

Tequesta:

The Orange Grove House of Refuge No. 3

By GILBERT L. VOSS

This paper was delivered at Delray Beach, Florida, February 18, 1968, as an address at the dedication of a bronze plaque that marks the site where formerly stood the Orange Grove House of Refuge No. 3. It has been somewhat amended and certain additions have been made to the original text. I am indebted to my aunt, Mrs. Charles W. Pierce of Boynton Beach, Florida, for the opportunity to examine certain manuscripts written by my late uncle, referring to the building of the station.

If we were gathered where we are now in the year 1873 a very different scene would lie before us. Instead of standing by a busy highway with passing cars, amidst hotels and villas, we would be surrounded by a dense ocean hammock with tall banyans, gumbo-limbos, and sea grapes, beach grass and open sand with not a sign of man or his works. Looking out, however, across the beach to the ocean we might see, instead of passing oil tankers and cruise ships, the tall spars and sails of a square rigger or the raking masts and stacks of a Morgan, Ward, or Mallory Line steamer.

Now were we to stand on the deck of one of these vessels looking shoreward, we would see a long curving line of breakers dashing upon a golden sand beach backed by a long, low, line of forest or jungle as far as the eye could see. And on that beach there would not be a house, a jetty protected inlet, or any sign to indicate that any other than Indians lived there. In fact, from Cape Canaveral to Key Biscayne, the only interruptions in that green wilderness would be the tall, slender, red tower of Jupiter Light and the shorter white brick structure of Cape Florida Lighthouse at the entrance to Biscayne Bay.

If you didn't care for ocean travel in the first place or were of a nervous nature, you might well wonder what would happen to you on that desolate stretch of coast if by chance your ship was cast onto the reefs through storms or faulty navigation. Where would you get help, food, water, shelter and final rescue?

And well you might wonder, for this beautiful stretch of the Straits of Florida was a veritable graveyard of ships. In 1825 no less than sixty-four vessels were wrecked on the southeast Florida coast.¹ With increased shipping in and out of the Gulf ports the toll rose. Between the years 1848 and 1857, 499 ships valued at over 16 million dollars² were disposed of by libel at Key West. The crews, cargoes and passengers were rescued by the industry of the Key West wreckers. Licensed by the government as Master Wreckers, these men belonged to an honorable profession maligned by romantic writers who depicted them as lurking behind the reefs luring innocent ships to their doom with false lights and other means.

At first there were not even any lighthouses. Although the Spaniards probably had one at St. Augustine, the first United States light was built there in 1824, followed by one at Key West in 1825. Cape Florida light went into operation in December, 1825. But all these lights were far apart and unpredictable and left an immense area of unlighted, dangerous coast. Jupiter Light was first lighted in 1857 and Fowey Rocks replaced Cape Florida in 1878. Hillsborough Light, the most powerful in the U.S. Coast Guard system with originally 5,500,000 candle power, was not established until 1907.³

But what happened to the seaman when his ship went ashore on this inhospitable coast? In the 1860s and 1870s the entire area was a wilderness. About a dozen people lived in a small community on Biscayne Bay around the mouth of the Miami River and at what is now Coconut Grove. On New River at Fort Lauderdale, no one was living at that time, and not another soul could be encountered until one reached Lake Worth. Prior to the mid-1870s, indeed, even here there was only one man to be found, Charlie Moore, an ex-sailor and beachcomber, living near the site of present Palm Beach. Permanent dwellers were first found at Jupiter, consisting of the head keeper of the light, his two assistants and their families.

¹ Adamson, Hans Christian, *Keepers of the Lights*, Greenberg, 1955.

² Shepard, Birse, *Lore of the Wreckers*, Beacon Press, 1961.

³ Adamson, H. C. *op. cit.* (1955).

