

Eighteen Months in the Everglades

BY

Mrs. M. F. George

ON the morning of the 27th of July, eighteen months ago, a party of twelve left Palm Beach, en route for the Everglades—six men, four women and two small boys.

We had great air-castles built as to what we were going to do, and the outing we were going to have. All kinds of scary tales had been told us about the dangers of wild animals, whirlpools in New River and the great Lake Okeechobee, which was supposed to have a muck bottom—and should your boat upset in one of the much-talked-of sudden storms, you would sink out of sight and keep on going as though you were in quicksand, with no chance of rescue. One little woman became so frightened that she cried every day for a week before we started. And the more excited she became, the more scary tales were told her.

Really, we all felt more or less nervous. All northern city people, we were not accustomed to boats and water. Our engineer was a young plumber who could run a Ford but knew very little about a marine engine, and our so-called captain knew less. But he had the honor of having once been as far into the Everglades as Okeelanta.

The boat to be used was a twenty-two foot gasoline launch named the "Willie". She was long and narrow, with deep sides, her engine enclosed in a box near the bow, leaving room for two persons

in front, with five seats in the rear, each holding two people. That left two to sit in the stern of the row boat which we were towing, loaded with provisions and our camp outfit as well as our carpenter's tools.

You will see by this that we were combining business with pleasure. It was not just a simple pleasure trip, where one might turn back if he became tired of the excitement or dullness.

A wealthy man from Chicago had purchased eighty acres of land on the shore of Lake Okeechobee, and in order to induce his city wife to come to the new country he must needs build a city home, with all modern conveniences and when it was completed my lady would arrive with a Grand piano and tons of heavy furniture. Remember, this was eighteen months ago and transportation was not what it is now—poor as we yet think it.

But wait; I am getting ahead of my story. Let me see—we were loading the boat. The telegram saying "Start, the lumber is on the way," had reached us the night before, so it was nine o'clock before we were ready to start. And just to show how deceiving weather can be! The sun shone bright and hot on the still glassy waters of Lake Worth; it had not rained for weeks and did not look as if it would ever rain again. But—

We had planned to spend our first night out in Fort Lauderdale. But

alas for plans, when a gasoline engine has the say-so!

Away we went, everyone in high spirits except the little lady who had been so frightened, though even she began to gain confidence as we went merrily on, enjoying the scenery along the shores of beautiful Lake Worth. Soon we came to the canal and on down past the little towns of Boynton, Delray and so on down to Boca Ratoon, a strange shaped lagoon with two points of land extending out into the water which the Indians thought resembled a cat and a rat, and so named it Boca Ratoon, Boca meaning cat, I am told, and ratoon, rat.

From this point we passed through a series of small lakes, bayous and short canals. The channel was not marked and not one in the crowd had ever taken the water trip to Fort Lauderdale before. Here we began to enquire the way of passers by. Two out of every three would say "I don't know" and the other would give some round-about information, and wind up with a graphic description of the dangers to be avoided—just enough to get on our nerves. Here the engine proceeded to "die" and delayed us a couple of hours.

Darkness came on and we were still a number of miles from Fort Lauderdale. We would miss the channel and strike a sand bar. After several attempts with the engine, without success, then it was "all men overboard and shove her off." We would go only a few rods perhaps and strike another.

Then we decided to cast anchor and await the rising of the moon. Here our troubles began. It may be imagined just about how mosquitoes would be in a place like that in July. Of course, as long as the boat was in motion they did not bother. At nine o'clock the moon rose, and we were glad to try again. By this time, in drifting about we had

lost our sense of direction, and anyway, things look different by moonlight. Everyone had a different idea.

As we could not run the launch out of the channel, the tow boat was cut loose and the men went on an exploring expedition. There seemed to be so many outlets to this lake that it was hard to guess the right one. At last they decided on a course. The engine became balky again.

By this time all nerves were at a ragged edge.

"Keep the boat level!" from the engineer.

"Sit down, Louie, you are rocking the boat!" from someone else, ("Louie" being a particularly nervous person who would insist on standing up that he might see what was going on in the engine box), and everyone felt as though we should like to fly.

