

Pioneering on Elliott Key, 1934-1935

By CHARLOTTE NIEDHAUK

The depression of the 1930's has been blamed for many things, but my husband and I look back on it with a bit of fondness. It made us pioneers for a time on Elliott Key, and changed the course of our entire lives.

My husband, Russell H. Niedhauk, age 30, and I, age 24, were not faring as badly as many other victims of the depression. We lived in Fort Lauderdale, and Russ worked for most of the year as chief engineer on a 77-foot yacht owned by the Baldwin Locomotive people. His salary was excellent for the time—\$200 per month and all expenses. During the periods when the yacht was not in use, he worked in a “filling station” where he met many interesting characters. Russ’ German background and Pennsylvania Dutch rearing had nurtured the creative ability that enabled him to excel at many things. Building a house or a sailboat, or putting together an engine from salvaged junk, was pleasure rather than work for him. In addition, he was both sensitive and adventurous; he met new people and situations eagerly and easily. And he did *not* believe in working wives!

I was a city girl of French heritage, trained as a private secretary and legal stenographer. My biggest problem was to conceal and ignore my background and accept and enjoy the speech, mannerisms, and habits of the new people in my married life. Though I may have been apprehensive at times, I at least tried never to let it show.

Our adventures on Elliott Key really began when the Ashtons wired Russ in March, 1934, from the yacht *Toddywax*: COME AT ONCE. WE ARE GOING ON A SIX MONTHS CRUISE. LEAVE YOUR WIFE AT HOME. I vehemently and stubbornly insisted that we would remain together or that I would find a job. Russ agreed to agree, and so we stayed together in Florida.

A filling-station friend named Bill told Russ about an isolated island with living quarters where we could stay. In return we would clean out some neglected key lime groves. Income could be derived from selling the limes and young lime trees, with some additional money from fishing and crawfishing. It was this challenge to adventure and a new kind of life that brought us to Elliott (known then as Elliott's) Key in 1934.

The key is located 35 miles east-southeast of Fort Lauderdale. It, and a few adjacent keys with deep channels through the surrounding shallow waters, were important areas in the early settlement of southeast Florida. Most of the original settlers were "Conchs" from Key West. At one time a colony of about 25 people farmed quite a few acres of Elliott Key, growing pineapples, rock melons, tomatoes, and key limes. Ship builders from the mainland cut madeira and Jamaica dogwood timbers and "natural knees" there. At one time hogs that had been abandoned by the early settlers became wild and dangerous, but they did kill all of the rattlesnakes on the key.

When the Overseas Extension of Flagler's Florida East Coast Railroad opened up the chain of islands to Key West, Elliott Key was abandoned except for a few fishermen and passing smugglers, rumrunners, and other lawless characters. It was into this situation that we unknowingly entered. When we arrived we would find the island virtually uninhabited, with only one family living on the ocean side several miles south of our homesite during the crawfishing season and only off and on at other times.

Our parents, who also lived in Fort Lauderdale, were shocked at our plan to give up our good prospects on the mainland for such an experience. When they realized that they could not dissuade us, however, they helped us by storing part of our belongings in their homes. My parents also insisted on keeping our daughter, Jan, aged 3, while we tried out island life. We moved out of our apartment but paid a month's rent in advance, thus giving us 6 weeks before that tie with civilization would be cut.

We made a list of supplies to take with us, and with this came my first realization of just how isolated we would be—no transportation, no refrigeration, and no outside communication. Russ carefully planned for a five weeks' supply of food, most of it dried, plus a reserve to be touched only in emergencies. When we finished our shopping we had over \$50 worth of non-perishable groceries (in an era, remember, when \$5 bought groceries for two people for a week!), and the car was jammed so full that I had to ride on Russ' lap on the way home. In addition, we bought such medical supplies as iodine, peroxide, bandages, and Oil of Sol, and other items including photographer's hypo and Kirk's Hardwater Soap. I sorted out those bare essentials that we would need—bed linens, towels, Russ' work clothes—and then realized that I had nothing suitable for pioneer dress. I bought myself dungarees, a wide-brimmed straw hat, and tennis shoes, the first I had worn since childhood.

Early one morning we were finally ready and arrived with all of our provisions at the dock where Bill was to transport us by boat to Elliott Key. After loading the supplies we bought a 100-pound block of ice, which was put in a burlap bag and stowed aboard. At last we were on our way. I of course had been deep-sea fishing, but never before had I been on a straight run such as this, heading for an unknown island to be put ashore. It was thrilling, but also more than a bit disconcerting. Almost before I was ready to face what lay ahead, the boat pulled up to a small, wobbly dock about 10 feet long and 6 feet wide. The dock started at the edge of deep water and the space between it and the shore was spanned only by a 2 by 6 plank. Over this we carried the supplies, and then followed a rocky path to a surprisingly pleasant-looking wooden house.

