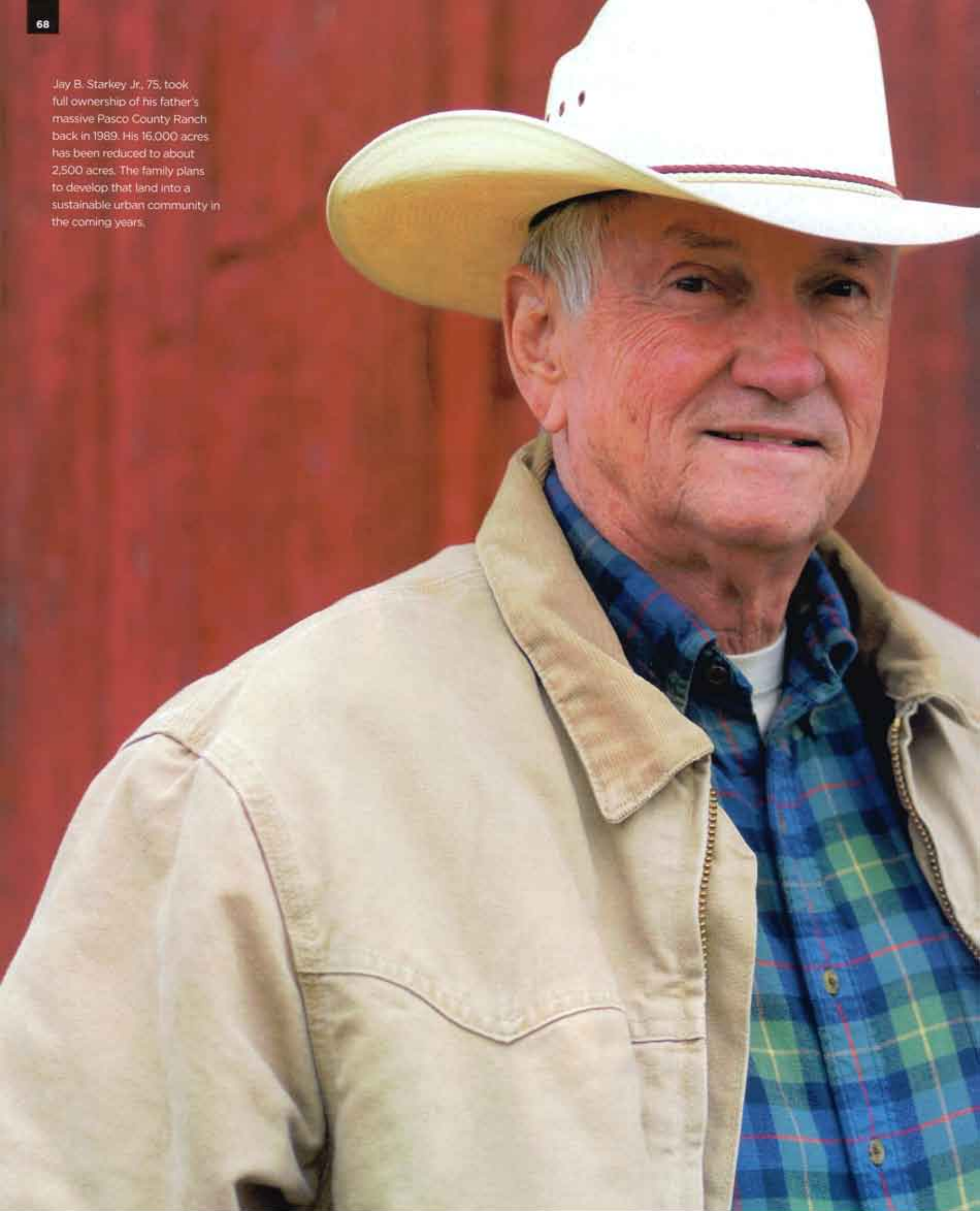


Jay B. Starkey Jr., 75, took full ownership of his father's massive Pasco County Ranch back in 1989. His 16,000 acres has been reduced to about 2,500 acres. The family plans to develop that land into a sustainable urban community in the coming years.