Lost again! The boat went on another exploring trip. After what seemed an endless time the horn began calling that we should follow. All went well for a little while, then all at once Providence, in the shape of our engine said stop. And stop we did. That engine positively refused to move another inch.

In the meantime the horn kept calling from away off up a winding river that could be plainly seen in the bright moonlight. They were too far away to hear us call, so after a long time they came back searching for us.

Hopelessly lost and a dead engine, twelve o'clock at night, in a crowded boat! Just imagine the situation. We had all been up since four o'clock the morning before. Mosquitoes had no mercy. All of a sudden a black cloud came up, and with it a stiff breeze. Next we knew it was simply pouring rain.

Remember, this was an open boat. The only canvas we had was over the

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provisions. We had intended having a cover put on the launch at Fort Lauderdale. Blankets, comforts, etc., were used for protection, but all were soon thoroughly wet. This kept up for an hour. I never saw it rain harder.

In the meantime someone noticed the boat was filling with water. The added weight was causing water to come through the cracks that were formerly above water line. Upon examination it was found the water stood almost to the top of the supply boat. Then it was use the pumps and bucket in earnest, not only once but repeatedly. It was reported at Fort Lauderdale that five inches of rain fell in that one hour.

There is always an end to everything so morning came at last, and with it a glow in what seemed west to us. We were headed exactly the wrong way of course. Naturally the engine was still stubborn after all that soaking, but we felt very thankful to it just the same, as it had saved us many an unnecessary mile.

Nothing left to do but pole or wade. But when we began to take soundings it was found that we were anchored or rather, drifting, in ten feet of water.

Just think! if that supply boat had gone down, the launch would have gone too, as they were tied together.

"But all's well that ends well."

By degrees we worked our way out to shallow water, then pushed and poled the boats about a mile to where we could see the roof of a house, through the trees. This proved to be some gentleman's winter home. The colored butler made us welcome and built a big fire in the kitchen range, which was certainly appreciated. But we were cautioned to keep very quiet, as "Master", who happened to be at home, was still sleeping.

Every suitcase was wet through;

not a dry garment to change. The butler then told us we were only about a mile from the Atlantic Coast Life-saving Station.

By this time the owner of the premises had risen, and while he very kindly insisted we should make use of his home we preferred the coast house, as we would be able to procure dry clothing. It was decided the butler should tow us over with the gentleman's launch. I never before appreciated what a life-saving station could mean to a shipwrecked person. It certainly seemed like coming home.

We were soon dressed in a motly array of all kinds of clothing, some from Noah's ark, I think. We looked like the remains of a masquerade ball. But just the same, we were comfortable as we sat down to a good breakfast and hot coffee. We remained at the station for two days, as every garment had to be dried out, and the launch sent to Fort Lauderdale for repairs.

The first night was delightful—a good high wind and the salt spray blowing into our room on the second floor. How we did enjoy our night's rest after all we had gone through the night before. Everyone voted this the finest place in Florida, and all wanted a home on the coast, where one slept to the song of the waves. Here I saw my first night-blooming cereus. It was a very large plant and the numbers of sweet scented blossoms made a beautiful picture in the bright moonlight.

If you ever happen to visit a Life Saving Station on any part of the coast of the United States, look in the record book for the year 1915, and you will find that Captain George and a party of eleven were given refuge at the Atlantic Coast Life Saving Station on the morning of July 28, 1915.

Early next morning we were on our way and passed through Fort Lauder-

dale about sunrise, enjoying the beautiful scenery.

Tall stately trees, cabbage palmettos, ferns of all kinds and the beautiful white spider lilies were growing along the banks. Then comes a long stretch of canal where one sees nothing but sand banks on either side, and all at once, the little town of Davie. A rest of a few minutes at this point and then miles and miles of lonely saw grass prairie. The banks were low here and any way you might choose to look nothing but tall waving sawgrass greeted the eye.

Tiresome? I should say so! About four o'clock we reached the junction of the South New River and Miami canals. Here, on the bank of the Miami canal we decided to camp, fifty miles, perhaps, from any house.

