

Pioneer Women of Dade County

by MARY BARR MONROE*

MARY BARR MONROE was born in 1852 in Glasgow, Scotland, the child of Robert and Amelia Barr. When she was two years old, the family emigrated to America, arriving in Galveston, Texas, in 1854. Robert Barr died of yellow fever in 1857. His three sons also died and Amelia Barr had to find some means of earning a livelihood for herself and daughter. She decided to go to New York, where opportunities were greater. Teaching seemed to be the only pursuit open to women in that day. She secured private pupils and in her spare moments began writing novels. Her first book was published in 1869, and she soon became one of the favorite, and most prolific, writers for the masses. Sixty novels in all are credited to her facile pen. Her dominant personality rather overshadowed that of her daughter, and Mary's personality and character were not, therefore, fully appreciated until after her marriage on September 15, 1883, to Kirk Monroe, the well known author of books for boys. Immediately after their marriage they left for South Florida, and established a home the "Scrububs", in Coconut Grove, just South of Commodore Ralph Munroe's place. Although Mary Barr Monroe undoubtedly had literary talent, she contented herself in her companionship with her husband and her devotion to his interests. They were much interested in the welfare of the Seminole Indians. Seldom did the Seminoles on their trading trips fail to stop to see the Monroe's. Mrs. Monroe was a zealot in furthering the preservation of wild life, particularly the birds. She would not hesitate to speak sharply to any woman wearing feathers in her hair or on her hat, especially the plumes of the egret. The story goes that on one occasion she forcibly removed an egret plume from the hat of an unwary visitor to the Housekeepers Club (the oldest Club in South Florida), of which she was a charter member. She was the first president, and later was made honorary life president of the Dade County Federation of Woman's Clubs. She died in Coconut Grove in November, 1922.

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A PIONEER is a title that any man or woman is proud of, for it at once places a person above the ordinary and marks the individual as having had interesting experiences. So the Pioneer is always a hero in whatever company he finds himself, especially in the eyes of the young.

"You came here 25 years ago," said a girl to me the other day, "how did you dare?" Well, it did not take such a lot of courage, looking back on it now.

Pioneer life, as we know, is always hardest on a woman, but one of the wonderful things about it is a woman's ever willingness to follow the man of her choice. Old or young, the wilderness has no terrors for her like being left behind or having Him go alone.

I wonder how many women in Dade County today would have come here of their own will, or from choice. In many cases the men have come first and such glorious accounts of wonderful weather, delicious fruits, and the ease and freedom of a life in the wilderness (all too true) has tempted many a woman, who came rejoicing so, at the joy of her man, that she has never murmured at her thousand and one little trials that beset the pioneer woman's life day and night causing many a tear and backward glance for the comforts of a civilized home.

I know one woman who wore a sun bonnet all day both in and out of the house for the first month she was at Cocoanut Grove so that her husband should not see her crying. Today she is very happy in the home he gave her as we all are after a few months of "settling down," but it is hard for a man to realize what it means to a woman to give up family, friends, church, doctor and a comfortable house and sleep in a tent, while the first house is being built, which is usually spoken of as the future packing house, or chicken house, when the grove comes into bearing. They do not realize the fear the women have at finding out that crawling creatures of the earth are so near to them, or the pain that comes with the hardening of soft hands in doing the daily housework of pioneer life. No, and women will seldom let them know. So the men are not to blame.

I know several college girls who left homes in the north full of enthusiasm and joy at the prospect of a life among orange groves and who have bravely met and overcome difficulties that if related faithfully would hardly be believed.

In 1874 the total number of Dade County votes was thirty; the names of seventeen of the women of that time are still remembered, although

only four of the women are still here, Mrs. Martha Peacock,¹ Mrs. Isabella Peacock,² Mrs. Matilda Pent³ and Mrs. Euphema Frow.⁴ The early work of those women did much to cause others to come and too much cannot be said in praise of their bravery, hospitality and the good principle of life they stood and worked for.

One of them told me that once being very ill, her husband got a friend who owned a boat to take her to Key West, where a doctor could be consulted, and that while she was away the men folks of her family thinking to save her extra washing on her return carefully folded away all the sheets and pillow cases of the beds, using only the blankets, and when she did get home she had not only the blankets but the bed ticking of both mattresses and pillows to wash. I asked her what she said to them; "Oh, nothing, dear me, I was only too glad to get back and proud to feel that they had thought of me," but she added, with a twinkle in her eye, "it took me a month to get things straight again."

