

# Florida Sheriffs Boys Ranch

a home with woods, water and a big backyard

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ON ONE OF THOSE picturesque horseshoe bends in the upper Suwannee River, about nine miles north of Live Oak, lies a 3,000-acre ranch. It is home to some 125 Florida boys, mostly teenagers, who, for various reasons, have lost theirs.

The Florida Sheriffs Boys Ranch was the dream of a handful of county sheriffs in 1957. They became aware of the need for a place for severely dependent, neglected boys to live—working, learning, adjusting to others, hunting, fishing,—just being boys.

From the humble financial base of \$5,000 cash and a \$26,000 mortgage, the first cottage-type dwelling was built. It was completed in late 1959.

Today, thanks to the generous support of The Florida Sheriffs Association, its membership and supporters, and the general public, the ranch owns physical assets of \$2 million and operates on an annual budget of approximately half a million dollars—derived *entirely* from voluntary gifts!

A visit to the Ranch and a few moments with its articulate executive director, Harry Weaver, will reveal that the Boys Ranch program is one of the most worthwhile conservation efforts of them all: the conservation of human resources.

"In a nutshell, the purpose of the Ranch is to

provide a good home and a secure future for as many boys as space and operating funds will allow," says Weaver. "Of course, we cannot care for every neglected boy in the state. There has to be careful screening and selection, for the good of the boys as well as the Ranch."

"We do not accept boys who have been judged delinquents by the courts. Our desire is to receive a boy and try to help him before he gets that far. To be eligible for admission to the Boys Ranch, a boy must be between the ages of eight and 16; he must have been declared a dependent child by the juvenile court; and he must be in good physical and mental health and have the ability to do school work. Further, his application must have been approved by the sheriff and juvenile judge in the county in which he lives. Boys are referred to the sheriffs by private citizens, welfare workers, school officials, religious leaders, and by juvenile court officials.

"A great deal of work—testing, counseling, interviewing, etc.—goes into considering a boy for admission, and it should be this way. To place a boy in a large-group living situation is unwise if, for example, there is a good foster home available. Or,

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By GENE SMITH

Over 100 boys live, work and play on Sheriffs Ranch near Live Oak.

Candid kitchen scene, right, finds Executive Director Harry Weaver "presiding" at the sink.



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if counseling by a skilled person can make it possible for a family to stay together in the first place, that is best. A boy needs all the love and attention he can get, and we all know that nothing can take the place of parental love and a boy's own home. But at the Ranch we try to give a boy the next best thing to a normal home—and while he's here we're constantly trying to work him back into a good home situation, his own or someone else's—a foster home."

On the Ranch the boys live in cottages with 14 to 18 other boys, all under the supervision and guidance of "Cottageparents," mature couples "who are accustomed to children and can tolerate normal teenage behavior," says Weaver. "Many Cottageparents have children of their own, as do other resident staff members."

"We like flexible, consistent, teachable people on the auxiliary staff of the Ranch, and age is no barrier in applicants. We like a person, or, in the case of Cottageparent applicants, a couple, with a positive outlook on life. We have no sadness here, for when we take a boy who has not adjusted in a foster home, or is at odds with his parents or a surviving parent, or one who has no parents, we want to bring him into an interesting, active, wholesome, fast-moving program. We do our best to provide a balance of education, religion, guidance, discipline, work, and play.

"Every rancher has regular chores, including cleaning his room and making his bed. In addition, there are work assignments—feeding cattle, making hay, building and mending fences, helping in the cafetorium, and with yard and grounds maintenance.



"The emphasis in cottage life is on family, or 'group-unity,' action. Cottageparents encourage their 'family' members to work and play together as a team—yet they also recognize and try to encourage individuality. Cottageparents have all the responsibilities of any other mothers and fathers, except that they have up to 18 children instead of the usual two or three. They handle 'home' discipline, excuse absences for camping, hiking, etc.,