Only one night's sleep in three; we were sadly in need of rest.

As there was nothing dry with which to build a campfire, the plumber's stove was made use of, and a warm meal of potatoes boiled in their jackets, fried ham and eggs and hot coffee made what seemed a feast after the cold lunches we had been eating.

Tents were erected, cots spread out and preparations made to spend the night on the most lonely spot you ever saw. The American desert doesn't compare. And yet there was no lack of noise. Frogs everywhere, and every now and then the grunt of an alligator, then the much louder noise of an old father alligator and the delightful song of the mosquito. As might be imagined, not an eye was closed in sleep; even the children could not sleep. Some time toward midnight the moon rose. What a relief! Loneliness is and enough with light, but much worse in darkness.

We soon made ready and were on our way again. First one and then another keeping the pilot awake to avoid running

into the bank.

Breakfast time and no place we could even land. Saw grass and water everywhere. So that meal had to be eaten in the boat, and with no hot coffee.

Noontime—and by climbing on top of a pile of rock we managed to move about a little and to get a cup of hot coffee with our meal.

About three o'clock in the afternoon we were about six miles from the lake and now and then a house came into view with fields of corn. It was certainly good to feel one's self among people once more, instead of unseen things. That night we spent at the Bolles Hotel, where we were made welcome by Mrs. Conklin and Mrs. Edwards.

Early the following morning we were directed across the lake to a point about a mile from Ritta, as the site of the new house to be built. All aboard! and we started out. When half way to Ritta island, sure enough, along came one of the sudden storms we had been told of; Okeechobee being so very shallow, a high wind and driving rain soon created a young ocean of waves. Nothing would do, at least for a part of the crowd, but to put back to shore. Danger always seems less over a road that has just been traversed than on the unknown road ahead. Of course it was over in a few minutes, but the lake remained rough and it was thought best to take a pilot. The two women and the children remained at the hotel, the five men and myself going across in the boat. I love the waves when they are high, so refused to be left behind.

Upon reaching our long-looked-for destination, five and one-half days from the time we left Palm Beach, a rather soggy, desolate looking sight met our eyes. Not a sign of a shelter but an old fisherman's shanty, filled with plunder. The only redeeming

feature was the fact that there were two families there, one a newspaper man and his son, the other a man, wife and son from Chicago who were camped near. They did all in their power to help out and make us feel at home.

The tents and camp outfit were carried up, the shanty cleared out and a small camp stove which we had brought with us, set up and a fire built to drive out the dampness. So, by the time the rest of the party arrived, we were fairly comfortable. All that remained was to erect the tents and arrange the sleeping quarters.

And then came a long tedious wait of ten days, for lumber which had been delayed in shipping.

At last, early one morning the barge came in sight, after having been through a three day's storm; and all the lumber at the bottom of the lake, from where it had to be reloaded! In time the building was started and after a great many delays it was complete. That is, all but the finishing, for there were still many things they had not been able to procure. People who live where there is every modern convenience, railroads, stores and so on, cannot have the slightest conception of what it means to develop the Everglades.

It requires great courage to come into a wilderness like the Florida Everglades and undertake to turn it into fair cities beautiful homes, lovely gardens, fields, cattle and hog ranches. The men who are doing this should go down in history as among the world's greatest men. And not only the men at the head of this great enterprise, but the working men, each one at his place, who gave of their time and their skill. Don't imagine they do this for the money alone. No, for many of them receive a much smaller salary than they would be able to command elsewhere. But they do it

for pure love of the country—for the sake of doing their share in one of the world's greatest enterprises—developing the Everglades, making fair homes of thousands of acres of otherwise waste land.

The Agwi Steamship News published an article on October, 1915, by Alan-son Skinner, assistant Curator of the American Museum of Natural History, New York, in which it is stated that in the fall of 1910 Mr. Skinner and a companion traversed the Everglades from one end to the other, being, as he states, the sixth party that had ever made the trip. This I doubt, as I have met a number of persons who claim to have lived, trapped, fished and hunted in this section several years prior to that date. But anyway, this will give you an idea as to how very recent this development really is.

