Marco, Florida in 1925

By MARY S. LUNDSTROM*

The village of Marco on Marco Island, Florida was a small settlement of some three dozen families when I arrived from my home in Indiana for my first year of teaching. My parents had planned to spend that winter of 1925-26 in St. Petersburg and hoped that I too could be there. But the reply to my application stated that, "We place our Pinellas County residents first and, as we have more than two hundred on our waiting list, there would be no use to file your application at this time."

I then wrote to every county superintendent in Florida but the reply was common, "Please apply again after you have had a year's experience." Miami, however, was positive and encouraging with the message, "As we do not employ teachers without experience please let us hear from you when you have taught a half year. We will then return a contract for your signature for the 1926-27 school year." Although as a college graduate I held a Graduate State Certificate, it meant nothing without that year's experience.

It was only a month before school was to open when the letter from Mrs. Tommie Barfield of Collier County came from Everglades City. She offered the position of Principal of the three-room, seven months school at Marco. She included an enthusiastic description of: one of the finest bathing beaches in Florida; unexcelled fishing and hunting grounds; the fine climate; and the hotel, near the school, where New Yorkers, and other Northerners coming down to fish, spent their winters.

The three-day train trip ended in Ft. Myers, a bustling town reminiscent of stories of the gold rush towns of the West. But in this case the gold was land, for this was the time of the Great Boom and the Bust had not yet cast a visible shadow. The sidewalks along the main business street were crowded with jostling men and women spilling over onto the street, and my taxi driver had to creep along to avoid them. I was lucky to get him for my train was late and it was almost dark. There were no rooms to be had at either of the two hotels or lodging houses, but he knew an elderly couple who housed a few roomers and they took me in for the night.

The driver came for me in the morning, bringing my trunk which

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he had picked up at the station. He then took me to the bus station where Mr. Bryan, a member of the Collier County School Board, was waiting to accompany me on the trip to Marco. He had intended to meet the train the night before, but when it was late, he had left to attend a meeting. The message he had left for me had not reached me, but such was the friendliness of the small community that it occasioned no serious problems, and the taxi driver had the message to meet Mr. Bryan.

It did not take us long to drive out of Ft. Myers. In fact I find it impossible to connect my recollection of it that morning with the city it is today, although a few of the white frame houses are still standing, on side streets. The palmettos and pines that dominated the landscape all the way to the Marco ferry were a continuation of what I had seen from the train windows, crossing the state from Jacksonville. But there were many more birds, of species I had seen only in pictures. The lovely white egrets with their graceful plumage and the wild turkeys were spectacular.

The sand shell roadway, worn to a washboard surface, was not bad for that time, but the many "bridges" over swampland and inlets were unbelievable. They were constructed of planks simply nailed to pilings with the cross planks laid loose. At one so-called bridge two men were working, for there was a hole large enough for a wheel of the bus to fall through. We waited until the men threw a pair of planks across the opening.

At Bonita Springs the other passengers left the bus and a group of rough looking men boarded. The driver explained that they were a gang sent to work on the road farther south. At the junction past Naples we overtook a mail truck and stopped for conversation. My "escort" decided to leave the bus here where he could ride to Everglades City with the mail. If he went to Marco, he explained, he then would have to take the longer way home, by boat. He said that I would be in good hands with the bus driver, and I could tell that I would be when he asked me to take the seat beside him and then quietly took his gun from its holster and laid it on the seat between us. But he had no need for it and, when we reached their road camp, each man told us goodbye politely as he left the bus.

We soon reached the end of the road, and here we saw the lighter, tied to the pilings at the water's edge. A man was busy with the cables and a boy of about fourteen was napping on the deck by the wheel. When we were loaded the man wakened the boy, who did not get up but simply put his bare feet up on the wheel and guided the boat across the channel from his reclining position.

We introduced ourselves and Mr. Tomlinson, the captain, pointed out the school house to me. It was a low white frame building with a belfry

to our left, the hotel was straight ahead, and the store was to our right. Through the trees in the background I could see a weather beaten cabin here and there. The hotel grounds were spacious and I was soon to learn that this was very valuable property. It was staked off with new wooden stakes into small lots and I was told that the price ran a hundred dollars per front foot. Yet, even with this hint of commercialism to come, it could not then have been presaged that this quiet little fishing village and its environs would, in less than fifty years, be obliterated by bulldozers.

