

The Church's Ranch

The Mormon church runs one of the biggest and most profitable cattle operations in the U.S. on a 300,000-acre ranch covering parts of Orange, Brevard and Osceola counties.

By Cynthia Barnett

Just after a September dawn on the Deseret Ranch in central Florida, cowboys on horseback crack long leather whips to set hundreds of calves charging toward a sprawling complex of pens and runs. Once corralled, the animals let loose a cacophony of moos and bays. The cowboys, too, holler out as they position themselves along a tall, wooden maze to sort calves by size and type into one of five pens.

One cowboy prods calves quickly through a gate. As each calf thunders down a narrow alley, another cowboy calls out a number, one through five. This tells the next cowboy, positioned atop a "turnaround," which of five doors to swing open to direct the calf into the right pen. From the pens, the calves will be run through another alley onto a huge scale for weighing. Then they'll be rushed along again onto 18-wheel cattle trucks idling nearby that will haul them to feedlots or pastures in Texas, Oklahoma or Kansas.

By 9 a.m., the men have sorted 500 calves. By the end of the day, they'll

have moved a total of 1,944 calves weighing 963,710 pounds onto 20 trucks. "This is payday," says Kevin Mann, the cowboy atop the turnaround. "This is what we work toward all year long."

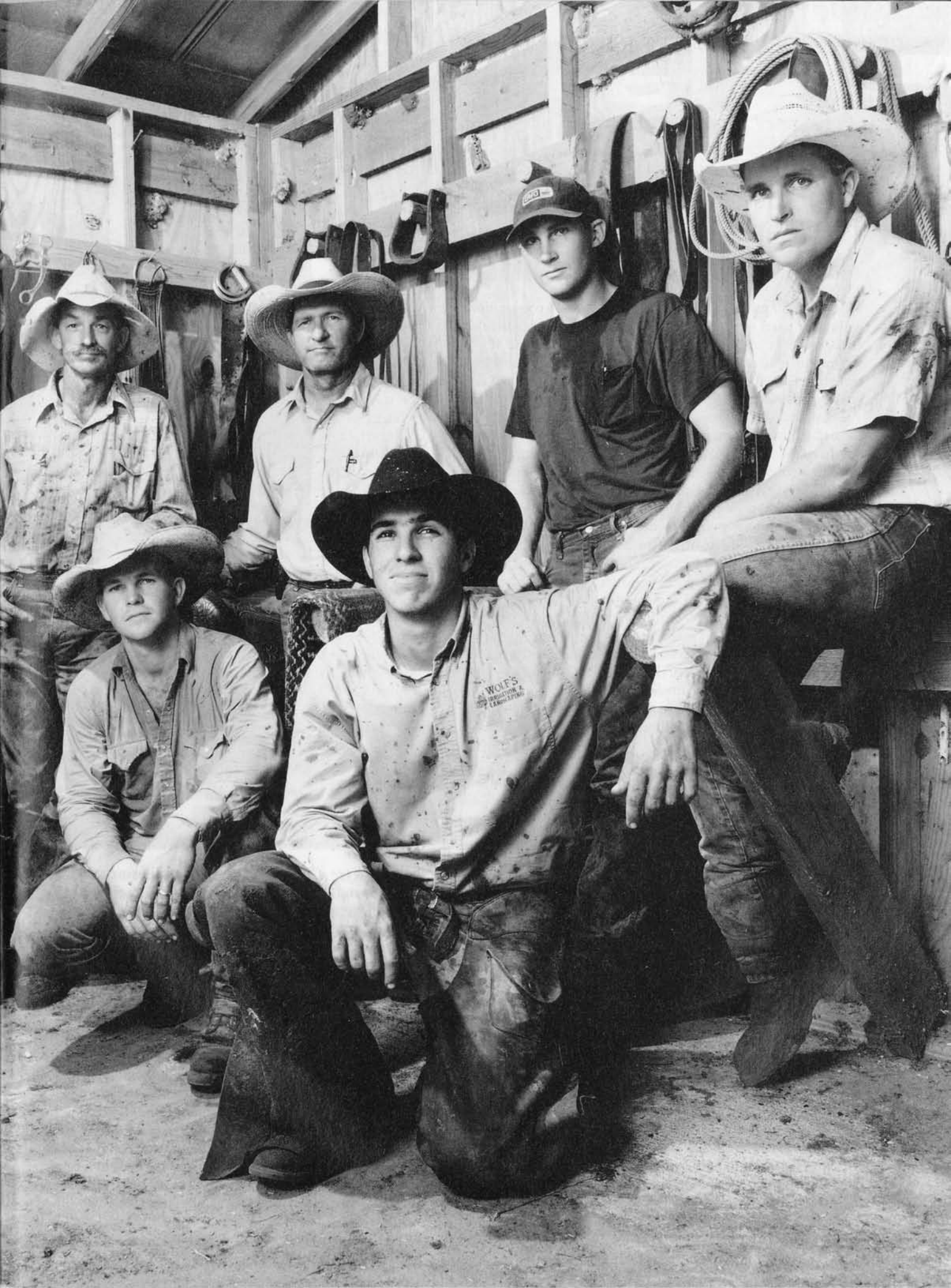
The ranch won't disclose financial information, but last year it moved more than 16 million pounds of calves — they are sold by weight, not by the animal — which translated into about \$16 million in revenues. For a cattle ranch, those numbers are huge, and not just by the standards of central Florida or even the cattle industry statewide. Deseret Ranch is the largest cow-calf operation in the U.S., with 44,000 head of cattle on 300,000 acres. Seen on a map of Florida, the sprawling ranch dwarfs neighboring metro Orlando,

