

Samuel Hodgman, Haines City, Florida Pioneer

by BRUCE W. BALL*

“Ella is unable to do any work. She is so weak for want of proper food. . . . For the past few weeks none of us have eaten anything but biscuits and coffee. . . . We used the last of the coffee this morning and do not have a cent nor the prospects of earning one.” “I hope times will be better when the quarantine (Yellow Fever) is off.”

These words were written by Samuel C. Hodgman of Climax, Kalamazoo County, Michigan who, with his family, settled at Haines City, Florida in 1885.

The recent discovery of his correspondence to his mother from Haines City, ranging over a period of nine years from 1885 through 1984, gives us a tragic, yet fascinating narrative account of his privations, hardships and suffering in attempting to provide for his family on this new frontier.

Hodgman was a wounded Civil War veteran with a small government pension. He was a civil engineer and surveyor, and also the inventor of a metal measuring tape used by civil engineers and surveyors. A man of some education, his handwriting was well formed, and the spelling and grammatical construction of his letters is excellent. The long cold Michigan winters and lack of surveying business brought him south in 1885. He and his brother Charlie bought adjacent tracts of land in or near the town of Haines City. “Charlie” apparently never came south, nor did he accept Samuel’s offer “to break ground and start a grove, provided money was sent to cover cost of trees and fertilizer.”

Despite Hodgman’s energy and determination to make a success of his new life, as shown in the early letters, he was plagued by constant failure and bad luck. He was unable to obtain regular surveying work; develop his land, or even to establish a kitchen garden. Lack of cash and fertilizer, inability to cope with the hot climate, and problems of marauding hogs and wild animals were a constant problem, and these, plus failing health, made his life and that of his family a daily struggle just to survive. Throughout all of his reverses and poverty-stricken existence, he continued

*Mr. Ball is a Miami philatelist who acquired the Hodgman letters for their covers. When he made contacts in Haines City for further information about Hodgman, he discovered a local organization much interested in the letters for their historical value, and turned them over to be added to the Haines City historical collection.

to be optimistic about the new country and his chances of eventual success and good fortune.

The first letter, written in 1885 and datelined Eustis, Fla., tells of his trip to Florida, accompanied by his wife Ella, daughter Minnie and son Rob. His nephew, Will, joined him at a later date. His wife eventually died of a gangrenous infection; his nephew Will of catarrh (tuberculosis). Hodgman and his daughter also suffered from catarrh, and all suffered terribly from malnutrition and the most primitive living conditions.

All of the seventy-two letters in the correspondence are datelined Haines City, except for three which were written from Eustis and Naples. Excerpts from his letters follow in chronological order:

June 14, 1885, . . . "the mosquitos no worse than in timbered country in Michigan, but lots of fleas. A seven foot alligator was killed in the lake here today. I am in hopes of securing a position on a new railroad running through here. . . . The road will be 60 to 80 miles long from Sanford to Ocala. (Author's note: The South Florida Railroad was built through Haines City, but did not stop until a Dr. Hitt, another pioneer of Haines City, had the bright idea of naming the town (formerly known as Clay Cut) Haines City in honor of General H. S. Haines, Civil Engineer for the Railroad). "I have not travelled around much since I have been here, as I did not think it best to go out in the hot sun until I get a little more used to it. . ."

July 21, 1885, "I wish you were all down here to enjoy this country and see the chance there is for making money where a person has a little to start with. . . . I visited an orange grove today only six years old from the bud that is heavily loaded with fruit. There are only ten acres in the place and half of it in oranges, yet I suppose \$1000 an acre would not buy it. On the same place are grapes, pineapples, lemons, guavas, limes, tea plants, etc. People here make more off five acres than off an 80 acre farm in the north."

August 8, 1886, "At times don't know where the next meal is coming from. I have had no work at surveying since spring to amount to a days work in all. The failure of the orange crop, and setback of vegetables left the people without any resources except land sales, and they have been kept back by the scare last spring. . . . With all the hard times, I would rather be where I am situated as I am than I was at Traverse City." (Michigan).

August 15, 1886, "Settlers are coming in . . . and my chance will come by and by. Our melons and sweet potatoes are doing very well despite

the hot weather. It is 96 today, but we usually have a fine breeze in the evening. I have had no luck with the raspberry bushes Charley sent, nor the seeds from Uncle Ed. Most plants which flourish in the north are not suited for this hot climate."