Miss Mary Lou Lee, from Georgia, was the other teacher and she had already arrived at the hotel. She had learned that, although there were three rooms in the school building, there would be only two teachers unless the enrollment of fifty pupils increased. The sportsmen did not bring their children of school age, so there was no tourist influx. We inspected the school house that afternoon and found the large center room and the smaller one on the north, or channel, side clean and in order. The smallest room, on the south, was cluttered and dusty, attesting to its disuse.

The dining room at the hotel was not open in the off season, but the wife of the clerk gave us supper. We then went to our room to unpack but our trunks had not been delivered, so we decided to take a walk around the village, hoping to make some casual contact with children or parents. It was now almost sundown and, as we set off toward the store, I began to feel needle-sharp stabs on my arms and legs. I could see nothing to cause this annoyance, there were no mosquitoes in evidence, but Miss Lee was in pain now too, therefore our walk ended at its beginning. This was my first massive encounter with the minute specks they called no-see-ums, or sandflies—both appropriate names for, on this island, they were surely as numerous as the grains of sand.

The next morning a Mr. Williams, a school board official, came to move us to Mrs. Kirk's boarding house, a cottage on the lane back of the hotel. He explained that we could not afford to stay at the hotel because the rates went up from $30.00 a month to $30.00 a day during the winter season. With our combined salaries of $210.00 per month we could not protest. We each paid Mrs. Kirk $7.00 a week!

Our room, off the dining end of the kitchen, had been hastily prepared for us. It had the only door and lock within the house, the other rooms having only curtains. Mrs. Kirk explained that she had insisted on this special privacy for us when Mr. Williams asked her, the day before our arrival, to put us up for the duration of the school year. Our trunks were in place, crowding the little room with its double bed and straight chair and dresser with oil lamp, and the wash stand with bowl and pitcher,

and waste bucket underneath. There were no ceilings to the rooms, the partitions extending only to the rafter joists, thus giving a spacious area above our heads and making for better ventilation.

Beside the back door, on a shelf, was the communal water bucket, with dipper hanging on a nail above. It was a rule of the house never to leave the bucket empty, thus the duty fell upon the drinker of the last drop to go across the lane to the cistern for a refill. Everyone depended on these rainwater cisterns, spaced at fairly convenient intervals, for all water used for drinking, cooking, and washing.

Mr. Williams told me that most of our pupils would be under age fourteen, because at that age they could drop out of school and the majority then worked in the Doxsee Clam Factory, as did many of the mothers. Most of the fathers were commercial fishermen and they too sometimes worked for the clam factory. When at times the factory shut down some of the boys and girls would have nothing else to do but to attend school, and we should accept them. Also, although he said this would not be likely, if any pupil who had finished the eighth grade wanted to continue I would be required to teach the necessary secondary subjects. This occurred only twice, and was of short duration.

Miss Lee and I went back to the school that afternoon to map out a course of procedure at least for the next day. We worked everything out together and I was glad to have the benefit of her two previous years teaching. I had the greatest respect for experience, now realizing its value. It was good to have some of the mothers and children come in during that afternoon and we gathered much useful information from them. Others came to Mrs. Kirk's and we met others at the store when we went for our mail so that, by the opening of school the next morning, we actually felt at home on Marco Island.

The first few days were taken up mainly with oral and simple written tests to determine which classes would be combined, with assignments, and with physical examinations. It was not surprising that, with no medical or dental services on the island, almost every child showed some need. But, on the whole, they were a healthy group of youngsters so, if their parents were unconcerned about unfilled baby teeth or hookworm infestation through bare feet, we concluded that it was not for us to do more than record and report. However, I was extremely concerned about the fact that not one of the children had been vaccinated. I sent notes home asking the parents about their own immunizations, and when almost all answers came back in the negative I wrote to Mrs. Barfield, asking if a doctor or nurse could be sent in to rectify this serious oversight. I remembered ten

years before when an epidemic of smallpox struck our small town, the resulting deaths and loss of eyesight and disfigurements.

