

to play his fiddle for the all-night dances in the Buckhorn Saloon in Immokalee.

Most of the ranch as it exists today was transformed by Frank Pepper and his family. The land was farmed by tenants, growing peppers, corn, melons and more. Hunting was a favorite pastime, with quail the primary target. The rule on the ranch was that if you killed it, you would have to eat it.

One of Frank's sons-in-law ran the cattle operation, buying calves from dairies for fattening and later sale. The JP Lewis family, jacks of all trades, who lived on the property, helped with the round ups as well as farming and hunting. Cattle were driven to and sold at Sears, a now abandoned town near Felda in Lee County. Pines and Cabbage palms were harvested on the ranch until 12-15 years ago.



Present day oil well— Staff Photo

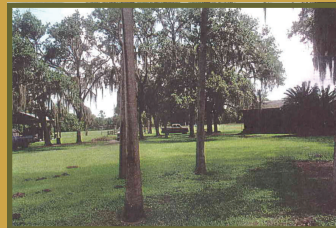
Oil exploration and extraction began in 1987. Oil rights for two quarter-sections remain privately owned and active extraction operations are ongoing. The remainder of the oil, gas and mineral rights are now held by Collier County.

Life at the ranch could be idyllic, but also dangerous and inconvenient. Hurricanes, floods and drought were a constant danger during the summer months with little advance warning. There was no hospital. Medical emergencies were handled by the

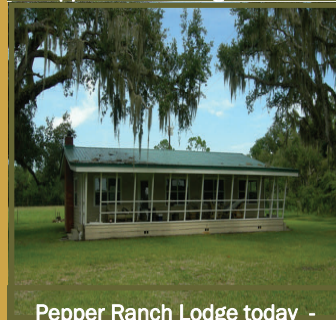
local veterinarian. Joyce Pepper Hearn recalls her daughter being bitten by a dog, leaving her eyelid torn, and having her father drive them to the vet's office where it was sewn back up.

The citizens of Collier County are now the owners of the historic Pepper Ranch, which was acquired by the Conservation Collier Program in February, 2009. While the ranch was acquired primarily for its environmental richness, there is also an historic and archeological story to this land. The story of the Pepper family and Pepper Ranch is intertwined with and inseparable from the history of Immokalee and Collier County. The Conservation Collier Program would like to thank the Pepper family for their generosity in sharing the story of their family with residents and visitors to Southwest Florida.

**Please call staff at 239-252-2961 for hours of operation.**

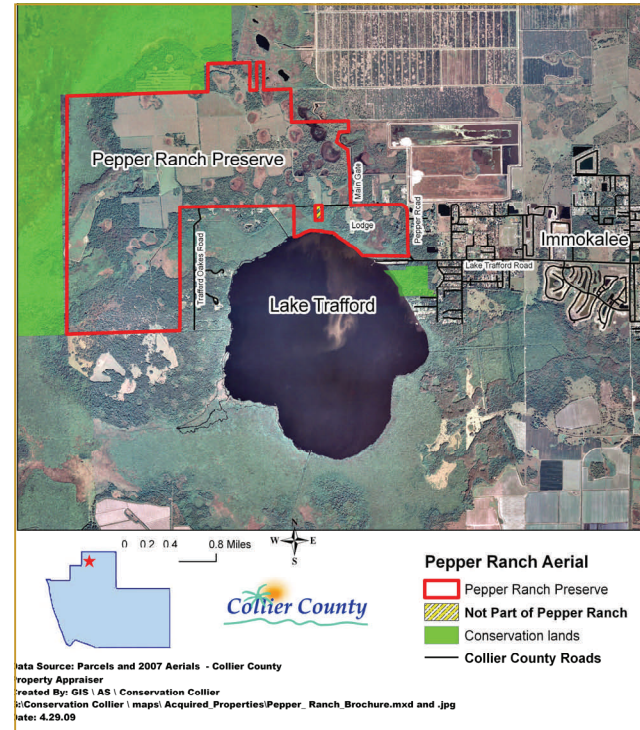


Pepper Ranch Lodge—built in



Pepper Ranch Lodge today -

*Please enjoy the preserve and remember, "take only pictures and leave only footprints"*



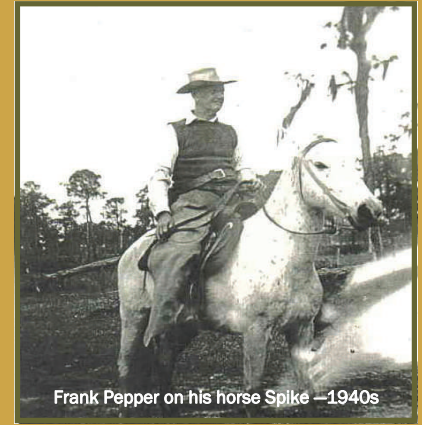
Historic photos courtesy of the Pepper Family Archives

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# Pepper Ranch Preserve

*A Conservation Collier Property*



Frank Pepper on his horse Spike—1940s

The **Pepper Ranch Preserve** is located in northeastern Collier County west of the town of Immokalee and is approximately 2,512-acres in size. Acquired by Collier County in Feb. 2009 primarily for its significant environmental attributes, the Ranch also provides an historical view into the lifestyle of a Florida ranching family in the early part of the twentieth century.