The entire coast was windswept and throughout most of the year infested with mosquitoes in numbers only remembered by the older inhabitants. North of Jupiter the coast was, if anything, even worse. Fresh water was difficult to obtain on the east side of Indian River and most of the settlements were on the mainland side. Shipwrecked men could have a fearful time in the midst of what later has been termed a sub-tropical Paradise. There was desperate need for rescue facilities.

The problem was brought to a head during the hurricane of October, 1873, when a vessel was wrecked about half way between Biscayne Bay and New River. The ship was a total loss but all the crew reached the supposed safety of the beach. There was no food, however, and the only drinking water was brackish in the salt marsh back of the beach ridge.

For the first two days they lived off fish washed up by the seas of the storm but a few days later when they were found by a man who had walked up the beach from Biscayne Bay, the half-starved crew were existing on spoiled fish.

The story of their hardships and near death was told in the New York papers and when this was brought to the attention of the government, Sumner I. Kimball, Superintendent of the Life Saving Service, ordered the immediate construction of five "houses of refuge" for shipwrecked people on the east coast of Florida.⁴

These houses of refuge would not be life saving stations with fully manned life boats to go out to ships, but lonely human outposts to which sailors could make their way to be assured of shelter, food and clothing all under the care of the single keeper.

By an Act of Congress dated June 20, 1874, this concept was put into force calling for the establishment of five Houses of Refuge to be located as follows: "about 18 miles north of the Indian River Inlet, a house of refuge; Gilbert's Bar, a house of refuge; near Orange Grove, a house of refuge; between Hillsborough and New River Inlet, a house of refuge; about ten miles south of New River Inlet, a house of refuge."⁵

⁴ Pierce, Charles W., Manuscript memoirs.

⁵ Anonymous, 1884. *Revised Regulations for the Government of the Life-Saving Service of the United States and the Laws upon which they are based.* Gov. Printing Office.

These houses, unique to the Florida coast, were numbered from one to five, beginning with Bethel Creek Station No. 1 and ending at Biscayne Bay Station No. 5. Among the early settlers they were called usually by their number. The construction contract was given to Mr. Albert Blaisdall⁶ and construction began in 1875. That little time was spent in erecting the houses is attested to by the fact that the Orange Grove House of Refuge No. 3 was finished and ready for occupancy in April, 1876. The name "Orange Grove" was derived from an old sour orange grove near the site of the station. Possibly the earliest reference to the area is to be found in an account of a skirmish with Indians at the "orange grove haulover" just to the south during the Indian wars.⁷

The Orange Grove Station was situated about a quarter of a mile north of the grove and on the flat east of the regular beach ridge.⁸ It was a wooden frame house of clapboard siding, roughly rectangular in shape, with a broad porch or verandah running entirely around it. The broad roof sloped down overhanging the porch, keeping it and the house reasonably cool in the summer. The ground floor consisted of four large rooms in which the keeper lived with his family. Upstairs there was a single large airy room, with several large windows, equipped with cots and bedding for twenty men, clothing, and staple dried provisions and salted meats. All these were kept sealed for use only by shipwreck victims. In addition, there were several medicine chests equally sealed and portable chests of books.

In an adjacent building were the Station's two life boats, one a large surfboat requiring about five men to man and a smaller two-man boat. There were also tackle for setting up breeches buoys to bring men ashore from stranded wrecks, and signalling flares. The life saving manual was very explicit about the care of this equipment: the need for airing bedding and clothing, the inspection of the salt pork, preservation of the medicine chests, etc.^{9,10}

Behind the Station lay the ocean ridge behind which the ground sloped down to the marsh or swamp that extended for a mile or two towards the

⁶ Swarthout, Zola. *Miami Herald*, Monday, June 11, 1956.

⁷ Sprague, John T. *The Origin, Progress, and Conclusion of the Florida War*. D. Appleton & Co., 1848.

⁸ Pierce, Charles W. *op. cit.*

⁹ Henshall, James A. *Camping and Hunting in Florida*. Robert Clarke & Co., 1884.