August 22, 1886, "At times don't know where the next meal is coming from, but I have managed to live so long and expect I will have all I can handle soon. Money is terribly hard to get."

September 19, 1887, "There is no use talking, we are having hard times here. We do not have enough to eat at times, and what we do have is just the one thing—bread and musty pork. Nobody peddles meat here because most of the settlers are poor. As for clothing, we are fast learning to do without. I do not have a whole pair of pants to my legs. I have only a pair of plow shoes and no hat but a straw which is pretty well weather beaten and is falling apart from decay."

"Ella is worse off in some respects. She has just washed her last calico dress for the last time, and has worn her only pair of shoes some two months since they wore clear through the bottoms to the skin of her feet. Minnie has none at all. I have received but one dollar for work or anything else since last May or June."

January 22, 1888, "The hogs ruined all my early beans and peas. Rob killed a seven foot rattlesnake and sold the skin for \$1.00. A few days later one was killed near Lake Hamilton with nine rattles weighing twelve pounds. . . . I can't plant any more garden for want of fertilizer. There are two 5 acre lake front lots in town that I could get for \$100 each if I had the money now. They are splendid vegetable land. Vegetables are being shipped from here now and bring good prices."

January 27, 1888, "Have a job of surveying, and will take my pay in teeth. I'll let Ella have the pay as all her store teeth are gone but one."

February 19, 1888, "I used part of the money to buy a hat, and the rest has had to go to keep starvation away. Rob has not been able to work for the past two weeks, and neither have I."

March 11, 1888, "Meanwhile Ella and I are both in effect barefoot. Our feet are on the bare ground part of the way. . . . A good many vegetables were shipped from here last week, 27 crates in one day. Can buy 15 acres of dry land for \$180."

March 12, 1888, Naples, Florida, postmarked Orlando, Fla. "Our mails are quite irregular and will be until the steamer which is expected to

run between here and Punta Gorda is ready for work. Most of the engineers will be through in a few days, but two parties of which mine is one will stay for awhile. The lots are not staked out yet and it is not certain whether they will be. I suppose that we will have to run a railroad survey line soon whose "ends" for the present will be at Haines City and Marco Pass, a few miles south of here. I expect it will be pretty bad going in some places, especially the mangrove swamps. Rob and I don't get much time for fishing although fish are very plentiful and good. I think the time is not far distant when this will be one of the most important pleasure resorts in Florida. The country is poor, but it is a good site for a town and is the farthest point south which is fit for human beings to congregate in. Wish I could send you some shells which are in abundance here." (Author's note: This letter was written by Hodgman while on a tour of duty in south Florida as a member of a survey team which was opening up the Collier County area.)

March 18, 1888, "100 acres of rice will be planted in June, and when that comes off, the land will be planted to cane. New groves are all the time being set out. Meantime, it is mighty tough. Bread and water three times a day aren't very satisfying."

March 25, 1888, "Rob will send in a few days to Orlando for some shoes for Ella. She has only one now that she can keep on her foot. Shipment of vegetables continues—40 crates some days."

May 27, 1888, "I had one days surveying which put bread in our mouths."

July 1, 1888, "Have posts set out to fence in garden, but no money for wire . . . and when I have to wait for the pay for my work it is pretty poor pickings in our house. Uncle Sam is terribly slow in paying his debts. Haven't seen a magazine in more than a year. . . . I have not been doing very much the past week as it has been too warm to work in the middle of the day. The hottest time with us is from 7 to 10 A.M. The mercury gets up to 98 with little breeze. I am at the mercy of the hogs. They come in every night and root up what they can find in the garden."

July 8, 1888, "The hogs, having destroyed all my garden, we are terribly hard pushed to get something to eat."

August 5, 1888, "Rob made about \$4 last week picking up 'cow chips'. That kept the table supplied for a time with some of the essentials."

October 21, 1888, Disinfected, (punched) letter. (Editor's note: During

the yellow fever epidemic of 1888 all mail had to be punched with nails set in a paddle, or run through a set of cogs which made regular indentations in a straight line across the letter and envelope. Such letters were then placed on wire racks in a railroad boxcar which was closed, and sulphur fumes from iron pots wafted for six hours through the letters and newspapers, which supposedly purified or killed the "fomites" or germs which were believed contained in the letters.) "Yours of the 14th received. Ella . . . is not able to do any work. She is so weak for want of proper food. . . . For the past few weeks none of us have eaten anything but biscuits and coffee. . . . We used the last of the coffee this morning and do not have a cent nor the prospects of earning one. . . . I am getting so weak that I can't do half a days work. . . . The hogs ruined all the sweet potatoes about town, but they are gone now. I hope times will be better here by and by when the quarantine (yellow fever) is off."