The first housekeeper of Coconut Grove that we have any record of was a Mrs. Beasley. Her husband was the first settler here having come in 1835. The Beasley cabin was built of logs and thatched with palmetto leaves, and the ruins of the stone chimney may still be found on the grounds of the Ransom school while the old parts of the Beasley starch mill⁵ are on Mr. Kirk Monroe's place. Everyone who came to the Grove, at that time called "Little Hunting Ground," of course stopped at the Beasley home. Beasley was a Connecticut man, therefore he built a stone fireplace for his cabin and Mrs. Beasley seems to have done her cooking inside her cabin contrary to the custom prevailing in the southern wilderness of cooking outside over a chip fire, and there is a story told by an old settler, that one day his father was taking dinner at the Beasley

1. Wife of John Thomas Peacock, better known as "Jack". The site of the David Fairchild estate was in the early days known as "Jack's Bight". He was the first of the Peacocks to settle in Florida. Martha Peacock came here from North Florida during the Civil War.
2. Wife of Charles Peacock, a brother of Jack Peacock. Isabella Sanders Peacock came to Coconut Grove in 1875. Sometimes called the "Mother of Coconut Grove", she was Eunice Peacock (Mrs. Geo. E.) Merrick's paternal grandmother. Charles Peacock and his sons built the famous Peacock Inn, then known as Bay View House.
3. Wife of John Pent, lighthouse keeper at Cape Florida in the Hurricane of 1876.
4. Mother of Charles Frow, Mrs. Alfred Peacock and Mrs. Grace Harris. She was Eunice Peacock Merrick's maternal grandmother.
5. Starchmaking was an important local industry. Almost every family had its small mill. It was made from the root of a small palm-like plant called coontie or comptie, somewhat similar to arrow root, that grew in the cracks in the rock formations in the pine woods. The plant grew very slowly and all attempts to grow it commercially failed. When the original supply was exhausted it gradually disappeared from the locality.

house, and happening to glance toward the fireplace where Mrs. Beasley was cooking a coon for dinner, he saw the head of a big rattlesnake sticking through a hole in the stone of the fireplace watching Mrs. Beasley; and that reminds me that one day just after we settled here I found a snake curled up among my tea cups in a corner of the dining room closet but like Mrs. Beasley's snake he had just dined on a rat, and was too full to move, so was easily killed.

The next housekeeper was Mrs. John Pent, "Aunt Tilley" as everyone called her. Her home was the first wooden house at the Grove, for in the early days nearly all the homes were made of palmetto leaves, thatched over a frame. She is a grand-daughter-in-law of old Squire Pent who was Commodore Porter's pilot off the reef in 1820. Mrs. Pent herself comes of a fine old Charleston family, and, in spite of many years of genuine pioneer life, has not lost the refinement and graciousness of her birth. The hospitality of her home is famous.

Mrs. Rosa Richards was one of Miami's pioneer homemakers, and there are few women in the country that can tell as interesting stories of the old days especially of the Indian women who were her friends and to whom she taught many useful things.

Cocanut Grove remembers her as once having resided there and at the time the Housekeepers' Club was started she became a member, often walking three miles from her home to attend the club meetings and do her share of the club work.

The great loneliness of the early days seems always to be the thing remembered by the women: they longed for other women from the great outside world. I do not think anyone ever had differences in those days and they all seemed to have been good cooks, and when one remembers that most of that work was done out of doors over wood fires it is interesting to hear of the dinners those pioneer women prepared for families and guests. There are wonderful stories of Johnny cake, "sweet and plenty of it," stewed venison, ash baked sweet potatoes, boiled Seminole squash, corn pones, roast wild hog, and wild turkey, coontie pudding,⁶ and coontie pancake, Indian Sofkie,⁷ Gypsy Stew,⁸ Reef Bean soup, turtle fry, and fried chicken. I can remember having a gift of six eggs at a Christmas tree that was considered a precious remembrance.

