

Title: Key West Oral History Interview with Gertrude Lowe Sandquist and Violet Pierce Stickney

INTERVIEWEE: Gertrude Lowe Sandquist and Violet Pierce Stickney

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Unknown: --Key West, so that old-timers will give us vivid recollections of Key West as it was as far back as they can remember and we're very fortunate today in having two women, two old-timers, two Conchs born here who recall a great deal of the past here vividly, but especially, the most important date in Key West history, and that was January 22, 1912, and it's always known to Key Westers as the day the train came in. So I'd like to introduce Mrs. Violet Pierce Stickney and Mrs. Gertrude Lowe Sandquist. Violet, how old were you?

St: Thirteen.

U: The day the train came in. Gertrude, how old were you?

Sa: I was sixteen.

U: You were sixteen. So you were a real youngster, just turned thirteen. And Gertrude, do you want to tell us what you did that day?

Sa: Well, with another friend of mine- also sixteen- and we both thought we were quite grown up; we didn't wanna go with our families, so the two of us set out and went down for the arrival of the train. And we saw it come in and as Violet said, we each had a little flag and roses and I think she's going to tell about that.

U: Yes Violet, tell us about the roses that you carried.

St: Well, the roses were Key West rock roses grown in Key West and my mother made me a new white dress for the occasion of Mr. Flagler's arrival--

U: What kind of material was it?

St: Well, I don't remember the material.

U: Cotton. [laughs]

St: Cotton, I guess. Cotton or (borel?).

U: Yes, yes.

St: So, a group of children from the different schools were on this platform singing and Dr. Fogarty- he was mayor of the city at that time- escorted Mr. Flagler across the platform. As he passed, we sang and waved Amer-- small American flag and threw the roses at his feet.

U: And you sang?

St: We sang, yes.

U: Various songs, I suppose.

St: No, it was just one.

Sa: One particular one. [both interviewees speak at same time]

St: One particular one composed especially for Mr. Flagler and his men.

U: Oh, how nice, yes. I understand there were some famous representatives on the train from other countries: from South America, particularly Argentina and Brazil.

St: Well, I can't remember those. I was only interested in Mr. Flagler and singing-- seeing the long train coming in.

U: Yes, yes. Gertrude, would you like to tell us just what you and your friend did?

Sa: Well, of course we saw the train come in and we were-- we had been around quite a bit because all of the young engineers were friends of ours and they had been working night and day for about three or four days and had had no rest whatsoever, and so, when-- just before the train came in, they went to the bunkhouse and they didn't even see the train come in.

U: Oh no.

Sa: No, but we did and we stayed around and when all the dignitaries had left, my friend and I were standing by and one of the-- one of Mr. Flagler's friends, I think it was one of his friends, anyhow, he was aboard the *Special* and he came up and asked us would we like to come aboard. So, of course, two daring young sixteen year olds, we did and he offered us some champagne and we'd never had champagne before in our lives and so--

U: The first time. [all laugh]

Sa: So we took a sip, but that was all. We knew better. [all laugh]

U: Well, I understand that they brought all kinds of things down on the train. Do you remember-- do either one of you recall what-- besides the passengers--

Sa: What do you mean?

U: --in the way of freight?

Sa: Oh! Well, it was about-- I don't know how many--

U: Do you remember Gertrude?

Sa: --how many cars, I would say about ten cars just by guess.

U: Yes.

Sa: Mm-hmm.

U: And that went on--

Sa: Of course to us, it looked like a mile long.

U: That was taken on ferry boats or over to--

Sa: Over to Cuba, mm-hmm.

U: --to Cuba. So it began a regular freight service as we said before.

Sa: There were two boats as I recall: the *Olivette* and the uh-- oh let's see, what was the name of that other one? The-- the *Mascotte*. The *Mascotte* and the *Olivette*, they were the two P. & O. steamships that came right up to the dock and the passengers and freight were put aboard and then they went to Havana.

