Rodeos were a “happening” on a working ranch before there was an official name for this sport in which cattlemen, and now cattlewomen, could compete. Put a man on a horse working cattle with other men, and you have the ingredients for competition – whose horse is the fastest and even whose cow dog is the smartest and, of course, who can ride better on a bucking horse or a bull, and who can rope better to catch a stray cow or to doctor a calf or to brand one for permanent ownership identification.

Speed was often necessary to get these chores done, as an uncooperative (stray) had to be run down and persuaded to return to the herd.

A cow whip was used to direct the moving of the cattle; seldom did it touch an animal unless it was very stubborn or a threat, and that was usually a bull. And, of course, the challenge of winning a race back to the barn, after long hours in the saddle, took place daily. The men enjoyed their skills used in their work so much that sometimes on weekends they would have events with participants from other ranches taking part. Quite naturally, this evolved into a more organized event such as a rodeo.

Okeechobee County Cattlemen began their rodeo in this area over half a century ago! With a lot of determination and guts, and without modern helpers, such as electronic timers and eyes (for the barrel racers), quality loudspeakers and hired entertainment, a rodeo was born!

Memories are kept alive by stories from old-timers who have been a part of this great sporting event for many decades.

In the early years, one could drive his vehicle up to the fence at the rodeo grandstand and watch the action from his reserved seat (on the hood of the car or truck)! Also, there were a few sections of unsheltered bleachers. We had entertainment such as local musicians playing...
People attending the rodeo had a choice; they could drive their cars up to the arena and sit on the hoods or sit in the uncovered stands. Most important, they enjoyed the rodeo and seeing a lot of local cowboys ride!

Shown in this 1955 photo were great supporters of the rodeo: J.O. Pearce, a local rancher who was prominent in the Florida and National Cattlemen’s Associations, and also president of the local and state chapter of the Cattlemen’s group; in the middle, “King Kong” Smith, a rodeo announcer; and Brack Cantrell, a local businessman.

A local teenage band called The Everglades Ramblers provided music at this rodeo. They were (from left): in white hat, Jimmy Stratton; female vocalist, DeeCee Douglas; in black hat, Buddy Thomas; in white hat, Kenny Williamson; and, sitting, Bobby Dillow.

Our county is very proud of what the Okeechobee County Cattlemen’s Rodeo has become. This association does much good for the community, for example, with the scholarships given to many high school seniors over the years. It also sponsors ranch rodeos in the old arena.

For years, the rodeo was a Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association-sanctioned rodeo with some of the best riders in the world, and some of these best were our own locals.

The rodeos take place two times a year, in March and September. The location was moved to Okeechobee’s Agricultural Center for several years but is back home on U.S. 441 North. The complex has been renovated and is in very good condition.

This event is well-attended by locals and visitors interested in this “wild sport.” Bring your family and friends to the next rodeo. Enjoy seeing a “real rodeo”; perhaps you’ll know some of the participants from local ranches.

Betty Chandler Williamson is a fifth-generation Floridian, and her roots in Okeechobee County go back to the time before the county was created, to the mid-1800s. She and her husband, Frank (Sonny) Williamson Jr., a rancher, celebrated their sixty-year anniversary in 2012. Her hobbies are genealogy and local history. She has been the president of the Okeechobee Historical Society for over ten years. Williamson compiled the 75-year membership list of the First Baptist Church, beginning with the date of its founding in 1915. Williamson is the coauthor of Strolling Down Country Roads: Okeechobee County, a Pictorial History.