

# John Newhouse, Upper Everglades Pioneer and Historian

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The old cliché that runs to the effect that most humans are damned to oblivion at birth will never apply to John Newhouse (Jan Van Nyhuis or Jan Van Nijhuis) since most histories of the Upper Everglades will be derived, in part, from his writings and thus preserve his name for posterity. The known historical productions of Newhouse total less than 150 typed pages: a long narrative of 50 pages (variously titled "Everglades History", "Memories of Early Days in the Glades", and "Pioneering in the Everglades"); six narratives of from 3 to 30 pages each; and two short incomplete narratives or sets of notes. None of these manuscripts have been published under his name for reasons that will become apparent later.

Very little information exists on John Newhouse. His estate when probated after his death in 1958 amounted to approximately \$5,000 and was divided among 48 relatives, virtually all of whom were residents of the Netherlands. He was born November 29, 1880, at Ermelo, Gelderland Province, the Netherlands. He migrated to the United States where he went to Iowa before entering the Upper Everglades in the fall of 1914 as one of the original settlers of the community of Okeelanta, four miles south of Lake Okeechobee, on the Fort Lauderdale Canal. He came to Palm Beach County at the age of 34 and spent the remaining 44 years of his life there. No record exists that he ever traveled outside the lines of Palm Beach and Broward counties. Apparently he had no desire to make any references to his earlier years in Europe or the United States.

John Newhouse was one of the countless thousands of persons from all over the United States and many other countries of the world attracted by the land selling boom that followed the inception of Everglades drainage operations by the State of Florida after 1905. The financing of the drainage operations was largely underwritten through the sale of numerous large blocks of public land, and almost always involved alternate sections so as

to enhance the value of the remaining sections retained by the state. The sales were to promoters and/or speculators. These buyers, in turn, organized land sales-companies which divided the large purchases into small tracts for resale, usually in five or ten acre tracts. By the establishment of offices in many of the nation's large cities, through the employment of many salesmen and the use of massive advertising campaigns an unknown number of Everglades acres were disposed in sales contracts for deeds. Few of the purchasers of the sales contracts ever saw their tracts. Much of the land involved eventually went back to the state for unpaid taxes. Many hundreds of persons, among them John Newhouse, came to Florida, figuratively buoyed by the great publicity waves created by the real estate operators.

The trials and tribulations of the settlers in the Everglades have been recounted elsewhere. Some of the farmers along the Okeechobee lakeshore existed, if they did not prosper. After a short period at Okeelanta, Newhouse worked at the Bolles Hotel at Ritta on the south shore of Okeechobee, clerked in a general store, served in land survey crews, was employed by the Brown Company on their "Shawano" farm on the Hillsborough Canal for several years, and lastly secured a job as a maintenance and handy-man at the state's agricultural experiment station near Belle Glade. He retired in 1938 and spent the remaining 20 years of his life on a tract he had purchased at Okeelanta, the place of his original Florida settlement in 1914. His small one-room home was modestly furnished, and was kept "Dutch-clean". There were few modern conveniences in this home when I visited there in 1948. By the time of his demise in 1958, he had disposed of most of the land around the house. He never married and was probably best recognized locally as one of the section's last adult bicycle riders for he never acquired an automobile.

When I was engaged in the research for a dissertation (which I modestly titled "A History of the Everglades") there was no dearth of historical information (in files and publications) concerned with the various aspects of politics, military operations, economics, and engineering projects. There were numerous volumes and articles of travel accounts, and even several fairly voluminous reports on the Seminole Indians. The ever-increasing mass of notes that I produced in this search proved the validity of a citation that I had previously used in an earlier manuscript:

"Shortly after the American occupation of Florida, when a great deal of ink was being spilled over Governor Andrew Jackson's

conduct in the Florida Territory (1821), a wag remarked that the Florida Territory was: "VERY PRODUCTIVE—OF DOCUMENTS" (D. Y. Thomas, "Report on the Public Archives of Florida," *Reports of the American Historical Association, 1906*, Volume II, 158).

There was, however, little or no information (that historians now refer to as social or cultural history) by residents of the Upper Everglades from their first settlement until the beginning of the publication of the area's first newspaper in 1924. From Dr. R. V. Allison, Soils Chemist in Charge, subsequently Fiber Technologist, of the Everglades Experiment Station, I learned of John Newhouse's manuscripts referred to above. Newhouse had written his narrative (in lead pencil) in copy or composition books. He graciously loaned several of these to me. The notes I derived from these manuscripts later became the basis of most of a 26 page chapter on "Glades Life in the Early Days."

One anecdote bears retelling. I had quoted a sentence that Newhouse wrote: "The real estate propaganda said, 'Take a tent, a bag of beans, and a hoe; clear a few rows in the sawgrass, plant the seed and in 8 weeks you will have an income.'" In a book published on the area in 1948 the "8 weeks" was misquoted as "a week". Newhouse's wry comment in a letter to me on the misquote was: "Even real estate agents knew better than to lie that much!"

In the early 1930's Dr. Allison was planning the preparation of an Everglades history. Newhouse's writings were to be a part of Allison's larger study. From Allison's first association with the Experiment Station in 1925 until his retirement in 1966 his hopes and works were largely directed toward the installation of some order in the chaos that had existed in the vast scheme of Everglades reclamation from the beginning of the undertaking by the state in the administration of Governor N. B. Broward in 1905 to this day.