The house was about 20 by 40 feet, with window openings screened all around and wooden drop shutters that were propped up to awning height by sticks. The house had a second story that looked like it had been an afterthought, as if part of the roof peak had been sawed off and raised up. The eaves extended over this level, and I could see a small, four-paned window in the middle facing the ocean.

Bill came from the boat with the last of the supplies and the padlock for the kitchen door. We soon had everything unloaded and could look around. The kitchen was separated from the living-dining area by a five-foot partition. There were shelves for the supplies. The living area was furnished with a long table, two chairs, and two benches, and was separated from the bedroom areas by 3-foot partitions and open doorways. There were curtains to draw for "privacy."

The back porch, which ran the whole width of the house, was entered through a screen door. A door in one corner of the porch led to a small bathroom with an outhouse-type seat. This toilet had to be emptied by removing a bucket beneath the seat. Our only "running water" came from an outside rainwater tank that gravity-fed water to the kitchen sink. There were three bedrooms in the sleeping area, and between two of these was a ladder leading to a trapdoor in the ceiling and to the upstairs room. This was the only room with a door—even though it was in the floor—and I chose this immediately for our bedroom. Taking our linens and suitcases up that straight ladder was my first tiring and frustrating task.

Bill had been told that there was an icebox in the house, but at first we could not find it. Then Russ remembered that the old-time Conchs often put

theirs under the floor. We found a wide, right-angled crack in the floor that turned out to be a trapdoor. Underneath was a box filled with sawdust and—we quickly slammed the lid back down!—teeming with roaches. Arming ourselves with a spray gun, books, and shoes, we attacked the problem. The roaches ran erratically everywhere after the spraying, and soon they were all dead or at least had temporarily disappeared. We then wrapped the ice in the morning *Miami Herald*, which we had not yet read, and put it in the box. Had I known that it would be another month before I was to see another paper on the day that it was printed, I would have thought twice about that. The meat we had brought was also wrapped in paper and placed on top of the ice, with more paper on top for insulation.

These activities took some time, and I was surprised when we suddenly found it difficult to see. As always in the subtropics, night had fallen as if someone had pulled a shade, and it was of course more noticeable away from the city lights. Russ lit the Coleman lantern he had brought and we had enough light to see. Russ and Bill stayed up and talked after we ate the food I had brought along, but I turned in early, utterly exhausted.

Morning, with sun shining full upon me and no way to escape it, seemed to arrive almost immediately. With it came new sensations and my first lessons. My leg muscles rebelled from the unaccustomed flat shoes and the strenuous activities of the previous day. The one luxury the house offered, a 4-burner gasoline stove, provided my first lesson. The stove had a dipstick that lived in its own little fuel reservoir; you removed and lit the dipstick and then lit the stove with it. The coffee, made with rainwater, tasted marvelous. I hope again someday to have another taste thrill like the one I experienced with my first rainwater coffee. Bacon and eggs were soon ready, and I made toast on one of those pyramid-shaped bread scorchers that sit over the open flame on top of the stove. Soon after breakfast Bill departed, and Russ and I were really on our own.

Housekeeping presented some special problems. Opened food packages were kept in a "safe," a 2-shelved, screened, 2-door cabinet suspended from the ceiling by iron rods that ran through funnels filled with kerosene-soaked cotton to keep bugs out. I quickly saw that jars would be needed for insect-proof storage, and we headed our beachcombing list with that item. Dishes were rinsed in the ocean and then washed in a minimum of water from our precious supply. Clothing was washed in salt water first, using the special soap that Russ had been thoughtful enough to bring, and rinsed with as little fresh water

as possible. I found the wet sheets and heavy work clothes almost impossible to lift and wring, and Russ helped me with that task. Those times when we had to forego the final rinse in rainwater we found that our clothes were not only prickly but also stayed damp except in the hottest weather. The residue of salt attracted moisture from the air. Bathing was accomplished in a similar fashion, with first a salt-water scrub and then a rinse in one quart or less of water. How I was to miss my twice-a-day showers! But I was determined to be a good sport, and we soon learned the importance of conserving every ounce of fresh water that we could.

We learned to wear protective clothing when going into the jungle, bathing suits for beachcombing, and nothing at all when we didn't have to. Our nearest neighbors traveled only by boat, and we could hear them or any visitors coming long before they could see us.

