands County School Board was embroiled in controversy over the proposed name of a new school, Cracker Trail Elementary. Many locals took offense at the name, claiming that the word "cracker" was an insult. Whites complained that it was a disparaging term for poor whites, and one black parent suggested that it was anti-black. In the end, the board decided to keep the name, pointing out that it had been derived from an important part of the community's history, the Cracker Trail, a route used by early Florida cowhunters to drive their cattle.

"Cracker" has long been a racial slur used by African Americans as a contemptuous term for the Southern white. In the early 19th century, Southern slaves and free blacks used the African word *buckras* to refer to whites, but by the mid-century "cracker" had become the preferred term.

Today, there are many Floridians who call themselves Crackers with great pride. In the 1970s—especially after the election of Georgia native Jimmy Carter to the presidency in 1976—many "reborn" Crackers emerged, all proud to claim and express their Southern heritage. Lawton Chiles, a Polk County native who served as a Florida legislator throughout the 1960s and as a U.S. senator through the '70s and '80s, celebrated his Cracker heritage during his two terms as governor of Florida, 1990–1998.

This heritage has also been celebrated in the arts. Florida novelist Patrick Smith is renowned for his many books, especially *A Land Remembered*, which chronicles three generations of a Cracker pioneer family. Florida's rich repository of folk music abounds with references to Crackers and what they stand for.

Still, there are places in the state where the word "cracker" should be used with care. Abraham Lincoln once made a statement to the effect that no matter how much you respect the common man, never call a man common to his face; and I imagine the same thing applies to Crackers in some areas. Allen Morris, longtime clerk of the Florida House of Representatives who wrote the syndicated, statewide newspaper column *Cracker Politics*, suggested that it might be prudent to accompany the nickname with a smile.

But no matter how you catalogue them or in what manner you explain them, Crackers will always be the people, the cultural group, who provided the very foundation on which rural Florida was settled. Their colorful legacy endures.

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