Several years later, while I was preparing an article on Dr. Thomas E. Will (*Tequesta*, VIII, 1948, 21-55) Newhouse responded to a request for an elaboration of his memories of this pioneer resident, developer, and leader with a seven page single-spaced epistle. He also read and criticized the manuscript on Dr. Will and offered to compose the rough draft of an article (what he called always "scribblings") on land sales in the Everglades during the 1912 Everglades land boom. He protested that "we now have many persons

here far better qualified by education and position to write the history of this region than I, but if Dr. Allison and you are of the opinion that these scribblings are worthwhile perhaps I'll start on this." He added: I'll leave it to you to polish it up; when—and if—you want to use it in the future. I will do so, if the spirit is still moving me."

Thus, in the late 1940's when he was reaching the Biblical "three score and ten" Newhouse moved into his second and final period of historical writing. He was probably motivated by the long letter on Dr. Will, his perusal of the article in manuscript before its publication, and the pleasure he felt and expressed on receipt of the article in print. Almost a year later he asked for a copy of the journal "to send to friends in Europe."

Before the writings of this second period of his literary activity appeared he expressed his fears to me that his productions might be placed in a public library (like some of the earlier ones given to the P. K. Yonge Memorial Library of Florida History at the University of Florida) "where everyone can go there, and tear it apart, and misquote it, until it looks silly. . . . If you would keep whatever I might write in your own care, to use it in the future as you see fit, I would not mind it so much."

Some months later he wrote: "I have done some scribbling on Everglades history this summer. . . . This writing is about the meeting of Florida Everglades Land Company buyers held in West Palm Beach in 1912. . . . I would like to make you a proposition—I do not like to send them to the library at Gainesville to have them distorted as was done to the other papers, but I would like to send them to you personally. You can look them over, and if you like work them over, and write an article about it under your name—not mine—then place a copy of it in your library. You can watch it better in Gainesville than I can from here. Anyone could have written this, in following the minutes of that meeting. . . . I have also written something about the growing Everglades taxes, from 1913 to 1930, when they rose from 27 cents an acre to \$4.40. This last piece contains about 2,000 words and I have to correct it yet. If wanted you can have it under the same conditions as the other piece. Anyone could have written it."

Whereas the writings of the 1930's involved many of his personal experiences, these of the second period involved the experiences of others, and so in his mind there occurred a distinction—anyone could have written it!

At the suggestion that some of this material, at the solicitation of the editor, might be published in the 1950 edition of *Tequesta*, Newhouse wrote: "I do not want to break into print, at this late date in my life. I have always shied away from publicity. But if you, or Dr. Tebeau see something worthwhile in it, I'll be glad to help you along with it."

Within a few weeks, in March 1950, the material on the 1912 land buyer's meeting arrived, written as usual in a composition book. In his letter of transmittal Newhouse wrote: "I do not mind having this piece printed; but I still shy away from having this done under my name. I meant it as notes for you to keep for reference, for possible future writing by you about the Everglades, like the information about Dr. Will that Lawrence Will and I sent you. . . . I understand that professional people are supposed to have articles published, occasionally to keep up their standing." The latter sentence might well be regarded as a layman's version of the famous academic dictum that echoes through the halls of learning: "Publish or perish!"

In his letter of May 2, 1950 to Dr. Charlton W. Tebeau, Editor of *Tequesta*, Newhouse gave another reason, beyond his innate shyness, why he would rather see one better qualified prepare the materials for publication. ". . . all what I know about the English language I have had to teach myself, while working long hours, at hard labor. I never had an hour of English instruction in school or from tutors. And although I am glad that I have learned to read, write, and speak it hopefully well, I can understand that there will be many mistakes, and various expressions that can be improved. That's why I would like to see it worked over by someone who has had more advantages than I." In response to Dr. Tebeau's invitation to Newhouse to join him in the activity of the bond of Izak Walton, the old Everglades pioneer stated: "Thank you for your interest in me, but alas, I am no fisherman. I am a book worm. Give me a paper, an interesting magazine or book, and I am dead to the world!"

Newhouse's then known writings were concluded with the two articles on land buyers and Everglades taxes. However, two additional articles, written in Dutch (in the usual lead pencil and in composition books) were loaned to me by Lawrence E. Will of Belle Glade, Florida. Internal evidence leads to the belief that Newhouse wrote these articles (one on sugar cane and sugar manufacturing and the other on Southern Negroes) for consumption

by persons in his fatherland. Both articles are more descriptive than historical in content.

The material on sugar cane and the manufacture of sugar is almost entirely factual. The material on the Negroes begins with his boyhood revulsion toward human slavery engendered from reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and is summarized in his conclusion after some 30 years in South Florida: "Though my opinion about slavery didn't change about the negroes I think different."

Perhaps if Newhouse's artistic talents had been expressed in brush and colors similar to the expressions of Grandma Moses the popular schools of the "primitives" would claim him. No doubt historiographers would label him an unlettered amateur. But the name tag becomes inconsequential, for his contributions to the history of the Upper Everglades will be valuable for many generations yet to come.

Newhouse's original manuscripts have been placed in the Yonge Library of Florida History, the Belle Glade Public Library, and the Library of the Fort Lauderdale Historical Society. Likewise, typed copies of the manuscripts are also in these libraries and in the libraries of the high schools of the Upper Everglades region where it is hoped they will be used for reading and research. Large portions of his manuscript "Pioneering in the Everglades" have been quoted or paraphrased in several Florida histories and in numerous articles in the journals of the Historical Association of Southern Florida, *Tequesta*, and the Florida Historical Society, *Florida Historical Quarterly*.