



1
9
7
4



Polk County Historical Quarterly

1
9
9
9



VOLUME 25

MARCH, 1999

NUMBER 4

THE DISSTON LANDS

by Freddie T. Wright



Saws.
Patent Gullet-Tooth Circular Saws.
Henry Disston & Sons.



Patent ground and tempered solid teeth, of extra quality, superior workmanship.

Florida Land and Improvement Co., A & G C C & Okeechobee Land Co., Kissimmee Land Co., and Disston Land Agency had offices in this Bartow building in the 1890s.

Of all the men who influenced the development of South Florida and especially Polk County, none can be given more credit than the dashing, young promoter, Hamilton Disston from Philadelphia. His father was Henry Disston, an English immigrant, who made a fortune by founding the Disston and Sons Corporation to make saws. When Henry died, Hamilton became president of the company at age 34. He was very successful and became a nationally known, wealthy man who enjoyed fishing trips to Florida. On one of these trips he met Col. Henry Sanford who interested him in Florida real estate which led to Disston's purchase of 4,000,000 acres of land from the state in 1881. Often Disston has been depicted as a promoter taking advantage of the state by buying land at twenty-five cents an acre. The facts paint a different picture.

In the 1850s and 1860s, everything in the central and south part of the state was referred to as South Florida. It was then a

wilderness. Heat, swamps, insects, Indians and outlaws made the interior of the state practically uninhabitable. The only industry was cattle raising. Not many settlers were moving into the state. In 1864 a newsman wrote in the New York Herald: "I am confident that no sane man who knows what Florida is like would give a thousand dollars to gain possession of all the territory beyond the St. Johns."

Between 1850 and 1869 Florida received from the United States Government 20,000,000 acres of land including Seminary, Public School, Railroad, Internal Improvement, and Swamp and Overflowed Land Grants. To handle this real estate the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Fund was created. During the period from 1855 until December 1872 practically all the lands of the fund were pledged for constructing railroads and for payment of principal and interest on railroad construction bonds. These

(continued on page two)

The Disston Lands

(continued from page 1)

expenses resulted in the fund's bankruptcy. In December 1872 the United States Circuit Court of the Northern District of Florida appointed a receiver and placed all assets of the fund in his custody for the benefit of creditors.

From 1872 to 1881 there was a continuing sale of land by the receiver with proceeds going to creditors. When Governor William B. L. Bloxham was inaugurated in January 1881, he found the Internal Improvement Fund still bankrupt and in dire circumstances. He interested Hamilton Disston in the drainage of Swamp and Overflowed Lands, described as being those covered by non-navigable waters during all or a portion of the year, so as to render them unfit for the usual purposes of cultivation unless drained or ditched.

A drainage contract with Disston was signed on January 25, 1881, a few days after Bloxham's inauguration. Drainage work was to be paid for with land. Later it was determined that no land transfer could be made without the consent of the court and the creditors. In 1870 Francis Vose, a railroad investor, concerned because state lands were being sold at extremely low prices, paid partly in depreciated script, had secured a court order forbidding payment for land in anything but United States money.

Governor Bloxham then convinced Disston to buy 4,000,000 acres of swamp and overflowed land for \$1,000,000. This paid the entire indebtedness of the fund and released seventeen million acres of lands of the Internal Improvement Fund for sale.

Critics said that Governor Bloxham had sold the land too cheap and had let Disston select land that was not actually swamp or overflowed. Generally, efforts were made to confine the grants to the least desirable lands, but much of the property, when surveyors finally arrived, was found to be high and dry - some of the best in the state. Another criticism was that the rights of squatters and homesteaders were not recognized. Actually squatters had two years to acquire the land on which they lived for \$1.25 an acre, the price fixed by state and national governments. Though small by today's prices, this was a

considerable sum for a Florida squatter in the 1880s.

There were problems for Disston. He did not have a million dollars. He made a cash payment of \$200,000 on the land purchase, with the remainder of the \$1,000,000 to be paid on designated dates with the last payment due December 30, 1882. To meet the payments to the state

Everglades. The company then acquired one-half the drained lands. Most of the land was in the counties of Polk, Manatee, Brevard, Monroe and Dade as they were in 1881. Counties have been divided and county lines changed since.