¹⁰ Anonymous, *op. cit.* (1884)

interior pineland. The swamp was full of herons; Louisianas, little blues, whites, and egrets, purple grackles, red-winged blackbirds and marsh hens all wading or perching about in the saw grass, arrow-root and lily pads. There were also a number of alligators. The ridge itself was covered with mastic, banyans, gumbo-limbos, sea grapes and cocoplums. When the sea grapes and cocoplums were ripe, or when the turtles were crawling, the bears came out to the beach to eat grapes or dig for turtle eggs. Panthers were common and there were numerous wildcats and racoons. Deer and turkey were easily shot. And not far away were the "Caves," nearly destroyed today, where in earlier times beach walkers hid from the Indians by day and the mailman took shelter in before the building of the Station.¹¹

These caves were west of the ocean ridge, surrounded by hammock growth, and facing westward. The larger one was about 20 by 20 feet, high enough for a grown man to stand upright in, and had a large squarish stone on one side, often used as a table. The other cave opened into the main one by a crawl way and was pitch black inside. Even in the hottest summer day the caves were cool. They were located near the present site of Briney Breezes Trailer Park and I believe were partially destroyed during recent road building. John Hollman who carried the mail from St. Augustine to the Bay during the Civil War used the cave for overnight stops and as a hideout. Local tradition claimed a pirate treasure was buried under the great slab but no one was ever able to move the stone.

The Station was finished in April, 1876, and in May of that year the first keeper of the station moved his family to the house and assumed his duties, being paid the munificent sum of \$400 per year. This was my grandfather, Capt. H. D. Pierce. He was accompanied by his wife Margretta and their only son, Charles.

Grandfather was born November 16, 1834, in Fayette, Maine, and at the early age of 16 he ran away to sea as so many boys of that era and state had done before him. He sailed in Donald McKay clipper ships and made one famous run aboard the Black Baller *James Baines* from Land's End, England, to Melbourne, Australia, in the fastest time ever made by a sailing vessel. In Australia he went into the gold fields but without luck and soon was back to sea again. He made at least one whaling trip into the South Seas. Later he was first mate on a schooner, the *Three Charlies*, on

¹¹ Voss, Lillie Elder Pierce, Manuscripts.

the Great Lakes. This vessel was driven ashore in a violent storm onto the breakwater off Waukegan, Illinois. The crew was rescued by the townspeople without loss of life and quartered in various homes until other arrangements could be made. Grandfather was sent to the home of Mr. James Moore where he met my grandmother, Margretta, and shortly after married her.

When the Civil War began, he and his brother-in-law, Will Moore, joined the Federal Army and fought throughout the war in the 17th Illinois Cavalry. Afterwards, he and grandmother moved to Chicago and it was there that Will Moore persuaded them to move to Florida. Uncle Will had been there only the year before near Jacksonville, sent south by his doctor to recover from tuberculosis.

Once the decision was made, grandfather and Uncle Will found and bought a 28-ft. sloop, the *Fairy Belle*, outfitted it completely, and had it on the stocks in a boatyard in Chicago when the Great Fire broke out one evening in October, 1871. At first the Pierce's home was endangered but the wind shifted and the fire passed only a block away, swept on to the waterfront, and burned down everything except the *Fairy Belle* which they found the next day sitting in the midst of ruin, miraculously unharmed.

Even though they were not prepared for so early a start, the Pierces, grandfather, grandmother, their young son Charles, and Uncle Will hastily finished their outfitting and left for Florida. That winter they were frozen in on the river and lived aboard the *Fairy Belle* until the Spring thaw. In the Spring they reached New Orleans and came out onto the Gulf. When they reached Cedar Keys they sold the *Fairy Belle* to a local boat builder who wanted to use her as a model because of her fine lines. She brought one hundred and sixty dollars, just one hundred dollars more than they had paid for her in Chicago.

