

# Newspaper Pioneering on the Florida East Coast, 1891-1895

By Ruby Andrews Myers\*

By the late 'eighties the Indian River Steamboat Company had put on a boat line from Titusville to Jupiter, and from that point had constructed a narrow-gauge railroad over the eight-mile strip between Jupiter Inlet and Lake Worth. The railroad terminal in Jupiter was on the south side of the Loxahatchee River, the train connecting closely with incoming steamers. This railway line was known as the Celestial Railroad inasmuch as Jupiter was its northern terminus and at its southern end, at the head of Lake Worth, was Juno, the county seat of Dade County, which then embraced all the territory south of Brevard County. Somewhere between the terminus a homesteader with a sense of local nomenclature had named his pineapple farm Neptune.

It was quite unique — that little road — and while it lasted, about seven years, was one of the most important links in Florida's transportation system, conveying hundreds of tourists and prospectors every year who, even at that early date, had heard of and were longing to reach Palm Beach. The train carried two coaches for passengers and two or three freight cars. The engine always remained at the same end of the train, running backward one way.

The run across from inlet to lake filled hardly more than half an hour, but that brief period was one of refreshing novelty. On the left the Atlantic filled all the vista, waves washing over the beach and dunes almost onto

---

\*Ruby Andrews Myers was an associate editor for Dade County's first newspaper, *The Tropical Sun*. This account of her experiences with the *Sun* was contributed by her daughter, Virginia Myers Hibbs of Boise, Idaho, herself a resident of Miami from 1942 to 1957.

the tracks of the road, while to the right rolled long miles of swelling dunes topped here and there with a palmetto or a towering pine tree, the slopes over-run with multi-colored convolvuli and sparce grasses of various hues. Fresh air from the sea filled the open coaches and the train soon puffed to a stop at the land end of the little wharf just over the water line of Lake Worth, where mail and passenger launches and baggage scows awaited its arrival. Juno, the southern terminus of the Celestial Railroad, was in evidence.

Judging from what you did not see as well as from what was visible there was no great strain on the imagination to visualize the aspect of the locality lying at the head of Lake Worth as it had appeared during the years preceeding 1890 — simply a continuation of that uninhabited strip just passed over — somewhat colorful as to natural hues but offering no inducement to permanent residence. When the train slowed for Juno the traveller had a glimpse of the small frame two-story courthouse situated a few feet from the tracks and the little jail standing close by. A little farther in was a long narrow one-story boarding house where courthouse visitors were entertained at meals and where the clerk of the court had his residence and wherein the post office had been located until very recently. Not far from this, and across the track, was a shack where a human derelict essayed to forget the world, visited occasionally by an intermittent wife. Then on down to the wharf where there was a little baggage-freight-telegraph office, about 20x20 ft. where the aforesaid derelict looked after telegrams, passengers, tickets and transfers in an official capacity. Around the wharf was usually a fleet of boats, some of them regularly in service such as the mail boat, a twenty-foot motor launch which came up the lake daily, making the return trip down after the train from Jupiter had come in. There was also a number of private craft, sail and motor, belonging to folk having legal business in the county seat.

Set back from the track some thirty feet and from the wharf about fifty yards, amidst a fine clump of gumbo-limbos and oaks, was a large two-story building, well-built and attractive, the lower floor of which housed the first printing office in Dade County; the second floor affording living quarters for the owner-editor and his family, the Guy Metcalfs. This also housed the staff of *The Tropical Sun*, a weekly, which had been established there March 18, 1891 and where, on that date this writer had entered upon the duties of associate editor and special correspondent at Palm Beach, ten miles down the lake. That was all there was at Juno in 1891.

The train came over twice a day, then backed to Jupiter. The boats

came up regularly once a day, lying over until the train had made the second trip. The home on the second floor — the *Sun* home — was commodious and comfortable, well furnished, with plenty of books, a piano and an organ for the use and pleasure of the office family, numbering nine to twelve. There was a common mess for family and staff and the numerous visitors which the *Sun* family entertained — former acquaintances from the Indian River country and new friends of the Lake Worth region. There was a lot of good reading, music and social pleasure during the evenings when the whole family participated in all that was to be enjoyed. There was also a natty sailboat owned by the editor that took Sunday picnic parties to the beach and down the lake almost every week. There were Sunday picnics at Jupiter when the railroad agent would obligingly send over the hand-car to transport the office family to the beach, as well as to dances at Jupiter given by the life-saving crew; and there was always the fascination of the office work itself, made doubly interesting by reason of its unique field, its locale and the several interesting personalities making up the journalistic family.