Beachcombing on an island in the rocky Florida Keys is quite different from walking along a lovely sandy beach on the mainland. All sorts of debris washed in from refuse dumped from ships in the Gulf Stream and drifted in from elsewhere. Beachcombing was hard work but profitable for obtaining some of the necessities as well as some niceties for our rustic life. On our first trip we found large, slat-sided crates with the wilted remains of heads of lettuce; a grapefruit uninjured by the salt water, quite ripe and usable; very large coconuts from far away and smaller ones from nearby; a pint bottle of Green River whiskey, one-third full; and a 2-quart jar with a lid—empty, but just what I needed. We eventually made dressers, shelves, and book racks from the crates. Further searching along the shore delivered up enormous old demi-johns (pear-shaped bottles of dark green glass holding about 5 gallons of liquid), which we saved to bring water back from the mainland in the future. We found a can of Trinidad asphalt, which was promptly utilized by Russ to caulk an old skiff we found tied up near the dock, and a wooden box of spar grease that we used as bottom paint on the same boat. We discovered the remains of an old kerosene stove that we turned into an outdoor grill, and when I stubbed my toe on an old, rust-encrusted file Russ was jubilant. He took it to the grindstone and while I dripped water on it, he made a lovely fish knife. We hauled in all the creosoted two-by-eights or two-by-sixes we could find for material with which to repair the dock. The possibilities of the beachcomber's "free market" seemed endless.

Garnering food took only about an hour of each day. We had sapodillas, with fruit sweet as honey, near at hand. We found many ways to utilize the

milk and meat of the abundant coconuts, and Russ fashioned useful utensils from the coconut shells. There was a plentiful supply of fish, crawfish, and conchs in the ocean. Russ patiently taught me each step of fishing, from extracting the animals from conch shells to use for bait to which fish to keep and which to release. We often returned handsome snappers to the water in favor of the smaller moonfish, which were real delicacies. Crawfish could be caught by hand, with patience, among the rocks. On our want-list for a future trip to town we added a "crawfish-grabber" to make this task easier. I naively suggested to Russ that it would be nice to have some sort of a corral for conchs, and later on we actually did devise a method for "anchoring" them that allowed them to roam about a limited area of ocean bottom to forage for food and yet remain easily handy to be picked out for a meal.

Using the remains of the old stove as a grill, Russ showed me how to make small, compact fires of Spanish cedar in such a way that the smoke would curl around and over the cooking food. The food absorbed some of the delightful fragrance of the cedar, and whenever possible we cooked outside over cedar fires, both to conserve stove fuel and because it made everything taste so good. Sandflies usually made it necessary to move inside to eat, however, and early in our stay we put a mosquito net on the shopping list for the first trip to town.

Shortly after our arrival, Russ set out to look over the lime groves on the island. The "little grove," of about 3 acres, was on the "pointy end" of the key. The "big grove," a couple of miles distant overland, was about 14 acres in extent. We usually worked in the little grove a while each day. While Russ cut down gumbo-limbos and other "volunteers" from between the rows of key limes, I pulled the vines that threatened to strangle the trees. The vines had to be uprooted, not cut, to insure their not promptly growing back. After much effort this little grove began to emerge from being just a tangled mess into an orderly and thriving, if rocky, orchard.

It was a long trip overland to the big grove, which made our early efforts at clearing there seem slow going indeed. Later when we could go around to it by boat, more time was available to work there. It had been many years since it had been cleared and then, contrary to all good procedures, the volunteer trees had been cut off at ground level instead of being dug out. The result was many prickly branches growing together in complicated tangles. We soon decided to hire some men to assist in removing the young trees, which could then be sold for ten cents each at a nursery in Princeton. There the trees would

be temporarily planted in black dirt and later sold to Japanese nurserymen on Miami Beach. Russ hired some men in Princeton and set them up in the small wooden house in the big grove, giving them fishing and cooking gear and instructions on the details of the work and how to live from the land. Because of the hot weather, the men started to work early in the morning and quit in mid-afternoon. After the trees were pulled from the rocky crevices they were hauled to shore, using a "fram-pole" that Russ had devised, and then they were pruned, wrapped, and wetted down to await shipping. Two days after the men started work the first skiffload was ready for delivery. The pick-up laborers we used in the big grove proved to be the cause of many problems and some adventures, and so were the many tricky water crossings with skiffloads of trees headed for market.

The days went quickly by and we lost track of time, but when we had been on the island about three weeks we heard a boat in the cut. We watched it land at nearby Sands Key, putting a passenger and supplies ashore. We hailed the skipper of the boat and, by shouting, exchanged introductions and greetings with George Deen, a Miami realtor who owned Sands Key and who had agreed to give a shy hotel clerk named Chester the "privilege" of camping on a "deserted island." George said that he would return in about two weeks, and the camper disappeared. A number of days later, Chester hollered to us and asked for help. He had a frightful case of "muck itch" from sitting on a mud-bank to fish. His hands, legs, and especially his backside were raw and swollen. Russ went over by skiff and moved Chester and his gear to our house and began treating him with our special remedy for poisonwood—wet compresses of photographer's hypo. Chester lay on his stomach in bed, getting up for meals but then retiring to be alone in his misery.

