

# Faith, family and wide open spaces in Duette

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**DUETTE** — From Arlin and Inez Taylor's front yard off Taylor Grade Road, you can look west and see the top of the Florida Power & Light smokestacks in Parrish. Or look to the east, and in the distance see a mountain of gray earth excavated by the Mosaic phosphate operation.

When Arlin Taylor's parents bought the property in the 1930s, there were neither smokestacks nor mining in

the area. Just lots of wide-open rolling country.

Today, one is struck by the beauty of the Duette area, which loosely includes Bunker Hill and Keentown. Taylor Grade and Bunker Hill roads wind through pasture and farm land, and rise to an elevation of more than 100 feet.

There is no such thing as congestion in Duette, which has more wide open space than people. There is just one flashing caution light at the intersection of State

Roads 62 and 37.

The Duette Fire Rescue District covers a 136-square-mile area, said Fire Chief Jim Leonard.

The population of maybe 1,000 increases during the peak of farming seasons with an influx of farm workers.

All of that space between neighbors requires self-reliance, and the willingness to go without amenities that city folk take for granted, including restaurants, fast-food pit stops and supermarkets.

At the same time, there is pride in the area's farming tradition, in its one-room school house, and a strong spirit of neighbor helping neighbor.

## Strong body, deep faith

Arlin Taylor, 84, sings bass in a quartet, did some roping in rodeos in his youth, is a deacon at Dry Prairie Baptist Church, and is a long-time rancher and farmer



Arlin Taylor offers snacks to his cattle on the family ranch. Beef is hot commodity these days, offering ranchers high prices. JAMES A. JONES JR./Bradenton Herald



## DUETTE FROM 1A

on 1,500 acres along Taylor Grade Road.

In 1999, he was named Manatee County's Outstanding Agriculturist of the Year.

He is also a deeply religious, humble man.

His family originally lived just north of Duette in Hillsborough County, in the days when Florida had a no-fence law and cattle could graze freely on public land. But when the law was repealed and people began buying up property around them, the Taylors moved to Duette in the 1930s when land was still plentiful and affordable.

Back then, Taylor said he didn't see so much beauty in the land as hard work, blood, sweat and tears.

After a stint in the U.S. Army, he returned to Manatee County in 1955.

He took a job with the state livestock board, and was assigned to Hillsborough, Manatee and Pasco counties, where a prime concern was screw worm eradication to save cattle herds.

He became so proficient at roping and treating cattle that he began traveling the country with rodeos.

Soon enough, Arlin and Inez Taylor agreed they needed to focus on making a living on land his parents had bought years earlier.

"Land is the greatest asset you could have. This is our potential. Let's quit our outside work," he remembers telling Inez.

### Duette at a glance

**Number of residents:** About 1,000

**Economy:** Farm- and ranch-based

**Notable:** Duette Elementary School was founded in 1930 and is Florida's last one-room school house.

**Must-see:** Bunker Hill Vineyard & Winery, 8905 Bunker Hill Road.

**Parks:** Bunker Hill Park, 35600 State Road 62, and Duette Preserve, 2649 Rawls Road.

**Websites:** Duette Fire Rescue District, dfrd.org

**Interesting tidbit:** In recent years, Duette changed to the Parrish ZIP code, 34219, which improved mail delivery to residents. Previously, Duette was in the Bowling Green ZIP code zone, located in Hardee County.

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Taylor's Farm and Ranch started out growing watermelons and branched out to include citrus, sod, and cattle.

Over the years, the Taylors have had to adjust to market conditions and challenges, including the recent Great Recession, which slammed the door on the demand for sod for new homes, and greening and canker, which decimated the Taylor groves.

Today, Taylor leases 500 acres to tomato growers and has an expanding herd of cattle to take advantage of the high price of beef.

"I don't retreat. I just advance in a different direction," he said.

One direction he hasn't taken is to sell any of his land to phosphate companies.

"We had just started planting watermelons one year and a real estate man came by and wanted to prospect our land for phosphate. We

wouldn't let him. This land belonged to my mother and father. We weren't going to sell it," he said.

Family, faith and community are all important to Taylor.

"A strong body, and deep faith all played a part in what we did here," he said. "Our kids all went to Duette Elementary."

He has five grandchildren, among them Jay Taylor ([facebook.com/jaytaylormusic](https://www.facebook.com/jaytaylormusic)), who has a noted career in Nashville as a county singer and writer.

"Can you believe it?" Grandpa Taylor says.

*Coming Monday, Part 2: Children, what's at the heart of Duette, and the rise of a surprising tourist destination.*

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ABOVE: Threatening sky builds over tomato fields on the Taylor Ranch & Farm. LEFT: A weathered bit of fence at Taylor Farm & Ranch.



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