the starkey LEGACY

PART 2 OF 4 IN A SERIES ON FLORIDA'S CATTLE RANCHING HERITAGE

PHOTOS: GABRIEL BURGOS | **STORY:** ERIC SMITHERS | **DESIGN:** CHRISTY BEEGLE

Some of the Bay area's most prominent and wealthy families had their start in cattle ranching. Though Florida may be known for its beaches, orange groves and theme parks, the state once went neck and neck with Texas in cattle production. Today, more than 15,000 ranchers still call the Sunshine State home, a fact lost on many Floridians.

Like much of Florida at the start of the 20th Century, Tampa Bay was a major hub for cattle. Families such as the Starkeys, who owned land in Largo and Odessa, earned their living through hard work and long hours maintaining the herds. Much of Starkey's 16,000 acres were sold to the state, which preserved nearly half and designated a portion as Starkey Park. Rich in land, the family now owns approximately 2,500 acres of the remaining property and is looking to develop it into a sustainable urban development.

In the second of *blu's* four-part series on cattle ranching in Tampa Bay, we sat down with the Starkey family to discuss its history, Florida cowboys and the struggle of passing property from one generation to the next.

What is now Starkey Ranch was once known as C-S Ranch. The initials were used on brands and signified the partnership between the Pasco County's Cunningham Brothers and J.B. Starkey Sr.



AT THE INTERSECTION OF STARKEY AND ULMERTON ROADS THERE ARE TWO GAS STATIONS AND A BUDWEISER WAREHOUSE. THOUSANDS OF CARS PASS THROUGH THE MAJOR LARGO JUNCTION EVERY DAY, AND ITS CONSTANT CONGESTION IS A REGULAR TOPIC OF DISCUSSION ON MORNING TRAFFIC REPORTS.

But 80 years ago on this same stretch of land once called Ulmerton Ranch, livestock roamed free upon miles of unpaved earth and men spent their days hunting cows. Back then, there were no fences to confine the cattle. Instead, ranchers used a signature brand and let them wander.

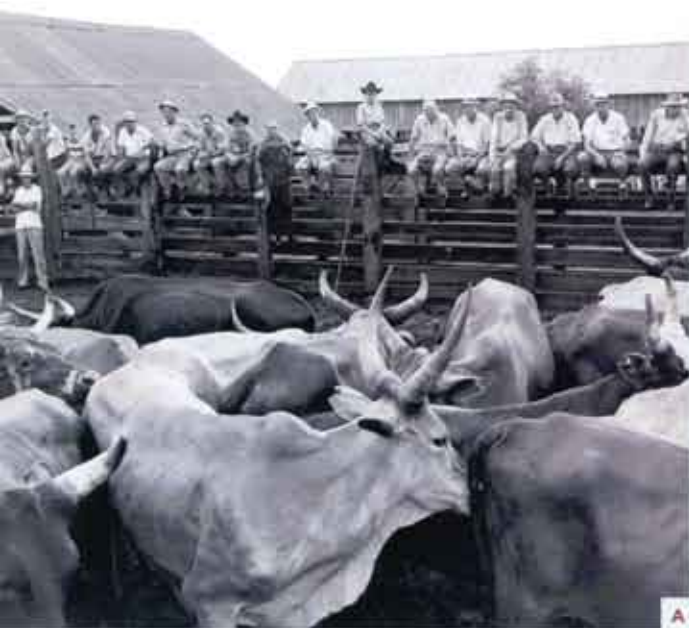
One of those men was Jay B. Starkey Sr., owner of Ulmerton Ranch and patriarch of the prominent Starkey family. Today most cattle ranches in the area—including Ulmerton Ranch—are long gone, but their legacies still remain.