Shortly thereafter another boat came to our dock, and we had the pleasure of meeting the owner of both the property where we lived and the big grove on the island, A. D. H. Fossey, Mayor of Miami, and his wife and children. We then learned that the Fosseys often came to the island for weekends. They usually arrived on Saturday, with guests, and we shared the house with them. Chester begged the Fosseys to take him back to Miami. They were happy to return him to city life, and we were delighted to inherit his remaining food supplies. On a subsequent return trip the Fosseys brought us, as a thank-you for Russ' nursing, a most remarkable variety of gifts from Chester: a pair of muscovy ducks in a small wooden crate; a mother duck and six ducklings in another crate; a miniature-sized feeder and water trough; and 50 pounds of duck mash and 10 pounds of special food for the little ones. In addition there

were thoughtful gifts for us: 12 pairs of white cotton socks; a gross of Bull Durham sacks of tobacco and cigarette papers to go with them; a large cast-iron Dutch oven, and some *Esquire* magazines. (Chester had been impressed when we had furnished him with an *Esquire* to read when he was recuperating.) A final, and fine, gift was a small fish trap and some artificial bait to use in it.

Another morning we again had visitors, a man named Flip who lived near the dock on the mainland where we had embarked and who knew Bill. Flip had his girlfriend and another couple with him. They had supplies and made breakfast for us before returning. We later learned that Flip was a rum-runner who had been operating successfully for about a year. Shortly thereafter he was caught and put in prison. Russ asked Flip if he could return to Fort Lauderdale with him, as he had decided that it was time to sell our car, buy a powerboat, and give up the apartment in town. Flip acted as if Russ was doing him a favor to ask, and they departed, leaving me to spend my first night alone on the island. Russ took the want-list, part of which he filled from our own stored possessions, bought groceries and ice, made arrangements to have our car sold and a boat sought, and came back the next evening in his brother-in-law's boat. Russ hated to borrow anything, but he had decided it was not wise to be so totally stranded on the island. He also brought back, filled with water, all of the ten demi-johns that we had found. Funny how you can suddenly feel very rich even when it is only because of extra drinking water. And steak, salad, and cake—the treats of civilization—for supper seemed almost too much.

The next afternoon we were hailed from our dock and saw two uniformed men getting off a speedboat that they had tied in back of our borrowed boat. They were Border Patrol officers who approached us with hands holster-high, suspicious of the new boat at our dock. They were Al Bjornaas and "Happy" Hood, who were to become our good friends. We brewed a pot of coffee and got acquainted, and thereafter they stopped often to visit with us. They said they were glad to have the house occupied again, as it had previously been a favorite waystation for rumrunners. Our Border Patrol friends were frequent and welcome callers, but we also had others who stopped by in their boats who were unquestionably on the other side of the law.

Alien smuggling, mainly of Orientals, was big business in the thirties. Many aliens were first taken to Cuba, which had no quota, and from there they obtained passage from alien-runners who used large crawfish boats with

wide overhangs and built-in lockers underneath. The aliens were put into weighted canvas bags and were hidden in these lockers. If pursued, alien-runners were known to dump their helpless cargo overboard to be lost in the dark sea. When not pursued, the smugglers took the aliens to keys near Miami where the Coast Guard couldn't chase them farther because of the shallow water. Then the aliens were transferred to powerful speedboats for the run to the mainland.

We were aware of this traffic, but our first confrontation with it came after we had been on Elliott Key for some time. Russ was again away for overnight. I went to bed without undressing, closing the trapdoor behind me, checking the gun beside my bed, and keeping my sheath knife near me for comfort. I was drifting off to sleep when I heard the sound of low or distant voices. I put on my shoes and crept to the window that looked out over the ocean. The voices became louder and seemed to have a kind of sing-song, garbled quality. Then I saw people approaching.

I was afraid to stay too close to the window, so I moved to the back window, ready to "unbutton" it preparatory to leaving, by way of the sloping roof with its 6-foot drop, into the bushes below. From there I knew I could get into the jungle where no one could find me, but I wasn't going to leave unless someone started into the house, and I intended to try shooting them first if necessary to slow them up. I sneaked to the front window again and saw people walking on the path toward the house. I sat quietly and listened to the thunder of my heart beating in my eardrums. It seemed to take forever, but eventually they all passed by the house without attempting to enter and continued down the path to the dock. Minutes were elastic and it seemed an awfully long time before the roaring of a large motor suddenly was close at hand and a boat pulled in at our dock from the bay side. The talking got louder, and I thought I heard an American voice telling the people to hurry. Eventually they all got on board and the boat left in the direction from which it had come. Everything was silent once more.

I couldn't sleep and decided to go downstairs for coffee. I was afraid to light a lamp and carefully outlined mentally a quick retreat in case anyone returned. When the coffee was finally done I sat in the dark sipping it and watched the faint dawn begin to break in the east. Just at daylight I heard another powerful motor. In a flash I swarmed up the ladder with the gun (no small feat) and looked out toward the dock. Border Patrol—I was never so glad to see anyone in my life! I met Al and Happy on the path and we had

coffee together, but they were soon off to see if they could find the boat in question. When they returned a few days later they reported that they had captured 18 Chinese aliens in the Miami River, and they had a newspaper clipping to prove it. When I had finished telling Russ about this on his return he had merely said, "Things sure do happen to you when I'm not around," so I got a great deal of pleasure hearing Al and Happy tell Russ that I had saved my life by acting intelligently.