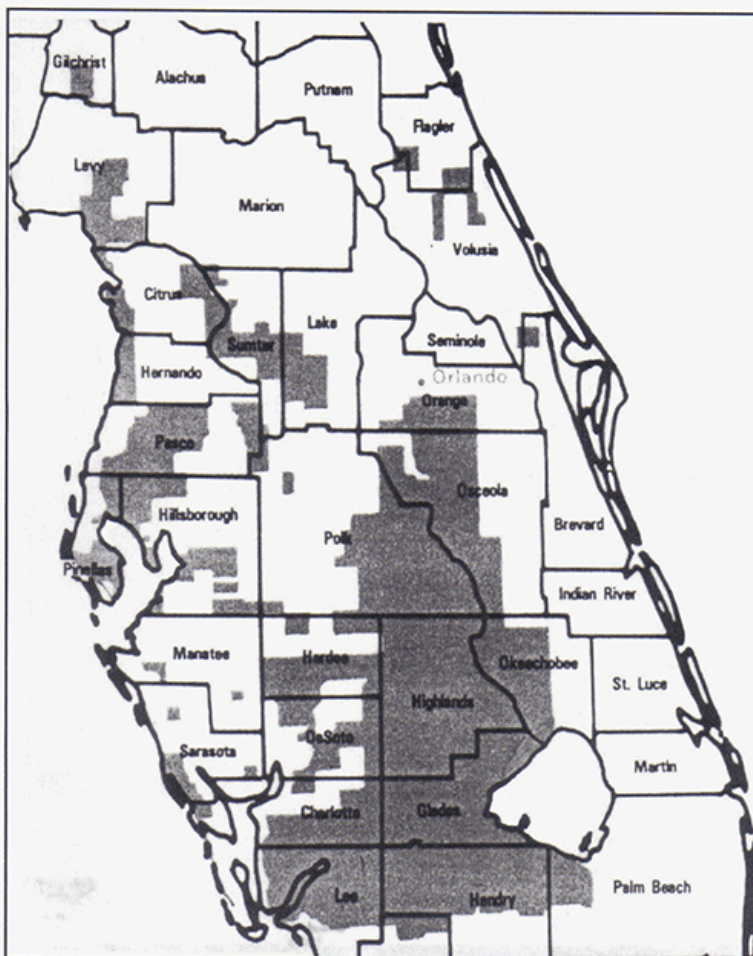
Disston associates who entered into the contract were, William H. Wright, Witt H. Drake, and Albert B. Linderman, all of Philadelphia; William C. Parson of Arizona and Colonel Ingham Coryell of Jacksonville, Florida. The Board of Trustees also approved the names of well-known Floridians who were to be associated with the Disston Drainage Project. These were F. A. Hendry, Jacob Summerlin, James Evans, Ziba King, J. J. Blount, N. W. Hendry, H. A. Parker, and S. G. Thorp. Most of these men were prominent Polk Countians.

In the middle of June, 1881, the Drainage and Reclamation Company published details of its organization. Under the name Atlantic and Gulf Coast Canal and Okeechobee Land Company, it organized with \$10,000,000 of capital stock in 1,000,000 shares at \$10 each. The officers were William Stokely, president; Col. J. J. Dunne, vice-president; Hamilton Disston, treasurer; James M. Kraemer, secretary; Stockley Dunne, Samuel H. Gray, W. C. Parsons, W. G. Wright, I. Coryell and A.K.P. Safford, directors.

Disston financed the building of two dredges to begin fulfilling his drainage contract. Digging started

on a network of canals that connected Kissimmee, a railhead in the middle of the state, with the gulf by way of the Kissimmee River, Lake Okeechobee, and the Caloosahatchee River. Kissimmee became headquarters of the Disston companies. Shipyards and a boiler factory were built there. Boats from the Mississippi River came to central Florida bringing goods, tourists and settlers. Steamboats, which had replaced sailing vessels, provided comfortable accommodations. It was fashionable for wealthy Northerners to come by steamboat to Fort Lauderdale or Fort Myers and continue on the inland waterway to winter at sporty Kissimmee. Hunting and fishing were good, the climate superb and gambling and horse racing entertaining.

For his drainage efforts Disston eventually received 1,652,711 acres for his half of land reclaimed. The Disston Land



This map shows areas in which Disston owned property. County lines are pictured as they are today, not as they were in 1881.

in 1882, Disston sold half the property to Sir Edward Reed of England. Disston could now concentrate on the drainage contract.

