

## [The story of Immokalee]

25999

### PREFACE:

The story of Immokalee, as given to me by Mrs. Platt, had special interest. I had been informed, when I first came here, by Dean Lucius Spencer, who was the United States Commissioner to the Seminole Indians, that Immokalee was not an old Seminole camping ground as stated in the literature given out by tourist offices. Dean Spencer said that it was originally just a cattle grazing and [grove?] settlement started by some settlers from Fort Myers. Fort Myers Chamber of Commerce said he was wrong, that it was Indian.

A map of Florida by Rand & [McKally?], dated 1895 did not show anything in that part of Lee Country, save Lake Trafford and Old Fort Foster.

Captain J. [F]. Jaudon agreed with Dean Spencer so I have been investigating and finally found Mrs. Platte. I believe her story is right. I have written to the Post Office Department about it.

Mrs. Platt has opened another line of study for me, namely: when and how the use of water-ground cornmeal and the question of leavening came to be used in Florida's early days. I have started out to question grocers as to how sales of plain and self rising flours sell, as to amount at different times of year, and to the class of buyers. I have also started to find out when [cracker?] women started to use baking powder, and to get recipes of the olden time. I have set out to find out what they did for coffee in the days of 1861 through the next ten years when conditions were so unsettled and times were so hard. Hope to bring in soon some recipes for making substitute for coffee. [Am?] working among southern women to secure information.

## Library of Congress

There is a chance that I may be able to go over to the west coast after January let, to visit Everglades, [Ochopee?], Chokoloskee and perhaps Immokalee. May also go up Road 26 as far as it goes toward the Lake. This will enable me to see the sacred islands of the Tequestas, which, I believe, are the old "Encampment ground" used by Captain Dawson and Captain Wright while scouting through the Everglades in the days of Fort Dallas. Am gathering data on this also.

Through Mrs. Platte, I hope to assure more clues to other lines of information. [????]

B. R. Comstock

FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT

Miami, Florida

Mabel B. Francis

Editor

4,800 Words

19 Pages

Folk Lore

Stephen Platt's family

1765 N.W. 17th St.

Miami, Florida

Dec. 16, 1938

## Library of Congress

Bertha R. Comstock

### THE BURRELL FAMILY

The house stands well back from the street. It is a simple structure, typical of the rural southland, a one-story frame building set up on a foundation off the ground in case of wet weather and allowing air underneath. It is a single gable house with a porch across the entire front, and a smaller rear stoop giving protection to the kitchen door.

In the backward areas of northern Florida we would expect to see the wide chimney of a fireplace, or maybe two of them, if the cooking is still done on the hearth. Of late years however, we find that stoves have found a place in the kitchen, and the open fire to maintained only in the living room.

In the home we are entering, there in a good range in the kitchen, and if there happens to be a cold "spell" in Dade County, it is only necessary to leave the door open into the kitchen and put more wood into the cookstove. At the side of the house is a generous sized rick of wood cut just right for the stove. The house faces the south and has a clear exposure on the east also, thus receiving all the benefit of the southeast wind and the morning 2 sun.

The house which has withstood three hurricanes, is built on that simple plan of a large living room which has the main entrance from the porch. A door at the rear of the room leads to a narrow hall, from which there is a door into the bath room, and at the other end of the hall is the kitchen. Bedroom open off the front room, the hall just mentioned, and from the side of the kitchen. Two of these bedrooms were built on when the family needed more sleeping space; originally, they were a side porch.

There is a solar heater on the roof. At the rear of the house is an outdoor laundry, a platform with a shed shelter, where the tubs are not near a covered rainbarrel. The "city

## Library of Congress

pipe” is also conveniently near the tubs. A “boil pot” is set up on blocks near by and the wire line is stretched from pole and tree.

The yard all around the house is well sodded and planted with a profusion of hibiscus, crotons, and azaleas that form a background for the smaller flowering annuals blooming beside the house. Rows of small flowering plants grow along the edge of the concrete walks that lead to the front steps, and continue around to the back door and down the yard to the small chicken yard.

Here a few hens turn the table scraps into eggs for the aged couple and the two sons who live with them. A widowed daughter and her child, a girl in Junior High, live in a small two-room house 3 on the same lot. There is a fish pool, and a few trees give shade as well as fruit in season.

There used to be a good garden on the adjoining lot, but old age has brought failing sight to John Burrell who in his prime was a successful gardener and stock raiser. Among the tress and shrubbery in the yard are hibiscus of many shades on the same bush, and citrus trees budded and grafted in former years when his vision was clear and his hand was steady.