U: I understand that that was a spot Flagler had really visualized.

Sa: Yes.

U: To--not only to anchor Key West to the mainland, but to anchor Cuba to the United States by having regular service.

St: Yes.

[audio cuts off]

U: -- and so on this eventful day, Key West was connected with the mainland by the vision of the pioneer Florida-- Flagler, H.M-- Henry M. Flagler. I understand, Gertrude, that many engineers wanted to come down here to help build this marvelous railroad that went 156 miles from the mainland.

Sa: Yes, they did. In fact, all the young engineers graduating from colleges at that time applied for these jobs- the job on the railroad- and my husband had just graduated from Yale in 1910, and of course, he was very flattered to be chosen as one of these young engineers. And when he came down, the road was only as far as Knight's Key, and from there, the boats went to Cuba, and the rest of the road was under construction and he had to come down by one of the little push-- railroad pushcarts at the time all the way from Knight's Key to Key West and then they were all bunked down there at-- well, it wasn't Trumbo Point at the that time because they had to fill in a lot more land. But anyhow, they all worked very hard on it and at the time that the dock-- the plans were being drawn and they were-- they had to have some steps going down into the water for certain yachts that would come in and the people would be transported right over to the train. And so he worked mostly on the plans for the dock and the steps, which were his own design.

U: Interesting. And you said your husband, you mean your future husband?

Sa: Yes, my future husband, definitely. [both laugh]

U: Because he graduated from Yale in 1910, you say, and what year were you married?

Sa: I was married in 1924.

U: Long time.

Sa: Yes, uh-huh.

U: But you said there were a good many civil engineers from all over who came--

Sa: Oh, yes, I have a beautiful picture with about twenty-five of them and I looked for it but I couldn't find it to bring it.

U: And it was called-- this railroad was called 'The Eighth Wonder of the World'. Violet, do you remember crossing the Seven-Mile Bridge?

St: Oh yes, I certainly do. I held my breath until I got over it, [laughs] and closed my eyes. I thought it was taking so long, but it was just about ten or fifteen minutes.

U: Yes, yes. You could see the Gulf of Mexico on one side, the Atlantic on the other. It must have been a wonderful thrill.

St: It was.

U: Yes. Well now, Violet, you didn't know Gertrude at that time? [both speak at same time]

St: No, I didn't.

U: Your maiden name was Pierce?

St: Pierce, mm-hmm.

U: And Gertrude, your maiden name was Lowe?

Sa: Was Lowe, mm-hmm.

U: And you went to the convent school, and you went to the--

St: The Russell Hall School.

U: To the Russell Hall School. And also being five years younger, you know.

St: Mm-hmm.

U: Now, do you want to tell me a little bit about your father, how he got in-- got to work in connection with the railroad, what his job was?

St: Well, it was my husband that worked with the railroad.--

U: Oh, your husband.

St: My father and my mother both was born in Nassau.

U: Yes.

St: So my father came over here when he was very young and when he became a bit of age, he was made American citizen and his occupation was sponging.

U: Well, didn't he work for the Southern Railroad?

St: That was my husband worked there.

U: Oh, I see. I had that confused. But your husband met the Flagler train.

St: He met the train, yes. [both speak at same time] And that's why--

U: And that's why it's part of the story.

St: Mm-hmm.

U: And just tell us how he met him.

St: He-- well, he was down-- when it was time for the train to come in, he would go down and he would deliver the express- the perishables and other things that came by express to the homes.

U: He had a wagon and some horse--? [both speak at same time]

St: He had a wagon was drawn by two horses. He had a colored man to do the driving while he did the delivery.

U: Yes, yes. What were the perishables? Were they--?

St: Well, they were fruits and vegetables and ice cream and--

U: Ice cream?

St: Mm-hmm.

U: Packed in sawdust, I guess?

St: Mm-hmm.

U: And ice, too, probably?