My husband's talents were many. On one trip to the mainland my older brother Dode (Julien) said he wanted to come back with Russ and spend a few days with us on the key. When he got aboard with his gear, Russ discovered a stowaway: Dode had with him a 4-pound black and white puppy with a very large bandage on its left front leg. Dode simply said, "I brought him for you—I know you can heal him." It was a six-weeks old German pointer. Dode had a large paper route, and that morning while making a delivery at a dog kennel near Hollywood he arrived just as the owner was about to shoot the pedigreed dog to put it out of its misery. He was a veterinarian and insisted that the puppy's leg was damaged beyond all repair. But Dode persuaded him that his brother-in-law needed that puppy. On arriving home Russ immediately started preparations for attending its injuries. He spread newspapers on the kitchen floor, scalded the wash basin, and put some Clorox in boiled water. He got bandages and the Oil of Sol (then called Oil of Salt), and soaked the pup's bandages loose with the chlorinated water. I was requested to supply some white silk thread. The pale yellow silk I located in my sewing box was accepted, and then I was barred from surgery. Russ dipped the dog's leg in the Oil of Sol and tied the torn ligaments of the leg. He then put pads soaked in the oil on the wounds and wrapped the leg so the dog couldn't move it and undo the repair job. The next morning when the bandage was being readjusted to insure the immobilization of the leg, Russ told me that the mangled foot was turned completely around backwards but that he hoped to correct that condition by massage after the wounds started to heal.

In the meantime the lively puppy learned to get around on three legs, but he sort of hop-darted instead of running. Because his gait resembled that of a fiddler crab, his name became, by unanimous consent, Fiddler. Fiddler became livelier each day and we began to let him stay outside longer and longer. The wounds showed visible improvement each day but the foot remained very twisted. Russ massaged it several times a day and kept stretching the muscles in the direction that the foot should go. A long time later the tendons and the foot were back in normal position. When the harness sling that had held Fiddler's

leg against his chest was removed, he looked at his foot in a puzzled way. He was used to hopping around and was at first annoyed by his strange fourth appendage, but it wasn't long before he got used to it again. Fiddler shared our household long after our stay on Elliott Key was over.

Soon after we arrived on the key we established a rewarding friendship. One afternoon a round-bottom skiff appeared in the creek, sculled by an upright, elderly man with a younger man with him. They introduced themselves as Captain William Reno Russell and his 45-year-old son, Reno, sponge fishermen out of Key West "come by for water." After checking the level of our supply, they requested and received 10 gallons, saying that they would obtain the rest elsewhere. They apologized for needing to take some of our water, but explained that since no one had lived in our house for a long time they had grown dependent on having water available there. We thereafter shared many interesting times with the Russells when they were sponging in our vicinity.

Our second visit with the Russells came one morning as we were finishing a leisurely breakfast. We saw Captain Russell sculling toward our dock in his skiff. He asked if it would be all right with us if he built a sponge crawl near shore by the big grove. It would be on our "water path" to the big grove, and he was sure that no one would bother it there when he was down-bay sponging. Russ of course said this was all right with us and that we would keep an eye on it for him. I couldn't resist wondering what it was we were to watch, so I asked Captain Russell what a sponge crawl was. At first he thought I was joking, so Russ felt obliged to tell him that I was just a city girl beginning to learn Conch ways. Then Russ explained that it was a pen made of stakes driven into the soft bottom close together, interwoven with light ropes near the top to make them more or less rigid. The sticks were long enough so that they stuck above the water 6 inches or more at high tide.

Captain Russell then went on to explain to me that each sponge fisherman had his own skiff. These were round-bottom boats with a small bow deck on which the barefoot sponge fisherman stood while poling with a 20-foot pole, at the end of which was a 3-pronged hook. It required knowledgeable maneuvering in order not to tangle the sponge hook with sea fans or in worthless sponges such as the loggerhead while poling and probing for marketable sponges such as the sheepswool or the glove. When the water surface was ruffled by wind gusts, the sponger would reach down on the port side of the skiff where he kept a quart-size milk bottle tied to the clamp strip to hold it upright. The bottle was filled with oil and had a thin, long stick in it with a

small rag tied to the end. With a few deft flicks of the wrist, the sponger would spread oil over the water. About 20 drops was enough to make a hundred-foot, mirror-clear surface, and in the clear water of the area the spongers could easily scan depths of 30 feet.

Now I was glad that Russ had told him that I was "just a city girl." When I asked him what kind of oil was used he told me all about the Key West shark industry. One type of fisherman concentrated on catching sharks. The hide was tough and could be used for boots, or, when peeled, for shoes. The liver of the sharks, when rendered, gave up many quarts of fine oil. Nothing else served the sponge fishermen's purpose so well, as shark oil gave none of the distorting highlights that other oils did.

