

Lake Okeechobee

Everglade Experiences

Notes of a Trip up the Canal to Lake Okeechobee

—BY—

EDWARD HELTZEL KUNKEL

FOR a long time it had been my desire to take a prospective trip through the Everglades, to see for myself what it is like. I am acquainted with the territory west and northwest of Miami and am convinced that it is the best soil I ever saw for farming and groves, though most of our fruit-growers laugh at the idea of growing grapefruit in muck. They are like the starving man, who, when he was offered a doughnut, refused, because all he could see was the hole. It will be but a short time until those knockers, who presumably are from Missouri, will be converted into boosters.

Every visitor to Florida is more or less interested in the Everglades and Everglade drainage. Nearly everyone living here knows something about it, as it has been a common topic of conversation and the daily papers and scientific publications have from time to time reported the progress of the work. I had been questioned numberless times about the Okeechobee region and had gladly given such information as I possessed, but I felt that I could talk more intelligently about a subject with which I was personally familiar. To this end I planned a trip to the



Bananas on Everglade Lands

Everglades in company with Dr. O'Bannon, of Missouri and Mr. Butterfield, of Massachusetts.

Business was rushing the day we planned to leave and we did not get started until six o'clock at night. We armed ourselves with gun and shells, giving the impression that we expected to have to fight our way through alligators, crocodiles, snakes, bears and all manner of dangers. Fully equipped for anything that might happen we bade our friends a fond farewell and jumping into the auto, made a quick run to Ft. Lauderdale, where we immediately started on a hunt for a boat and some one to take us to the lake. We wanted a man who was familiar with the waters and could get us back when our curiosity was satisfied, but to our disappointment no one seemed willing to attempt the trip that night, because of the low water in the canal.

However, we were told that if anyone could get us there Capt. Forbes could. Finally we found him and he agreed to take us that night. But again we were disappointed, as he was unable to obtain gasoline at night, so after all we had to defer

our start until five o'clock next morning.

We went to a hotel, but with the spirit of adventure roused to high pitch, I found myself very wakeful. At last, with visions of alligators, snakes, wild cats, and bears before my eyes, I fell asleep, dreaming of Florida as I read about it in my geography when I was a boy in school. I was ordering our provisions, demanding that they be delivered at once and the merchant was assuring me that they would be there in a minute when the old freight engine gave four shrill whistles close to the hotel.

"Whew, those men are prompt in delivering," I said. Then I opened my eyes to find it morning. I looked at my watch; it was just 4:30 o'clock and we had half an hour to get started.

We did some hustling, and soon had everything in the boat and were ready for our trip. The captain cast off and we were off for the Everglades!

We climbed to the deck of the boat, where we could see everything there was to see, one of the first sights which claimed our attention being

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the beautiful homes along the river—pictures of restful comfort. Then we passed the houseboat which Cleveland and Joe Jefferson used on their hunting trips to the jungles of Florida. The boat seems to be rotted away, but the house is still good. All along the river we saw packing houses and private docks, used by the truckers who carry their produce to the railroad by boat.

For quite a while after we left the river and entered the canal, all we could see was rock, piled high on either bank, but the farther into the 'Glades we went the lower the banks became—evidence that the muck was becoming deeper. When we arrived at the locks the operator was there to open the gates, which worked very systematically. A queer thing about it was that the water was not under control but was running around the lock as well as through it. It appeared that there had been so much water in the canal that there had been no necessity to dam it for the passage of boats.

A reminder of the great northwest wheat-fields was a great, unbroken waving expanse of saw-grass prairie stretching out as far as the eye could

see in either direction. A little farther on we saw thousands of curlew, a bird something like a duck. We also saw many ducks, rail and several others I could not name. But we hadn't seen any alligators and we were wondering if there were any.

"The alligator will soon be a thing of the past," said the captain. "Everyone who makes this trip wants the honor of shooting one."