Though Sir Edward Reed soon sold his interests in Florida he was influential in the development of Polk County. His extensive advertising in British newspapers was responsible for attracting other real estate agents to canvass Great Britain for potential land buyers. C. H. Alleyne, of London, was one such agent who was responsible for many settlers buying land in Acton and Fort Meade.

The drainage contract provided that Disston's company should drain and reclaim, more than 8,000,000 acres, about one-fourth of the state lying south of Orange County and east of Peace River. This included both the Kissimmee and Caloosahatchee Valleys and a large area around Lake Okeechobee and some of the

Company, one of 20 companies formed by Disston, started an intensive campaign to promote the sale of real estate. Sales offices were opened in Northern cities and in Europe.

Disston's Florida Land and Improvement Company ended up owning 102,000 acres in Polk County. Most Polk County towns had a Disston Land Office. Dr. Charles Mitchell was the agent in Fort Meade. He not only sold land, but owned a nursery to provide citrus trees for planting. The success of Disston agents attracted others to be real estate salesmen, John Robeson and George Hendry of Fort Meade and J. H. Tatum of Bartow were among the promoters.

A map of Disston's holdings in Polk County shows that most of the Polk property was on the east side of the county near the Kissimmee River, but one parcel was north of Lakeland extending into the Green Swamp. Many abstracts of titles of present-day land-owners bear the name of Hamilton Disston.

Disston tried many ways to attract settlers. He persuaded the United States Department of Agriculture to establish an experiment station to test varieties of sugar cane. Under his direction, rice, potatoes, peaches, grapes, pineapples, and vegetables were tried. In partnership with R. E. Rose, who had been employed as resident engineer by Disston's Drainage Company in June 1881, he established a sugar mill and made extensive plantings of sugar cane. In 1916 Rose wrote a paper entitled The Swamp and Overflowed Lands of Florida in which he described the Disston project in detail. He stated that "No action of any Governor of Florida has had a greater influence upon the development of the state of Florida, her railroads, waterways, the settlement of her waste places, than the wise and business-like transaction by Governor William D. Bloxham, who not only rescued this vast domain from bankruptcy, paid off all indebtedness, inaugurated the drainage of wetlands, but also released for public improvement some seventeen million acres of her best lands."

A promotional booklet distributed by C. H. Alleyne & Co. in 1885, four years after the sale, said: "Mr. Disston then formed a company, which advertised (for the first time) Florida freely, and brought it to the public notice. This company (The Florida Land and Improvement Company) may be

C. L. Mitchell,
AGENT FOR
"Florida Land and Improvement Company,"
Including all the lands owned by William and Hamilton Disston,
in Polk and Manatee Counties.

ALSO, AGENT FOR
Okeechobee Drainage Company.

I represent S. J. Waller's lands in all the southern counties, besides lands owned by many other private individuals. In a word, I control many valuable tracts of land in all the southern counties of Florida, including beautiful lake fronts, town property, etc.
Town lots for sale in Mitchell's Addition, Fort Meade, Fla., at \$50 per lot.
This sure opportunity of securing desirable locations for orange groves and other semi-tropical fruits will never occur again. Take advantage of it while you can.
As owners of the
"Sunnyside Nursery,"
I will supply all varieties of trees, plants and seeds. I am now prepared to furnish trees, and will superintend the work of planting groves and attending to all other business for non-residents, such as locating lands, paying taxes, and keeping farms and groves in order.
For further particulars, address, with stamp, or call on me at Fort Meade, Fla. (C. L. MITCHELL.)

TESTIMONIALS.
TALLAHASSEE, FLA., August 22, 1882.
I take pleasure in recommending Dr. C. L. Mitchell, of Polk County, as a gentleman of high character and standing. I can confidently recommend him in all respects as worthy of the fullest confidence. Respectfully, W. D. BLOXHAM, Gov. of Florida.
TALLAHASSEE, FLA., August 22, 1882.
Dr. C. L. Mitchell, of Fort Meade, Fla., has been known by me for several years as a gentleman who possessed the respect of this community for his integrity and worth, and from my personal acquaintance with him, I can recommend him as one who can be safely trusted with any business that should be placed in his hands. E. K. FOSTER.

FLORIDA LAND AND IMPROVEMENT COMPANY

(DISSTON'S PURCHASE, 4,000,000 ACRES.)

The lands of this company will be thrown open for sale, at Government Prices, (\$1.25 per acre.)
From October 1, 1882, to May 1, 1883,
in quantities of not less than 80, nor more than 640 acres to any one purchaser.