The marketable sponges were thrown into the boat bottom, and out of the water the minute, jelly-like sponge animals died in the hot sun. At the end of each day the sponges were put into a sponge crawl where they would not be washed away but where the moving tide helped rinse them. When the weather was too rough for the men to sponge, or when the sponge crawl got too crowded, they devoted their time to curing the sponges. The crawl was also useful as a pen for the green turtles that formed the main part of the spongers' "meat" diet. Excess turtles were taken to market in Key West when the sponges were taken there for sale.

The next morning Captain Russell came to our house to issue an invitation for "Dinner with Reno and I, early this evening." When pressed for a more definite time, he seemed to indicate any time after four o'clock: "Should have enough daylight to eat by. We don't carry a lantern except in the rigging for anchoring at harbor in Key West." It was our first evening out on the Keys. Russ said I should not wear my usual dungarees and shirt—such an invitation called for my "sailor whites" usually reserved for trips to town. When we reached the turtle crawl we saw Reno working rib-deep inside the crawl. He had a sort of paddle affair in his right hand and was using it to beat a sponge held in his left hand. The paddle was about a foot long beyond the handle and about 6 inches wide. Holes at least a half-inch in diameter had been drilled through the blade. When he hit the sponge, it compressed and a smelly liquid oozed out. He then put the sponge under water to rinse it and repeated the process. When he considered it clean enough—the animals all removed—he threw it into the skiff tied alongside the crawl. He said that he had to give them all one final rinse and that he would meet us at the sailboat. "You go on to the boat. Papa is waiting."

We tied our boat to a stern line Captain Russell threw us and went aboard the 24-foot sailboat on which the Russells lived while out sponging. On their sponge boat strong coffee always simmered on top of the small Shipmate stove fastened to the deck. Pencil-box sized pieces of buttonwood were used for fuel. These provided an intense heat and very few ashes. I sat on the deck with my legs crossed, but Captain Russell and Russ squatted "Conch style." Over our coffee I asked about some pieces of meat dangling from a fish line in the rigging. Captain Russell said, "That is the main part of our supper. Reno got a couple of nice big turtles yesterday evening. Those are parts of the flippers of one of them. That's the choicest part. Got to 'string' them, though, and let them drip most of a whole day to get the wild taste out of them, before they're good to eat."

I then asked why Reno had gone so far offshore to rinse the sponges again. It was explained that part of the milky sediment I had seen beaten out of the sponge was "seed." It was important that the sponges get their final rinsing in deep water on the proper tide drift so that the seed could be carried offshore—a method of planting sponges for the future.

When Russ asked about the location of the best sponge beds, Captain Russell told us that these had all changed since Flagler had put in the railroad. He said that the solid supports for the railroad tracks between the Keys had disturbed the natural flow of the water and had changed the location of the sponge beds. "No good can come out of man changing the flow of water like that. If we get a big blow like we had in '06 when Flagler got his railroad blown apart before it was finished, it will just ruin the sponges. Lots of stagnant water, trapped, where it never was before. When that gets mixed with the rest, something bad is going to happen." After the Labor Day hurricane Captain Russell's words came true, and sponge fishermen had slim pickings in the Keys for many years.

During our conversation, Reno had finished his seeding and had tied his boat alongside. He reached up over the bow of the sailboat and got a thin bundle of heavy pieces of twine, a sail needle, and the narrow inside rim of a coffee can. He measured each sponge against the rim of the can to check for legal size; if it were large enough and without imperfections, he ran the needle through the middle of the sponge and strung it on the twine. He added sponges of comparable size until the line was filled. Each piece of twine was 4 feet 8 inches long, the standard size used by all sponge fishermen. When filled and tied in a loop it constituted a "string." Most of the sponges were of fine quality

and of the correct size; sponge fishermen's trained eyes usually could gauge these factors well even in deep water.

Reno put the strings of sponges aboard the bow of the sailboat and bailed his skiff. I was fascinated by his bailer—the front half of a large horseshoe crab. He washed his hands a final time in the ocean and climbed aboard, dripping wet. Going to the bow, he hung the sponges in the rigging to dry and then squatted on the deck next to Russ. This canted the boat a bit and the dripping water ran off the deck. Captain Russell handed him a cup of coffee. Reno said, "I thank you Papa, I surely hope you aren't going to make me change into dry clothes." Captain Russell smiled his sweet smile and said, "No, son, reckon our company been around the water too much to mind."

The captain took some bacon grease and put it in the frying pan, stood up, untied the steaks from the rigging, and put them on to fry. He then leaned down into the small cabin and brought out plates and knives and forks. When the steaks were done he spread the plates on the deck and served the turtle. Then he opened the stove's tiny oven and took out a coffee can that just barely fitted into the oven. Inside the can was a loaf of bread, which he cut and served, one-quarter for each of us. It looked lovely and smelled heavenly. I glanced around, and since Reno had started to eat, I did too. I don't remember anything tasting quite as good as that first dinner out on the Keys. The bread was not buttered, but I saw Reno dipping his into the steak juice so I did the same. The bread was light, with lots of crisp crust, and the gravy was the final, delicious touch.