Jay B. Starkey Jr., 75, remembers walking through the palmettos along what is now Starkey Road, cow hunting with his dog, pushing through leaves, losing himself in his family's land. He always had more of an emotional connection to it than his father, he recalls one chilly December day in Odessa.

Wearing a tan long-sleeved flannel shirt tucked into a pair of blue jeans, Starkey sits in his office overlooking what remains of the Pasco County ranch. In the early 1960s, the office was his home, the place he raised his four children. The building is now the ranch office and headquarters for his daughter Laura's nonprofit organization, SCENIC.

Starkey is a tall, slender man at about 6 feet and 4 inches. But he has a gentle, even welcoming presence. Though he holds more of an emotional attachment to the land than the elder Starkey did, he says his father was more pragmatic. Starkey Jr. says cattlemen are inherently practical folk. Wave enough money in their faces and odds are they'll listen. The truth is, today most ranchers aren't



A



B



E



C



D

A This photo was taken in 1946 during a demonstration by veterinarian Doc Swanson, who was showing ranchers how to battle horn flies. The infection killed many cows during the already lean winter season.

B This hay barn is often referred to as the scales barn. The structure is the original barn on the ranch and was used to weigh cattle before they were sold. The scales are still inside the barn and are used regularly.

C Thousands of cars every day pass through the intersection of Starkey and Ulmerton Roads. More than 80 years ago, the same stretch of land was called Ulmerton Ranch. J.B. Starkey Sr. sold his piece of land in Largo, but the legacy of these cattle pioneers still remains.

D Jay B. Starkey Jr. (left) with father J.B. Starkey Sr. in front of planted clover.

E J.B. Starkey's granddaughter, Laura Starkey, walks through her family's land to inspect the controlled burn sites and the condition of the longleaf pine trees. Laura is the founder of SCENIC, an organization she hopes will unite past and present Pasco County ranchers.

able to maintain their land with just a cattle operation. According to Starkey, during his father's time it was much different. He saw something more tangible in the property: cattle and financial security.

"Stocks and bonds go away, but land won't," Starkey Jr. says. "Even in bad times, you've still got it. Paper doesn't last."

In the 1920s, the elder Starkey, a former post office employee, bought his first 20 acres southeast of Largo for \$60. He wanted to be a cattle rancher, so he moved his family there and purchased more land whenever he had extra money.

In his prime, Starkey Sr. raised hogs and cattle on 665 acres. He called it Ulmerton Ranch. Today, commercial and residential buildings dot the area.

After World War I, cheap homes began sprouting up across Pinellas County like weeds and Starkey's property was too valuable for cattle operation. He knew Ulmerton Ranch would never last in Largo.

In 1937, Starkey partnered with the Cunningham Brothers from Pasco County and purchased 16,000 acres in Odessa. They named their land the C-S Ranch. Starkey sold his Largo property and watched as strip malls and suburbia took over.

"He didn't cry over it," Starkey Jr. says of his father's impression of Largo, "but he didn't particularly like it."

Oddly enough, Starkey had a buy-out agreement with the three Cunningham brothers that said if one of the four partners died, the remaining owners would have the option to buy or sell that person's share of the property. His



youth and health literally paid off in that transaction because Starkey, the youngest of the four men, outlived the others by several years.

He took full ownership of the land in 1956 when the last Cunningham brother passed away. Starkey Sr. renamed the property to Anclote River Ranch, and in the 1970s, sold roughly the north half of the land—about 8,000 acres—to the Southwest Florida Water Management District.

Starkey believed in conservation and keeping wilderness for future generations to enjoy. That legacy lives on at the Jay B. Starkey Wilderness Park and in the hearts of his family members. Starkey Sr. died in 1989 and his son has made sure his father's land isn't being treated the way Ulmerton Ranch was.

"I want a man to be able to bring his children and see it how I saw it, how God almighty made it," Starkey says of the J.B. Starkey Wilderness Park. "Without that there won't be any places to see natural Florida."



