

Some Reflections on the South Florida of Long Ago

JOHN C. GIFFORD

WHAT I shall have to say is probably not what many would call history. There is the old saying, "Happy is the land without a history." The originator of this saying had in mind conflicts and tales relating to the so-called great—which are not unlike the yells of triumph of the primitive man over his kill or the exaggerated tales of hunters and fishermen of today.

No matter how commonplace, the man who does constructive work well measures big in my estimation. I am interested in the inventor of the wheel, the man or woman who first milked a cow, the man who discovered bread, the man who made the first barrel, and above all, the men who introduced or developed the many things necessary for food, medicine and clothing. The school, the church, and the home are pillars of civilization, but there is a bigger pillar on which all depend, and that is food. Therefore, the science of subsistence is truly basic, and the history of this science in this Antillean Area is what has interested me.

Otis Barrett says "that agriology, the comparative study of mankind's modes of living before the civilized epoch, is one of the most interesting, yet most difficult of natural sciences".

Archaeology and history merge. One is dependent upon artifacts, the other on written records. When I find potshards (and they exist by thousands in kitchen middens everywhere) I wonder who molded the pot, and the source of the clay, but I wonder more as to the source and kind of food it once contained. The pre-Columbian man did his part and passed it on to the early settlers. The Indian chewed gum, ate corn on the cob, and gave to the white man such things as tobacco, (according to some historians tobacco first crossed the Atlantic from Florida to Portugal) chocolate and quinine. It is the part played by these early plant products that has puzzled me. I can often locate an old Indian camp-site by the wild cotton plants and cacti growing around it, both brought, no doubt, ages ago from nearby Cuba or Yucatan. The Yucatecan peninsula points

toward Florida and is not far away. Early travellers tell of meeting their large canoes far out at sea, and among the things for trade was chocolate. When it finally reached Europe it was mixed with milk to furnish the milk-chocolate of today, and the name no doubt is an imitation of the splashing sound when the Indian agitated the mixture of water and ground chocolate with his home-made molinet (the original egg-beater).

It is hard to segregate the indigenous from the naturalized immigrants. The hand of man has been working for a long time. The plant, the place, and the people cannot be separated. Bows, lances and clubs came first, after these the ox yoke, whip-stock, tool handle and the like, then finally the age of the match, toothpick and lead-pencil. We are now in the lead-pencil age. Over a billion lead-pencils are used each year in this country, and Florida cedar has been almost exhausted by this demand. It has no peer in this regard. It is light, easily sharpened, and rests comfortably over the ear or in the hair. It has been one of the most important adjuncts of our so-called civilization. Even the fact that its mark can be rubbed out is an advantage which gave rise to the common name, rubber, another great American Indian product. Our tropical Indian played with rubber balls, and the word "caoutchouc" is probably in imitation of the sneeze produced by the smoke in coagulating the gum of the tree. It is said that Mr. Goodyear of rubber fame, a member of Dr. Perrine's company, sought refuge in a wild rubber tree on the night of the Indian Key Massacre.

Chewing gum, so essential to the world, comes from the juice of the saponilla, a sturdy tree common on the Florida Keys. The ancient Mayan used it and mixed it with various medicines for the teeth and gums. It is now one of our greatest pacifiers. Stock in these companies is bought and sold in Wall Street in great volume by big traders. It has led to the discovery of many ancient ruins. About one out of every ten billboards along the highway advertise chewing gum. It has probably reduced the demand for chewing-tobacco, which is another plant of Indian origin. The plant first used was not tobacco. The Y-shaped tubes inserted in the nose were called "tabacs," but the substance smoked was powdered cahoba, a drug that deadened the conscious self, and brought the subconscious to the fore so that the subject told the truth, a drug which might be used to good effect on many people. Finally tobacco came into general use so that the tax on cigarettes alone amounts to \$350,000,000 a year, \$50,000,000 more than the annual cost of our Navy. (Not so today.)

Another common plant was a species of holly similar to the famous mate of South America. It was called the Black-drink of the Creeks. It contains caffeine, and when consumed in quantity clarifies the brain and body, and fitted the Indian for service in his council meetings. It is common in Florida and ought to be used when our legislature meets, instead of other kinds of liquors. The word "Osceola" is from "asi-yahola," "asi" the name of the leaves of the plant, and "yahola" the long-drawn-out cry when they started to drink. It is possible that our word "hello" comes from "yahola."

Intermittent fevers were common throughout the South, and among many bitter barks the Florida-quinine, or Georgia-fever-bark, was a common household remedy. The bark was soaked in rum, and at regular intervals the family and slaves lined up for their proper doses. Down on the Keys prince-wood bark was used. Both belong to the quinine family and have been almost exhausted. Dr. Perrine introduced the first powdered quinine into this country from France. Without this quinine exploration of the tropics would have been much delayed. It is still necessary in many places. During the Civil War the supply of quinine and other drugs was short in the South, and my friend, Dr. Charles Mohr of Mobile, now dead, was delegated to find substitutes in our own fields and woods. In this line he was very successful, and we have many things now not used, quite as good as articles imported from foreign parts. We need to study what the Indians and early settlers knew before it is too late.