THE ABOVE OFFER
covers all the lands now owned by this company, except the "Gulf Coast" and "Timber" Reserves, 370,000 acres, which can be purchased at graded prices.

THIS LIBERAL OFFER
is in order to supply lands at Government Prices to the thousands of immigrants now
SEEKING HOMES IN SOUTH FLORIDA.

FLORIDA LAND AND IMPROVEMENT CO.,
Jacksonville, Fla.

The Florida Land and Improvement Company Sale Flyers.

called the parent company of the others, as it, in nearly every case, sold them the lands they own."

There was an immediate surge of development. New rail companies were chartered and old charters were renewed. New settlers poured into Polk County. Groves and crops were planted. There was much building, not only of homes and churches, but hotels to handle tourists and promoters. Cities and towns grew as new settlers moved into the state. Bartow incorporated in 1882, the first town in the county to do so.

The Disston land sale freed lands from earlier claims and attracted railroad entrepreneurs such as Henry M. Flagler and Henry B. Plant to the state. Plant's South Florida Railroad reached Lakeland in August 1885, Bartow in September 1885 and Fort Meade in December 1886. Disston did not participate in the railroad and hotel boom. He concentrated on the development of agriculture.

The panic of 1893 resulted in the failure of banks and one of the worst depressions the country had seen. Banks called in loans and bonds were defaulted. Disston kept the work going as long as he could, but finally had to close the operation. On the evening of April 30, 1896, Disston shot himself. After his death, his brothers sold most of the Disston companies' assets to pay taxes and debts.

Such a sad end for a brilliant man who

had been responsible for so much of the development in Florida. Think of the cities that might not have flourished without clear land titles, railroads and the promotion of the state that occurred after the Disston Purchase. Polk County benefited. Kissimmee and Tarpon Springs were successful Disston promotions. Disston City on Boca Ciega Bay was less successful at the time, but today is Gulfport, immediately south of St. Petersburg.

Critics said that if all the high land acquired by Disston had instead been taken up under the Homestead Act and sold for \$1.25 per acre, Florida's population would have soon been doubled and means of transportation would have followed. Such critics ignore the fact that the harm had been done by the time Disston became involved. There were accusations that fraud occurred in some of the dealings, but none of these negate the fact that Disston's promotions brought many new settlers to the state.

The drainage of so much acreage completely changed Florida's landscape. While it allowed settlement in areas that had been too wet before, it resulted in pollution of streams and lakes, destruction of habitats and loss of native plants and wildlife. Such problems were not recognized until years later. See Mr. Sherwood Stokes' article on page four for a description of the water table a century ago.

The Water Table In Northeast Polk County A Century Ago

by Sherwood Stokes

Where was the water table in Northeast Polk County a hundred years ago?

Sometime when you are driving through Haines City look at the Palm Crest Hotel and know that there is much evidence that in 1883, this location was in the Lake Eva Marsh.

As a small boy, the writer became acquainted with a colored gentleman who trundled the mail from the Post Office to the Railroad Station in a two-wheeled cart. I was often at the Station with my father's mail, which went RR mail, without postage. I was not tall enough to hand it up to the engineer and this man would hand it up for me.

When I came back to practice law in Haines City in 1948, I renewed his acquaintance and he was an invaluable source of information on the people who lived in Oakland and on "The Hill" and I relished his historical knowledge of early days before there was a Haines City.

His name, as best I can remember now, was George Smith and he came to what is now Haines City with the Railroad in 1883 as a young man of about 20, fell in love with the area and never left.

In one of our visits about early history of the area, he told me that when he came to the area in 1883 the site of the Palm Crest Hotel was in the Lake Eva Marsh.

Although the old man had always been very truthful with me, I charged this off as a mere embellishment of a good discussion of where the water table had been in 1883. However, the nagging idea that he might have been entirely correct lingered, and I began to search for evidence that he was either correct, nearly correct, or entirely wrong in his recollection from sixty years past.

Much of the evidence was found in the old plats as I examined abstracts of title to land in the area. Other evidence came from representing Haines City Drainage District I and studying their records. Still other evidence came from talking with early settlers, from the records of Peace Creek Drainage District, Davenport Drainage District, from R. A. Sterzik, a scholarly engineer, who surveyed and platted 123 of the 125 subdivisions recorded in the 1920s in the Haines City area and who also made the engineering plan for the Haines City Drainage District No. I, and even a little from my own recollections as a child of six, growing up in the area in the mid-twenties and thirties.