6. Made from the coontie or comptie starch.

7. Or Sofkey, a thin sour corn meal gruel. Pounded nuts and marrow were sometimes added for flavor. It is said to be a typical Indian dish even today.

8. Made from "whatever was at hand". The meat base was usually wild hog, gopher, or manatee.

In fact a study of the cooking in those days is an extremely interesting thing. There was very little cultivated fruit, if any, beyond guavas, limes, sapodillas and pomegranates but the pioneer women of that time made use of all the wild fruits and found them good. The Hog plum, the cocoa plum, huckleberries, sea grape, wild grape, custard apple, paw paw, ground goose-berry and Indian possomon. There were but 6 orange trees in the whole county, and they were here.

Flour, sugar, coffee, salt and grits were all brought from Key West, or obtained at times from the one store, Mr. Brickell's south of Jupiter Inlet.

The first winter we were here two of my women friends asked me to let them have a can of condensed milk as their children had never seen milk. One of the women had been born and brought up on the West Coast in the cattle country, so of course, she knew what it was, but her children had never seen a cow. The other had come here when young and could not remember ever having tasted milk although she was certain her father had owned three cows. Guava syrup was the principal sweetening for pies and cakes, and it was good.

I fancy reading was mostly from newspapers, although I can tell of one pioneer woman's husband who had, and read many of the standard books, which he obtained from wrecked vessels. A wreck was the most wished for and thoroughly enjoyed thing that could happen, provided no lives were lost, and that seldom occurred. The men all went to the wreck whenever "Providence, bad machinery and worse navigation sent us one," and then it was that the women had a good holiday inasmuch as they all got together for company while the men were "off wrecking."

If the wreck was a general cargo, such as canned foods, dry goods, household furniture, and baby carriages then there was great rejoicing. Of course that was long ago before the Revenue cutter, an old side-wheeler at that time could get here, or the wreck could be reported at Key West, and as there were no telegraph lines then, it was always quite a while before a wrecked vessel could be reported.

I remember only two such wrecks, and also a wine wreck, when the beach was strewn with wine. Then a ship came ashore loaded with olives stuffed and salted. That cargo was a great disappointment, as so few of us cared for olives, especially in such quantities. But a wreck of ready-made clothing, sewing machines, bolts of cloth, kitchen utensils, candles and furniture was something like, and everybody was happy.

It is scarcely as long ago as a quarter of a century since whenever any of us wanted anything very much that it could not be picked up over on the beach at Cape Florida, or something that would answer as well.

"Beach combing" was a fascinating occupation, and I have seen all sorts of odd things found. One day one of my young friends wanted a cradle for her first-born (a strapping young man of 23 now) and said to her husband, "I wish you would go over to the Cape and see if you can't find a cradle."

He did go and came back with a cradle. It was a little the worse for having come from a wreck and laid on the beach for a while, but when it had been painted a French gray and neatly put together, it proved all it should be.

Many a good boat has been picked up, and at one time there was not a house here that did not boast of at least one piece of ship furniture. But those were the early days, when Christmas tree gifts were a bushel of Irish potatoes, a dozen eggs, a fancy cake pan, and when an eggbeater was unknown. When Sunday school was attended by every man, woman, baby and dog in the place and always ended in a social gathering; when every woman did her own work, including her washing, and when a social gathering was one in every sense of the word.

Way back, twenty-five years ago, Cocoanut Grove had but six houses, and that number included the Bay View House, afterward the Peacock Inn, and now the Lake Placid School quarters. Miami at that time had but three houses. Mrs. Charles Peacock, lovingly known as "Aunt Bella" and whom Mr. Flagler called the Mother of Cocoanut Grove did all the work of the Bay, in that she managed everything. She was doctor, judge, minister, and friend to all including the Indians.

Mail reached us twice a month if there was no wreck on the reef, and when it came, the whole settlement stopped work to attend to it. Now if it does not come once a day and on time, Postmaster Budge's minutes are made uncomfortable for him.

When a schooner came in from Key West, everyone turned out to see who had come, what they had come for, and how long they were going to stay.

Should any strange woman arrive from the North, as they sometimes did, with a particularly attractively cut collar or trimming or new fashion skirt, Mrs. Peacock always managed in some way to get a pattern of the article, so that we could all make one like it, and the way in which New York fashions were imitated in 5 cent calicos was interesting to say the least.