The county seat of Dade County had been located at Juno in 1889, moved there from Miami after a vote by Dade County residents. Only the courthouse and jail attested to the legal status of the settlement, supplemented in time by two resident attorneys. The surrounding country however was filling up. Large areas were opened to homestead entry, numbers of new people had come in and a mild sort of boom began to develop. The Lake Worth folk decided a newspaper would help progress more than anything else, pending a possible railroad invasion at some time in the future. Offers were made and accepted with the result that a newspaper soon followed the courthouse at Juno. The office was well-equipped in every particular, good printers were hired, local correspondents were attached, experienced writers employed and the paper made its first appearance during the season of 1891.

That newspaper venture was a unique enterprise — a printery in the woods. There at the head of the lake about three hundred miles south from Jacksonville, the nearest printer's supply base, with a thrice-a-week mail and ten miles from a store of any kind, and the same distance from the Palm Beach and Lake Worth hotels, the center of the social and business life, was the *Sun* office, located at the far end of the long, slow Indian River traffic route which however beautiful, was tiresome when haste was imperative.

Everybody connected with the office lived in apprehension of a break in the machinery. If there was a little unusual sound from the big cylinder press while running, there ensued a panic, for it might involve a delay of

possibly two weeks while an order was dispatched or somebody was sent to Jacksonville, for the steamer was apt to go aground almost anywhere or anytime in the Narrows. Then too, sometimes stock gave out; ink, paper, job supplies; or maybe there would be a vacancy on the force due to a call from somewhere or an illness. On such an occasion the entire staff and family would be pressed into service in any capacity, for almost any member could do anything the office required. The editors could make up form, the job and ad men could read proof, any member of the family could help with mailing. Type was all set by hand of course, and I was not without some skill in the mechanical department inasmuch as I had been initiated into the craft during my early childhood under the tutelage of my father, who had entered upon his journalistic life when I was a very small child. Hence my earliest recollections are of a country weekly office, and while I could recall very little of the mechanical operations of those infantile days, I retain a very distinct impression of the layout of the office, the personnel and other important features of the trade and certainly then and there was born my lifelong interest in, and love for, the craft of the printer and the profession of the scribe.

During my adolescent years I had frequent opportunity to cultivate and cement my acquaintance with the craft, so that when I reached Indian River country on February 22, 1886 I found an established printery in Cocoa. I almost immediately found employment therein and for several ensuing years "held a case" in the local office. My father bought the paper in 1888 and for the next several years I remained with him in a general capacity, gradually enlarging my duties to include writing. In time I established connections with outside papers that took all descriptive matter I submitted from the Indian River country. This eventually led to my connection with *The Tropical Sun*, where I could take a turn at the editor's desk, stick to the reporter's job at Palm Beach or read proofs. In addition to other responsibilities the editor had taken over the post office, it had been installed in his private office, with a delivery window opening out on the front verandah. Not to be outdone in usefulness, I assumed the duties of assistant postmaster and chief clerk.

The printery in the woods flourished. There was a good deal of job work of various sorts and the advertising was excellent. This seemed a marvel to some on the outside, but all that country was new, filling up with new people, homesteaders and others wanting new things for new houses. While there were no local supply houses, there were big houses in Jacksonville and Savannah eager for south Florida business. These dealers were glad to advertise in the *Sun* and did so. Big ocean-going freight schooners

out of Jacksonville, and the Indian River steamers came into the section loaded with goods — furniture, building supplies, musical instruments, cook stoves, fertilizer, machine supplies — everything advertised in the paper found a way into homes and hotels.

