

CHAPTER THREE

WIPING out the Ashley gang of bank robbers and desperadoes in that fall of 1924 marked the end of one chapter of frontier Florida. Four bodies, sprawled dead beside the Dixie highway at Sebastian river bridge, closed the books on John Ashley and his chief lieutenants, a band which had terrorized the East Coast for more than a decade.

Their last exploit was the robbery of the Bank of Pompano of \$9,000 on September 12. Before disappearing into the Everglades, they sent a rifle bullet to Sheriff Bob Baker of Palm Beach county with the mocking message that they would meet him in the 'glades.

Baker, the most intrepid peace officer Florida ever knew, soon was hot on their trail. After 10 days of crawling and wading through the swamps, Baker and his deputies got close enough to exchange shots with the outlaws. Three deputies were wounded, no captures were made.

Nothing more was heard of John Ashley and his followers for nearly a month. Then, as Baker was about to conclude a spirited campaign for re-election, he got word that Ashley was going to try to escape up the coast to Jacksonville, where some of his kin lived. The night of their departure was November 1, when Baker was to make his last speech of the campaign in Lake Worth. He knew if he should drive up the coast to intercept them, the warnings would fly like wildfire. So he sent four of his deputies, in a strange automobile, to enlist the aid of Sheriff R. E. Merritt of St. Lucie county in setting a trap at the Sebastian river.

A heavy chain was stretched across the bridge and a red lantern hung on it. Late at night, a motor car stopped there. It contained innocent travelers, but while it blocked the way, the Ashley car drove up behind it and was immediately surrounded by deputies. John Ashley, Hanford Mobley, Ray (Shorty) Lynn and Bob Middleton were caught before they had a chance to reach for the pistols or rifles with which they were armed.

What occurred next will always, presumably, be shrouded in doubt. Shooting began and when the smoke had rolled away, John Ashley and his three followers were dead by the side of the road. The official report on the shambles related that before Ashley and his companions could be handcuffed, they had suddenly produced hidden weapons and made a break for liberty, the lethal shooting following. Not long after, however, two young men reported they had passed by the bridge and had seen four men handcuffed and in chains lined up along the side of the road. A few minutes after they had gone, they said, they heard shots. Many in St. Lucie county signed petitions that they believed the Ashley crew had been murdered.

However that may be, the backbone of the Ashley gang was

broken. The body of Middleton, product of the Chicago underworld, was claimed by relatives. Back to the rude little burying ground at Gomez went the other three, back to Mrs. Joe Ashley, mother of John and grandmother of Mobley. The two, with the stranger, Lynn, who had no kinpeople, were buried beside the father, Joe, who had been shot to death early that year in a still raid which also claimed the life of Deputy Fred Baker.

Ed and Frank Ashley, brothers of John, had died in 1921 while running a load of liquor from Bimini. They disappeared at sea, believed to have been victims of hijackers. Bob Ashley, another brother, was killed in Miami in 1915 when he tried to "spring" John, held in jail by Sheriff Dan Hardie while awaiting trial on a charge of murder. Laura Upthegrove, "queen of the Everglades" and John's sweetheart and gun-fighting companion, killed herself in a fit of rage several months after John's death, drinking poison at her filling station near Canal Point. Daisy Ashley, beauty of the family, also died by her own hand. Lesser members of the gang have scattered, or are in prison.

Nothing out of the way marked the life of John Ashley until 1911. He was a trapper and wood chopper, and one of his trapping companions was a Seminole, DeSoto Tiger. A dredge digging one of the state canals back of Fort Lauderdale hauled out the body of DeSoto Tiger one day, and John Ashley was accused of the murder. He escaped, traveled into the West, and returned about three years later, giving himself up to Sheriff George B. Baker, whose son, Bob, then was jailer. While his trial was in progress, however, Ashley again escaped, and began a reign of terror which is thought to include even robbery of a Florida East Coast passenger train.

In 1915 the Stuart bank was robbed of \$4,300 and an accidental shot destroyed John Ashley's left eye. His need for medical care led to his speedy capture and he was lodged in Dade county jail, from which his brother Bob unsuccessfully tried to free him. The old charge of murder finally was thrown out, but John was sentenced to serve 17½ years in Raiford state prison for the bank robbery. He escaped, made and ran liquor back in his old haunts for three years, was recaptured in 1921 and returned to the prison.

By escapes from various penal institutions, the augmented Ashley gang reassembled in 1924, after Mobley and a companion had again robbed the Stuart bank. The first major achievement after that was the foray against the Pompano bank, which ended so disastrously.