During the hot September weather the young people enjoyed night swimming off nearby small beaches on the Gulf, where the prevailing winds kept the insect pests away. This was actually the only outdoor recreation one could engage in after sundown away from the smudge buckets. One evening a group of us was swimming off the westernmost island when one of the girls was bitten above her ankle. By the appearance of the many punctures in her flesh the attacker was identified as a barracuda, rightly called the Tiger of the Sea. Fortunately the fish only set its teeth and then let go, instead of ripping off the flesh as these dangerous fish more often do. As it was, the wound was bleeding so profusely by the time the girl was up on the beach that we feared she might bleed to death before we could get her home. But someone's shirt was quickly torn into strips for a tourniquet and the heavy bleeding was stopped. She was out and about the next day, such is the magic of sea water.

Saturday mornings Mary Lou and I would go to Mrs. Robinson's. She taught in the school at Caxambas, the other fishing village five miles south, but lived on the lane north of us. We washed our clothes in the tubs in her back yard. Her husband would build the fire for the wash boiler, and we thoroughly cooked all the germs and dirt out of everything we had worn through the week. The heat made many changes necessary. My silk lingerie and other unsuitable clothing had been packaged and mailed home, and I was busy for several evenings making underclothes and simple dresses out of cotton prints from the local store, using Mrs. Kirk's treadle sewing machine. Not much material was needed for those were the days of flapper styles and skirts were slim and at our knees.

Most of the boarders at Mrs. Kirk's were transient—men working on the island or passing through on business. They might be at the table for only a meal or two, or they might room there for a week or longer. Their quarters were divided by screens and curtains, and the size of the living room was determined by the number of lodgers at the time. We might leave the cabin in the morning with the room in its normal state and come home to find half the furniture on the front porch, with cots lined up the length of the room. But there was always space for the Victrola at one side of the front door and the aged piano at the other, each with a kerosene lamp on its top.

Besides Miss Lee and I there were two other regular lodgers—Mr. Norcross and his ninety-year-old mother. She had been a brilliant doctor with her own hospital in New York, but she had become senile and was,

he said, more content here at Marco than anywhere he had taken her. They were alone in the world except for his son, who was in South America working on a research project for Harvard University, of which he was an alumnus.

Other people we came to know who were not natives of the island were Mr. and Mrs. Leslie Bronson and their small daughter. And there were the wives of men connected with the two factions which were working to develop the island—to their own interests. They lived at the Marco Lodge only temporarily and their names are long forgotten.

In October, after one all night squall, the weather changed abruptly to comfortable days and cool nights, and the sand flies and mosquitoes disappeared. The following Sunday the parents and other villagers had a picnic for their teachers. We went in boats to the beach side of the island west of the village. All the food served was grown on the islands or caught off their shores, and the cooking was done on the spot. There was turtle soup; fish, snapper and mullet, broiled over open fires; creamed hearts of palm; avocado salad; and a variety of fresh fruits.

Every famliy had a boat, varying from a light skiff to a fair sized fishing boat with a cabin, but there were few automobiles. Even if one had the money for it a car was a very unnecessary expense for the fishermen. Without crossing to the mainland, which cost $1.00 one way on the ferry, there was no place to drive except over the five mile shell trail through the woods to Caxambas.

The deputy sheriff, T. S. Maupin, boarding at Mrs. Kirk's at the time gave Mary Lou and me our first ride to the south end of Marco Island. We passed several newly-built cabins in clearings near the road, each one surrounded by a barbed wire fence. They appeared to be vacant and I asked our new friend about them. He replied that they were built by the government for road workers who were to have cleared the jungle when they built the new road. But it seemed that the project had been abandoned, because of some controversy over land rights, and now nothing was being done by the government anywhere on the island.