From Cedar Keys they came across to Jacksonville on David Yulee's Florida Railroad. Here, Will Moore remained for some time practising his trade of tinsmith. But the Pierce's destination was Indian River and they boarded a steamer at Jacksonville and went down the St. John's River to its headwaters at Enterprise and from there by oxcart to Titusville on the lower part of the Indian River. Here they took up a homestead at Ankona Heights. They arrived in the middle of the summer to be met by the greatest hordes of mosquitoes imaginable. Life was intolerable. To add to their troubles,

their house burned down and with it many of grandmother's belongings. In the midst of despair, a sailboat anchored off the beach and a man waded ashore. It was Captain Armour, head keeper of Jupiter Lighthouse. There was need of a new assistant keeper at Jupiter Light and Capt. Armour had sailed up to see if grandfather would take the position. In 1872 the family, probably with a sigh of relief, moved into the assistant keeper's house.

It was here that grandmother got her first sewing machine, which came drifting up the Loxahatchee River in its packing crate from a wreck ashore on the beach. Father pulled it ashore almost from under the hand of an Indian who was also salvaging flotsam from the wreck.

But the Pierces had come to homestead a new home in Florida and from the light grandfather could see to the south towards Lake Worth from which he heard such wonderful reports. There was even a large tropical island in the south end. It had no name but it sounded ideal. So, in October, 1873, the Pierces packed their things into one of the lifeboats from the steamer *Victor* from which the sewing machine had come, and with their skiff in tow set out. On the way they were met by the October hurricane which resulted in the building of the house of refuge. This storm they passed under the overturned rowboat which Grandfather shifted as the wind changed, to keep the bow pointed upwind. Finally, they reached Lake Worth and the unnamed island. It was eventually named Hypoluxo by Mrs. Pierce who got the name from an Indian who said it meant: "Big water all around, no can get out." And so Hypoluxo, the oldest settlement on Lake Worth, first got its name.¹²

The Pierce house was built of heavy ship's timbers for corner posts, the siding from ship's planking, all gathered from the beach; the shingles were rived on the beach from ranging timbers and smoothed down by hand with a drawshave. The ceiling came from the nearest saw mill at Daytona Beach from timber carried up by boat, milled and returned, a round trip of about three or four weeks. This house is still standing on Hypoluxo Island as part of the servant's quarters on the former Col. Jacques Balsan estate, now a country club.

The first year was hard work. Land had to be cleared and planted, but it was rich and crops were good. At that time, of course, there was no

¹² Voss, Lillie Elder Pierce, *op. cit.*

place to sell them. The house had to be built. The Pierces, like all pioneers, lived off the land; what they could grow, game that they shot, and of course the treasures cast up on the beach. The beach often was their store and it was worked hard. Lumber was salvaged, barrels of food, cans of butter, kegs of wine, olives packed in oil, all found their way to the beach eventually, but there was little or no way to earn hard cash. And even there it was needed desperately. Life on Hypoluxo Island in the first few years was very difficult indeed.

Just at this time word came to the Island that a house was being built near the orange grove by workmen put ashore by a schooner. Capt. Pierce went down at once to learn what was going on and met the superintendent of construction, Lieutenant Travis of the Revenue Marine Service and the subcontractor, Gates, who happened to be a fellow State-of-Mainer. Grandfather made application for the job, was accepted, and moved his family into the station in May, 1876.

As keeper of Station No. 3, Capt. Pierce had certain duties to attend to. Each day he had to fill out the daily weather log, note the number of ships that passed by and, according to the written instructions in the manual: "Keepers of Houses of Refuge will be expected to reside at their stations with their families, throughout the year, and immediately after storms they will go personally, and send such members of their families as are available, along the shore in both directions, to as great a distance as practicable, with a view to ascertaining if any shipwreck has occurred, and of finding and succoring any persons that may have been cast ashore."¹³

