

'Neath Southern Skies

By
Van Campen
Heilner.



A typical dwelling in the Ten Thousand Islands.

FAR, far, to the southward, away at the end of distant Florida lies a wild, little frequented and seldom explored region, the great Ten Thousand Islands of the West Coast. Sportsmen coming from the East Coast occasionally reach Shark River, the most accessible spot of that whole country, or those on the West Coast come down as far as Fort Myers, but the vast network of islands, bays and swamps that lies between is a sealed book to the majority.

From the magic pen of the late Mr. A. W. Dimock, whose *Book of the Tarpon* is a world-wide authority, I first heard the luring call of the Ten Thousand Islands. But one day I picked up a portentous volume on Florida, and in idly scanning the pages, came across the following paragraph:

"The Ten Thousand Islands is interesting ground for exploration. This is the one region, besides the Everglades, that is yet to be invaded by civilization. The fastnesses of this remote region have been a safe retreat for years for criminals and social outlaws, but the *sense of aloofness from all the rest of mankind* is what most impresses the person who chances upon that out-of-the-way corner of the world."

I read no further. It was the spark that kindled the fire. I've always had the Wanderlust and now it seemed to take a firmer hold on me than ever.

At that time my cruiser was at the builders nearing completion, and I made trips to Bayonne nearly every day in my anxiety to see that she was progressing with all possible speed.

AT last she was done! I gazed rapturously at the vision of grace as she floated for the first time on the waters, shining under her white paint and shimmering brass.

The summer glided by, filled with golden hours for Billy and I, who fished in the *Nepenthe* from Sandy Hook to Cape May and even along the Delaware shores.

Summer merged into fall and I betook myself to the North Woods on my annual deer hunt and then, one bleak November morning, I returned to the shore. A wild nor'easter was beating down on the deserted coast and the surf was moaning of the winter to come, when I bade Billy good-bye at Seaside Park.

I watched him as he slowly passed out of sight down the Bay, headed for the balmy land of sunshine and flowers.

For the next few weeks, I was kept busy overhauling my outfit, purchasing new tackle, etc., etc., and making ready for my departure. Then one day a tele-

gram arrived and I eagerly tore it open. It was dated Miami:

ARRIVED SAFELY, MEET YOU LONG KEY SATURDAY
was what it said, and it was signed "Billy."

I HARDLY slept that night nor the next, being continually haunted by droves of tarpon, panthers, deer and sharks which pursued me for miles, and just when I escaped I would fall into the hands of a gang of murderers.

Thursday I left for New York in a blinding snowstorm, and the same afternoon saw me on the rear end of the observation train, gazing back through the mist of falling flakes at my last glimpse of the North for many a month to come.

The sun was very hot. Despite the fact that many of the windows were open, I was glad, upon looking out, to see the white slender shape of Alligator Light far out on the reef and know that Long Key was only a matter of minutes away and I would be able to get out of this stuffy Pullman.

MY car stopped short of the platform and in endeavoring to descend with all my luggage, I fell and rolled down the



The first little 'gator.

embankment, rods, suit cases and what not following in my wake, all seeming to choose my body as their resting-place.

As I scrambled sheepishly to my feet amidst the howls of joy from my fellow passengers, a great pair of sun-burned arms flung themselves around me and I looked into the bronzed face of—Billy.

Gene Hamilton, with whom I had made arrangements some months before, was with him, and together we all carried my baggage down to the dock and deposited it in front of the *Nepenthe*. She looked the same, a trifle worn from her long journey, but to me she epitomized about everything in life just then.

Billy and Gene loaded up with ice and water while I strolled up to the camp, that Mecca of all devout big-game anglers, and interviewed the hospitable Mr. Schutt, than whom as a genial host there is none better.

WHEN I returned, everything was in readiness, and we lost no time in getting off. The waters of the Bay of Florida lay like glass under the broiling heat of the sun, and the bow of the *Nepenthe* rolled back a wave that gurgled and splashed with a delightful cooling sound as we sped on our way.

Being familiar with the route as far as Cape Sable, I took the wheel while Gene and Billy prepared lunch.

