

Rancher and cattle breeder Alto "Bud" Adams died Saturday

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(Photo: JUAN DALE BROWN/TCPALM)

Iconic rancher, pioneering cattle breeder, avid environmentalist and wildlife photographer Alto "Bud" Adams Jr. died Saturday morning at his ranch in western St. Lucie County. He was 91.

Adams cut a tall, wiry figure. For most of the 25 years I knew him, Bud never seemed to age. Even until recent years, he was spry enough to ride on horseback around the ranch and keep a careful eye on his cattle breeding business.

I last spent time with him in late April this year.

He was honored by the Economic Development Council of St. Lucie County with the Pete Hegener Leadership Award. (/story/specialty-publications/your-news/st-lucie-county/reader-submitted/2017/03/07/nominees-pete-hegener-leadership-award-announced_/98860622/) I was lucky enough to be a member of the selection committee.

Accompanied by two of his sons, Bud was obviously frail and certainly quite hard of hearing. Yet he gave a crisp and complete assessment of his ranching and cattle breeding career.

He was always rightfully proud of creating a complete new breed of heat-resistant and heavy beef-yielding cattle, the Braford. He was just as proud of doing so in a natural environment unsullied by fertilizers and pesticides.

Visiting Adams Ranch (<http://www.adamsranch.com/>) was always a chance to see how Florida must have looked in its natural state.

Adams was the epitome of integrity and generosity. When he received the leadership award I wrote, "Bud is never flashy; he's quiet and thoughtful. His manners are courtly. He believes honesty and integrity are vital in every aspect of business and personal life. 'They are your reputation,' Bud told panel members."

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With typical modesty, he said he had been surprised and touched to even be nominated for the award.

Bud was raised, literally, in the saddle. Above everything else he was most proud of being a cowboy, and to still employ real cowboys to do the work on the ranch.

"It's just the best way to do it," he explained.

In his youth, Bud spent some time living "in town" in Fort Pierce. It was during this time he was sent for elocution lessons to help improve a slight speech impediment.



His teacher, the late historian Ada Coats Williams, told me how frustrated Bud would get during lessons. Finally he snapped, storming out of the classroom and angrily told the teacher he didn't "need to talk right. I'm gonna be a cowboy!"

And that's exactly what he was for the next 75 years.

Bud spent his working life tending to the family ranches in four Florida counties, including 24,000 acres in St. Lucie County.

His father, Florida Supreme Court Judge Alto Adams Sr. had bought the St. Lucie ranch for \$1.50 an acre in 1937. The family joined him in Tallahassee shortly after. Then World War II intervened and Bud joined the Navy.

He returned to the ranch in 1947, never having set foot on a ship. His father asked him to look after the ranch.

Over the years, Bud produced the new Braford breed of cattle. He kept on tinkering with the breed for decades. Recently, the family struck a deal to sell organic beef to the Whole Foods chain.

I recall visiting the ranch on Orange Avenue many times, usually for social events Bud would graciously stand greeting guests in his courtly way, but you could tell he was dying to get away.

He'd catch my eye and jerk his head. "Come with me. I want to show you something," he said.

The something was invariably the latest tweak he'd made to the breeding effort. We'd take off in his dusty green SUV that was packed with papers, cameras and a couple of rifles in the back, and lurch down bumpy ranch roads.



At the approach of every gate, Bud would slip the truck into neutral and coast gently toward the gate. In one fluid motion, he'd leap out and snatch the gate open. He'd politely refuse any offer of help.

Bud spent much of his time on the ranch, but also was a frequent visitor to Fort Pierce. In addition to all his other qualities, he was a generous philanthropist.

He was a long-time supporter of the Indian River State College Foundation (<https://www.irscfoundation.org/>), the Backus Museum (<http://www.backusmuseum.com/>) and Heathcote Garden

Alto "Bud" Adams, Jr. leads a tour of the Adams Ranch property in Fort Pierce in February 2014. His father, Alto Adams, Sr. bought the property in 1937 and since then, four generations of Adams have joined the company, which is one of the largest cow-calf ranches in the country. (Photo: CHRISTOPHER ARNOLD/TCPALM)

(<https://www.heathcotebotanicalgardens.org/>), among other good causes. He was a founder of the United Way of St. Lucie County.

And Bud was an accomplished wildlife photographer who spent many hours capturing images of the animals that lived with him on the ranch.

Kathleen Fredrick, director of the Backus Museum, was a good friend for the last 25 years. Bud called to congratulate her on "the most sensible letter to the editor I've ever read in the Tribune," she recalled as the beginning of their friendship.

For Fredrick, Bud's greatest legacy is his record on environmentalism. "He wasn't aggressive," Fredrick recalled, "he led by example. He created a (natural) environment that was unheard of at a time when ranchers were cutting down every tree in sight.

"I think he opened people's eyes to new ways of managing land. He always said cattle are better off raised in a natural way, with trees for shade. He really was a visionary in that sense."

I have to agree. It was an honor to have known Bud Adams and have him show me what he created. Long may it last, protected and pristine.

At the time of writing, funeral arrangements were not available.

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