When we had finished our steak and bread, Reno rinsed the plates in salt water and then some fresh water from a jug. Captain Russell then turned again to his stove and removed the lid of a 2-quart kettle simmering there. Using a fork, he hooked into a string that was floating on top and lifted out a 5-pound sugar sack. It was about a third full and had been tied just above its contents. When I asked what it was he looked surprised and said it was "plum duff," a favorite Key West dessert. He drained the hot water over the side and then set the kettle on a slightly scorched piece of wood in front of the stove. He untied the string, rolled the cloth bag down, and with a quick twist of his wrist deposited the whole thing upside down on his plate. With a fork he hooked into the cloth of the bottom of the bag and raised it as he peeled it up the sides of the duff, which was slightly larger than the round loaf of bread had been. The duff was also divided into four portions and served. It was thick in consistency, very chewy like soft caramel, and delicious. Captain

Russell seemed honored when I asked him for the recipe for the duff and wrote it out for me with a smile. Our first dinner out on Elliott Key was a grand success.

One of our major adventures was riding out the 1935 hurricane. Here are some notations from my husband's Hurricane Log.

Saturday, Aug. 31. Mr. Fossey arrived for his usual weekly visit. Weather fair, wind moderate NE, with a few mild squalls. The creek between Sands Key and Elliott is full of fish. Mosquitoes are very bad and fly right into the wind to bite. Our muscovy ducks appear nervous and did not go swimming on the incoming tide as usual. They seemed especially hungry and ate facing NE.

Sunday, Sept. 1. Mr. Fossey's party is out fishing. This is the first time no one caught any fish. I picked a half-crate of limes for them to take back. Wind fresh, NE, the sky partly cloudy, and the air sultry. 11:00 A.M. A Coast Guard plane from Dinner Key flew over Sands Key Cut. It circled low and on the second pass dropped an orange container. We waved to signify that we had seen it and went out for it in the skiff. It was canvas-covered cork, about 8" x 4" x 2". A hole in one end was plugged with a cork. In it we found a message wrapped in a piece of oiled silk: U. S. Coast Guard Official Dispatch 2654 headed WARNING TO ALL VESSELS and dated today. WEATHER FORECAST: JACKSONVILLE TO FLORIDA STRAITS: MODERATE NORTHEAST WINDS OVER NORTH AND CENTRAL PORTIONS FRESHENING OFF THE COAST AND INCREASING NORTHEAST WINDS PROBABLY REACHING GALE FORCE OVER EXTREME SOUTH PORTION AND POSSIBLY OF HURRICANE FORCE IN THE FLORIDA STRAITS TONIGHT OR MONDAY WITH HEAVY SQUALLS IN THE FLORIDA STRAITS. PLEASE PASS THIS INFORMATION TO ALL VESSELS IN YOUR VICINITY. A personal message from the pilot was also enclosed. "If you want to be taken off, put some sheets on the lawn. Will see them on next circle." We signified that we had the message and waved the pilot off; he headed back toward Miami. Mayor Fossey and his party and George Deen and his party began to get their gear together to leave immediately. We finally convinced them that we were not afraid to stay on the key. We pulled our skiffs on shore and went around to the bay side in the powerboat to warn the sponge fishermen there of the impending blow. We first approached two boats anchored close together, but the men laughed at us. "What does Mon who sit at desk know about weather? Fishermen know better." At the third boat, however, Captain Russell and Reno were grateful for the in-

formation. They said they had seen bad weather signs and were watching carefully. "When you see crawfish moving in the daytime, heading for deep water like we did yesterday, it is most unusual." They asked us for a tow to the entrance of a "hurricane creek" on the west side of Sands Key where their sailboat and two skiffs would be safe, and we promptly did so. At home we carefully tied our own boats and then removed the spout between the rain gutters and the water tank so that liquid mud blown from the wave tops would not spoil our fresh water. Until 3:30 there was no sign of really bad weather except for a heavy cloud bank in the west. 4:30 P.M. Many boats are heading for Miami. The wind is strong NE. Ragged clouds are appearing in the E and SE. Tide is ebbing fast. Charlotte counted several hundred seabirds heading ashore. 5:30 P.M. The tide, which should be on ebb, has started to flood. The wind is rising fast, now about 35 mph, due NE. 7:30 P.M. Wind same, squalls sharper. Little rain. All our shutters have been nailed shut except one that we can get out through if we need to retreat to the jungle. For such an eventuality Charlotte has packed the Boston-bag with bathing suits, a jug of water, crackers, baked beans, can opener, matches, flashlight, and our cherished Seth Thomas clock. 12 midnight. Almost time for high tide and the water shows no sign of slacking. Wind NE, nearly 50 mph. Little rain. Very bad squalls are shaking the house.