Several hours after, looming up through the haze, were the outlining sentinels of that vast island region of Cape Sable and just as dusk settled down, after picking our way through tortuous channels and banks where even the shallow draught of the *Nepenthe* was sometimes too much, we dropped anchor in a place known only to perhaps ten sportsmen who have ever visited Florida—Conkey Bay.

This wonderful bay was discovered a few years ago by the Thompson boys of Miami, who named it in honor of the gentleman whom they were guiding at the time. Should Mr. Conkey by chance read this article, let him have no fears in regards to his fishermen's paradise being fished out; neither I nor Billy shall ever disclose its location, and as Jeffy and Jimmy Thompson are the only guides in Florida who know, and since their services are commandeered a year ahead, and furthermore as the majority of the anglers prefer the East Coast and would not wish to undertake such a long and distant trip, Conkey Bay will remain known to only the "chosen few."

IN the first place the entrance to the Bay is so narrow that a boat passing within a quarter of a mile of it would

not be aware that there was any bay there at all. Secondly, the deepest water in the bay is five feet, while the average is between 3½ to 4, so a cruiser of extreme light draught is absolutely essential. Although the *Nepenthe* draws only 27 inches we have forced her over 18, and she is the ideal boat for Conkey Bay.

When once in this El Dorado of fishes, the sportsman may practically take his pick. The bay seems to be the natural feeding ground of thousands of porpoises, saw fish, tarpon, jacks, sea trout, redfish, sheepshead, ladyfish, barracuda, robalo, turtles, stingrays, etc., to say nothing of several rookeries of cormorants, pelicans, herons, and no end of wild ducks. The above are the only fish I have seen in this country. If there are others, I have never caught nor observed them. Billy and I spent a month there one winter and we—but I just remembered, we are bound for the Ten Thousand Islands, and Conkey Bay is another story.

FOR the next few days we spent our time in the bay, harpooning. For this sport we were in an ideal location, and to say that we got our share would be putting it mildly. One day I harpooned so many sharks I was forced to stop out of utter exhaustion. The fatiguing strain on my arms, to say nothing of the terrible excitement coincident with the fish charging the boat, and one thing and another, was too much; I collapsed in the cockpit. They took me back to the *Nepenthe* and I slept for fourteen hours straight.

Deciding that we had had our fill of harpooning, we started one morning on our journey around the capes. There are three in number; East Cape, Middle Cape and Northwest Cape. From East to Middle Cape stretches the largest coconut grove I have ever seen. It comprises approximately 90,000 trees, and the coconuts are left to rot on the ground. Either the owner is dead, or transportation facilities are too difficult. I am inclined to favor the latter theory as the railroad is around on the East Coast and shipping the coconuts away by boat would be rather a slow operation, I imagine.

It looked rough around the capes, so we went ashore at East Cape to reconnoiter. The beach here is about the most curious that I have ever seen. Expeditions sent by the Government, report the shells here to be the most interesting collection in America. I don't doubt it for a moment, for I saw more strange and fantastic-looking shells there than I've seen in most any museum.

Billy wandered up the beach while I amused myself by shooting sharks. The water was deep right up to the shore, and the big fellows swam along within a foot of the sand, their grey dorsals cutting smoothly through the water, their tails swinging from side to side. A huge one came wallowing up almost on the bank. The water was milky and he didn't see me. I held my revolver down to with-

ina foot of his head and fired. He tore out of there like a stampede, throwing water all over me. Gene was out casting for mullet. We wanted some for dinner.

BILLY hailed from up the beach and I went to him. He was standing back some distance from the sand underneath the rustling palms . . . the palms that always sound like the gentle fall of rain. "Come here!" he called, "I want to show you something."

It was a grave. Surmounting it was a small stone upon which was a tablet with the following inscription:

GUY M. BRADLEY
1870—1905

AS GAME WARDEN OF MONROE COUNTY
HE GAVE HIS LIFE FOR THE CAUSE
TO WHICH HE WAS PLEDGED.
ERECTED BY THE FLORIDA AUDUBON
SOCIETY.