Photos By Gene Smith



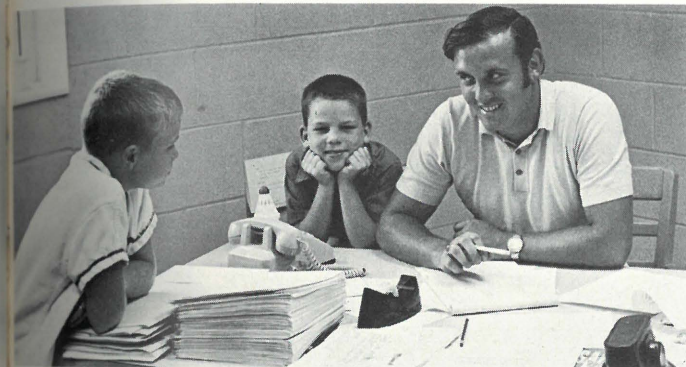
Recreation Director Greg Fields coaches young air-rifleman, above, and archers, at left on safety and sportsmanship. Older ranchers may hunt alone after meeting certain requirements. Summer fun includes exploring Suwannee River, Huck Finn style, right, and crawfish-bait fishing.

go around teaching firearms safety for a living!" says Sorenson, who, incidentally, is a building inspector for the City of Tallahassee. "They really appreciate it when someone comes out to help them," he says with a lot of conviction.

Besides a rifle and archery range, other facilities for recreation and sports include, as we mentioned, a fine gymnasium, a brand new riding ring and horse show arena, donated to the Ranch and dedicated just last October at its 14th annual anniversary celebration, a swimming pool, a big arts and crafts center just nearing completion, a ball field, a "ham" radio station, WB4PHT, and a club for budding operators in training for their Federal amateur radio operators' licenses, and, of course, there are lots of waterfront facilities—canoeing, swimming, and fishing in the fabled old Suwannee.

The Ranchers also have a nature study group, recently organized as an active conservation club. One of its members, Robert Myers, a bright young man, is extremely interested now in wildlife photog-

Photos By Wallace Hughes



raphy. (He also is a "ham" radio buff.) FLORIDA WILDLIFE's art director and graphic arts supervisor, Wallace Hughes, coached Robert on the basics of photography and some of the fine points of bird and other wildlife photography on our recent visit to the Ranch.

A glance at the bulletin board in the Ranch cafetorium gave us a pretty good idea of the variety of fun things provided for Boys Ranchers: on a big poster listing "Coming Events" we read, "Horseback Riding, Swimming Classes for Beginners, SCUBA Diving, Rifle Practice for Future Contests, Canoe Trips, Water Skiing, BB Gun Shooting Contest, Frog Racing, and Archery." There was also a note that safety factors and proper procedures would be presented with each event.

The day we visited the Ranch, a load of them were departing on a bus trip to Ichetucknee Springs for a tubing party down the spring run. Some of the boys told us, too, of a bus trip they had taken earlier to the Great Smoky Mountains.

As Executive Director Weaver said, "We do our utmost to provide a balanced life here, and that includes plenty of things for boys to do. There's certainly room at the Ranch for them to just plain fool around without getting into a neighbor's hair or joining the wrong group and winding up in serious trouble.

"We feel that, next to a good home, the Florida Sheriffs Boys Ranch is the best place to bring up a rejected youngster and to help him develop to his fullest potential."

Those who have seen the Ranch and met the boys and their dedicated staff of administrators and counselors couldn't agree more. And as their sign says, "Visitors Welcome." ●





Water sports are always popular, especially canoeing, swimming and fishing, shown here. For other information on the Boys Ranch—and new Girls Villa near Bartow—write Florida Sheriffs Association, Post Office Box 1487, Tallahassee, Florida.