October 28, 1888, "Sunday has come again and we are still alive if we don't kick very much. We have managed to get along somehow even if our stomachs have been pinched. I will try and finish clearing and grubbing a garden patch on Charley's lots just as soon as I can get something to eat besides bread and water."

Hodgman's land was apparently not of the best. He wrote frequently of the need for fertilizer if his gardening was to be productive. His land and that of his brother was apparently overgrown with palmettoes which he laboriously dug out by hand. On October 25, 1888, he wrote: "Monday and Wednesday dug in the hammock. I can dig a strip six feet wide and 60 feet long in a day by working pretty busily." On October 21 he had described the nature of the palmetto which made it so difficult to uproot. "There are a good many palmettoes to be dug out. Just imagine a log 6 to 8 inches in diameter and from 4 to 15 feet long partly on and partly under the ground and tied down by a double row of wires two or three inches apart for the whole length and it will give you some idea of a good healthy palmetto root. It is really a tree with the roots at the side instead of the end." Only those who have wrestled with a palmetto root can really appreciate the description.

November 25, 1888, "Rob is now clerking for \$3.00 a week and board himself. We have been living on oatmeal the last week. Rolled oats, 25¢ a package makes us three meals. Went fishing last Tuesday. Polled my boat about a mile and a half through the marsh and caught eight fish which I sold. Ella has been confined to bed for several days. Her sores are bad . . . and limbs pain her so that she cannot keep up."

November 28, 1888, Disinfected, "We have just cut two bunches of bananas so we are beginning to enjoy some of our fruits. Next year we will probably have plenty of bananas and some figs, pineapples and guavas. The bears drove the hogs off the island, so we have them back again every few nights. Two families arrived from Louisville to build on and improve some land five miles south of here. This may start a boom here, as the Louisville Club now owns some 1200 acres of land in this area. Rob is studying to fit himself for teaching. He will try to attend a Normal School for about ten weeks if he can raise the needful . . . as soon as I can get something besides bread and water, I will be able to do some work."

December 2, 1888, "The yellow fever seems to be about played out, and travel will soon commence. The orange crop is immense, and will keep most of the men busy to handle it."

December 16, 1888, ". . . Received package of old clothes. . . . A great many people are coming into South Florida, and things are beginning to stir up a little . . . no use to plant vegetables until I can fence out neighbor's chickens and buy fertilizer. We have to use the strictest economy. If we have pork, we can't have lard, and can't buy potatoes at all. The longer I stay here the less I feel like going north again to live. Those that have lived here and gone north temporarily are glad to get back again."

February 10, 1889, "Went surveying last Monday. \$10 worth of teeth. We are to have quite an addition to our town. Mr. L. A. Marshall of Chicago, a stone contractor, bought four acres of high ground and will clear and build a residence to cost 5-8 thousand."

March 3, 1889, "Have no work yet, and Rob has none. We expect a new stock of goods here next week. New blood and capital are being transfused here which will help us some when it gets to work. Caught some fish and sold 10¢ worth. . . . Beans bring 6 to \$6.50 a crate."

April 4, 1889, "I have had only 30¢ in money for about two months which I earned by filing and setting a saw. . . . I gather cow chips for fertilizer. . . . Got a pair of shoes from M.W. & Co. of Chicago, cost \$2.25 (shoes \$1.65 and express .60¢). Expect sugar plant costing \$750,000 will be put in about five miles north. 3500 acres of saw grass will be drained and planted to cane. I expect that in a few years this will be one of the best sugar regions in the world. The mill at St. Cloud is now producing 15,000 pounds a day."