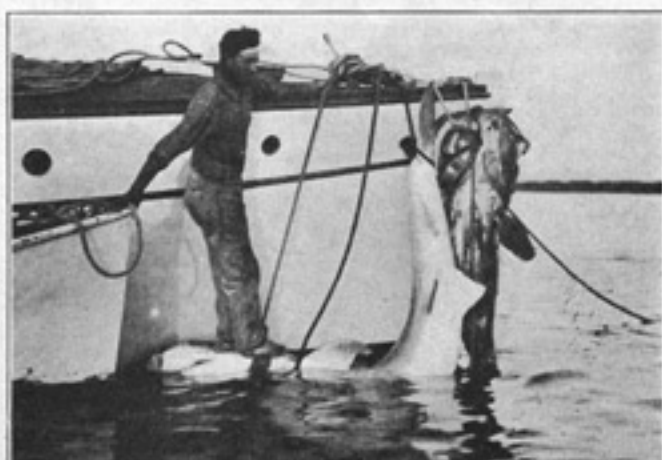
We took off our hats in memory of one who had died in an effort to bring law and order to this frontier country. I knew his story. I had long known his relatives and friends and how he met his death with no news to me.

Bradley had been appointed game warden of that section. The famous Cuthbert Rookery lay to the east of Cape Sable and on the Oyster Keys, near the small settlement of Flamingo, were several rookeries of the lesser herons. One Smith was residing at Flamingo at the time, and Bradley, believing that Smith was going to Cuthbert Rookery and also that he was molesting the heron rookeries on the Oyster Keys, went out one afternoon to investigate the latter's sloop which lay near one of the islands. He failed to return that night. The next afternoon Gene Roberts while out fishing, was attracted by a large flock of buzzards sitting on the mangrove bushes of the keys. Going over he found Bradley's skiff, and in it, the owner, face down in a pool of blood, a bullet through his forehead.



"... A little three pound beauty."

that Bradley shot first and he showed a hole in the mast of his skiff to prove where the bullet went wide of its mark. He was exonerated. What my personal opinion of the matter is I will not say. There was a bad feud at Flamingo for several years, over the matter, and I do not wish to create any more trouble.



Trophies of the harpoon.

We rounded the capes in a living gale. We were obliged to put the side-curtains down for with every plunge, great sheets of green water came hissing over the deck, running under the curtains and down into the cockpit in little rivulets. We ate no lunch that day. Gene, wrapped in his sou'wester, hand on the wheel, stared out through the dim glass, his eyes fixed on the heaving waste of waters. I gnawed on a hard crust of bread; Billy smoked. Now and again something would go crashing down in the cabin and I would go staggering down the steps to investigate, clutching for support at all available objects. The cabin was warm and cozy and I lay down for a short nap. The old Gulf certainly was peeved I thought, as I drifted away into the land of dreams.

I AWOKE several hours later. All was dark outside and we were in calm water. I went up on deck and found them using the "search." Billy clapped me on the back. "The Ten Thousands at last, old boy!" he cried. "There's Shark River ahead. Shake!"

The flare of the light showed the delta'd mouth of a river, up one branch of which Gene steered the boat.

"Let her go!" he yelled to me and I released the anchor with a splash, into the black depths. It had been a long hard day and we were all tired—not too tired though, to partake of a delicious roast duck which Billy prepared in our Dutch oven in a tantalizing manner. As I climbed into my berth and switched off the lights, something kept whispering to me even on into my sleep. "The Ten Thousand Islands at last! The land of fish and game, of mystery—of romance!"

DAWN . . . dawn in that vast island region of the tropics came quickly and silently. I looked out through the porthole at the river dimpling and eddying its way silently to the Gulf. Mist hung low over the surface of the water rising slowly to meet the oncoming sun.

Billy and Gene were still sleeping. I went out on deck. A big tarpon broke water close to the stern, its scales shimmering brightly in the pink light. A flock of curlews came flying overhead, bound outward from the rookery to the feeding grounds. The heavy scent of tropical vegetation floated across to me, wafted by a gentle breeze which was just stirring.

It was all very beautiful and very wonderful, but I must be going below and rousing the others. We had a long journey ahead of us, for we were striking for

the head of Harney's, into which Shark River branched, and the Everglades.