I was ashamed of my desire to help bring about this deplorable state of affairs, so I set about to dissuade the Doctor from taking the life of a poor innocent 'gator—should we be lucky enough to see one. I put up an eloquent argument in favor of the native of the 'Glades, and was feeling very well satisfied with myself when I heard the gun crack. Jumping to my feet, I was just in time to see a beautiful little 'gator turn his feet up and sink to the bottom. And the argument began all over again. We saw a number of them later.

As we neared the lake, we saw quantities of a gigantic weed, called by the natives "careless weed." The name fits it all right; it surely is careless about its growth. I saw some as thick as a stove-pipe with branches



Corn Growing Near Lake Okeechobee



Pioneers of To-day in the Okeechobee Country

like trees. The heaviest growth of weeds is on the banks where the soil is stirred up, or where it has been farmed and allowed to lie uncultivated. A growth fifteen feet high is made in an incredibly short time.

No fertilizer is used, but experiments have been made with the rock taken out of the canal near the lake. This appears to be of a different nature from the so-called "coral rock" on the east coast; when ground fine and applied to the muck it has a beneficial effect. There was more farming being done in the region within a few miles of the lake than I had supposed.

It seems that an important feature of this part of the 'Glades is being overlooked by most people. South from Lake Okeechobee are thousands of acres which have been but partly submerged and then only during the heaviest rains. Now that the canals are dug this region will never be in danger of overflow. As this soil has never been actually under water for any great length of time, it has no great excess of acidity, and it is claimed therefore that it is in better shape for immediate cultivation than the lands more recently drained.

As we entered the lake the banks

appeared from a distance like a grass covered hill rising from the water, but as we drew nearer we saw that it was custard apple trees covered with moonvines. The fragrant waxy blossoms were opening and with the glossy, deep green leaves made a picture not soon to be forgotten. The sun was setting in a glow of crimson and gold. Two great, fiery cloud dragons, with wide open mouths, seemed to menace the intruders of their fastness. They remained there until the last rays of daylight faded and we had landed at the dock of the hotel at Rita Island.

We were hungry as bears; and if the truth must be told, a little apprehensive regarding our chances for getting something to eat away out there on an island in the heart of the Everglades, at eight o'clock at night.

But we need not have worried on that score. In a short time—it didn't seem more than half an hour—the bell rang for dinner, and we didn't lose much time getting to the dining room, where we sat down to a feast of pork chops and brown gravy, potatoes, green beans, green onions, lettuce, sliced tomatoes, cabbage, peppers, elderberry sauce, and egg plant, the latter served in a style new to

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We were so sure that we would be eaten alive by mosquitoes if we did not prepare for their reception that we had brought along several bottles of "mosquito dope," and a lot of mosquito bar. But we might as well have left it at home, for we did not hear or see a mosquito while we were there.

Next morning we were out bright and early inspecting the farm. We saw some fine fat shoats running 'round, and were told that the five families who make their home on the island allowed their pigs the range of the island. There are about five hundred of them, all fat as need be for market, all raised without feed other than that they obtain themselves.

After breakfast, as we were about to get into the boat to take an exploring trip we saw something moving about in the shallow water.

"That's Murphy, their pet alligator," said the Captain quickly, before the Doctor had time to shoot. And I took off my hat to the protector of the natives!

The lake was smooth as a mirror. The silvery clouds seemed to hang

just above its surface, casting their reflection down in the shining depths. We had informed the captain that we wanted to go through Pelican Bay first, but he shook his head and said he thought the water was too low. He said that if the locks were not soon put in, a trip to the lake in a boat would soon be a thing of the past—the lake was eighteen inches lower than it was intended to be drained. Anyone who doubts that the Everglades can be drained has only to take this trip to be convinced that they can.

We insisted that we would make the trip if we had to carry the boat. When we reached the mouth of Pelican Bay we ran to what is known as "the fishermen's skinning camp," where we were told that we could not get over a hundred feet farther with the big boat. We told our captain to wait and we would be back in about two hours, and that then we would go back, get dinner and start out in some other direction.