The Station was equipped with some rather odd things. The clothing was mainly heavy winter gear better suited to Hatteras or New Jersey in the winter than the usual Florida climate, and Capt. Pierce groaned at the thought of ever launching one of the life boats. The big one would have taken every able-bodied man on the Lake to launch and pull it, and the Lake was twenty-seven miles long and five miles away from the Station at its closest point. In fact, until then the only time all five men on the Lake had gotten together was in the national elections to cast their ballots in the palmetto hat of Polls Inspector H. D. Pierce at Hypoluxo.¹⁴ Apparently the idea was that if some of the crew got ashore safely they could, under the

¹³ Anonymous, *op. cit.* (1884)

¹⁴ Douglas, Marjorie Stoneman, *Florida, the Long Frontier*, 1967.

supervision of the keeper of the Station, man the surfboats and breeches buoys to assist their fellow crewmen off the wreck.

Mrs. Pierce never really liked the Station. She loved their island home and missed their few neighbors. The only visitors at the Orange Grove were the occasional inspections by House of Refuge Superintendent Champ Spencer, infrequent beach travellers and passing small boats. Other visitors were the Indians; they came walking up the hammock trail from their hunting grounds to the westward or passed, during good weather, in their canoes on their way up or down the beach.

There was no inlet then at Boynton Beach. Instead there was a narrow strip of land between the lake and the ocean known as Lake Worth Haulover, where, since the Lake ended there, the Indians hauled their canoes over into the ocean. Only a short distance below the station was the Orange Grove Haulover where the canoes were again dragged into the narrow reaches of the river which formerly opened into the ocean at Boca Raton, now Boca Raton Inlet, then closed.

On August 15, 1876, only three months after coming to the Station, the Pierce's only daughter was born, Lillie Elder Pierce, the first white girl born between Jupiter and the Bay. Mother grew up on the Lake with only a brief tour at Station No. 5 at Biscayne Bay and probably looked like an Indian. She sailed her skiff like a boy, carried her own shotgun on her trips through the hammocks alone with her dog, and played the violin with her brother. Later she married a blond young State-of-Mainer, Frederick Christian Voss, and lived most of her life in Hypoluxo. She passed away only a few months ago (September 14, 1967) in Delray not far from the House of Refuge Station No. 3 where she was born 91 years ago.

There was a little excitement for Mrs. Pierce. One day while Grandfather was gone up to the Lake, two tall, turbaned Indians carrying rifles and with murderous-looking hunting knives in their beaded belts, stalked silently up to the house where Grandmother sat on the porch.

"Where's Pierce?" asked the leader. Grandmother replied that he had gone to the Lake and would be back shortly. Nervously she pulled her brightly colored wool shawl about her shoulders for she recognized the Indian as one who had been implicated in the murder of a white settler a few years

before. Grandmother was used to Indians, indeed an Indian midwife had been with her mother when she was born at Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, November 11, 1840, and she had been raised around them. But she was terrified when the Indian drew his huge knife from his belt, advanced on her, and laid the knife blade on her shoulder against her neck.

“Where you get?” he asked.

With quaking heart she realized that he intended no injury but was inquiring about the shawl because he wanted one like it for a turban. When she told him that she had gotten it in Titusville he regarded her for a moment, thrust his knife into his belt, said “Tell Pierce I come back” and stalked away.

On another occasion, Grandfather was building one of the large wooden “safes” or screened cupboards used for keeping food away from the flies and cool when some Indians came up and watched him hammering away. Finally curiosity got the better of the younger one and he asked, “What you make?”

Grandfather stopped long enough to indicate the baby on the porch and said “I’m making a cage to put my squaw and pickininy in.” The Indian looked at the baby, the safe, and Grandfather with his big black beard and said, “Pierce, you heap big liar,” and walked away.

The “safe” was a permanent and well-used part of our kitchen furniture at home in Hypoluxo until the house was sold a few years ago. Grandfather liked the Seminoles and was great friends with them.