Breakfast was soon over and we headed up river. It was a long drag. The river narrowed, then widened; sometimes we went through creeks so narrow that the mangroves almost scraped the sides of the boat; at other times we would be traversing a chain of bays, dotted in places with great flocks of ducks. Tarpon rolled frequently, water turkeys fell headlong from overhanging branches, at our approach and disappeared into the river, appearing shortly after with only their long snaky neck darting here and there above the surface. These birds were always a source of wonder and amusement to us. Black, with brown neck and gray streakings on the backs of the older birds, a long thin neck which they poked hither and yon when swimming, easily made one see why they were called "snake birds." How a water turkey can swim with his entire body submerged and his head and neck above the water is a mystery to me and ever will remain so.

THE current was against us, flowing silently, steadily to the Gulf, so we did not make the time we should have in quiet water.

At last the branch of Shark River we were traversing came to an end and we entered a long wide bay, our first sight of Harney's River. At the far end stood the Tussock, a small island made famous in A. W. Dimock's *Florida Enchantments*.

We anchored the *Nepenthe* near the Tussock and after a hasty lunch set out in Gene's launch to do some bass fishing near the head of the river. We had barely passed out of sight of the boat when Gene with a sudden, "There he is! Quick! on your left!" shut off the motor and turned the launch toward shore.

As we drifted near the mangroves, I made out, lying on the bank, our first alligator. He was a little fellow but still he would make a nice skin so I dispatched him with the 22.

We then proceeded on our way. Bird life became extremely plentiful. Several flocks of curlew or White Ibis, passed swiftly over our heads, their pink feet and long curved bills making a striking contrast with their snow white plumage. These must have been roosting birds, for we passed the great deserted Harney's River rookery shortly after, which a few months later would be one great chattering, screaming bird city of beautiful white ibis, stretching for a mile along the river.

"We are nearly to the bass grounds now," said Gene, "you ought to . . ."

"Holy smoke! What's that ahead?" cried Billy. About a hundred yards upstream two black blotches were moving across the surface of the river. "Gator and a monster!" whispered Gene. "Easy now and we'll get him."

BUT the old bull was wise and he suddenly sank from view. We stopped the launch and Gene grunted, a peculiar

whining sound, something like the boom of a big bull frog, and very hard on the throat. As a rule it always brings a 'gator to the surface, but in this instance, it failed and we were forced to give up. "Never mind, old fellow!" Billy called into the depths, "Some day we'll get you!" It was prophetic,—and another story.

A short time after, we were on the bass grounds, Gene told us ("trout" he called them). I cast from the running launch in order to wet my line.

"Stop! Stop!" I shouted. Something had seized my Baby Crab and was doing gymnastics on the other end of the line. It was a large-mouth, a little three-pound beauty.

Billy and I got into the skiff and drifted



Billy gives Tommy Tiger a present.

along the bushes, casting under all the likely branches and into all the inviting holes. I shall never forget that afternoon. Those bass had probably never before seen a plug nor known what rod and reel meant. Certainly they didn't show it. They literally fought for the bait, rushing through the water like torpedoes, ravenous, wild. Billy was using a pet bait of his, a Wilson's Fluted Wobbler. I used a Baby Crab and we averaged about even. We caught thirty-two black bass that afternoon. We kept none of them. Why should we? We had a plentifully stocked larder on board the *Nepenthe* and this was the last day of the year; we could afford to be generous.

"Hullo!" observed Billy, reeling in a nice two-pounder, "we have visitors, I see."

I GLANCED up river and saw a small narrow craft in the bow of which stood a dark skinned individual in a gaudily colored shirt which reached nearly to his ankles. In his hands he held that with which he propelled the dugout, a pole on one end of which was a wooden fin, used in pushing and paddling, and the other end a sharp spike used in spearing turtles and garfish. Gene spoke a few words in a gutteral tongue to him and he replied briefly.

"He says he has seventy-nine otter skins at camp," said Gene. "That's Tommy Tiger." The Indian nodded vociferously:

"Otter, me got 'em ojus," he affirmed.