- April 14, 1889, "Received back pay from government. Also increase and new pension. Paid some bills, but not all. We were very destitute. Our crockery nearly all used up—only one towel in the house. Ella had not a single calico dress or night gown. Rob has work at \$1 a day."
- April 28, 1889, "Minnie has been quite sick with roseola. My money has run out again."
- May 10, 1889, "Chickens have ruined the garden. Had a days work surveying. Walked to Auburndale for necessities—eleven miles away . . . tomatoes bring \$5 a crate."
- May 19, 1889, ". . . Am drafting a drainage law for the state, and if done in time will be sent for action by the Legislature."
- May 26, 1889, "Rob mounting snake skin 8 feet long and 4½ inches in diameter—13 rattles. I am working on a map of Haines City and vicinity."
- June 30, 1889, "I have my map about finished—as soon as I can get the money I shall have a plate made and publish it."
- July 14, 1889, "Two days of surveying, \$20.00. I hope the railroad means business and wants me for chief engineer."
- July 28, 1889, "There have been quite a number of land sales in the vicinity. Haven't had a thing to do to earn any money since I last wrote."
- August 3, 1889, "We are having a hard time for victuals now as I am having no work."
- August 25, 1889, "no work, grub limited."
- September 15, 1889, ". . . as our one room is somewhat overcrowded, I shall build on a couple more rooms as soon as I can."
- September 29, 1889, "Ella is suffering all the time. I think despondency on account of our poverty is helping it along a good deal. I notice that when we run out of coffee, sugar, meat and flour all at once and have to do without several days at a time she seems worse. Went fishing yesterday and caught 7 pounder and some small ones which made us two meals. My map as yet don't amount to anything financially. I'll be lucky to get back the cash I paid for it to say nothing of the surveying and making the original map."
- June 15, 1890, "I have been putting the siding on my house. We have a store here now and hope to get another soon."

- August 17, 1890, "Can't do anything on my home until I raise funds for windows, at least. Am not able to do any work on land, and I think I will soon have to give up surveying. Ella is still confined to her bed unable to sit up at all. Minnie is troubled in the same way, but not enough to keep her in bed. I still try what I can do without machinery in getting out a crude phosphate — enough to make a practical test of its value as fertilizer. We are to have another store opened in a few days. . . . I think I wrote you that I had been appointed school supervisor for this district. I am now in correspondence with prospective teachers, and we will probably have a school in operation before long. We are to have five months school. The county allows us \$41.25 per month, and we have to pay a teacher \$50.00 — the balance is raised by subscription."
- August 31, 1890, "Rob is cutting wood for the railroad. He cannot average \$1.00 a day and board himself."
- September 7, 1890, "Ella is somewhat better. I made \$3 and the first thing I did was buy a bottle of 'Dr. Pierce's Favorite Prescription' which she is taking. Also got cloth for windows to shut the rain out until I can do better."
- September 14, 1890, "School begins tomorrow, but Minnie can't go yet until her mother can fix her up."
- November 1, 1890, (Details of Ella's death with description of symptoms.)
"The doctor pronounces it 'phagadenous ulceration' or malignant postule. The sores on her body continued to worsen and especially the one on her hand which was large as a silver dollar. Gangrene set in and she died at 3 PM . . . I have given up all hope of work at surveying — only an occasional job, and cannot endure hardships of railroad work even if I could get it. I cannot leave home to hunt up work."
- April 19, 1891, "I have to go tomorrow about ten miles from here to inspect three pieces of land, and will have to make a rough survey to locate them. Will take one man with horse and wagon. I dread the job."
- May 3, 1891, "Rob plans to take up bird skinning. He sold the skin of one Ivory Billed Woodpecker — a rare bird as large as a crow, for \$6.00 to a taxidermist in Chicago. Things have a more hopeful look here than they have for the past two or three years. Truckers have done fairly well this year and groves are beginning to bear . . . There are now more than 50 or more orange groves in a five mile area."