The Cowboy Way

The ranch employs both Mormon and non-Mormon cowboys, but they all play by the church's rules: No coffee in offices; no alcohol in common areas. And the swimming hole closes on Sundays.

Photography by Burk Uzzle





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stretching 50 miles long and 30 miles wide over parts of three counties: Orange, Osceola and Brevard. Its northwestern tip is 10 miles from Orlando International Airport. Its southeastern tip stretches almost to Palm Bay.

But despite its size and its stature in the nation's cattle industry, most Floridians have never heard of Deseret Ranch. "We like to keep a low profile," says general manager Ferren Squires.

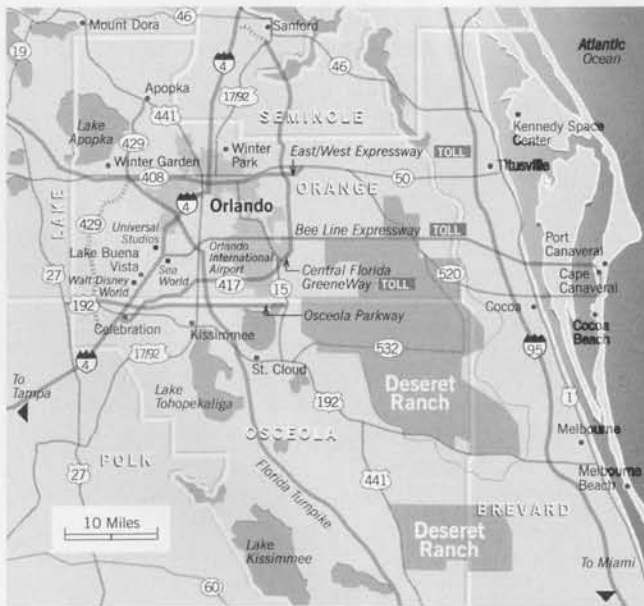
That profile is in keeping with the business style of the ranch's owner, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — the Mormon Church. The fastest-growing church in the U.S., with a 4.7% annual growth rate, the church is also by far the richest per capita. While its media guide states innocuously that "the church has a limited number of commercial properties and investments," a *Time* magazine financial analysis of the church in 1997 pegged its assets at a minimum of \$30 billion. If it

were a corporation, the magazine found, the church would fall in the middle of the Fortune 500 — below Union Carbide and PaineWebber, but bigger than Nike and the Gap. Among others, the church runs media, insurance, travel and real estate companies along with agribusiness operations. In Florida, besides Deseret Ranch, the church also operates tomato and citrus farms in Ruskin, Naples and Clewiston.

The church's success in business is very much rooted in its history, scholars of Mormonism say. Members faced extreme ostracism and poverty before they made their trek from Illinois to Salt Lake City in 1847, the same year Brigham Young wrote that "the kingdom of God cannot rise independent of Gentile nations until we produce, manufacture and make every article of use, convenience or necessity among our people." Once in Utah, the Mormons' isolation forced them to build their own farms, factories and railroads. As they struggled through the Great Depression, they also began to build their famous welfare system, the largest non-public venture of its kind in the nation.