One of the 1916 plats showed

Lake Eva reaching north nearly to the present location of the K & Y Lounge located on Hinson Avenue adjacent to the City Hall. On that plat, Ledwith Avenue dead-ended on the east and west shores of the north arm of Lake Eva.

This reminded me that when I was in High School, the bath house and city beach was located between the present Library Building and Ledwith Avenue.

And that in turn reminded me that I could also remember when the city beach was located on Lake Tracy, about where Charles Garrett's house now stands; when the location of the present city barn and workshops was a part of Lake Tracy; when the A.C.L. Railroad ran through the Lake Tracy Marsh on a trestle, that has now become a fill, and driving with my father in a Model-T over the Polk City Road as it was being built through the Lake Lowery Marsh and watching in wide-eyed amazement at the number of ten pound and larger Black Bass, either lying belly up dead, or slowly dying on the surface because the machinery had stirred the silt and clogged their gills.

But it was well before my time that Peninsular Drive, which now circles the west side of Lake Eva was named. It was so named because the Drive ended at the Lake Eva Marsh, and the territory it divided was then a peninsula.

Various sources show that the bleeding away of the water table did not await the establishment of the Drainage Districts during the teens and the twenties.

Northeast Polk County is the headwater of three rivers and also contributes water to two others. The Peace, Hillsborough, and Withlacoochee Rivers have as their headwaters Lake Lowery, which is situated in the southern part of the Green Swamp.

Water from the Green Swamp also finds its way through the Pilitkahaha Creek into Lake Harris at Leesburg, and joins the Silver River flowing out of Silver Springs to spill into the St. Johns. Meanwhile, rainwater falling East of Summit Avenue in Haines City flows into Lake Marion and thence by Lake Marion Creek into Lake Hatchineha and the Kissimmee River.



Haines City in 1925, looking west from the corner of Hinson Avenue and Tenth Street. On the left the construction is for McWilliams Hotel (Holiday Motel) and the Florida Theater. On the right is that of the Polk Hotel - "Ten stories of solid comfort." (Now Landmark Baptist College.)

Activity in any of these five rivers can then affect the water table in northeast Polk County, and there was very early activity in two of them, the Peace and the Kissimmee.

During Reconstruction, following the Civil War, the State of Florida became practically bankrupt, and avoided it only by the sale of four million acres of swamp and overflowed lands to Hamilton Disston for twenty-five cents per acre. This grant stretched south from Kissimmee to Lake Okeechobee and reached as close to Haines City as the northeastern shore of Lake Marion.

Soon after the purchase, Disston commenced northward from Lake Okeechobee with his steam dredges to give a navigable channel to the Kissimmee River. Although it was shown on the maps as a river and was known as such, the Kissimmee was actually an extension of the Everglades north from Lake Okeechobee to Kissimmee and east to St. Cloud. It was a vast, wide and shallow marsh in which were set Lakes East Tohopekaliga, Tohopekaliga, Cypress, Hatchineha, and Kissimmee. With the opening of a clear channel to Okeechobee, the water table began to bleed away.

At about the same time, phosphate was discovered along the bed of the Peace River, and mining commenced there. The Phosphate Dock at Boca Grande was not commenced until 1906 or railroad reaching it until its completion, and the only way for the phosphate to reach market was down the Peace River by barge to Punta Gorda, transfer there to lighters and by lighter across the Charlotte Harbor to Boca Grande for transfer to waiting ships.

Until this time the flow of the Peace River was relatively slow due to multiple shoals and many rapids, but it was necessary to dredge these away so that the barges could ply the river. Taking into consideration that the Peace River has a fall of about 1.10 feet to the mile from Haines City to the Charlotte Harbor it is easy to understand how the bleeding away of the water table of the western side of the Ridge in northeast Polk County began.

As late as 1918 Congress was asked to pass a bill which would have provided for the Corps of Engineers to dredge a channel in the Peace River 6 feet deep from Charlotte Harbor to Bartow. Fortunately the railroad had been completed to Boca Grande and the Peace River and the water table of northeast Polk County was spared this further depredation.

Fortunately, the original beds of the Hillsborough and the Withlacoochee have remained relatively undisturbed until they reach a point near sea level, and the fall to the St. Johns is gentle and the tortuous course of the water of a long distance slows the run off of the water table.