When I first settled in South Florida the country was still wild. It was covered with a thick growth of Caribbean-Pine on the rocky highland. Although much of the land was unsurveyed there were many blazes on the pine trees. I soon learned that these blazes marked the tasks for the comptie gatherers. There were homesteaders here and there, and their only cash crop was comptie starch. Barrels of snow white starch were shipped by sailboat to Key West and then elsewhere by steamer. Here and there were little comptie mills. Nearby were bad-smelling heaps consisting of comptie refuse, much used for fertilizer. Many of these settlers depended on this starch while waiting for their groves to grow. The Indian hollowed out a pine log in the shape of a trough. After washing off the dirt, the squaws pounded these roots into pulp with heavy wooden pestles. They filled the troughs with water, the floating roughage was cast aside, and the white farina settled to the bottom. After thoroughly washing the starch it was dried in the sun and furnished an essential food for the whites, reds and blacks. It was superseded

in time by grits, but in the early days it was essential to the life of the backwoods settler. The *comptie* grew only on high dry land, and it was a picturesque sight to see Indians, negroes and whites together, digging these wild roots in the dense pinewoods. In those days the horseflies were troublesome, and rattlesnakes not uncommon. The red water resulting from the washings was poisonous, and if a dog or other animal drank from the puddles he soon died a painful death. It is more than likely that some aboriginal experimenters lost their lives in testing *comptie*. This water and refuse, however, were rich in nitrogen, so that limes, guavas and other trees planted in the clearings grew in great profusion. This industry died a natural death with the exhaustion of the *comptie*, and was followed by the sawmill which left very little in the way of natural resources.

The early settlers depended also on the cabbage palmetto, once so common in the Florida of old. The berries yielded a healthful medicinal drink called "*metto*." Canned palmetto salad is now famous, but it is a crime to sacrifice a tree which has been many years in the growing for a dish of salad. Many Indian and Cracker children have been reared on palmetto cabbage and alligators' tails. Of course, those near the sea had plenty of sea truck, including the famous turtle-egg pancakes.

In 1831 a forester, Patrick Matthew by name, wrote a book on "*Naval Timber and Arboriculture*." Mr. Matthew believed the only way to have peace was by universal empire: one powerful but just people must rule the world, and of course, the British Empire was his choice. This required a great navy, and since steel was not in use for ships at that time, Mr. Matthew felt that the greatest occupation for man was the production of crooked timber for ship construction, also, of course, for casks for water on ship-board and containers in which to age and transport their precious liquors. About two years previous to this book, a forest reservation of live oaks under the control of the Navy was established on Santa Rosa Peninsula near Pensacola. This was the first forest reservation in the Western Hemisphere, and its purpose was to provide live oak for the navy. They needed timber with natural crooks for ship-construction. This reservation lasted only two years because "the artificial propagation or culture of live oak was not authorized, nor necessary, in view of the existing forests of natural trees." The country must have been well supplied with timber a century ago, plenty of choice yellow pine for planking, and live oak natural crooks for timbers, although both Spanish and English must have used a lot of it near tide-

water for ship-construction. There are many famous live-oaks throughout the South, duel oaks where old timers shot at each other at dawn; suicide oaks, and oaks in the shade of which many important events occurred. They afforded grateful shade on old plantations where they served as shelters for farm machinery and stately avenues to Colonial homes. The Indians extracted a cooking oil from the live-oak acorns, and ate the sweet acorns of the cow-oak, the ribbons of the wood of which furnished the fine cotton baskets and woven chair seats of the South.

The lime was essential in those days. Pirates and buccaneers, for the sake of their health, planted limes by water holes in the West Indies to have the fruit handy for the prevention of the dreaded scurvy. Mouldy flour, wormy cheese and salt meat, without fruits or vegetables in time always produced the deadening sea-scurvy. Old English ships were called "lime-juicers." For many years there were lime trees around such springs as Harney's Punch Bowl in Miami. They are still there. Canova, an Indian hunter during the Seminole War, tells how they landed at Fort Dallas to deposit some captured Indians and then proceeded to Harney's Punch Bowl for water and limes. He tells also how he would have starved to death in the Glades without the chocolate-like substance in the seed of the fruit of the cocoplum. The coconut although not native was probably introduced very early by the Spainards to supply oil for lighthouses and cooking.

The pineapple industry was once the largest in the world on the East Coast of Florida and on the Keys. It is now almost a thing of the past, and like several other things, has gone to Cuba, Hawaii, and the East Indies.

The great sisal industry of Yucatan owes its impetus to the elder Mr. Deering, who once lived in Coconut Grove where he planted a few acres of sisal. Dr. Perrine introduced it into Florida. Later Mexico prohibited its exportation from Yucatan and Quintana Roo. Mr. Deering found in its fibre the best twine for the reaper-and-binder. I was on the old ship *Lizzie Henderson*, which took sisal slips from *Lignum Vitae Key*, where Dr. Perrine first planted them, to Nassau and Cuba.

In 1892 I saw grapefruit for the first time in Tampa. It was used only for ornament, for because of its bitterness only Negroes ate it. Today it is America's greatest breakfast fruit. Florida has the leadership in this industry, but will surely lose it if she ships green immature fruit.

In the early days cassava, or yucca, or tapioca was a common Florida

plant. It is still the mainstay of many tropical peoples, and probably the easiest of all crops to produce. It yields a famous starch, also the pepper-pot or cassareep, which is still the basis of some of our best food dressings, such as Worcestershire sauce. People circled around the old iron pot which was constantly simmering. Into the stew they threw many things, but by means of it there was warm food of some kind at all times. Our Seminole had the same with comptie for a base. In it there was a big wooden spoon from which all ate at any time. The heat killed the germs on the spoon when it fell back into the steaming stew.

I have mentioned only a few of the things which have helped to mold the Florida of today. There are many others, and to me the past relationship of plant, place and people is real history. From the days of Doctors Turnbull and Perrine, Florida, has been the proving ground of many soil industries. Just why so many finally failed and prospered elsewhere is hard to explain, unless it was due to the constant influx of new people, not soil and plant conscious, and not accustomed to the producing and processing of tropical and sub-tropical crops. They had other traditions and tradition is still as strong as ever in the lives of most of us.