The church will not reveal precisely how it spends the money it takes in from its businesses and from members' tithing contributions — 10% of their incomes. But it says it uses the greatest portion to build churches. The rest is spent on worldwide humanitarian aid for which the church is well-known; its vast educational system, which includes Brigham Young University, and long-term investments in its private ventures.

Like its grain and other food-manufacturing opera-



Land, Lots of Land

The ranch's 300,000 acres in the fast-growing central Florida region will come under increasing development pressure.

Church-going cowboy

Deeply tanned and covered in a fine layer of dust, Squires, 47, wears Wrangler jeans on skinny hips and drives his



Ford F-250 at breakneck speed along the graded roads of the ranch. Down-to-earth and quick to smile, Squires seems like the prototypical cowboy. But he wears many other hats: A father of six, Squires speaks Japanese, a result of a proselytizing mission to Japan as a young man. He holds a master's degree in agricultural business from BYU, is a former official with the Mormons' massive welfare headquarters in Salt Lake City and serves on the presidential council of the church's Cocoa "stake" — a Mormon organizational unit similar to a diocese.

Granting a rare tour, Squires drives along mile after mile of sprawling pastureland dotted with stands of palm trees and thick oaks. Only a sliver of the ranch, the eastern edge along the

St. Johns River, is still densely wooded. Deseret is divided into 14 "units," each with a couple of thousand cows and its own complex of pens, a barn and a cowboy office. The cowboys spend time on laptop computers as well as on horseback, entering every detail of their calves' lives: The calves are born in January, February and March; summer is spent fattening them up and keeping them healthy; fall is the "payday" that Mann describes.

In the middle of the property, Squires pulls up to an old cracker house with hardwood floors, a stone fireplace and a wrap-around screened-in porch where ceiling fans turn lazily in the afternoon heat. The house serves as Deseret's history center and as temporary home to

On the Hoof

Calf prices have dipped recently from about \$1 per pound to around 85 cents. The ranch's production costs are about 62 cents a pound. Last year, it sold about 16 million pounds of calves.

one of the five retired Mormon couples that volunteer on the ranch. The living room is furnished with brown leather couches, along with a stuffed Osceola turkey, wild boar and white-tailed deer. The book "Florida Cowman" shares the coffee table with The Book of Mormon. A stand in one corner of the room holds a handsome old saddle and whip; a stand in the other holds a guitar and songbook open to Mormon hymns. On the walls hang photos of famous Mormons,



Head Cowpoke

The ranch's manager, Ferren Squires, a father of six, has a master's degree in agricultural business and speaks Japanese as the result of a proselytizing mission to that country.

including a number of cattlemen.

After a visit to the Sunshine State in 1949, western cattleman and church leader Henry D. Moyle became convinced that Florida's climate would make it an ideal place to raise cattle. (The key to the industry, as uncomplicated as it may seem, is growing grass.) Moyle pitched his idea for a Florida ranch to fellow members of the church's first presidency — the Mormons' worldwide leadership council. The council bought the original 54,000-acre tract in 1950. In 1952, a dozen Mormon families sold their homes out west and moved to the property to help the church turn wetlands and tangled forests into roads and pasturelands.

It took nearly 50 years, but Deseret's managers eventually proved Moyle right. By cross-breeding cows for speedy

growth, good reproduction and climate tolerance and by developing and perfecting grasses for central Florida, they have achieved some of the highest weights — and therefore some of the highest profits — in the industry. Deseret Ranch's average weaning weight — a calf's weight at nine months, when it can be weaned and sold — has increased from 300 pounds in 1981 to 546 pounds last year. Statewide, the average is closer to 450 pounds, says Jim Handley, executive vice president of the Florida Cattlemen's Association.

Today's going market price is around 85 cents a pound — down from about \$1 a pound earlier this year but up from 65 cents during an industry slump three years ago. According to Squires, Deseret spends about 62 cents to produce each pound it sells.