By 1925 the water table in northeast Polk County had been dealt some ghastly blows, but the coup de grace was administered by the Haines City Drainage District No. 1 when the level of Lake Eva was lowered from its 1925 level by seven feet and Lake Tracy by eleven.

Original plans for the Haines City Drainage District No. 1 called for the lowering of Lake Tracy by only nine feet so a weir was installed to correct the mistake of two feet and hold the lake at nine feet below its 1925 level.

The main canal of the Haines City Drainage District No. 1 emptied into Middle Lake Hamilton and was extended from the west side of that lake to Big Lake Hamilton whose level had already been bled several years earlier by the Peace River Drainage District into the Peace River.

Already the Peace River Marsh, which forced General Zachary Taylor in 1836 to build a special road fording the Marsh near what is now the town of Waverly, had been drained. General Taylor, later to become President Zachary Taylor, was on his way from Tampa to Fort Gardiner on the Kissimmee River with two companies of infantry and two small cannons.

Could the Palm Crest Hotel ever again be in the Lake Eva Marsh? The answer is yes, but not for long.

If the reader wonders how, the answer is a wet year and a very wet hurricane. In 1935, the area recorded 240 inches of rain in 24 hours from the hurricane which killed 1200 veterans on

Matecumbe Key, but that was not Florida's wettest hurricane. Florida's wettest occurred in the mid 1950's when a hurricane which reached Cedar Key took a freak turn south and deposited 55 inches of water in 23 hours on Yankeetown.

With the Withlacoochee River running through the center of town, and a slope of a foot to the mile to the Gulf six miles west, Yankeetown readily survived.

And that yet is not the wettest hurricane to strike this hemisphere. That one, occurring about 1909, deposited 96 inches of rain in 24 hours on the Yucatan Peninsular of Mexico, fortunately in uninhabited areas.

Yes, the waters may come up Fifth Street to Hinson Avenue and east on Hinson to wash the feet of the Palm Crest and the countryside may look like it did in 1883, but the rivers and ditches will soon carry the water table away.

This talk was given to the Rotary Club in Haines City in 1983 by Sherwood Stokes, a lawyer and longtime resident of the city.



Hinson Avenue, Haines City, looking west from Tenth Street, in the 1950s. The tall building at the right is the old Polk Hotel remodeled and called the Palm Crest Hotel. (Now Landmark Baptist College.)

A Dissertation On Little-Known Froe

by Hazel L. Bowman

Thomas W. and Annie Alderman Sweat homesteaded southwest of Chicora across the Polk County line in Hillsborough in 1891, a year after their marriage. Their residence was a log house with a stick-and-clay chimney. Here they reared their children and farmed now unheard-of crops such as rice. But at that time Central Florida was undrained, probably just right for growing rice.

Robert Earl Reynolds, the Sweat grandson who now lives on the farm, says he was twelve when the log house was replaced by a modern structure. He dates the new house to 1951. In some outbuildings, however, the original logs are still to be seen.

Sometime before the log home disappeared, I was visiting with Leona, Robert Earl's mother. She had a pan of some vegetable she was preparing when she suddenly said in exasperation, "This knife is as dull as a froe!"

Hearing what sounded to me like an old Anglo-Saxon word, I immediately asked what a froe is. Leona explained that it was a kind of fairly dull broad blade used by frontier settlers to "rive out" shingles for their log cabin roofs. Today's builders use shingles made by machine to resemble those the old-timers hacked out by hand. For anyone who might wonder what was really involved, let's briefly describe the method used by pioneers to make watertight roofs.

Fell the tree of choice, probably cypress, and clear off the top and branches with an axe. Now saw the log into "bolts" about 15 to 18 inches long. Upend each bolt and using the froe and a maul to drive it, split each segment into slices of wood, working the bolt from its broadest diameter so that the split-offs become thinned at the bottom. Shingle width of five or six inches is obtained by dividing each slice of tree. Never again look with disdain upon those gray, rough-cut shingles on old rural homes! They represent patience, hard work, and lots of time.

Modern dictionaries credit the verb "rive" to Old Norse and "froe" to either Old Danish or Old German. These words no doubt came into Anglo-Saxon (Old English) when Scandinavians not only overran the areas we know as Scotland and England, but also mastered what is Normandy in modern France. In 1066 A.D. when the Normans conquered Britain, they were conquering their Scandinavian cousins from centuries back. North American colonists from the British Isles brought



Froe, shingle bolt, and one-piece maul (from live oak).

not only remnants of their languages, but the tools of their ancestors, both found today in Central Florida and elsewhere in North America.