Insects were indeed a problem, mostly mosquitoes. Even when I was a little boy in Hypoluxo each house had a mosquito smudge in front of the door, often of coconut husks, and a mosquito switch hanging beside the door to brush them off with before one entered. We also usually carried one made of palmetto fan to brush them off with when walking outside. At the station, mosquitoes were nearly always present but they were particularly bad in the summer except when there was a good sea breeze. Sandflies were plentiful.

We do not know how these first evenings were spent at the Station, but writing about life a few years later at Hypoluxo Island when she was a

¹⁵ Voss, Lillie Elder Pierce, *op. cit.*

young girl, Mother described a typical evening.¹⁵ Before dusk, all chores were done up and everyone went inside to stay until morning. Screens kept much of the insects out but on bad evenings the lamps were not even lighted. Mostly the family sat around talking quietly or singing songs. Grandfather had a tremendous deep bass voice and Grandmother a clear light one. Favorite tunes were "Irish Molly, Oh," "Within a mile of Edinburgh Town," "Sweet Afton," "Oh, Willy, we have missed you," "Sweet Belle Mahone," "Nellie Gray," or Moody and Sankey hymns. Grandfather's favorite songs were "From Greenland's Icy Mountains" or the old sea chanty "High Barbaree." It didn't take much for entertainment in those days.

Thirteen months of Station No. 3 and Mrs. Pierce declared she wanted to go back to Hypoluxo Island. Their house was there, their boats, gardens and grandmother's brother. Superintendent Spencer had to find a replacement which he did in the form of a young twenty-one year old Londoner, Stephen M. Andrews. Steve, as he was called, had only recently come to the States in the company of Charles Peacock who was lured to Florida by the exciting letters of his brother Jack Peacock of Biscayne Bay fame.¹⁶ Steve was then a bachelor and moved into the Station in late June, 1877.

Steve lived alone at the Station and was a great favorite with the early settlers on the Lake. But he was not a bachelor long. In 1879 Mr. Hubble and family moved down from Michigan and built a home at what is now Boynton Beach, right at the intersection of Ocean Avenue and the ocean boulevard.¹⁷ The Hubbles had two daughters, Mahalie and Anne, and when the Hubbles gave up a year later and moved back to Michigan young Steve followed shortly thereafter with the avowed intention of marrying Mahalie. Somewhat to the surprise of the other families on the Lake, when he returned, Mrs. Andrews turned out to be the other sister, Annie. Eventually Steve and Annie inherited the Hubble homestead but sold it in 1895 to Major Boynton, the founder of Boynton Beach.

Steve planted vegetable gardens, fruit trees and even had chickens and hogs. The latter were his favorites, of which he was very proud. He also had a pen in which he kept gophers, the large Florida land turtles so liked by the early settlers as a variation in their table fare. Steve's dog Nellie liked

¹⁶ Monroe, Ralph Middleton. *The Commodore's Story*, Ives Washburn, 1930.

¹⁷ Voss, Gilbert L., *The Early History of Boynton Beach*, Literary Florida, vol. 5, No. 11, 1949.

nothing better than to go out to the gopher pen and turn the turtles over and then bark until someone came out and righted them again. (Told by my sister, Mrs. Harvey E. Oyer, Boynton Beach.)

As the town of Delray, or Linton as it was originally called, began to grow, there was need of a post office closer than Hypoluxo Island and what better place to have it than at the Station where the mail carrier stayed the night. Mrs. Andrews ran it from 1888 to 1892 under the name of Zion. The Andrews lived at the Station until it was finally closed down and sold in 1896. But the name of the keeper of the Station No. 3 has survived, commemorated in the name Andrews Avenue, long after the Orange Grove House of Refuge had been all but forgotten.

