

## Early Families of Upper Matecumbe

By RICHARD E. GENTRY\*

Curving gently to the southwest from the mainland of Florida lies a string of small islands that make up the Florida Keys. Of these none is prettier than Upper Matecumbe, now synonymous with the town of Islamorada. This tiny island, consisting of less than 500 acres, lies almost equidistant between Miami and Key West. White settlers can be traced back as far as 1860,<sup>1</sup> but its role in modern Florida history began with the northward passage of Spanish treasure ships along the Florida reef where many of them met disaster. The recent history begins with three families who homesteaded the land and still live on the same property after the passage of more than a century.

The Russells, the Pinders, and the Parkers are the original Conchs of Upper Matecumbe.<sup>2</sup> Conch is a term applied to residents of the Florida Keys who are of British descent by way of the Bahamas. Being a people dependent on the sea and its bounty they chose the name "Conch" after a large mollusk found throughout the Caribbean. These people shared a oneness of background. Their forefathers were American Tories who left the American colonies at the end of the Revolution and went to the Bahamas, where they were given new homes on grants of land from George III.<sup>3</sup> They settled throughout the Bahamas and some of them ultimately found their way to the Florida Keys. The Keys living afforded them a better and more varied life in which the sea yielded much of their needs and location along a trade route brought them into closer contact with civilization.

Upper Matecumbe is a small island of only 465 acres. Between 1880 and 1906 three families, the Russells, the Pinders, and the Parkers acquired the entire island under the provisions of the Homestead Act of 1862, and divided it among themselves more or less evenly.<sup>4</sup> In 1880 the Russell family homesteaded 162 acres on the upper end of the island which came to be called "East End" by its inhabitants. Three years later the Pinder family settled on the middle section. Its 130 acres were the highest and considered the best of the land. Finally the Parkers acquired the lower third in 1903, and its 171 acres became "West End." Not all of the land was usable as much of it around the perimeter along the seashore particularly on the north or Florida Bay side was low-lying mangrove swamp.

The families actually lived on and worked the land some years before they acquired title to it. In 1860 Mary Ann Russell with her husband and family came to Matecumbe from what is now Marathon. They had visited the island much earlier and must have liked what they saw, but news of the Massacre of Dr. Henry Perrine on Indian Key on August 7, 1840 sent them back to Marathon, closer to the protection of Key West.<sup>5</sup> Dr. Perrine was a distinguished horticulturist who came to Florida to experiment with the introduction of tropical plants. He was to receive a township of land on the mainland, but was residing temporarily on Indian Key which was an important trading center at the time, but did not afford the hoped-for protection. Chief Chekika and a party of so-called "Spanish Indians" came in canoes to attack and loot the trading post. Dr. Perrine was among those killed.

Soon after the Russells arrived, Mary Ann's husband died. She and two of her sons, James William and John Henry, continued to farm the land. The other children moved elsewhere but returned from time to time for visits.<sup>6</sup>

The Russell like most of their neighbors built their homes of driftwood. This was lumber washed overboard from passing ships wrecked on the Florida Reef, or from the ships themselves as they broke up. This material was plentiful and cement was not yet in wide use though pioneers made a lime by burning oyster shells. Matecumbe houses, of course, had wooden floors which their owners kept scrubbed clean with the skin of the turbot or triggerfish, a reef fish with a very coarse skin or "hide," still used today in the Bahamas. If they had lived on the palmetto and pine lands of mainland Florida they would probably have used palmetto roots as scrub brushes.

The natural environment also supplied the material for making beds. They collected "mattress grass" which grew wild along the beaches with which to fill the mattress. When the grass broke down or became unevenly distributed, they simply added more or refilled the ticking with fresh grass.

James and John Russell grew pineapples on East End and became fairly prosperous. They acquired two sailboats to carry their own produce and that of other dwellers along the Keys to market. With the larger boat they made trips to Mobile and New York.