Monday, Sept. 2, 3:30 A.M. There is a decided lull with fewer squalls. We will try to get some sleep. 6:30 A.M. Wind and conditions about the same as at 3:30, and we've had some sleep. Things are OK at the dock and the house. 12:00 noon. Squalls are increasing. Wind NE and more rain. Tide is about 2 feet above normal. 2:00 P.M. Squalls are very sharp. Wind gusts to 65-70 mph and NE winds blowing a steady 55-60. The roof is blowing off in chunks. 6:30 P.M. I made it to the dock and the boat is pitching in the waves and surges in the cut, but will be OK if the many lines hold and the tide doesn't get much higher. Our heavy crawfish car has been carried away. I'm grateful it didn't from the boat in passing. 10:00 P.M. Wind almost SE now, steady, about same intensity. The house has stopped trembling and is swaying now. The water is over everything and coming in at speedboat pace, with lots of debris going by. We just had a squall of 12-minute duration that was the worst one so far. We had to shout to hear one another. 12:00 midnight. The wind is SE, way over 90. Just a deafening hiss and roar. No sky visible and lots of rain. The dogwood trees near the house are bent double and "crying." Their wood makes a high screaming whine and I don't see how the trees stand the wind's force. All the other trees near here are broken or gone.

Tuesday, Sept. 3, 3:30 A.M. The worst squall so far, also the heaviest wind and lots of rain. The tide just now started to ebb. Not much chance to check the boat now—wind is much too strong. *8:00 A.M.* Wind SE about 90, fairly strong and steady. Tide is just on the turn from ebb to flood, and down to normal high tide level now. Things are really a mess at the dock. Our boat is still afloat but looks as if it had been sand-blasted. The skiffs are sunk and everything is covered with coral rock and debris from the ocean. *10:00 A.M.* Well, the salt-laden air has stopped our clock, which was so carefully wrapped in the tightly closed Boston-bag, so we're timeless now. Wind is SE about 80 in squalls, with steady light rain. The tide is rising slowly and starting to surge again. I had some stakes on the beach and have just checked them. From 14 inches to 2 feet of sand and rock has disappeared along the entire beach. Will have to build a new gangway to the dock as the old one is much too short now. *Approx. 12 noon.* Wind SE by SSE 60-70 mph. Tide rising and running parallel with shore and taking out sand and rock fast. Steady, light rain with a few squalls. I feel certain that when the wind reaches SE the storm will be over. The main part of this hurricane has lasted over 36 hours and it is getting very cool now. I think this one will set a record for wind violence and low barometric pressure. Charlotte was much affected by the changes of pressure as some of the violent squalls went by. To get some relief from the headaches from the pressure she sat in the open doorway watching stuff blow by. She didn't realize that she swayed back and forth as the changes in pressure caused the air to rush in and out of the house. *Approx. 6:30 P.M.* Fowey Rock light just went on. The tide is way out and has not changed for hours. *Approx. 10:00 P.M.* Wind a steady 40 now with short, sharp puffs of 45-50. Definitely S now, and we expect to sleep tonight for a change. The house is like a big sieve but what does a little water matter! The ocean is a dirty white offshore and muddy near shore."

On September 4 we ventured out to see if Captain Russell and Reno were safe. We untangled and bailed out our boat, uncovered and washed off the motor with fresh water, and finally were able to start the engine. We met Reno coming to ask us for dry matches and for shovels to dig themselves out of the mud. We got these and helped dig them out, and then towed them to our dock where we shared freshly brewed coffee on their boat. Then we all went inside our house for a gigantic meal of Russ' fabulous coconut pancakes. The Russells were anxious to sail for Key West to see how their people there had fared, so we towed them out to where they could catch the wind for the long sail southwest.

We wanted to check around our island, and first went to where the other sponge fishermen had been, but we saw no signs of either their boats or of any wreckage. We found the lime grove just about gone. The trees were splintered and frayed, and limes were on the ground 6 inches deep. We were just talking about whether to try to save some of the fallen limes when we found a man's body, and so instead we went back home.

Shortly after we arrived there a small airplane came over, circling slowly. It had ASSOCIATED PRESS painted on its side. We gathered some linen and quickly spread it out to form an OK. The plane circled slowly and a passenger waved frantically. We waved back and Fiddler jumped with excitement. We later learned that the passenger was my brother. He wrote the story about our being safe that appeared in the *Fort Lauderdale News*, our hometown paper.

We were among the very few key-dwelling survivors of the 1935 Labor Day hurricane. More than 500 people lost their lives in that storm on the keys south and west of us. Being so isolated suddenly lost its attraction, and we decided soon thereafter to leave Elliott Key and return to Fort Lauderdale. But life was never quite the same again. Eventually we returned to island living, this time to the more accessible Florida Keys. We have no telephone and still have to go by boat to the mainland, but at least we are now only a mile and a half offshore.