In 1882 Capt. Pierce went back into the Life Saving Service. He moved his family down to Biscayne Bay Station No. 5, one of the most desolate Stations in Florida. It was located on the ocean beach near the north end of Biscayne Bay and about five miles by water from Brickell's Trading Post at the mouth of the Miami River, and seven miles from Norris Cut. The beach ridge was mainly a long expanse of scrub palmetto bordered by mangroves on the Bay side. Ed Barnott, the first keeper, and his wife had just moved to the mainland near Brickell's. Although the salary of the keeper had been raised from \$400 to \$500 per year, the Pierces had a rough time, as had the Barnotts.

There were no deer or turkey in scrub palmetto country and only mangrove snapper in this part of the Bay but there were small delicious coon oysters on the mangrove roots. Basic food was salt pork and potatoes, relieved by dry beans, biscuits, and canned tomatoes. A few groceries could be gotten at Brickell's: quart cans of tomatoes at 60 cents each, occasionally eggs at 75 cents a dozen. Butter came in sealed cans put up for the Cuban trade. Vegetables could not be grown here and mother used to walk the beach for miles gathering and eating the edible sea kale with its peculiar bitter taste but delicious to a person starved for greens. The Pierces were relieved at Station No. 5 by Jack Peacock who later was also keeper of Station No. 4 at New River.

Back at Hypoluxo, Grandfather had the Post Office. This was the jumping off place for the barefoot mailman, so called because he walked the beach, the only road, from the south end of Lake Worth to the Bay staying

overnight at the various stations. There were other routes and other methods of carrying the mail but in the mid-1880s through until the barefoot trail was ended the route was as follows.

The mail started off from the upper end of the Lake where the mailman left on Monday morning in his sailing skiff and sailed down to Hypoluxo where he got the last of the Lake mail. (Later the route was shortened and originated at the Hypoluxo Post Office.) He then sailed to the Haulover, tied up his boat and crossed the ridge to the beach. Here he took off his shoes, rolled up his pants legs and with mailbag and shoes over his shoulder struck off down the beach. There was a knack to beach walking; above the wash the sand is soft and wearying to plod through; down in the water the waves soften it as well but right at the edge of the damp sand it is usually hard as cement and the walking is easy and fast except that the beach slopes so that one leg has to be a little longer than the other and move a little faster. Walking thus developed a peculiar lope.

From the haulover it was five miles to Station No. 3 where he stayed overnight. Supper, bed and breakfast were free to the carrier. The next day's walk (Tuesday) was twenty-five miles to the New River Station No. 4. The following day's walk (Wednesday) was about eighteen miles to Dumfoundling Bay near Baker's Haulover, where he took his mail skiff and crossed the Bay to the post office eight miles away. Here he paid for his meal and room out of his \$10 a week. The following morning (Thursday) he started back, arriving at Palm Beach on Saturday, three days each way, 136 miles of beach walking a week, about 7000 miles a year for the sum of \$600!

The only real tragedy to strike Station No. 3 was the mysterious death of a barefoot mailman, Ed Hamilton, a young Kentuckian about 32 years old. On October 10, 1887, he left Hypoluxo in his sailing skiff with my mother, now 11 years old. He turned the skiff over into her keeping for the week at the haulover and started over the ridge. That night he stayed with Steve and Annie Andrews at the Orange Grove and the next morning early, October 11, set off down the beach with that peculiar lope used by the beach walkers. It was the last time that he was ever seen.

Two days after he was supposed to return, Charlie Coman, keeper of Station No. 4 at New River, sailed up to the Orange Grove to find out why Ed had not come through with the mail. The replacement carrier went

back down the beach with Coman expecting to meet him but on the north bank of the Hillsborough River they found only his mail bag hanging from a seagrape tree along with his shirt and pants. Near the water's edge they found his underclothing and on the opposite bank, the U.S. Mail skiff. A beach tramp had taken the mailboat across and Ed had tried to swim the swollen river to get it back and was either drowned or eaten by sharks or alligators. A bronze tablet now stands on the banks of the Hillsborough Inlet on the lighthouse reservation, commemorating his loss in the line of duty.