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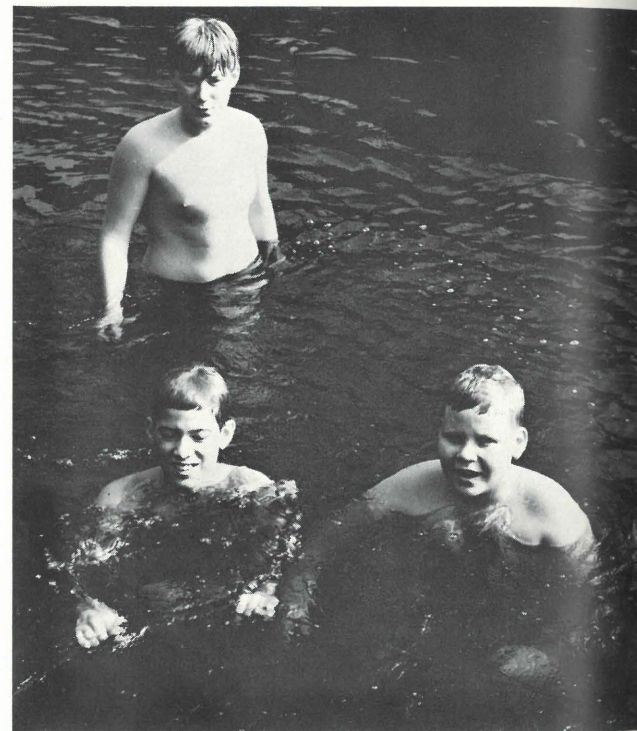
Ranch life. This is best illustrated by the wide freedom the boys have in the area of outdoor recreation.

Indeed, boys are expected to be boys at the Ranch. Sure, there is an excellent program of organized sports and hobbies, but the boys have lots of time to piddle too—just to wander through the woods and along the trails down by the Suwannee to check on the frogs, turtles, and water snakes. They may fish, hike, and hunt, in season, with real firearms, provided they meet five basic requirements.

In order to hunt, unsupervised, a Rancher must possess a general knowledge of state hunting regulations; have a valid hunting license (which means he must be at least 15 years of age); he must have received instructions in the proper use and handling of firearms; he must have demonstrated generally good judgment in most areas of Ranch life and school life; finally, he must have obtained permission from his Cottageparents and clearance with the Director of Ranch Life, who controls the number of boys out hunting at any given time. (Staffers may hunt on the Ranch also, *but they must be accompanied by a boy or two!*)

No boy is allowed to keep firearms in his room. His Cottageparents keep guns safely stored, including BB rifles, and Recreation Director Greg Fields keeps the rifles used on the firing range under lock and key in the gymnasium.

Just as a great deal of cash and goods are donated to the Ranch, so are a lot of "labors of love." Probably as good an example as any is the time taken by Henry Sorenson of Tallahassee, a fully qualified firearms safety and marksmanship instructor who for many years has conducted gun safety courses at the Ranch under the auspices of



Photos By Gene Smith

the Sunrise Optimist Club, of which he is a member.

Hank's valuable teaching and coaching is always presented just before the opening of the hunting season. It was a welcomed feature at the Ranch again this fall.

"What impresses me about going to the Sheriffs Boys Ranch to present the instruction is the enthusiasm of the boys, but even more than that, their surprise that anyone would be interested enough in them to come over without being paid or sent. Many of them were surprised this season to learn that I was on my own time; that I didn't

establish bedtime, award privileges and special treats, and help with homework.

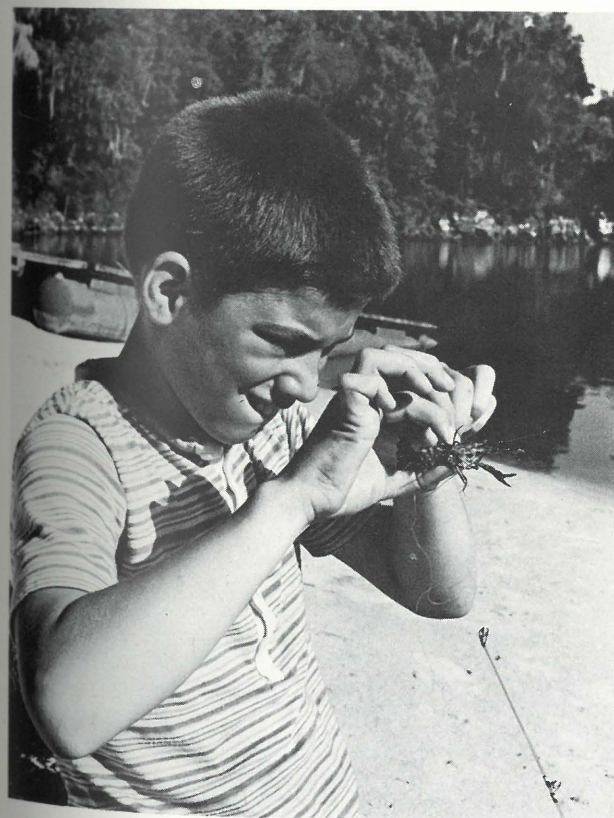
"The Florida Sheriffs Boys Ranch spares no expense or effort in trying to help a boy find his place as a productive, stable member of society. This is a big job, but one that is being accomplished—with the aid and continued financial support of the people of Florida," says the executive director.