St: Ice, too, yes. And there was poultry. There would be-- I guess you'd call them coops of chickens he had to deliver to the-- to the stores.

U: Yes. And of the pineapples, did they come throughout the Keys, because you had a pineapple factory here. That old--?

St: Well, they came from Cuba. They would come over on the cars-- on the ferry from Cuba. They did have a pineapple factory and employed hundreds of men.

U: Processing them and putting them in cans.

St: In cans, mm-hmm.

U: I remember the early cans. Gertrude, after this eventful day and your first champagne, [laughs] tell us a little bit more about these engineers who were-- who were carrying out Mr. Flagler's vision. You-- I think someone told me, perhaps you did, that they earned about \$75 a month?

Sa: They did. That was room and board and \$75 a month [both speak at same time] And that was supposed to be big pay at that time.

U: Oh yes, yes. Did newspaper people come down to report this before it was finished? I wondered if they had reporters--

Sa: Well no, I think-- no, I think probably they-- I know they all came down from-- for the first train.

U: Yes.

Sa: I don't think we had too much coverage before that except our little Key West papers.

U: The local papers--

Sa: Mm-hmm.

U: --covered it. But the word spread that it was going to come on this particular January 22--

Sa: Oh yes, indeed.

U: --because you had the--

Sa: Well, that was an event recorded all over the country. I mean, it was really--

U: Yes, yes. Would you say that the people of Key West were about nine or ten thousand who were there at the train?

Sa: I would say that-- I think it's always been said there were around ten thousand people there, mm-hmm.

U: Yes, and all the schools were let out, I take it.

Sa: Oh, everything, everything closed. And when the train came in, the whistles blew and, oh, there was quite a celebration. Every whistle-- any noise-maker was turned on.

U: Right. Well now, I understand, Gertrude, you said that they had entertainment in the evening like balls and--

Sa: Oh, yes. They called them 'cotillions'.

U: Cotillions, yes.

Sa: And they had teas and cock-- well, they didn't call them 'cocktail parties'.

U: No, no.

Sa: There were teas and--

U: Where were the cotillions housed?

Sa: They were at La Brisa.

U: That's where the (Sand Scrub?) is now.

Sa: That's-- yes, uh-huh.

U: On the Atlantic side of our island.

Sa: Mm-hmm, on the Atlantic, yes, mm-hmm.

U: On the Atlantic side. And they must have had a fairly large ballroom there.

Sa: Oh, they did. It was entirely surrounded by a veranda and inside was the enormous dance floor. You know, Key West was a great place for dancing. We had to make our own little amusements and--

U: Yes.

Sa: --it was a great town for dancing. A cotillion-- when they had the cotillion out there, it was-- well, it was a very fancy, fancy-- a ball in other words.

U: Yes. They wore long dresses and all that.

Sa: Oh, yes. Oh, very dressed up.

U: Yes. What sort of a--?

Sa: Men wore tails.

U: I was gonna say. When they-- yes.

Sa: Key West was quite social-minded in those days.

St: Of course, you were too young for--

Sa: Yes, I was too young.

U: She was just a little girl.

Sa: Well, I didn't go to the cotillion. Oh no, indeed, I was much too young, yes.

U: At sixteen.

Sa: Oh, sixteen.

U: I guess you had to be eighteen.

Sa: Yes.

U: Something like that. Did your father and mother go?

Sa: Yes, mm-hmm.

U: They did.

Sa: Oh, yes.

U: What kind of a dress did your mother wear?

Sa: Oh my goodness, I wouldn't be able to tell you, but I know it was very fancy because they wore very fancy dresses in those days.

U: We have some of those dresses on exhibit at the Martello Towers here.

Sa: I know you do, and they're beautiful.

U: Yes, and they're refurbishing them now. They-- the salt air and everything isn't the best thing for over time--

Sa: No.

U: --dresses and--
[audio cuts off]

St: Well, I can remember my mother making one of the dresses for someone for the ball and it had yards and yards of baby blue ribbon and the skirt was very, very wide.