This was the last major event in the history of the Orange Grove House of Refuge No. 3. Delray was growing and the coast was filling up with settlers. In 1896 the Station was closed after twenty years of service and finally burned on March 2, 1927.

It has long been believed by historians that only five Houses of Refuge were built: Bethel Shoal Station No. 1, Gilbert's Bar Station No. 2, Orange Grove Station No. 3, New River Station No. 4, and Biscayne Bay Station No. 5. However, in 1882 an Act of Congress authorized the construction of five more and the contract for their construction was let to Francis M. Smith. These Stations were: Smith's Creek Station No. 1, Mosquito Lagoon Station No. 2, Chester Shoal Station No. 3, Cape Malabar Station No. 4, and Indian River Inlet Station No. 5. Of all of these ten stations, the one at Cape Malabar was closed after only five years of operation. Orange Grove was next after twenty years and the rest went on into this century. Gilbert's Bar Station on Hutchinson Island was operated by the Coast Guard as a surf station before World War II, was closed, and then recommissioned during the War. Today it is the last of the stations and now is the Martin County House of Refuge Museum.

Keepers of the houses of refuge usually did not last long at their jobs for the stations were in desolate areas and the loneliness was overpowering. Actually few rescues were made by the Stations as they were built just at the time that the east coast of Florida was beginning to build up. A full history of the role of the stations and their keepers has yet to be written. The logs and reports of the stations are all on record in Washington and will make exciting reading when they are finally given to the public. A partial list of the keepers of stations 3-5 include the following, hopefully in the correct order.

Orange Grove House of Refuge No. 3,—First keeper, Capt. Hannibal Dillingham Pierce, May, 1876 to June, 1877. Second keeper, Stephen M. Andrews, June 15, 1877, to 1896 when the station was closed.

New River House of Refuge No. 4,—four miles north of New River Inlet. First keeper, Washington (Wash) Jenkins, 1877-1882. Second keeper Mr. E. R. Bradley of Hypoluxo (father of Guy Bradley, game warden shot at Cape Sable) who stayed only seven months. Mr. Jack T. Peacock of Biscayne Bay for a brief period. Fourth keeper, Mr. Charles Coman, a college man studying marine biology. Fifth keeper, Mr. Dennis O'Neill, a Boston Irishman described as having a "dark red beard and a big heart." The last keeper was Mr. Jack Fromberger who held the position until the town of Ft. Lauderdale grew up.

Biscayne Bay House of Refuge No. 5,—First keeper, Mr. Edward Barnott; second keeper, Capt. H. D. Pierce; third keeper, Mr. Jack Peacock. Of subsequent keepers no record is available to me.¹⁹

The Gilbert's Bar House of Refuge No. 2 was closely linked with the stations mentioned above. A partial record of its keepers include the first keeper, Fred Whitehead, Dec. 1, 1876 to Feb. 8, 1879; Ezra Stoner, Feb. 1879 to May 26, 1881 (?); Mr. McMillan (or McWilliam) to 1882; David E. Brown of Lake Worth 1882 to March, 1885, followed by that veteran Station keeper Jack T. Peacock of Biscayne Bay, Sam Bunker and the final keeper, Mr. Bessey.²⁰

What good did the stations do? Wrecks were numerous before and after but few occurred during the years of their operation. What they did was serve as a way-station for travellers, a haven for the mailmen, and a comfort to the ships in passing. Sailors knew that here in these desolate dwellings were men and women dedicated to helping them in case of disaster. The Houses of Refuge were unique to Florida and with their passing went the end of an era. Few today who drive the ocean boulevards of this State know of or remember the brave men and women who manned these lonely outposts.

GILBERT L. VOSS—Feb. 18, 1968

¹⁸ Voss, Lillie Elder Pierce, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Voss, Lillie Elder Pierce, *op. cit.*

²⁰ Stuart News, Nov. 9, 1950, quoted in Voss, Lillie Elder Pierce, *op. cit.*

This Page Blank in Original
Source Document