Unless it is cold and wet, the front door always stands invitingly open, and as you knock and enter, a cheerful voice bids you welcome. In fact, your coming was seen by the little lady on the bed, for she looks out of the window all day long. Mary is seventy-eight years old, and “not very strong on her feet” but still gets around although not able to walk far or much at a time. She is a real pioneer woman, or as she expresses it “A real genuine Florida cracker.” She sits upon her neatly made bed, wearing a print housedress, her slippers on the floor within reach.

The old-fashioned solid wood rocking chair near the bed helps Mary to pass the hours, as she knits, crochets, some or reads. Her Bible, prayer book, the daily newspaper and a Ladies Home Journal all within reach reveal the source of her knowledge of current

## Library of Congress

events. She has many visitors, and as she says “There is so much that is interesting in the world that one doesn't need to gossip.”

4

John, her husband, who is several years older, often joins the conversation and is most entertaining in his description of early times in Florida. He is an expert citrus worker and until recent years, when his sight failed and his hand grow unsteady, he made a comfortable living by bussing, grafting, and pruning fruit trees. As a diversion, he grafted hibiscus and other trees and bushes; there are many odd combinations in the Allapattah section of Miami as a result of John's efforts to produce “something different.” He also kept a fine garden when he was able and supplied the neighborhood with okra, sweet potatoes and “greens” of unusual quality, for his garden lay in the rich marl prairie that was once a slough forming part of the waterway of the old Allapattah River, now designated as “Seybold's Canal.”

There is one piece of furniture in the plain comfortable living room that attracts attention: the old clock that sets on a shelf where its face is visible from all directions. It is a loud ticking 9-day clock, which has to be wound with a big key and which strikes the hour with a measured, far-reaching stroke that seems to vibrate through the whole house. Asked how old the clock is, Mary says she doesn't know. It was in her grandmother's house as far back as she can remember. They called it “the old clock” then, so it must be at least a century old.

The house furnishings include hand woven blankets, hand braided rugs, and other old fashioned things, interesting, comfortable and noteworthy because of their quality, durable like all things hand-made by the pioneer [woman?], who furnished her home with articles prepared from material produced on the plantation. Linen, cotton and wool were all raised and prepared at home, the thread dyed from home made dyes, that still retain their color, their loveliness increased by the softening of age.

## Library of Congress

Mary says that her own family, the Brennans of South Carolina, came to America from England among the early colonists. She does not know just when, but her grandmother was born in Madison County, Florida. Her uncles and aunts, with their families, also lived in Madison County and just over the line in Brooks and Thomas Counties, Georgia. The country up around there to still full of relations” she said, “They were all slave owners. Some of the family owned more slaves than others.”

“One uncle living in Madison had, in addition to his town residence, three large plantations, manned by many slaves who worked the plantations under the management of an overseer. Among the crops raised were cotton, sugar-cane, corn, tobacco, peanuts, sorghum; these were all grown in quantity, so that after home needs for family and slaves were counted out, there was a surplus for market, which brought cash for the farm-owner. They also had gardens and raised all kinds of vegetables, and of fruit trees there were peach, apple, plum and pears; the pecan is native in this locality. This tree really belongs to the hickory family and, at 6 that time, it was a rather small, hard shelled nut. It grew wild and was generally distributed over northern Florida and southern Georgia. The Creek Indians found it one of the important items of their winter food supply, every family gathering all they could each season.

At the time of which we speak, before the Civil War, northern Florida was still thinly populated, the pine trees were still in their prime, and there were many oaks and wild pecans. The wild persimmon was also a native of this area.

The wild, or razorback hog was not so much in evidence at that time, but every farmer raised many hogs, the corn and peanuts being the main feed crops. To these were added the refuse of the sorghum and also sweet potatoes. The hogs foraged under the oak and pecan trees. Those that strayed away became wild and thus began the vast number of wild pigs running at large.

## Library of Congress

Mary did not remember the special breeds of hogs which were raised in the south in [these?] early days; it was more a matter of selection than of breed. Runts were fattened and butchered as soon as possible. A good animal of either sex was retained for breeding, and service was exchanged among farmers. They had good hogs in those days, but when everything was demoralized during war days, and through the terrible days of reconstruction, many people were unable to feed their stock, there were no Negroes to work the farm, 7 and “everything went to ruin.”

That is why the “native stock” of cattle and pigs was so poor in Florida.

North Florida, where Mary's people had lived for generations, was a cattle and hog country. Both the planters and their slaves had all the meat they wanted, such as beef, pork, poultry and wild game. During the four years of the war, times were hard but the climax came with reconstruction when “Carpetbaggers” took control.