U: And what kind of slippers did the dancers wear?

St: Well, I can't remember because I wasn't there--

U: Probably satin, little black satin--

St: I guess so.

U: --they didn't use the colored slippers so much in those days. I imagine it was hard to settle down after the celebration, get back into school?

St: Well, it was. We were always thinking on it.

U: You were? [laughs]

St: Did any of the young boys in school get kind of the ambition to be engineers or--?

St: Well, I don't think so. I guess they were too young at that time to decide what they were going to do.

U: What they were going to do. How about you at the convent, was there a good deal of talk about this?

Sa: Oh, yes, the whole island just was excited for a long time afterwards.

U: Yes, yes. And because there are newspaper clippings, we really have the record of it. We don't have the feeling of the-- how the people here reacted to it. I guess the reporters were too busy--

Sa: We didn't settle down for several weeks.

U: Yes. Well, the engineering feat is the thing that made newspaper headlines all around the world because to cover twenty-- to build twenty-seven bridges. Tell us about one of them the base--

Sa: The Seven-Mile.

U: Right, the Seven-Mile Bridge and then the Bahia Honda- the high bridge. Tell us a little bit about those bridges as you recall.

Sa: Well, of course, I don't know anything about the construction.

U: No.

Sa: But I do remember when they filled in Trumbo Point because there was no land to bring it in and have a station and--
[audio cuts off]

St: --every Sunday afternoon, everyone would walk down on Trumbo and they had little shells all over the beach and we would gather them up and make necklaces out of them. Remember those, Gertrude?

Sa: That's right. Mm-hmm.

U: Yes. Well, I understand that these bridges were built on concrete viaducts.

Sa: Yes, they were.

U: And one of the engineers, (Nora?) Smiley said-- brother, I believe--

Sa: Yes, mm-hmm.

U: --said that they found that this marl that they used was the best. They tried bricks and the first hurricane would destroy the bricks, but the marl was porous like a sponge and could absorb the water.

Sa: Yes, I think that's right.

U: Do you recall that, Gertrude?

Sa: Yes, mm-mm.

U: How about you, Violet, do you know anything about--

St: No, I don't really remember that.

U: It's a technical thing, but the engineers seemed very pleased with themselves when they finally worked out using the native marl.

Sa: Marl, mm-hmm.

U: Now the marl was kind of a mixture of little pearl animals and-- stuck in the beds of the ocean--

Sa: And the salt water.

U: -- and mixed with the salt. Yeah, and those viaducts have held.

Sa: All along. All through the whole three hurricanes, they have.

U: Yes.

Sa: That was the encouraging part of it. The road beds would wash out, but always the viaducts held.

U: Yes. Would you care to discuss the hurricane that you remember the most, Violet?

St: Well, I think it was in either 1909 or 1910.

U: Yes.

St: My mother and my sister and my brother was alone in the house and my daddy had went down to secure his boat and the scaffolds on the upstairs blew off and the water just came down all through the house. And after the storm was over, we had about a foot of water all through the house. And it was-- we thought sure that our-- my daddy had got lost, but we heard a knock at the door and when we opened the door, I said to my mother, "Mother, here's papa." [laughter] She says, "No, I don't believe it, he's lost at sea." So he came in and, oh, we were happy.

U: Yes, yes, wonderful. Do you remember any of the hurricanes, Gertrude?

Sa: Yes, I do. I was-- I lived right opposite the convent gate and I can remember-- I think it was the 1909 hurricane-- that was a very bad hurricane-- and the water was about, oh, I'd say halfway up the convent fence, I'd say about two feet anyhow. And it was right up to the-- it didn't quite come in our house, but it was right up to it.

M: But then the word would come down from the keys that parts of the-- part of the bridges were lost.