At the University of Florida in Gainesville, animal science professor emeritus Alvin C. Warnick says the church has achieved some of the highest profits in the industry because of its long-term commitment to the ranch — and its deep pockets. The ranch's heavy, healthy calves are a result of lots of years and lots of money spent on ultrasensitive genetics and breeding work, he says. "They have earned a reputation for calves that turn out good carcasses, grade well and do well in the feedlots," Warnick says. "Their buyers are repeat buyers from all over the country."

The ranch's size and success help it attract some of the top animal-scientist graduates in the nation, Warnick says. Several of the cowboys hold bachelor's or master's degrees. The church puts a premium on its workforce and manages with an employee-centered philosophy. Most of Deseret's 80 employees live on the ranch, which has 65 tidy homes scattered over its acreage. Pay is at or higher than the industry average, and the ranch offers profit-sharing as well as professional-development programs.

The Mormons, big on big families, are also big on family perks: The ranch hires employees' children in a work program each summer and sponsors a pay-for-grades program that gives cash to employees' kids on the A-B honor role. Other family amenities include horseback riding and an elaborate swimming hole with wooden docks, diving platforms, slides and rope swings.

Squires says while a good portion of Deseret's employees are Mormon, the ranch is an equal-opportunity employer. Still, non-Mormon employees clearly have to accept a work culture dominated by Mormons. There isn't a coffee machine to be found in ranch offices. No alcohol is allowed in common areas. Single employees can't have overnight guests of the opposite sex. And the swimming hole's closed on Sundays.

Back at the cattle drive, Kevin Mann, a non-Mormon cowboy who lives on the ranch, says Deseret's religious underpinnings made him leery of working



The church acknowledges it will likely sell fringe areas for development but says it plans to keep the bulk of the land agricultural.

there, but its reputation persuaded him to give it a try. Five years later, he says, he's glad he did — as much for the career opportunities as for the community that his wife and two young daughters enjoy. "You wonder if they're going to hound you, but they never have," Mann says of the Mormons' reputation for proselytizing. "The best side to it is that they're very family-oriented, so it's a great place to raise your kids even if you're not Mormon."

The ranch's neighbors, too, give it high marks. The ranch is among the biggest taxpayers in Osceola County. (The church pays taxes on all its private businesses and in fact has a policy of not accepting government subsidies, including farm subsidies. The policy is related to the church's welfare program, whose basis is "individual self-reliance, not a handout that might rob the receiver of self-respect.")

Osceola County Commissioner Chuck Dunnick describes Deseret as benevolent to the surrounding community, professional in its dealings with local government and a good steward of the environment. The ranch has its own staff of wildlife biologists and has worked with state and local agencies on a progressive wildlife-management plan, Dunnick says. "They've been very quiet over the years, but if they do want to talk about an issue, you know they're going to be highly professional and well-prepared," he says. "They're great neighbors. If you could pick your own neighbors, I'd definitely pick them."

Ecclesiastical entrepreneurship

While the church is committed to stewardship of the land, it is just as committed to squeezing profits out of its private companies. And eventually, those two missions are sure to clash on this prime central Florida property. Real estate sources estimate Deseret's spread is worth some \$900 million,

though the assessed agricultural value is far lower than that. For decades, the family cattle ranches that once made up Osceola and outlying Orange counties have been gobbled up by housing developments — a pattern that's repeating itself throughout Florida and the nation. But because the church is so rich, it has not yet buckled to pressure to sell any of its Florida land to developers. Ten years ago, the church backed off a plan to develop 7,000 acres near the Bee Line Expressway under sharp criticism from environmentalists.

Often at odds in other parts of the country over issues such as animal waste and grazing, the tree-huggers and the cowpokes in central Florida

have for now become allies. For example, environmentalists helped Deseret fight a huge landfill Brevard County wanted to put adjacent to the ranch. That area is also home to one of the largest bird rookeries in the state.

Squires says the church's long-term plans for the majority of Deseret Ranch are to keep it agricultural. But he acknowledges the business-savvy church will develop the fringes — particularly its property outside Orlando — as the land becomes more valuable. "The pressure is here," Squires says. "But we want to be responsible and be good neighbors." It's in his church's ecclesiastical and entrepreneurial missions to do so, he says. □



Mission

Mormons say their beliefs call for them to be self-reliant; the ranch's manager says beef from the ranch could help feed people in the event of a catastrophe.