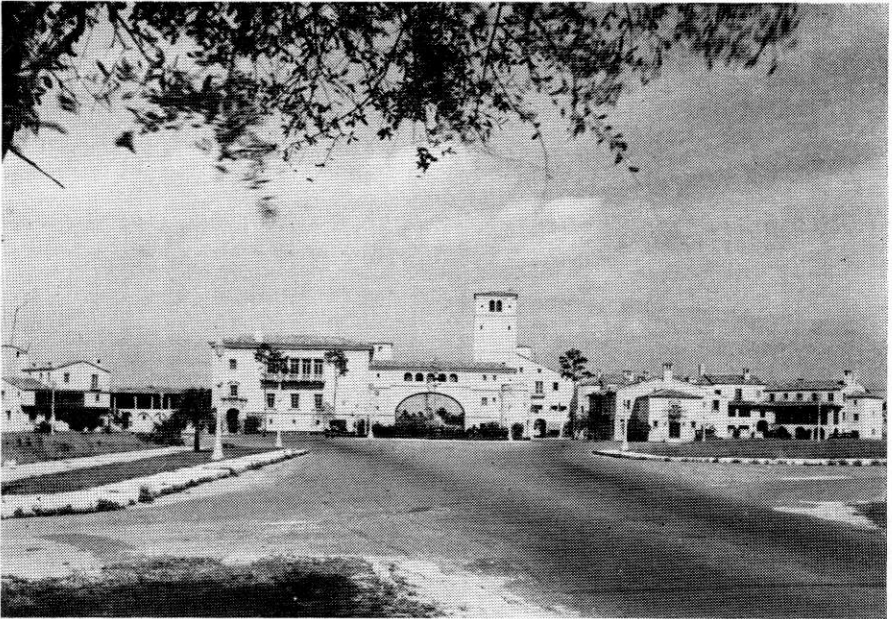
Only "Old Lady Ashley" was left at the little home at Gomez, south of Stuart, out of all that fierce brood she mothered. Today even Bob Baker is dead, passing away recently from the effects of an old injury which resulted in the loss of one leg. He went quite peacefully beyond the power of that curse called down upon him by Mrs. Joe Ashley as she wept beside the graves of John Ashley and Hanford Mobley: "It's Bob Baker's work," she had exclaimed.

"I hope he's paralyzed tomorrow and they have to feed him out of a spoon the rest of his life."

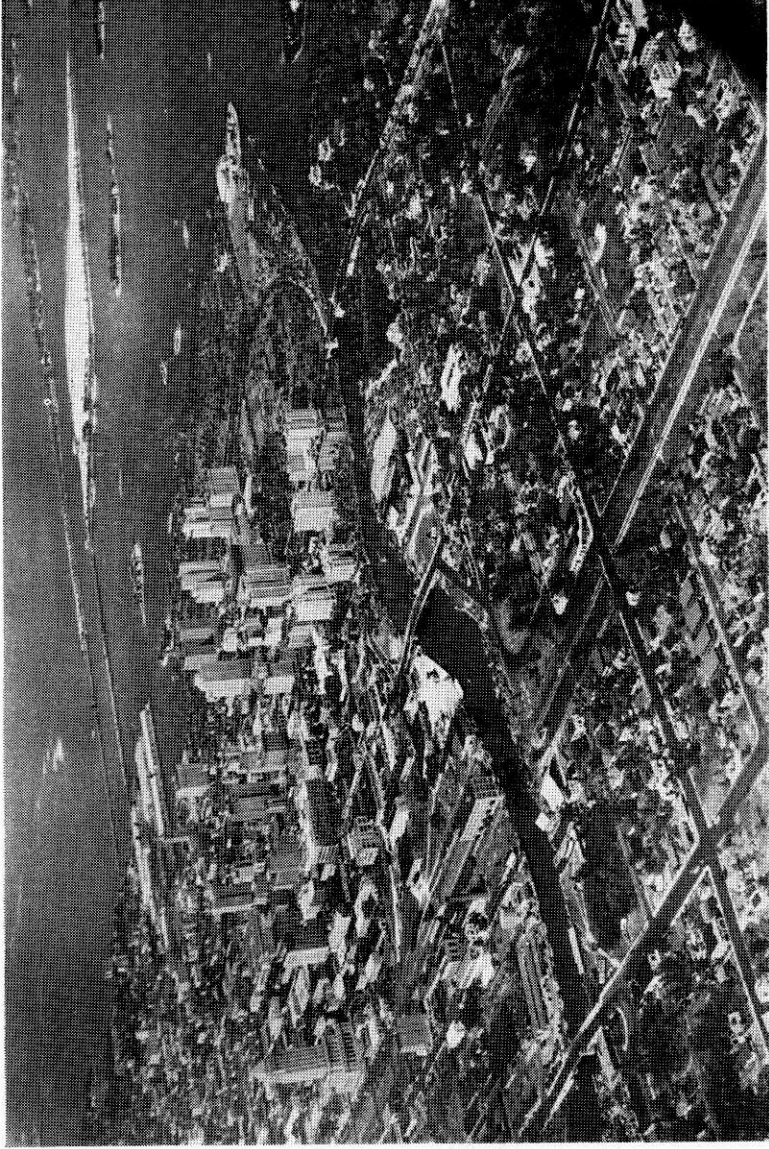
Bob Baker, during his last years, told a picturesque and slightly gruesome story of that final chapter. John Ashley for years had worn a glass eye in place of the one destroyed by accident during the first Stuart bank robbery. It had long been Bob Baker's threat that he would yet wear Ashley's eye as a watch charm.

After the Sebastian bridge affair, the glass eye found its way into Baker's possession. But before the funeral, Baker recalled, Laura Upthegrove sent word to him that if he didn't replace that eye she would "crawl on my hands and knees through hell to get you."

"I knew that I'd have her to kill if I kept it," he remarked ruefully, "so I sent it back." That was perhaps the only time in his life that Bob Baker backed down before the threat of death.



. . . they thought nothing of spending a million dollars during the boom for this Douglas entrance to Coral Gables.—Brower Photo.



. . . looking down on modern Miami from the air through Richard B. Hoyt's camera, showing the bayfront and two causeways in the distance, the Miami River in the center.