In the mid 1990s, the family sold another 3,500 acres to the Florida Department of Transportation, which needed mitigation credits for its construction of the Suncoast Parkway. The land served two purposes in that swap: it allowed the family to pay off an estate tax bill and added more land to Starkey Park, which expanded to 12,500 acres.

While Starkey says his time was full of pioneers, the current generations have lost interest in the practice. "Things don't stay the same," he says.

That said, the hard work of passing the property on to other generations has worked well for him.

His children (Frank, Laura, Sarah and Trey, and daughter-in-law, Kathryn) are dedicated to preserving the family's legacy as conservationists. With the land they have left—about 2,500 acres—Starkey, his wife, Marsha, and five grandchildren of Starkey Sr. have developed a sustainable new urban neighborhood.

"About 1,000 acres of that is planned to be a mixed-use, green design,

walkable-community development," says Laura, Starkey's granddaughter and co-founder of the Starkey Ranch project. "Using traditional neighborhood design principles, the rest of the land will be kept in conservation."

Laura Starkey, 44, says the family is trying to use and develop the remaining land in a way that will be not only financially beneficial to the family, but have minimal impact on the environment and culture in Pasco County.

The project will be similar to the Longleaf community her brothers Trey and Frank developed several years ago on 568 acres off Starkey Boulevard and State Road 54. The traditional neighborhood development was designed to embrace a small-town feel with its compact, pedestrian-friendly layout complemented by retail, office and recreational facilities.

According to Laura, the Starkey Ranch development was slated for construction in 2010, but the current economy forced the family to place the project on the back burner. In the meantime, Starkey's land is still being used as an active cattle ranch, though Starkey Jr. sold his herd seven years ago to another rancher who leases the property.

Laura likes to say she learned much of her cattle ranching knowledge through osmosis. Though she and her siblings know little about the actual practice, they've picked up enough over the years to know how the operation works. Laura is more invested in the land, conservation and uniting the past and present generations of Pasco County ranchers.

"SCENIC ultimately ties our past and where we come from, the ranch, the land and natural environment, to where we are going," she says. "In ecologist terminology, it's called the wild land-urban interface. How can we connect people to nature in meaningful ways?"

Spend an afternoon with her in the flatwoods and Laura will explain the fragile ecosystem that is a cattle ranch. She'll show you how important controlled burns are to the natural balance of the property and how longleaf



A To help pay estate taxes the family has allowed the removal of trees by logging companies and a section of the ranch was exhumed for fill dirt. The empty space is now a beautiful lake.

B Traditional Florida cattle ranchers let their animals roam free through the flatwoods. Ranchers would herd the cows a few times a year. Starkey Ranch still has cattle on the property.

C The Starkey family during Christmas 2009 (back row) Sarah Starkey, Frank Starkey, Mike Patterson, Laura Starkey, Hunter Jones, Tino Diaz, Lindsey Diaz, Kathryn Starkey, Trey Starkey. (front row) Marsha Starkey, Jay B. Starkey, Jr., Sofia Starkey, Madi Starkey, Zack Starkey.



pinetrees grow anticipating such destruction. Having spent her childhood in Odessa, she too holds a connection to her family's land.

The question remains: How much of the Starkey Ranch will be developed? Most ranching families know that economically, using their land strictly for cattle doesn't make sense. The Starkeys believe the best plan for the area and for them is to build sustainably. It's a mindset that was instilled years ago when J.B. Starkey Sr. bought that first piece of land in Largo and

watched it boom into the gas stations and mini-malls that it is today.

"Because Florida is so much shifting sand, so to speak, our ranching history is a solid, steady thing," she says. "For a region seeking to know itself, we need to know our own stories. If we (the Bay area) want to create a sense of place, or have a sense of place, to me it is most logical and authentic if we approach it from the perspective of our own roots. Soak our roots and they'll grow deeper." ■