"Billy was about to release his bass when he thought better of it and handed it to Tom Tiger. A little red-skinned pickaninny occupied the stern of the dugout. I proffered him a Uneeda biscuit. He took the whole box. Finally Tommy Tiger informed us that he thought he'd kill an *eecho* (deer) before dark, and picking up his pole soon disappeared around a bend of the river.

It was nearly sundown and tired but happy over some of the greatest black bass fishing we had ever experienced, we started back down the river, arriving at the *Nepenthe* just at dark.

It was New Year's Eve, and Billy sprang the surprise of the trip by producing a de-

licious milk fed chicken which he had smuggled into the ice box at Miami unbeknown to us. We had it roasted, stuffed with celery and onions and surrounded by browned sweet potatoes and strips of bacon. I am ashamed to say I made a hog out of myself that night, but I shan't regret it.

AFTER supper, pipes were filled and we sat up telling stories and planning the future. The witching hour of midnight was not far distant when Billy produced the cold remains of the chicken and some sliced tomatoes reposing amongst some lettuce. Billy was always surprising us that way.

The best surprise of all, however, was left to me. I repaired to the back cabin and returned with a bottle of champagne, a bottle which I had closely guarded between shirts all the way from New York.

Suddenly our little alarm commenced to ring, and lifting our glasses, we drank to the New Year. Gene had never before tasted champagne and he drank three glasses down in short order, saying it was a "little weak, but very good." Gallons of corn whiskey had injured his stomach to nothing less than carbohic acid.

Billy says I shouted out "Waiter!" several times in my sleep that night, but I don't believe it; he is always making fun of me.

THE next day dawned perfect as they always did and we ran for the head of the river and the Everglades. Water turkeys were in evidence everywhere, coots rose ahead of the launch, alligators slid from the banks with a ker-splash into the water, but they were mostly all small and we didn't bother them. Tarpon were rolling everywhere and once the head of a great manatee rose and gazed at us for a moment, then sank beneath the surface.

Suddenly the river forked off into two branches, the left-hand one of which we took. Two hundred yards further on, the branch ended and we looked out into the Everglades.

This desolate land has well been termed the "Land that God Forgot." As far as one can see, a never-ending vista of sawgrass and water presents itself to view. And not a sound, not a breath disturbs those vast solitudes.

Once on the East Coast, I penetrated

the 'glades to within 18 miles of Lake Okeechobee, when circumstances forced us to turn back. But I have never forgotten the trip. The silence, the loneliness, got so on my nerves that I felt like throwing myself screaming mad into the nearest 'gator wallow.

WE boiled some tea and ate our lunch at an old Indian camp nearby and then started back for the cruiser. Gene had told me of a lake back in the swamps where the 'gators had not been hunted for 10 years (the demand for their hides having decreased), and I was anxious to secure the skins of some of the big saurians, and at the same time improve my rifle practice somewhat.

The following day found us anchored off Gene's home, on an island at Porpoise Point, and the next morning Billy, he, and I set off through the jungle for the lake of the 'gators.

We plodded on for several hours through the steaming growth, across sloughs, under and over twisting roots, until all of us were more or less glad for a chance to rest. The chance presented itself in the shape of a broad prairie, about a mile in circumference, covered with waving yellow sawgrass, and here we sat down for a smoke and a consultation. Gene said that the lake was a few miles further on and that it would take us some time to reach it, also that if one of us chose to remain behind at the prairie, the chances for a deer were very good in the tall grass along the edges.

Billy elected to remain and Gene and I pushed on. It was hard going and I must confess it was with relief that I at last saw the water gleaming through the trees and knew that we had reached our destination.

It was a wild and desolate sheet of water that we looked upon. Gene said that we were the first white men to look upon it for over ten years, the last time being when he and his brother were hunting 'gator skins for market and had taken close to a thousand 'gators from the body of water before us.

THERE was no beach, as the mangroves grew out into the water, so we ascended one and crawled out on a limb which overhung the lake. There were five 'gators in sight at the time, lying like logs on the surface of the stagnant water, so picking out the nearest I fired at him. I overshot, but he did not move; no doubt having lived so long unmolested, did not even know what a rifle was. Taking more careful aim the second time, I fired and hit him.