Mary remembers the days when slaves were still with her family. Her own father had only a few, one being the old mammy who cared for the children and directed the housework. This woman had a son about thirty years of age, who managed the farm and was a general handy man; there were several younger slaves, especially Mammy's children who did chores, both in the house and on the land. Often slaves were sent over by other members of the family, when planting time came around, or when crops were harvested, cane cut and syrup was boiled, and when the hogs were killed and the meat cured. The neighborly feeling among all the white families extended to their slaves, and Mary remembers those days as a time of peace and plenty.

Asked how the planters arranged matters when slaves from one plantation married into another family, she explained that, as far as possible, the owners encouraged their slaves to marry within their own plantation. When a slave wanted to marry “outside” however, 8 he always told his master and matters would be adjusted. Either the two masters would arrive at an understanding and usually the woman slave was bought by the master of the

## Library of Congress

man, or sometimes if the two lands were adjoining, arrangements would be made for the wife to live with her husband on the land of his master, while she would go back and forth to work for her own master.

I asked if it were true that some slave owners bred slaves for the market as one breeds farm animals. Such, we had heard, was the case. Not unkindly truly southern woman said, "That is just another instance of how the North was misinformed about conditions in the south. There were slave dealers, it is true who did that, but it was not done as generally as most northern people thought. "Remember," she continued, "it was Yankee ships that brought the slaves over, and because the Negro could not stand the severe weather of the north, the Yankees disposed of them in the South. That started the slave business. It is true that some slave owners abused their slaves: some men, even among Yankees, will kick a horse or beat a dog when angry. They have "Humane Societies" to make people be kind to animals, and in all these horse races, they are very kind to their horses and won't have a stableman who in any way neglects the animal he is caring for. That is because the owner of that horse has his money tied up in the animal. Now, don't you suppose that when a planter paid good hard cash for a slave, and was depending on that slave to work his land, and raise 9 and harvest the crop that was to make his money, he would take care of that slave?"

She went on to describe how the Negroes had their little houses, each family to itself, and how they were fed and clothed by the master. If sick they had medical care. "They have veterinaries for animals, don't they?" she asked. In addition to supplies regularly furnished by the master, each slave family was allowed to make a little garden, or maybe have a hog of their own. Often a runt was given to a Negro boy and he took great pride in showing the master what he could do with it.

"What about whipping?" I asked. "Well," she said, "we did whip them when they had to have it. Our parents whipped us when we needed it, and we whipped our children when they needed it. Of course, now it is considered wrong to whip a child no matter how

## Library of Congress

much he needs it. But as to the slaves, whipping was not as general nor as severe as Harriet Beecher Stowe says it was. There were some Simon Legrees on some of the plantations, but not as many as northern people think. Discipline had to be maintained, and there were other ways of punishing besides whipping. Sometimes it was solitary confinement on a restricted diet; sometimes a change to an uncongenial kind of labor, such as changing from the stable to the field at hard labor, or maybe a house servant would be sent outside to work. Housework and personal attendance were jobs most highly thought of by Negroes. But when whipping was needed, it was 10 given.”

Here again Mrs. Stowe made a mistake by representing the whipping as too frequent and too severe, according to my informant. Negroes were accustomed to whipping as a punishment, and knew when they deserved it. In many cases, other forms of discipline were most effective. To put a Negro in solitary confinement only let him enjoy leisure. A change of employment was given for minor offenses and upon a return to obedience, the culprit would be forgiven and returned to his former place, but when whipping was needed it was administered.

In this connection, we were reminded, there was a time when flogging was a common thing in the United States Navy and in almost every state prison. In Delaware the whipping post is still in use. In our convict camps in Florida, severe whipping is still in operation to say nothing of the sweat boxes and straight jackets. The main point, however, of this discussion was that inasmuch as slaves had an economic value, it was very poor judgment to allow them to be whipped unduly, and cases of extreme flogging were not near as common as most Yankees imagine, always with due respects to Mrs. Stowe.

Mary remembers her childhood home as one of comfort and peace. Her father owned a small farm which was worked by a few slaves who were well treated. There was a plentiful food supply such as various 11 vegetables, peaches, pears, apples, plums and grapes in season, plenty of meat, both fresh and cured, and game at all times. They used to have turkey several times during the week, besides other birds and small game. Cane and

## Library of Congress

sorghum cutting and boiling of syrup were festive times for both family and slaves. Things were different when the Civil War came on which only prepared the way for the suffering that followed during reconstruction.

Asked for information on the days following the war, Mary told of how the slaves were declared free. Many went off, only to come back asking for food and clothing, or for money, of which there was none, although they understood that they no longer needed to work. This was where the northern politician came into the picture, forbidding the slave to work for his old master unless he was paid for every trifling service rendered. There was no money save Confederate script and not much of that.