Over the years I have asked descendants of our pioneers if they ever saw a froe. Arrie Royal Routh, former Brewster postmistress now living in Winter Haven, well-remembers the froe on her North Florida grandparents' farm. And Charles Richard "Dick" Rowand, Jr., former electrician for Polk County and retired in Mulberry, gave a lot of detail about his DeSoto County grandfather, Richard Rowand, and his use of virgin bay trees for shingles. These trees were too large to reach around and gave shingles as resistant to Florida climate as cypress shingles. And yes, Grandfather Rowand used a froe to rive out his bay tree shingles!

Hugh Wright of Bartow, who grew up at Agricola, remembers a depression days WPA project when froes were used to rive out shingles for the Lake Henry pavilion east of Fort Meade, a favorite swimming spot in our youth. Recently on a trip to Sarasota, I saw several froes for sale at a roadside flea market, no two alike and all obviously handmade.

The Polk County Historical Museum has a froe in its collection which could become the center of an educational exhibit on early home construction. But "rive" and "froe" and "shingle bolt" are not apt to become the commonplaces of local speech that no doubt they once were.

1897 SEARS, ROEBUCK & CO.

Froes.



No. 12790. Coopers' Froes, steel edge, 10 to 14 inch cut. Used for splitting shingles, staves, handle stuff, etc., from the log. Weight, 2½ lbs. Price, each..... 60c

The Dirt Floored Kitchen

Twenty-seventh in a Series on Pioneer Life

by Ray Albritton

The first pioneer houses usually had a dirt floored kitchen. There were logs for the walls, pine saplings for rafters and straight splitting pine blocks could be made into shingles for the roof. Sawed lumber was scarce and expensive, and until the sawmills came, it was used only when nothing else would substitute. The sleeping rooms usually had sawed lumber floors, but the kitchen could get by with a dirt floor.

Back in the early thirties there wasn't much around the house in the way of entertainment. Radios were scarce and television wasn't even a distant dream. We used to sit around the fireplace in winter and on the front porch in summer and the old folks would tell stories. Papa would tell stories about outdoor activities like hunting and fishing and Mama would tell about how things were around the house when she was a young girl.

She liked to tell us about the old dirt floored kitchen in the house where she spent her childhood. All of the cooking was done in the fireplace. There wasn't a stove back in those days. The fireplace was made of sticks and clay. The sticks were laid in the shape of the fireplace and clay was packed around them to protect them from the fire. When the fireplace was first built it had to go through a long curing process with a low fire to dry the moisture out of the clay. There was a vertical rod in the fireplace and it had rods connected to it that held the cooking utensils and allowed them to be swung over the fire. Temperature control consisted of swinging the pots closer or farther away from the fire.

The dirt floor wasn't ordinary dirt. The floor had to be covered with clean white sand. It had to be brought in by wheelbarrow from a sandbar in the creek or white sugar sand from a high

Boiling was the most common method of cooking. Pots required little attention, and so long as the water didn't waste away or the fire die, dinner went right on cooking.

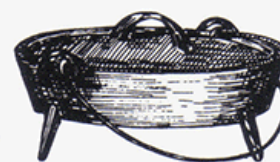
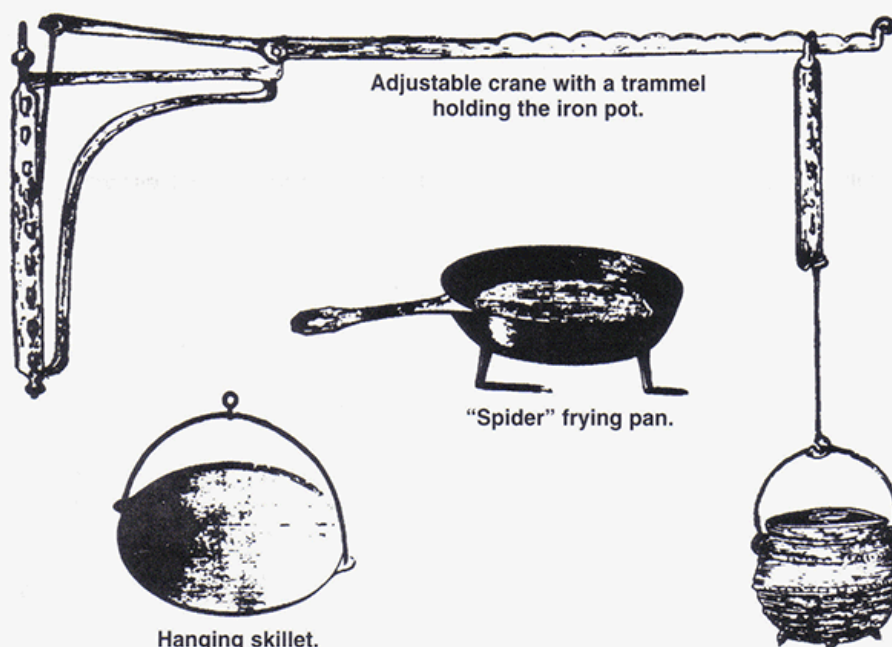