But I was telling of the first modern home built on the shores of Lake Okeechobee. There it stands—a lovely landmark that can be seen for miles. About the time this was complete we began to hear rumors of the new town of Moore Haven to be built about thirty-five miles north on the lake shore and the Three Mile canal. I suppose we had caught the fever—at any rate we decided to accept an offer to build the new hotel at that point. A few at a time our crew had left us, until Mr. George and myself and the two boys alone remained.

Several weeks before we had decided to move our camp on to what is called a skinning bench, a building once used to dress fish. It is built out in the lake a hundred feet or so, having a floor, roof and two sides, and which could be reached by a long narrow planking two boards in width. If one kept a level head it could be reached without accident. This was a delightfully cool place in hot weather, but not

so nice in one of those sudden storms. I well remember the first one that came on us unaware. Away went every loose article—tin plates, pans, hats and even the stove pipe. Don't forget that we were miles and miles from any store, and, like the effects of Robinson Crusoe, each article was more than valuable. So all hands into bathing suits, and hunt up the lost furniture. One man failed to find his hat and was compelled to return home without one.

The first day of October we landed in Moore Haven to build the hotel. But what we saw then would never be recognized as the Moore Haven of today, though it was only eighteen months ago.

We had been well prepared for what we saw, as only a few mornings before leaving Ritta, a skiff load of negroes came poling by, and when asked where they came from said: "The most awful place in the world—that place called Moore Heaven".

When we told them we were waiting for a boat to take us there, they were shocked. I can see their faces yet.

"Don't you nevah do it sah! No place foh a white man. Niggah can't live there."

We laughed, but came on, though I must confess that when I reached what was known as Moore Haven, I felt as though the negro was about right!

One screened tent, occupied by Mrs. King and her cook, and used as a boarding house; two other very small buildings of one room each! And this was Moore Haven, October the first, 1915.

The ground was only partially cleared and so full of cracks that it was dangerous to walk about for fear of breaking an ankle. I think this point must have been burned over at some time previous, leaving it exposed to the hot sun, which caused the soil to crack, for

wherever I have examined other uncleared tracts, I have always found the soil moist, loose and extremely rich, being much like the rich black woodland soil of the central states.

The first barge load of lumber arrived just before we landed. On the first day of October the new hotel was started. In a short time the company began building cement sidewalks. Seed was sown for a lawn on the hotel block and some shrubbery set out. In a marvelously short time a beautiful green lawn with a border of varicolored crotons was the delight of all who passed. And on Christmas night a ball was given in the new Moore Haven hotel, our guests being friends from Ritta.

The first weeks after we came it seemed doubtful whether we were to live or starve. No arrangements had been made for supplies. Provisions began to get low. A small launch was started for Miami, but there was no knowing when it would return. At this point Mr Moore came to the rescue and established a boat line from La Belle. In this way we had fair service, when the water did not happen to be too low. Our Christmas mail was delayed for days.

The next thing to be built in Moore Haven was five store rooms, which were soon occupied by the much needed merchants, Post Office, Land Company's office and poolhall.

The town has been steadily growing ever since the beginning. A number of neat cottages were built by the company, then came individuals who proceeded to build. There is are now a laundry, several good rooming houses and restaurants, a fine picture show and a bakery, the electric light plant, which supplies our light, with an ice plant connected from which we hope soon to be supplied with ice.

Then came numerous tractors for clearing land, and soon the wild brush country was turned into fertile fields, from which thousands of bushels of Irish potatoes, corn and vegetables have been taken in the past few months.

Less than a year ago we went into ecstasies over the first horse and wagon brought in by Mr. Taylor for the company's use, but now one sees horses, buggies, wagons, automobiles—and Crawford's "Cattle acts" (a number of ox teams used for heavy hauling.)