The Russells also grew sweet potatoes in the rich soil on the Key. They made a bread of the potatoes which was baked in large outdoor ovens. The bread is still baked by the same recipe today on East End.<sup>7</sup> Looking at the rocky and barren looking soil on the Key today one might wonder that it once was called fertile and produced valuable crops. Longtime residents of the Key say that recurring hurricanes that swept

over the low land stripped the Keys of their topsoil. When the dense vegetation was cleared for farming operations the soil could more easily be washed away. Some Conchs maintain that they do not get the rainfall that was common even a generation ago. Some recall a swale along the Atlantic beach ridge running the entire length of the Key which held brackish water almost the year around.<sup>8</sup> For some, shallow wells provided a source of fresh water...Since the only fresh water was what fell on the land, it may be that the natural means of trapping it were destroyed. For instance, clearing the vegetation facilitated runoff. Residents offer further confirmation that there was water enough to provide a breeding ground for hordes of mosquitoes. Hats with mosquito netting to protect the face had to be worn out of doors and mosquito netting was required for sleeping. Smudge pots were used to drive out and keep away the pests. When wire screens did become available the material usually rusted quickly in the salt air.<sup>9</sup>

While the Russells were busy farming the East End, Richard Pinder was busy establishing his home and family in the center of the island. Like most of the Pinders who found their way to Florida, Richard came from Spanish Wells in the Bahamas where the name Pinder is still one of the most common. Richard brought with him his wife Sarah and two sons, Cephas and Adolphus. They came by way of Key West, and lived for a short time at Indian Key. In 1875 he applied for a homestead on Matecumbe. He received the patent or title to the 130.76 acres on January 20, 1883, in a document bearing the name of President Chester A. Arthur.

Richard and his two sons began to grow pineapples for market as well as vegetables and fruits for the family table. Pineapple growing was a flourishing business at the time and the Pinders often employed four or five men in their fields. When the pineapples were ripe they were cut and sent to market by boat. Since the water was too shallow for ocean-going vessels to come in to their docks, the "pines" were loaded onto small vessels and carried out to dry-well smacks which could not come inside Alligator Reef.<sup>10</sup> These vessels were fast little cargo ships somewhat similar to the more famous clipper ships which sailed the high seas of the world at the time. There are Conch tales of one smack loaded with pineapples from Upper Matecumbe that sailed to New York in four days, quite a feat.

At the height of their pineapple growing activity Cephas and Adolphus Pinder established a small canning factory on the beach at Upper Matecumbe. It ran smoothly for a time, until a major disagreement arose between the brothers and the man who operated the plant. When he quit, the modest factory fell into disuse.<sup>11</sup>

After Sarah Pinder died, Richard took a second wife, Caroline. There were no children from this marriage. On September 22, 1900, Richard Pinder died and the property passed undivided to the sons. However, on December 22, just two months after the death of his father, Adolphus died leaving a wife and seven children, and for the first time the homestead was divided.

The heyday of pineapple growing came to an end early in this century for the Russells and the Pinders and all of the other residents of the Keys and the South Florida mainland. Pineapples came by ferry from Cuba to Key West and moved north by way of the Florida East Coast Railroad which reached Key West in 1912. If the railroad which ran along the Keys opened to them a new world, it also let the competition of a wider world into their secluded and isolated land. At one time three ferries were running between Cuba and Key West; the *Henry Flagler*, the *Parrott*, and one other.<sup>12</sup> Pineapple growers on the Keys could not meet the Cuban competition and turned to the growing of limes. There too they soon met competition from growers in Dominica where labor was as cheap as twenty-five cents a day which made it possible to wrap the limes individually in paper.<sup>13</sup>

When the growing of limes and pineapples became no longer profitable, the Pinders tried, along with commercial fishing which always played a part in their economy, raising tomatoes and gathering sponges. The fine sheep's wool sponges they collected from the nearby shallow waters remained a lucrative occupation until a blight destroyed the sponge beds. Also the center of sponge gathering had moved from Key West to Tarpon Springs where Greek divers gathered the sponges from deeper water. But they too were ruined by the blight, and Tarpon Springs became more a tourist attraction than a commercial sponge capital. Meanwhile also synthetic sponges began to take much of the market. Only in recent years have natural sponges been gathered in any quantity in the Biscayne Bay-Florida Keys waters. The industry has to some extent been restored by Cuban refugees.