It was almost dark when we left Caxambas, but we had seen the cannery and hotel, and the cottages so like those at Marco. About half way home, as we were going up a rise of ground, the car suddenly ran up onto an enormous snake crossing the trail. We could see the great flat head reared above the left front fender, with the tongue darting frantically. The air was filled with the dry hollow rattling of the tail that we could see to the right of the car. I asked Mr. Maupin why he didn't run over the snake and end its agony and he replied that it wouldn't finish him. If we

were on level ground or downhill he could drag the brakes and tear the huge thick body apart in the sharp shells. But that wouldn't work going uphill. At last he reached under the seat for the crank. It seemed too small and light a weapon for such a target, but he leaned far out and the instant he struck the rattle ceased. He drove the car up and back over the body several times before we continued on our way. He said the buzzards would have it picked clean the next morning. The law men and hunters were constantly trying to rid the island of poisonous reptiles.

Later we had a similar adventure, but much more dangerous, on a Saturday hunting excursion into the Everglades. The Tamiami Trail in 1925, from the bend north toward Naples, was a rough wagon-trail bordered with palmetto scrub and saw grass that led thirty miles east into the Everglades and stopped. At this point we left the flivver that brought us across the ferry from Marco and proceeded on foot with our guns. I had been given the only extra gun that could be found at the time — an old rusty 10-gauge double barreled shot gun. I was instructed to hold the stock tight against my shoulder when shooting to avoid getting a mighty kick.

We penetrated quite far into the wilderness, firing at various targets along the way, and I was having such good beginner's luck at hitting stumps and then smaller distant targets that I expressed the wish to find some live thing that should be killed, such as a rattlesnake. When we came to the more dense jungle we turned back and were near the wagon trail when suddenly the air vibrated with that dry, frantic buzzing that is like nothing else in the world but a rattlesnake. The air was so completely filled with the noise that the reverberation seemed to be coming from all directions, as though there were snakes all around us. I jumped up onto a stump. Someone pointed, speechless, to the spot I had just left and there, right beside my shoe print in the dust, under a palmetto shrub stood the tense coils of the second diamondback I had seen in Collier County. It was coiled like a strong spiral spring and we never did see the head. Everyone was now in the small clearing where wood cutters had trampled the grass flat and we could not get back on the path, for the snake could easily strike across it. No one now would step into that tall grass again. Because I was the one who had wished for a snake I must be the one to shoot it, they said. I was weak with fright and shaking so that the gun was wobbling in circles when I aimed. I couldn't have held it tight to my shoulder if I had thought of it. But with the gun's report the noise stopped, and I was knocked off the stump by the recoil. One of the men fired into the enert mass again to make certain of getting the head. Someone else asked if I wanted the rattles and buttons, but I couldn't get away from that place fast enough. I carried a souvenir for weeks—an arm black from

shoulder to elbow. After this experience I invested in a light 16-gauge one-shot gun from the Sears Roebuck catalog.

As I recall it was the Bronsons who were responsible for the hunting experiences. They enjoyed hunting snipes, long legged sea birds always in abundant supply along the beaches. After a Saturday morning of shooting we would go back to their place and dress and stuff the birds for roasting, and have a feast in the evening.

Occasionally an itinerant preacher would come to the village to hold services in one of the cottages, but there was no church and no Sunday School. So there were no festivities planned for the children for Christmas time. We had a week's vacation and my parents expected me at St. Petersburg. But Miss Lee was not going home and I decided to stay and help to organize a real Christmas program. Back then there was no worry about being arrested if we touched a religious theme in school. We had our tall pine tree set up in Miss Lee's big room and we held the beautiful celebration of Christmas there. Each child had a part in the program and each one received a gift, and it was touching to hear the parents join in singing the familiar carols.

Mary Lou and I had Christmas Day with my parents after all. We met at Charlotte Harbor, where we went by bus, and afterward they visited the island.

The first excitement in January was the oyster fishing. We went in rowboats, in and out among the mangrove islands, reaching down into the rust colored water to pull the rough shells loose from their moorings. First, we would eat our fill, opening the shells with strong knives. They were delectable, salted to perfection by the Gulf waters. Then we would fill the croker sacks and take them home to be shucked and made into stew, or fried, or scalloped, or just eaten in their natural state, seasoned to taste.