The dredge, which was some five or six miles out in the lake when we arrived, has passed through the Three Mile canal and on down toward the Caloosahatchee river, leaving a deep channel away out into the lake. The Okeechobee to Palm Beach canal is almost complete. In fact, boats are running from Okeechobee to Lake Clark at the present time. This will give an almost direct route from the Atlantic coast to the Gulf of Mexico. Boat lines have been established in every direction. The South Florida Farms Company have five boats in constant use, a speed boat for quick service making the trip from Moore Haven to Fort Lauderdale in six hours, a large, comfortable boat containing twenty-six berths for the accommodation of the land company's guests, and others for passengers and freight service.

A good sized steamer, the Osecola, plies between Okeechobee City and Moore Haven, making several trips a week, besides numerous other boats. Compare this with sixteen months ago and our one small launch. At a barbecue given in honor of our first anniversary, October 5th, 1916, over five hundred people were present, including visitors from Fort Myers, Miami and surrounding towns.

But still better, when on Christmas night a little more than two months

later, five hundred people attended a Christmas tree entertainment given by our Sunday School children, nearly all were residents of Moore Haven and vicinity.

Where one year ago we seldom saw a stranger, there are now dozens of tourists and land seekers either visiting or passing through Moore Haven daily. Our numerous hotels and rooming houses are scarcely adequate to accommodate our guests.

The new automobile road to Fort Myers and other points was completed a few weeks ago, Mr. O'Brien and Mr. Colbert making the first trip through to Fort Myers. Many cars are now coming over the road daily.

Plans are complete for the new bank building and office rooms to be erected at once. I understand a bank will be opened in a temporary building until its permanent home is completed. A number of other large buildings are also contemplated.

Where, last August, there were scarcely enough pupils in Moore Haven to enable us to procure a teacher, we have at this time enrolled over sixty pupils and two good teachers.

The Atlantic Coast Line railroad is graded to within seven miles of Moore Haven and we are assured it will be in operation by August 31, 1917.

I had forgotten to mention the large ditcher that has been busily engaged in digging lateral ditches every half mile at a cost of five hundred dollars a mile. This is not because our land is low and swampy—far from it—but as a protection against possible overflow. This makes it very attractive, as one can go by boat as well as on land to almost any point. This work has been in progress for the past eight months and a great deal has been accomplished, many miles of laterals being now complete.

If all that I have described in the above article has been accomplished in sixteen months by a handful of people handicapped by transportation, clearing of land and other inconveniences too numerous to mention, what should we expect in the next sixteen months, with a railroad and all modern conveniences?

There is a project on foot now, originated by P. A. Agnew, proposing a canal through the state from the Atlantic ocean to the Gulf of Mexico, which would make cheaper freight rates and also be a refuge from possible bombardment in time of war. An effort is being made to get this matter before the Legislature. It is thought the Federal government will bear at least one-half the expense of constructing locks, excavating etc., which is estimated at about ten million dollars.

With all of our natural advantages, delightful climate and wonderful soil, it will be strange if Moore Haven does not become the foremost city in central Florida in a very short time.

We also have a live Board of Trade and last, but not least, a live Women's Club, with a rapidly increasing membership. And right here it is only fair, as I have paid tribute to the men, brave pioneers of the Everglades, that I should say something of the women, braver still—city bred women, for the

most part, who have left modern homes and conveniences, social life and friends and worse still, taking bright children from city schools to bring them here with no school training for a year.

During the building of the Panama canal, great inducements were offered men to bring their wives in order to establish more home-like surroundings and lend encouragement—in fact to help in their way one of the nation's great enterprises. No such inducements were offered here. We took what came, lived in tents, sharing comforts and discomforts with the men—and all without a word of complaint.

But bravest of all was dear Mrs. King, the white-haired landlady of the Moore Haven hotel, and the first woman in Moore Haven. She is rightly named the Mother of the Glades.

We came, and we stayed, and we are glad we came. We now have comfortable homes of our own, if not yet complete, at least in course of construction, and a bright future ahead. We have a good school for our children, with the expectation of a high school the coming year.

Our Woman's Club and a Union church are the beginning of our social life, and we have the satisfaction of knowing that we have helped in a great enterprise—the Reclamation of the Everglades.



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Moore Haven Hotel



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