To help him meet these goals, Weaver has a competent professional staff which includes administrators, social service workers, a recreation director, medical service coordinators, a librarian; food services, laundry, central supply, and other logistics specialists; directors of ranch life, child care, and social services (the latter work includes counseling with former ranchers); supervisors of farming, cattle, and a profitable forestry operation; and personnel in charge of buildings, grounds, and equipment maintenance.

The combined child care and auxiliary staff of the Boys Ranch totals about 60 persons, including 12 husband-and-wife teams, according to Weaver.

"How long does a boy live at the Ranch?" I asked Mr. Weaver.

"Until his future is secure," he replied. "Until he is out of high school or college; until he is trained for a job and regularly employed; until he enters military service—until he decides what he wants to do with his life.



"We've had ranchers go into all kinds of work: law enforcement, printing, carpentry, barbering, etc. Several have made military service their careers. One, who is a high school senior this term, has expressed a keen interest in wildlife law enforcement—after a tour in the U.S. Air Force. His name is David Thigpen. I imagine the Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission will be hearing from him about employment one day."

Just as the Boys Ranch is *not* an institution for delinquents, it is *not* a refuge from society. Quite the opposite is true: the Ranch and all connected with it are a part of the community of Live Oak—especially the boys themselves. They attend public schools in town; they participate in sports and all other school activities. Many hold high offices in the various school clubs.

"Acceptance in the community is very important in the lives of these boys," says Weaver, "because they have, in most cases, experienced so much rejection prior to coming to the Ranch."

Religion is an important aspect of Ranch life, too. The boys attend the church of their choice in Live Oak each Sunday, and many participate in the various youth and other church-related activities.

Private devotions are conducted in each cottage, and individual worship in the Ranch's beautiful chapel is encouraged. Special services are held there from time to time with the boys providing the leadership. It is not uncommon, either, according to Weaver, for the Ranch chapel to be the setting for the marriage of a former rancher.

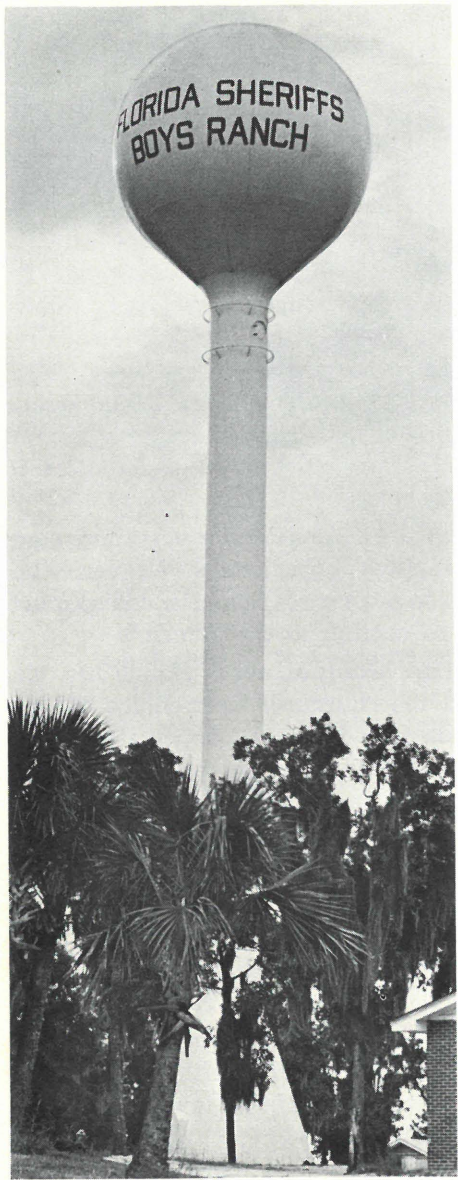
"The townspeople invite ranchers for dinner, to stay overnight, to go on trips with them, and to help out with special projects in town—at school, church, or the recreation center," Weaver points out, emphasizing the value of such contacts to a boy's social adjustment.