By the end of January "the season" was in full swing. The great Ringling and Rexall yachts were anchored in the deep pass by the school, to the distraction of teachers and pupils; the village men were completely booked up for guiding; every boy's spare time was busy with bait fishing; and the hotel was filled with northern sportsmen and their wives. Miss Lee and I were sometimes invited to their evening affairs, and one Sunday we were included on a yachting-swimming cruise around the islands with a New York group.

These friendly people in this remote spot were sometimes hard pressed for the means of making a living for their families. Fishing was

not always good or profitable, the clam factory was not always producing and therefore hiring the women and girls and boys, and the rich New Yorkers who paid well for guides and bait were there only in the short winter season. Thus the temptation of fabulous fees for illegal transport of contraband goods became irresistible to some. Mary Lou and I, accepted as we were by the native people because we lived as they lived (an advantage we would have missed had we stayed at the hotel), were taken across the channel one night to see eight hundred cases of smuggled liquor stacked up in a clearing in the woods. This was to be transferred, before daylight, to boats that would take it to Ft. Myers. There, we were told, it would be snapped up, for a price, by the many bootleggers operating in the area. The really big loads were sent to Chicago and to eastern cities for distribution.

Liquor was not the only contraband touching the shores and lives of this small remote island in the Gulf. More sinister and infinitely more dangerous was the smuggling of hard drugs, and of human beings, aliens—Orientals who came from the East via South America, who would pay a thousand dollars and risk their lives to get into this country. This traffic was not commonly engaged in by the fishermen, but it was known to them. We did not learn any details of the workings of these most deadly occupations but we did hear reports, probably third hand at least, of fatal encounters with the Coast Guard.

School had been in session over five months when we first met the woman who hired us, Mrs. Barfield. One of the Doxsee children brought the message his father had taken at the clam factory before school one morning in February. Miss Lee and I were to drive to Ft. Myers with Mrs. Tommie Barfield the following week to attend the three-day Educational Conference. The school was to be closed for that time.

We met Mrs. Barfield at the ferry landing at daylight on the morning she had stipulated, and then began a most interesting acquaintance with this dynamic and public-spirited pioneer. She told us that she often drove to Ft. Myers alone at night, in order to be there by the time offices were open in the morning. By traveling at night she could take care of business in Ft. Myers without being away from home for more than a day. She said she was not afraid because everyone knew she was handy with her gun.

On the final day of the conference Mrs. Barfield received a telephone call from Marco telling her that smallpox had broken out on the island. She was in touch immediately with the Lee County Board of Health, which had to serve the relatively new Collier County, and they promised to send a doctor and nurse at once. Mrs. Barfield recalled my letter con-

cerning the vaccinations and apologized for not replying. She explained that she knew of the situation and didn't consider it serious because it was common to the area. She had never known of an epidemic on the island in all her years there, and illnesses were almost always light. The people were not accustomed to having a doctor and would not have cooperated in having the inoculations. But now the circumstances were changed and we must get every man, woman, and child immunized.

We left at once and were much relieved when we reached Marco to find that there were yet only two cases. Mrs. Barfield went on to Caxambas that night and then on to Everglades City the next day to determine the extent of the disease. It had not spread and, although another case had developed by the time the doctor arrived, Mrs. Barfield was right, the cases were light.

The doctor, a young northerner, had just finished his internship and had taken the position with the Health Board as his first assignment. I was asked to assist him until the nurse would arrive. We set up operations in the office of the clam factory and this was convenient for the busy workers there. No one on the island refused the shot.

A month later, shortly before school closed, the promised nurse arrived, stopping on her way back to Ft. Myers from her home in Miami. She had received word from the Board of Health office to do this and, as there was nothing in the message to indicate urgency, had assumed that this stop was to be at the end of her vacation. She stayed over night at the Marco Lodge and gave each child in the school a check up. Mary Lou and I enjoyed her visit and I was to renew the acquaintance the following year, for my contract to teach in the Miami schools had come the end of February.

When I met my parents for the drive home to Indiana I told them that the term had been a priceless experience, never to be forgotten.