Several generations of the Pinder family have farmed tomatoes from time to time. In the early 1900s tomatoes often brought the family from \$400 to \$600 a year, considered a respectable cash income for the times in that area. Tomatoes were sent to Key West where they were placed aboard steamers bound for eastern ports.<sup>14</sup> This was an early phase of Florida's winter vegetable industry. Key West was at the time a major port linking much of the Caribbean and Cuba to the United States in both the Atlantic and the Gulf ports.

Until the coming of the railroad almost all development was along the beach, which was the highway of travel and communication at the

time. The inner part of the island, narrow as it was, remained dense with native woods except where it was cleared for planting.<sup>15</sup> In order to go from Russell's East End to Parkers' West End one simply walked the beach. The other alternative was a small boat. There were no horses for the farm work or transportation. On land all work was done by hand. Mules made their first appearance on the island when they were brought in for use in railroad construction early in this century.<sup>16</sup>

Everyone's home, as well as the general store and the church, was situated just above the high water mark, and often the smell of seaweed washed upon the beach was almost unbearable. There were advantages to living on the beach, however, for one could enjoy the cooling ocean breezes before the days of air conditioning.

Hurricanes often played havoc with the three Conch families. In 1935 the fury of the storm swept away and killed many residents on the Keys. Long before there was a functioning weather bureau, residents learned to trust God and his barometer between the months of June and October. Little could be done to protect a house on the beach, but the families maintained "hurricane shanties" on the higher ground of the island's interior in the midst of the thick vegetation that served to break the force of the wind and water. One such refuge owned by the Pinder family was constructed of heavy timbers, the windows, for example, being made of 1" x 12" boards.

In the 1935 storm four Pinders died. Sixty-one Russells were lost leaving only eleven descendants. Henry Russell, his wife and eleven children perished. All of the Parkers survived.

Mail delivery was always a problem in the Keys. John Wesley Johnson owned the first store in the Upper Keys and as was the case in so many early settlements it doubled as the post office. It was located at the now abandoned town of Planter just north of Tavernier. Mail came from the mainland by a side-wheel steamer, the *Chinnecock*. Since there was no channel deep enough to float the boat, the mail was left on a piling set in water deep enough for the steamer's keel. Johnson would row out, pick it up, and leave the outgoing mail for the return trip of the *Chinnecock*.<sup>17</sup>

There were no cows on the island and no supply of milk was available. Babies were all breast fed. It was often supplemented with grits at an early age just as children farther north were fed mush when very young.

Religion was an important part of the lives of these early settlers. Late in the nineteenth century, mainly by the efforts of Richard and Cephas Pinder a Methodist Church was constructed toward the eastern or upper end of the island. The location proved unsatisfactory and the building was dragged to the shore at low tide and floated on the high tide.

Two small schooners, the *Linton* and the *Virginia*, flanked the church and "sailed" it down to about the center of the island. It was brought ashore there and placed on a new foundation where it served very well until it was washed away in the 1935 hurricane.<sup>18</sup>

On his death bed Adolphus Pinder, a devout Christian, asked his son Preston to stand by the church. Preston kept his promise by acting as Sunday School Superintendent for fifty-five years and serving as lay preacher for twenty-five of them, often sharing the pulpit with Edney Parker.

In 1898 William Parker brought his family from Key West to Plantation Key, just north of Upper Matecumbe. He was born on a small point of land called "The Bluff" just off Harbor Island in the Bahamas. Before coming to Florida he had married Amy Cash. On Plantation Key the Parkers had much the same experiences as their neighbors on Matecumbe. They grew tomatoes, limes, and other vegetables for market and for the family table. William and several others constructed the first church on the Upper Keys.<sup>19</sup> William also did commercial fishing at times, catching and salting the fish which were sold to a buyer out of Miami.