sandy ridge.

There were advantages to the dirt floored kitchen. If a log rolled out of the fireplace, there was no danger of setting the house on fire. It wasn't a big job cleaning the floor. When food was spilled it wasn't much trouble to clean it up. When a cup or plate or dish was dropped, there wasn't much chance of it breaking. The dirt floor was very forgiving. After the floor got in really bad shape, it could be renewed with a few wheelbarrow loads of fresh sand.

The next floor to come into common use after the dirt floor, was the puncheon floor. Puncheons were short blocks of wood that were set with the grain up and made a durable floor. It still required a lot of sand to fill the cracks between the blocks.

Mama always reminded us about how good we had it now with our modern wood stove and a wood floored kitchen.



The raised edge on the lid of the bake kettle held the red-hot coals from the fire, permitting the baking of the top as well as the bottom of its contents.



Polk County Historical Association

25TH ANNUAL LUNCHEON & RECOGNITION OF OUR PIONEERS

Noon • Thursday, June 17, 1999 • Bartow Civic Center

Our annual meeting will be special this year as we celebrate our twenty-fifth year of working to preserve the history of Imperial Polk County. Be sure to attend and bring friends to enjoy the special program that has been planned. Frank and Ann Thomas of Lake Wales will sing and play their original songs about the history and environment of Florida.

The Polk County Historical Association was organized by a group of citizens in 1974 for the purpose of collecting, recording and preserving all kinds of objects, pictures, stories, videos of older citizens, etc. These are donated to the library, museum or park. Our non-profit organization is completely independent of any government entity. Everyone is encouraged to join. Reports are made to the membership through a monthly newsletter and a quarterly containing historical articles. Meetings are open to everyone.

In 1998 the Polk County Historical Association contributed over \$10,000 toward renovation of display cases in the museum. Many of the displays credit the association for the information and pictures used. Before the Homeland Heritage Park was opened, Polk County Historical Association members contributed \$10,000 and over 2,300 volunteer hours. We collect many materials for the library. Thanks to the support of loyal members, many living out of state, we are able to send our quarterly, without charge, to all public schools and libraries in the county, publish a monthly newsletter and arrange for excellent speakers at monthly meetings. We are proud of our accomplishments, completely independent of, but in cooperation with, the county government.

Our most recent project is a cooperative program involving The Polk County Historical Association and The Neighborhood Improvement Corporation of Bartow which has formed "A Curious Coalition" for the purpose of generating community discussion and understanding of race relations. Florida Humanities Council is providing a grant to implement the effort. Bartow High School and Bartow International Baccalaureate students are involved. As an introduction, the Humanities Council presented the program, "Parallel Lives," with Beverly Coyle and Bill Maxwell describing growing up in a segregated society. A diverse audience of about 150 attended. Our newsletters will keep you informed of the progress of this exciting venture.

SEE YOU AT THE LUNCHEON! Reservation information will be mailed to those on our mailing list. Pioneers are encouraged to be interviewed. We need your stories, pictures and presence.



POLK COUNTY HISTORICAL QUARTERLY ISSN 1063-9306

Published in June, September, December, and March by the Polk County Historical Association. Benefactor - \$500.00 or more, Life Membership (for those over age 65) - \$200.00 per person, Family Annual Membership - \$25.00, Regular Annual Membership - \$20.00, Student Membership (through Senior High) - \$10.00.

FREDDIE & HUGH WRIGHT
EDITORS

Volume 25, Number 4
March, 1999



Polk County Historical Assn.
P.O. BOX 2749
BARTOW, FL 33831

Address correction
requested



Nonprofit Org.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
PERMIT NO. 7