He threw his whole body out of the water with a great splash and disappeared. The same with the next one I shot at; I could hear the thud of the bullet as it struck the reptile and then it immediately disappeared.

It was impossible to reach these brutes, so I gave up the long range shots and turned my attention to those nearer at hand.

All the alligators had sunk from view by this time, except one which we could see swimming along the bushes on the far side of the lake. I did not wish to try

him so asked Gene to "grunt some up." A few persuasive notes from that worthy's throat and there rose to the surface no less than thirty-seven alligators, which I slowly counted in wide-eyed astonishment.

I was just taking aim at the nearest, a great bull, when I felt the tree in which we were in, tremble slightly, and looking down I beheld, not three feet from my foot which was suspended over the water, the form of a huge alligator.



"The swamps were full of raccoons."

I IMMEDIATELY thrust the rifle down between my knees and fired at the dark head, whereupon there ensued the most frightful commotion I have ever witnessed.

We were both deluged by sheets of water, and the mangrove tree shook so violently that I momentarily expected to be hurled from my perch into the savage jaws below.

I fired again and things grew quieter, though the great tail still thrashed about with powerful swings breaking the low branches into matchwood.

We descended and skinned out our victim, a difficult job amongst the gnarled roots and mucky ground, but we finally accomplished it and a beautiful skin it was, a fitting memory of that desolate lake in those far-off swamps.

I killed three more 'gators and then as we had all the skins we could carry we started back for the prairie.

The swamps were full of raccoons and on the return trip I shot two, one a dandy with the fur in prime condition.



One of the big bull alligators.

WE came upon Billy almost where we had left him and here a pleasant surprise awaited us, for he was skinning out a fine little buck—enough fresh meat to last us for several weeks.

On the way out we stopped at old man Jorkan's, a hermit who lived some miles back of Gene's place, and got some sweet

potatoes for the boat. I was surprised to find Jorkan a man who had traveled over a good part of the world, including China and Japan. What he was doing, living in that out-of-the-way portion of the globe, I do not know—nor did I ask.

The next day we went duck shooting. I have never seen so many ducks in all my life. There were literally thousands upon thousands of them, and they covered the water in acres! There were no points from which to shoot, so we shot from the launch, firing into the dense masses with buckshot and killing the cripples with the finer shot when we came up. We secured enough to last ourselves and Gene's family for a couple of weeks to come and called it a day. If ever again I want ducks, I know where to go for them.

WE drifted around that vicinity for several days, visiting a white pelican rookery and taking part in some of the early season mullet fishing, the principal occupation of the few inhabitants of that region.

Gene's brothers and father lived at the mouth of Lossman's River, a wild stream that flowed down for miles out of the vast Everglades, and after a short visit to them, we decided to explore the upper reaches of the river.

The very afternoon after we started, I shot an otter, a big handsome fellow, and the second morning up-river I had a new adventure.

I had risen before the others, and taking my rifle, slipped into the skiff and rowed quietly up the stream, scanning the banks for possible signs of a deer. I had just rounded a bend when I thought I saw something move on the opposite bank, and barely discerned some sort of a body slinking off through the brush.

Taking hasty aim I fired twice. Out on the still air burst a terrible scream and a long yellowish body crashed through the trees and disappeared.

VERY much excited, I rowed quickly to the shore and made my way cautiously through the bushes. Fifty yards back from the bank, I found it, a big panther, stone dead.

Just then I heard the "put-put" of the launch, and Billy and Gene hove in sight. They had been awakened by the shots and the frightful cry of the beast and had hurried to the scene, clad merely in their pajamas.

We skinned out the big cat and returned for breakfast, while I related, again and again, the exact details of the killing.

Were I to tell of our many other adventures, it would consume a volume, so I will not try. We hunted, ate and slept; fished, ate and slept again. One day, up toward the head of Lossman's, a big tarpon, which Billy had hooked, jumped into the boat from which he and I were fishing, and immediately capsized us, wrecking things generally. Another time—but what's the use; I could go on forever.

We finally left that enchanted land—back to civilization once more. We were to return there again in April, but had we known of some of the things that were awaiting us, we would never have left.