Some older boys hold part-time jobs in town. Others make their own spending money (which is 'banked' for them) right on the Ranch. Many are hired by local tobacco farmers who lease acreage from the Ranch on which to grow their crops. (Incidentally, lease income and sales of timber from their 1,400 acres of planted pines augments the Ranch's annual operating funds. Last year, approximately \$25,000 worth of wood was sold by the Boys Ranch.)

Every Rancher gets a weekly allowance, the amount being based on his age and work assignment. Boys may earn more by doing extra work.

The pursuit of happiness at the Sheriffs Boys Ranch allows for a lot of free time when the chores are all done. There is as little regimentation as possible. Virtually every rule or restriction governing work or play at the Ranch is of the minimum severity consistent with good order and peaceable

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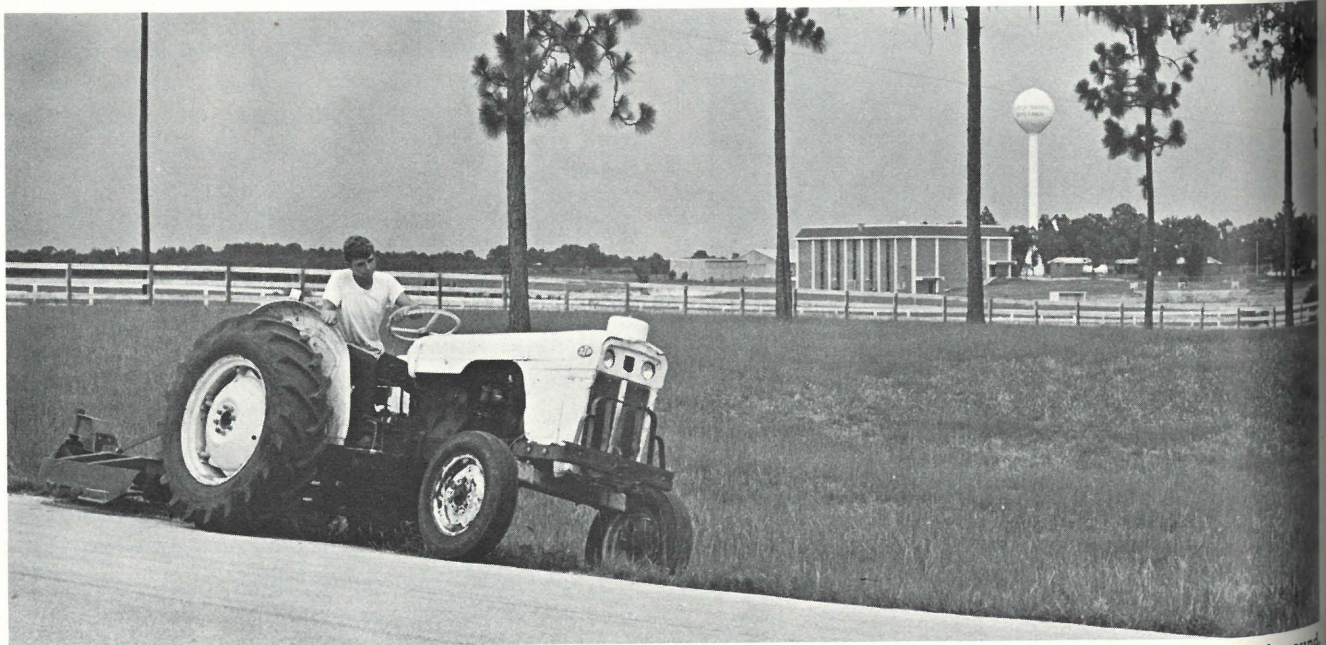


Medical-Dental Clinic



Residence Cottage

Photos By Wallace Hughes



Rancher at work with gymnasium and Water Sphere in background