The Peacock Inn was the great gathering place for all occasions—political meetings, church services, Christmas trees, weddings, and club meetings, for not only the Housekeepers' Club met there, but the Biscayne Bay

Yacht Club held its first regatta from the Peacock wharf, and gave its first entertainment, a dinner, at the Peacock Inn, then called the Bay View House. Mrs. Peacock taught us all how to make bread from home-made yeast, preserve pineapples and guavas and do the family washing. Then the commissions I used to have from my neighbors when we went North, all the way from a box of hairpins to a ready-made gown. These same women now dress far better than I do, and if they do not go north they know perfectly well how to wear the gowns and hats that the Ladies' Wear Shop selects for them.

One of my neighbors at that time who cooked over an open fire in her back yard for years, and whose best gown was a striped lawn which her husband brought her from Key West, and which she wished had been a "morning glory pink stripe instead of a black stripe," now rides in an auto and could wear a "morning glory pink silk" if she wished, but she is just the same dear friend as of old.

The founder⁹ of the Housekeepers' Club was Coconut Grove's first school teacher. She was also the first woman to homestead land in Dade County. The Coconut Grove railroad station is on her land, and very near where her little one-room house stood. One morning a friend took a picture of her standing on the tiny piazza in front for her house with a broom in her hand, and surrounded by household articles of various kinds. A few years ago she happened to go to an illustrated lecture on "Life in the Wilderness," and then all of a sudden her little homestead cabin with herself and broom appeared on the canvass, entitled "A Pioneer Home in Florida."

She was here when the first carriage arrived. Mr. William Fuzzard who then lived at Cutler, then called "The Hunting Grounds" brought one to the bay and cleared out a road between Cutler and the Grove, so as to use the carriage, to which he harnessed the only mule here at that time, a big white animal called Sampson, who was just as much of a character as any of us. Well, Mr. Fuzzard appeared with his carriage and Sampson, and we all made a rush for it, he let the women and children have a ride around the hotel grounds. Now auto cars go to Cutler from Miami and back every day.

All of this does not make us as old as at first appears, for civilization

9. Miss Flora MacFarlane. She came to Florida with Mrs. Thomas Monroe (mother of Kirk Monroe) to spend the winter in 1886. She returned in 1889. She helped to found the Housekeepers' Club. She taught private pupils at first and later taught the first public school opened in Coconut Grove. The land she homesteaded is located at the intersection of LeJeune Road and U.S. Highway No. 1, in Coconut Grove.

came to the Bay very quickly after it was discovered by Mr. Flagler, through a bunch of lime blossoms shown to him by Mr. Ingraham, who had gathered them on Mrs. Tuttle's place, when northern Florida had been frozen, but that's another story. Mrs. Tuttle was a wonderful woman and her perseverance gained southern Florida for us many years sooner than it would have been.

Pioneer life in Florida today is very different from that of yesterday as it were, for almost everything is possible and gettable today, even in the Cape Sable country, as never before of course, in many sections it is rough there, but the necessities of life are all possible and a great many luxuries, even in the pinewoods miles from the railroad. But it was not so 25 years ago. The coming of the railroad has brought to the pioneer women comforts that were a long way off at one time, and women that never expected to get beyond a wood stove are now using gas ranges, go to town in the latest auto runabouts, and are club members.

I remember how disappointed some strangers were a few years back because when they asked for a drink of water, my maid handed them ice water in a thin glass served on a silver tray. "Why" they said, "we thought we would get it in a country gourd."

It is scarcely 2 years since I was asked by a big western farmer's wife, how I managed not to be eaten alive by snakes and alligators, and if I was not scared to death half the time, and how I kept from burning up in the summer time, and only last year, I was asked "what was the use of living down here in the wilderness in anything but a tent" and yet we think we are quite up-to-date.

Pioneer days are wonderful days, and there is one thing certain, they bring out all there is in a man and woman. They teach forbearance, on a big scale, and there is another wonderful thing, no one ever regrets them.

There is a big recompense someway for women are just as ready today to go into the wilderness without the comforts of life. In fact to learn life all over again as they ever were, and Dade county, Florida has had and has her share of these brave-hearted women, and her men are proud of them.