Frank Jefferson Pepper was born in Cherry Creek, Nevada in 1880, one of five children of James M. and Emma (Geyer) Pepper. James was a rancher, who followed his fortunes west, on the way meeting up with many of the colorful characters of the western frontier, including Jesse James and Wyatt Earp.



Pepper Family at Lake Trafford—1950's

His son, Frank, received a high school education in St. Joseph, MO and began his career in the engineering firm of a Chicago railroad company. He was soon promoted to management and transferred around Missouri to run various railroad operations. He came to Miami in 1907 with a sick wife and small child, on doctor's orders to find a warmer climate. Arriving in Miami with just a few dollars in his pocket, family members recall that he fished in the Miami River to feed his family.

Frank began working for Henry Flagler as a surveyor with the Florida East Coast Extension Railroad. In June 1910, he started working with Frederick Morse, agent for the Florida East Coast Railroad. Upon Mr. Morse's death in 1920, Frank Pepper and a partner, B.S. Potter, assumed control of the business. Pepper & Potter conducted their own general real estate business and also represented the interests of Henry Flagler and other large corporations of the day. During his working life, Mr. Pepper managed to acquire significant land holdings.

Joyce Pepper Hearn, Frank's daughter, recalls that her mother would tell how her wedding ring was more often off than on, as Frank pawned it for capital



Frank on fiddle, Jim on guitar and Joyce at the piano - Late 1950's

to make his land deals. When the profit was made, the ring returned to her hand. Frank Pepper was also one of the founders and owners of the Royal Palm Club and along with others had started the Gulfstream Racetrack, both in Miami.

Frank Pepper acquired the Pepper Ranch property in 1926 as collateral on an unpaid debt. At the time he acquired it, there was an existing fishing camp on the shore of Lake Trafford. Frank's brother Jim and Jim's wife Jesse operated the fishing camp until the 1950's when Jim died. Jesse cooked the fishermen's catches along with biscuits and pies and became known for her good cooking. Word got around and soon the whole town was coming out to the camp for Sunday dinner! Jim Pepper was also a Baptist Minister. He founded the 1st Baptist Church in Immokalee, now located at the Immokalee Pioneer Museum at the Roberts Ranch, a Collier County Museum facility.

Frank's family remained in Miami, but came to the ranch every several weeks to escape city life. The family built a small pier onto the lake south of the current lodge, with a cabin at the end where they could relax and fish. Hurricane Donna destroyed the pier and

cabin in 1960. The photo above shows the family enjoying an afternoon of music in Jim's cabin.

In the early 1930's Lake Trafford was a clear, sandy bottom lake filled with bass and brim. Covering 1,600 acres, it is today the largest freshwater lake south of Lake Okeechobee and serves as the headwaters for the Corkscrew Marsh complex. Based on emerging archeological records, humans have lived and fished at Lake Trafford for thousands of years. There are several known Native-American "mounds" in the area and ancient canoes and other artifacts have recently come to light in and around the lake. The photo below is of Joyce Pepper Hearn in the 1950's, with her own catch of bigmouth black bass.



Joyce Pepper Hearn —1950's

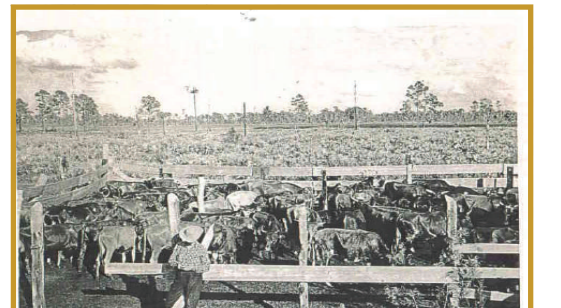


Joyce Pepper in a corn field — 1940's

In the mid 1940's Frank Pepper donated 10 acres of land to Collier County to be made into a park. The wrong 10 acres was mistakenly surveyed, and today Lake Trafford Marina and Anne Olesky Park sit on the wrongly surveyed site.

In the early days, the Pepper family rode by auto over from Miami via the Tamiami Trail, stopping to shoot gar fish in the canals along the way. Stopping in Everglades City, they would buy ice, strap it to the bumper and bring it to the cabin to preserve foods. Arriving on the old clay Immokalee Road, ice dripping, they would have to dodge the hogs and sleeping dogs to get to the ranch. In rainy season, they often got stuck in the ruts.

Frank Pepper was well known locally as a community leader and personality. He would often be called upon



Frank Pepper at the cattle pens—undated