Slaves were encouraged to go away from the land on which they had lived. Many went away only to become vagrants and were guilty of misdemeanors in other localities. As conditions grew more desperate, so the problem of the Negro became more serious. The carpetbagger stirred them to lawlessness, and only the appearance of the Ku Klux Klan saved the women and children of the South, including the north Florida counties and the southern counties of Georgia, where the Burrell families and their connections had their properties.

12

Only the old Mammy and her three young children remained in the home of Mary's father. The older son, who had worked the farm, went away and found a wife some miles away. Mammy, like many other faithful household servants, remained with her "folks," and shared the days of trial and privation with them. The way of living was far different from those days of comfort heretofore described.

Then slave labor was gone. There was no money to hire help. No crops were planted and there was no food for either stock or family. Nearly all horses and mules had gone to the army long before. Carpetbaggers and scalawags joined with the freedmen in taking what they wanted. It was hard to get enough of the commonest and coarsest food. It was during

## Library of Congress

these days of suffering that the use of chittlings, innards, jowl and rind dishes came into use.

The few Negroes who remained with their “folks,” and the white families themselves, took to the hoe and raised as much food stuff as they could. The crops which heretofore had been money makers now had to be abandoned. Sugar cane was not planted, but sorghum could be handled with less arduous labor and so the use of molasses as “sweetning” began. Field peas or black-eyed peas grow with little cultivation and will bear for a long period if they are regularly picked, so these were planted, and the children picked beans every day. Peanuts, which grow easily were also planted, but instead of being used almost entirely for hogfeed, they too became a food staple. How the Florida cracker and backwoods darkie still love peanuts boiled in salt water! Sweet potatoes were also an important food item as they can be planted at almost any time of the year. The vines can be taken off for replantings, and the pigs can root along the row, finding considerable food.

Both Negro and poor white had opportunity to learn to hoe the corn. There were few plows, fewer horses or mules to pull them, and few Negroes to guide them. The small patches of corn were hand hoed instead of plowed. Corn was ground in small mills at home for a long time. Then small mills were established for community use and the corn was usually carried to be ground in a handcart by a boy of the family if there was no Negro to do it.

One pioneer woman took her bag of corn four miles to the mill, walking behind the cart with her baby in the cart.

Meal so ground was called “waterground,” and is today the favorite meal of the South. It is the whole grain ground fine, and is much better for food value and taste than the meal produced by modern mills in the northern grain belt.

Mary said that it was during these days of privation that the “Crackers” learned to like their “hog, hominy and turnip greens” diet. Many of the old southern recipes were created at this

## Library of Congress

period by ingenious southern housewives, who made the most of such supplies as they had. Wheat flour was very rare and, as the people 14 of the South adapted themselves to the new order of things, small communities grew up around the mill and the school. Church services were usually held in the school building on Sunday.

Mary married in Madison county and became a widow after a short time. She went to work in her uncle's store in Thomasville, Georgia, where she lived for two years. Then, while visiting in Fort Myers, she met John Burrell, a citrus grower of Manatee, and later they married.

John, now eighty-one years of age, proudly relates that he was only out of the state of Florida one time, and that was for one night only. He went over into Georgia and could not get back so he had to stay all night. He has been out in a boat fishing in the Gulf, though, in the daytime.

Mary and John lived in Fort Myers for five years and here the oldest son, Wilbert, was born. Then John made a real estate transaction and went down into the edge of the Big cypress where he built a "cracker house" on foundation boles of cypress. The open corridor had rooms on each side, a porch was built across the front and a rear porch for "doin' the work".

It was twenty-four miles by ox-cart, later by mule and wagon, to Fort Myers. Every ninety days the trip had to be made, to bring back supplies, cornmeal, bacon, molasses, rice, maybe some cloth and some shoes. In fact all food had to be brought in until the 15 garden could yield something for the table.

It was at this time in 1887 that Mary first had baking-powder. Until then, all "risin" breads were made with sour mil, preferably heavy buttermilk and soda. Heavy buttermilk is that which had stood after being churned until it was thick. This was considered the best for baking. Milk that was merely "sour" did not give as good results. Clabbered milk could be

## Library of Congress

used, but the best cooks always preferred heavy buttermilk. But the new baking powder created a furor for “new bakings” among the pioneer women of the deep South.