Well, the little boat plowed through the water like an ocean steamer, but in less than a mile it was grounded. The guide had missed the channel. We three explorers jumped into a



Orange Trees in the Okeechobee Country

got his money, as well as his home, and everything he owned.

Of course the pioneer in any enterprise is the one who suffers the most hardships. It may not be pleasant to live, as one of them puts it, on "grits, grease and grace," but stick-to-it-iveness generally wins out if coupled with real gray matter. The man who gets in on the ground floor and keeps his stand is the one who will laugh at the bargain hunter five years from now. If the latter gets in on the twenty-fifth floor he will be lucky.

Put this down in your year book and look this country up five years from now.

But we were talking of mud. Oh yes, there is some mud, as Mr. Butterfield can testify. Once, when the big boat struck what seemed to be solid bottom, he decided to make a landing. Tying his clothes in a bundle and holding it above his head he started for the shore. The bottom wasn't as solid as it seemed to be, and several times he went down almost over his head. Nothing daunted, however, he struggled to the shore, which he found to be high and dry, seven feet above water level.

This was a disagreeable experience, perhaps, but one not impossible to

obviate. With no great expense or labor a dock could be built—mostly from material at hand—from shore to deep water. This location on a beautiful lake could be made into a fine home as the soil is rich beyond belief.

No, I own no land around the lake, so have none to sell, but if I hadn't left when I did I surely would have been the next choice morsel for that fabled snake!

Our visit to Mr. Callahan's farm was most interesting. To be frank, I cannot say much about his house, except that it is exceedingly small. He has been too busy to build a mansion. Besides he is all alone and doesn't need one. As he has no wife to scrub a floor, he hasn't put one in! As mosquitoes do not bother him, there are no doors or windows. But he is the most contented and satisfied man I ever met. And why not?

We saw grape vines, planted a year ago, full of fruit. Three year old peach trees fifteen feet high and bearing good crops. Grapefruit trees of the same age, also full of fruit. I saw a beet as big as my head, carrots three to four inches in diameter, strawberries, rhubarb, white potatoes, sweet potatoes, dasheens, corn—great big



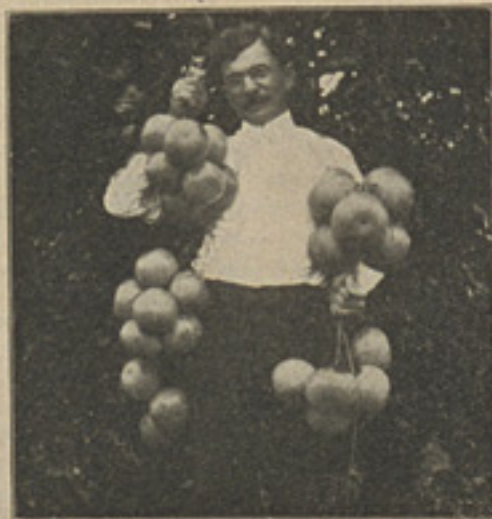
A Future City--Winter in Lakeport.

ears of which any farmer might be proud—barley, well filled; in fact he has every kind of vegetable that will grow anywhere in the state. There hasn't been a pound of commercial fertilizer on the place.

There was sugar cane, fig trees eight feet tall and heavily loaded with delicious fruit, pears, mangoes, apples, quinces, guavas, egg fruit, sapodillas, papayas. I won't even attempt to name everything.

I have been in the state long enough to know something about the fruit and a little about soils. We have planted thirty-five groves in the last three years, and I thought I knew how to grow trees; that I knew just what kind of fertilizer to use to keep trees healthy and vigorous. But as we stood there after we had looked at the wonderful growth on this place in the once despised Everglades of Florida, I must confess I felt whipped.

Note.—In a later number, Mr. Kunkel will tell more about his experiences on this and another trip which he expects to make through this country.



Mr. Kunkel and His Favorite Fruit

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