The Parkers found homesteading no easier than did other Conchs. They lost one child to diphtheria shortly after their arrival. They tried raising chickens, but mosquitoes killed many of them. To supplement their diet with something other than fish, they ate cormorants and egrets abundant throughout the area. Since these birds usually had a salty taste from the diet of fish they were usually stewed. In season the young cormorants could be taken from the nest before they could fly and could be prepared in other ways such as frying, and they lacked the salty flavor of the older birds.<sup>20</sup> Beans, fresh or dried, were always a staple in the diet. Freshly shelled lima beans cooked almost to a puree and served with freshly baked bread was a favorite Sunday meal.

The nearest medical services were at Key West, and Conch pioneers like all others dealt with most medical problems with folk remedies. Kerosene was applied to cuts and lacerations, while a freshly cut aloe leaf relieved the pain of a burn. For fever they made a sage brush tea from a plant that grew on the island. A tea brewed from the leaves of the lime tree also made a delightful beverage. It was made by crushing the leaves and putting them in hot water.<sup>21</sup> Once every year everyone received a dose of castor oil in order to get in the mood for "spring cleaning." For a chest cold William Parker made an onion plaster and wore it on his chest. Kerosene lamps were used to light the houses. Sometimes the flame would travel down the wick, and begin to burn on top of the kerosene in the reservoir. The response was to throw it out the window lest it explode.

In 1911 one of William Parker's sons, Edney, married Edna Mae Pinder, thus uniting two of the early families in marriage. For their first

house Edney acquired a two story building on Umbrella Key, now called Windley's Key, placed it on a barge and floated it to Upper Matecumbe. Edney chose a spot and placed a marker just above the beach where he wanted the front of the building to rest. The man who supervised the setting of the building placed the rear of the house at that point, and Edney's front door was only about fifty feet from the high tide. Later when the second story proved unsatisfactory, the neighbors turned out in the fashion of a barn or house raising and sawed off the second story and reroofed the building.

The coming of winter visitors spelled the end of frontier days on Upper Matecumbe. Some of the residents rented living quarters to them. The men also served as guides to visiting fishermen. Many a child on the island earned pocket money digging crabs on the beach to be used for bait by bonefishermen.<sup>22</sup> The final response to visitors was the construction of Matecumbe Club for accommodation of visitors.

The founding of the club, like the coming of the railroad at much the same time, marked the end of a special way of life on Upper Matecumbe. Frontiers lose their romance when progress catches up with them. It was only a matter of time before the newer residents would say that they had never heard of East End or a dry-well smack. Life might be more secure, but it was less varied and less individual. Today Russells, Pinders and Parkers make up less than ten percent of the more than 1,000 inhabitants.

## FOOTNOTES

\*The author was a member of a Florida History Class at the University of Miami. He is a resident of Upper Matecumbe and related to two of the families named in the paper.

Editor's comment: This paper is an indication of what can be learned almost exclusively from interviews with pioneers and their descendants, and little or no documentary sources.

1 Interview with Mrs. Clifton Russell, Islamorada, April 14, 1973.

2 Land abstracts, Monroe Title Company, Key West.

3 Interview with Mrs. Clifton Russell, April 14, 1973.

4 Land abstracts, Monroe Title Company, Key West.

5 Interview with Mrs. Clifton Russell, April 14, 1973.

6 *Ibid*

7 *Ibid*

8 *Ibid*

9 Interview with Mrs. Burt Pinder, Islamorada, March 8, 1973.

10 *Ibid*

11 *Ibid*

12 *Ibid*

13 *Ibid*

14 *Ibid*

15 Interview with Mrs. Clifton Russell, April 14, 1973.

16 Interview with Mrs. Burt Pinder, March 18, 1973.

17 *Ibid*

18 Jean U. Guerry, "The Matecumbe Methodist Church," *Tequesta* XXX (1970) pp. 64-68.

19 Interview with Mrs. Eddie Sweeting and Mrs. Earl Gentry, Islamorada, April 22, 1973.

20 Interview with Mrs. Earl Gentry, Islamorada, April 15, 1973.

21 See note 19.

22 See Note 9.