This new product was a package done up in stout outer wrapping, inside of which were two kinds of powder, one three times as large as the other. One was soda, the other cream of tartar. The directions were to use one teaspoonful of cream of tartar with two tea spoonfuls of soda. They had to be mixed well and were put into the batter after everything else was mixed well; the oven must be ready and the pan greased to receive the batter. Then the new baking powder was stirred in quickly and thoroughly, the batter turned into the pan and put in the oven.

It took a long time to get used to baking powder, and most “cracker” women liked the old way of soda and heavy buttermilk the best. Now, a large percentage of “crackers” use ready-to-mix flour, rather than worry with a recipe that calls for yeast or baking powder.

16

Mary said that “most old timers from Georgia and the backwoods” buy the ready-to-mix flour for both biscuit and pancakes.

A grocer, in reply to inquiries, stated that the ready-to-mix flours for biscuit, pancakes, piecrust, gingerbread and cake sell at least four times to one among southern women and boarding houses that feature “southern cooking.” His statement included both the self-rising flour in flour sacks, and the ready-to-mix package flour.

In conversation with another southern woman, I found that “Southern recipes are all founded on old style breads, always served hot, and self-rising bakings seem to be lighter than where you have to mix your baking powder yourself. As most buttermilk nowadays is not churned, but made with tablets bought at the drugstore, we just use self-rising and ready-mix as a sure means to have good bakings.”

## Library of Congress

When the Burrells arrived at their new home down on the edge of the Big Cypress, twenty-four miles away from Fort Myers, there was nothing there save some very good soil which had the makings of a good garden and fine grove. Occasionally, an Indian passed but they were not even on the Indian trail.

There was only one neighbor and the two women shared each other's burdens, and helped each other as occasions arose. Bishop William Grey, who established the Glade Cross Mission among the 17 Indians. Dr. W. R. Brekins and Dr. William Hanson, father of W. Stanley Hanson, came by infrequently.

Four times a year the Burrells went over the old wagon trail to Fort Myers, to lay in supplies. Then Mary's sister and family and two or three others moved in.

There was no mail unless someone coming through from Ft. Myers would bring a letter so, in 1895, the handful of settlers met at Mary's house and signed the necessary papers asking the Postmaster General to give them a post office. Mary suggested the name "Immokalee" being the Seminole word meaning "our home." The application went through, and Mary Burrell was appointed first postmistress. The first mail went through by wagon to Fort Myers on August 15, 1898. Mary served as postmistress until 1919, when she moved with her family to Miami.

John, with the help of his two sons, built the house in which they still live. It has gone through three hurricanes, never having had any damage, save that the roofing paper was torn off in the storm of 1926. Mary proudly avers "It is a regular cracker style house, but the small farmers in the back county know how to use tools and my menfolks know how to put a house together; that's their part, and it is my part to make it comfortable and homey inside."

The house is yet unceiled, but Wilbert, the son, intends to ceil it as soon as he has time. Meantime, the inside showing all 18 timbers and studding, is so evenly finished and well

## Library of Congress

painted, that one wishes it might be kept as a demonstration of how a well built, rural house should be built.

Asked what is the greatest hardship for a woman and her family, in times such as she passed through, Mary said, "First of all, it was hard to be so far away from a doctor, especially for expectant mothers. If you did not have family folks to go to somewhere in civilization, you had to just trust God and the next neighbor. During those awful days of reconstruction, we often had no one to help us but some neighbor or perhaps a colored mammy. If the case was a hard one, as it often was, the woman would perhaps die and the child, too, before someone could go all the way to town and bring the doctor back. Of course if we could, we went somewhere within reach of help, but some women had no place to go."

"It was hard, too," she continued, "when there were little children needing a doctor. We women were pretty well prepared with standard remedies and helped one another, but the women of today with the doctor, the hospital, the drugstore, the trained nurse and the telephone and ambulance all at hand, have little idea of what it meant to be a mother in the back woods of Florida in those days we have been talking about."

Another thing of which she spoke was the absence of schools for the children. In reconstruction days, there were schools for the 19 freedmen maintained by northern money, and pretty, young New England school marmes. Children of southern families were usually taught at home or, in each community, families would arrange to have children meet at one house where the teaching was done by someone, often an old man or woman, who could at least give the children the three R's. "The reason why so many elderly Florida women have scant education" Mary said, "is due to the fact that school facilities were so meager in those terrible years."

Living at Immokalee, when they first went there, was not near so fearful as it was to live in northern Florida during the reconstruction days. The Indians did not come through the

## Library of Congress

Immokalee section then. The Seminoles would not hurt anyone. There being no direct road, only a mere trail, there was little danger from roving Negroes or other tramps. In northern Florida, the women and children were safe until the reconstruction days set in. Then it was no longer safe to live out in the country and she moved, with her family, into Madison.