- June 7, 1891, "Local people have begun shipping grapes . . . will have about 2000 pounds . . . pretty good for the second year after cutting. Walked to Bartow and got excused from jury duty. Fee \$7.20."
- August 16, 1891, "The place is filling up, and all of the houses are occupied. There has not been a case of malarial sickness since I have been here that originated here. Minnie is learning nicely. She brings home 'perfect' cards every Friday night."
- August 30, 1891, "Haines City is now filled up — not a vacant house in town. Forty bushels of limes shipped this summer at \$1 a bushel."
- October 25, 1891, "Have survey job in view at Winter Haven. The railroad runs from Bartow Junction to Punta Gorda and to Lakeland . . . Peaches have been in bloom for two or three weeks and I have a seedling muscadine grape full of blossom buds."
- December 20, 1891, "I am getting interested in a railroad now, and am in correspondence with the prime movers . . . last night I received a letter asking the cost of a preliminary survey. If the road is successful it will help Haines City a great deal even if I don't get a job."
- February 14, 1892, "Have been sick. Had one half days work, \$3, the only money I have earned for a month."
- March 27, 1892, "Minnie is well now and does nearly all the cooking. She makes splendid biscuit. . . . Caught 9 bass from 1 to 7 pounds. Received appointment as Notary Public for the State at large which will perhaps give me a quarter once in awhile."
- April 10, 1892, "Will has situation in the office. \$30 a month."
- August 14, 1892, "My persimmon has climbed up to eight feet four inches and still growing . . . It is a breezy comfortable day. We don't have any hail storms or tornadoes down here and only just a little frost. No sun strokes nor hydrophobia. I have made arrangements to correspond for a Bartow newspaper, the 'Courier Informant'. There is interest in mango culture here. Mr. W. B. Campbell, two miles south of here will realize nearly \$50 this year from three bearing trees. One man in Winter Haven has just shipped 90 crates to New York."
- March 2, 1893, Letter from Will datelined Titusville, Fla. and addressed to his father at Climax, Michigan. "I am not very well. My lungs are weak, and I am hardly able to crawl around. I do not have any work to do. Everything is handled by the deck hands. I seldom have more than three or four packages. I get my board for looking after

the baggage, and \$40 for express. I think about six months more of Florida will use me up completely."

July 9, 1793, "It is very lonesome here. So many have gone away, and more going."

September 3, 1893, "There is something of a scare about yellow fever, but only one case is actually known. But it is enough to set hundreds of people wild. We have not the least fear of it here.

September 10, 1893, "Will is in the hospital — probably won't get well. No money for 'Amick' cure."

December 31, 1893, "We are well as usual except Minnie's catarrh. If I am not able to get medicine for her before long I am afraid she will go as Will did. Haven't earned a dollar in two months or more."

January 4, 1894, "I was busy yesterday filing saws and trucking. Earned \$1.50, the first money I have had for several weeks. The newspapers talk about our railroad again, this time an electric road. I have not much hope of getting work on it, but it will open up the country and make a market for land now lying idle."

January 28, 1894, "Rob left today for the road again. He begins on the 'Hotel Limited', an extra fast train from Sanford to Tampa, as flagman at \$40 a month. If I don't get work soon I shall sell my instruments and drop the surveying business."

August 12, 1894, "The mercury got up to 98 yesterday, one of the hottest days I can remember. I worked as much as the heat would let me last week . . . Minnie is some better but difficult . . . She needs to be with a good woman for a year or so. I would gladly live alone if she could only have that advantage. I am feeling better than I was a week ago, still I am losing flesh all the time. My legs are weak. When I sit or lie down a short time it is hard work to get up again."

Here the correspondence ends. Perhaps his mother to whom almost all of the letters were addressed had died. Hodgman lived until May 1, 1900. Apparently his health and his economic well being improved in later years. Certainly he lived an active life. It is possible that he had exaggerated the hardships of the earlier years.

Besides the letters to his mother and the map of Haines City in 1889—and how many communities can boast such a map at that stage of their development—he is credited with building St. Mark's Episcopal church

in the early 1890s. Bishop William Crane Gray who assisted in the building of churches all over the frontier in southern Florida raised the money for the materials and Hodgman did most of the work of building it. The bishop visited once while the building was under construction. In recognition of Hodgman's efforts to provide Episcopal church services the bishop ordained him a deacon.

Hodgman conducted Episcopal services and assisted visiting clergymen who occasionally came that way. On August 18, 1889 he wrote his mother: "We expect a clergyman here from Thonotosassa on the second Sunday & the Bishop has promised us a visit in the winter." On September 15, he wrote: "I did not have much of a congregation today on account of the rain but read the service all the same. We are going to try hard to get funds to buy an organ if possible to make our service more attractive." On August 12, 1894 he was still reading the service, and mentions working on the church. "Had service today. It was so warm there were only half a dozen present. . . . I keep it going." And on December 31, 1893, he had written: "Putting up church, material all furnished."

For all of his ill health and poverty and complaints he never considered leaving Haines City. In fact, he repeatedly disclaims any interest in living anywhere else. He also certainly left a more tangible legacy than most of his fellows on this or any other similar frontier.