Sa: Oh yes, uh-huh. Yes, but Key West has withstood so many hurricanes. You know the-- we were built mostly by old New England ship carpenters and they built the houses so well that we really weren't too disturbed when they had a hurricane. Most of the buildings withstood them.

U: Withstood them because they were put together not with nails, but with--

Sa: Well, the old-- real old ones were put with wooden pegs. But they were-- they built differently in those days, they built to last.

U: Yes, yes. Mm-hmm. Well, one of the--
[audio cuts off]

U: --and I can just say--
[audio cuts off]

U: --but however secure Key Westers felt, further up the Keys in -- during the building of this famous railroad, there was trouble whenever a hurricane struck. The first bad one was October 1906, when 100 mile an hour hurricane smashed into the construction camp located at that time on Long Key, which is now Knight's Key. Work on the first major ocean-crossing, the Long Key viaduct was damaged and more than 160 men died as wooden houseboats were swept away by the pounding tide. Millions of dollars were lost and many thought this was the end of Henry Flagler's dream. But the railroad owner wired the builders, "Go on to Key West", and the work was begun again.
[audio cuts off]

U: About a year after that 1906 hurricane had wrecked the beginnings of Long Key viaduct, it was completed and the word spread to Key West that the train was-- would soon be running. However, the train could only travel thirty-one feet above the ocean sea for two miles, and that was really the first test of ocean rail travel. But it was proof enough to the aging railroad builder that the Florida East Coast Line could go all the way to Key West and he was determined. So the next big task was building the mammoth Seven-Mile Bridge- Violet, you mentioned traveling over it later- between Knight's Key and Bahia Honda- the highest bridge. Actually, the bridge was nine miles in length if you include the approaches. The land could scarcely been seen from the center of the span, right?

St: Mm-hmm.

U: A 250-foot swinging bridge in the center if the channel allowed the ships to pass between the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico. Foundations had to be built almost thirty feet below the waterline in a swiftly flowing current. And I understand that Greek shrimp-divers were brought over from the Tampa area where they were hired to help with the underwater work. But the railroad continued and again, a hurricane came in September 1910; it struck the Keys. Almost all of the roadbed below the Seven-Mile Bridge washed away. But again, the concrete viaducts that we spoke of stood the test. In the meantime, Flagler's health was failing fast. His one remaining desire was to ride his train all the way to Key West. So the work was pushed ahead at top speed in order to fulfill Flagler's dream. And you told us about the terminal, ready for the-- so on January 22, as we have said, the *Extension Special* left Miami carrying Henry Flagler and an array of dignitaries. That--
[audio cuts off]

U: This is Mrs. Frank Malone who is now going to tell us about the worst hurricane, which occurred on the Keys in 1935, long after the train had been running from 1912. Mary Malone?

Malone: My husband was at that time, city editor of the *Miami Daily News*. He was also a veteran World War One and was very interested in the fate of the remains of the veterans of Army. You remember the--

U: The CCC Camp.

M: --on Washington and they'd been moved from Washington on down and down and down and they finally wound up at Matecumbe.

U: Tried to find jobs for them.

M: They-- just the remnants of them and really the least employable men, but they were human beings. My husband spent the entire day of that hurricane trying to get permission from Washington to send a train, which was already made up, to get those men from Matecumbe. It took nearly the whole day to get approval for the trip. When the train started out, it got just a little bit beyond Homestead and was blown off the tracks and the road-- the railroad was destroyed and never rebuilt.

U: Were they able to get any of the veteran's--?

M: No, they never got that far down.

U: I understand some five hundred were lost--

M: Oh, they found them in the trees and-- oh, it was a terrible massacre.

U: Terrible disast-- disaster. So you recall that vividly, too. There are a great many stories that old-timers can tell about hurricanes and yet, as we think back on the things that have happened to Key West, perhaps the day the train came in was one of the happiest, wasn't it?

Sa: It really was.

U: Thank you so much for coming.

Sa: Mm-hmm.

END OF INTERVIEW