Many visitors came into the *Sun* home. Among the most interesting was Mr. J. E. Ingraham of St. Augustine who lunched there the day he completed his historic trip through the Everglades in March 1892. Weary as he was after his march, he gave an enthralling talk on his experiences. Of this trip by Mr. Ingraham the following is taken from "Florida Old and New" by Frederick Dau: "In March 1892 the late Mr. James E. Ingraham crossed the Everglades southeasterly from Fort Shackelford to Miami, with 23 men, and in traveling not much over seventy miles consumed about three weeks' time. Such peril and hardship were suffered by him and his party that they saved their lives by a narrow margin only, and had they been out but two days more they would have undoubtedly starved to death and never been heard of again."

That day at Juno, Mr. Ingraham showed every evidence of having been through "peril and hardship." His was probably the first white party that had penetrated the Everglades since the Indian wars. He was then on his way to take the Indian River boat at Jupiter on his return up the coast.

Senators Wilkinson Call and Samuel Pasco, Congressman C. M. Cooper, future Governor Gilchrist and Mrs. Julia Tuttle of Miami were among visitors in 1892. The *Sun* played an important political role that year in addition to its successful advocacy of a fine Florida exhibit at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893.

At Juno all household supplies had to be brought from Palm Beach stores or from Jupiter. Much was bought wholesale from Jacksonville and brought in by freight schooner or by steamer down Indian River. There was a good deal of game, much fish from lake and ocean and fresh fruit locally grown; bananas, pineapples, custard apples, sapodillas. Surinam cherries and other native fruits were not grown on Indian River at that time.

Not to be outdone in civility we sometimes obtained the use of the jury room on the second floor of the court house and gave a *Sun* dance. The dance was attended by Jupiter and Lake Worth friends and neighbors and music was furnished by ourselves or by an old fiddler who had lived in Jupiter many years. He and the Jupiter contingent, including some of the life-saving boys from the House of Refuge, came over on the hand car.

The Seminole Indians made frequent trips to Lake Worth which had been their old camping ground for many hundreds of years. One day they came into the printing office, shyly and quietly looked the printing outfit

over, listened to the clock strike, watched the train come in and back out and bought cigars at the office booth. They answered not a word to questions asked, except one at the end of their visit. All of a certain party, except one, had filed out and down to the wharf where their canoes were moored. This one laggard lingered at the booth for another cigar. It suddenly occurred to me that I had never heard an Indian pronounce the Indian name of Indian River, moreover I had been told that it was a secret with the tribes and forbidden to be divulged. I decided that Indian must now pay for this cigar. Stepping forward in what I intended to be an ingratiating manner I reached into the show-case and carelessly moved the box of cigars just out of his reach. I asked him innocently enough if he came from Indian River.

“No. Miami,” he answered, waving his hand toward the southwest.

“What do Indians call Indian River?” I asked. Silence. I repeated the question, to which no answer was vouchsafed and looking at him I saw he was gazing at his companions outside. It occurred to me he was waiting for an opportunity to answer me as soon as they would leave. I pushed the cigars a little nearer to him, and as he reached for one, I repeated my question while I again withdrew the box. He instantly realized he was being bribed to tell. Then we played hide and seek for quite a little while and I began to think I should never know. Then with a look out of his eye that might have gone through the back of his head in the direction of the Indians outside, so sly was it, he faced me without looking at me and spat some word or words between his teeth and made a grab for the cigar box. Not so, thought I, and pulling it toward me, I asked again. Again he said something that I almost caught. By this time his friends had reached the wharf and time was pressing. Over and over again I made my move, he made his; each time we both looked out at the others moving around and at last I caught the name, or thought I did. I said it after him. He repeated this several times; he seeming to enjoy the experience and I certainly did. Finally I attempted to write the words he had spoken, pronouncing each syllable as I wrote. After many trials, I said what I had written and there it was, nailed fast with his approval. “Ays-ta-chattee-hatchee.”

“Uh-hum. Good. Ojus much!” And with a smile in his eyes but not on his lips he slipped away to join his companions, bearing a whole handful of the best cigars in the *Sun* show case. Leaving with me a long-treasured reminder of an enjoyable experience.

“Ays-ta-chattee” means red man, “hatchee” means river and there you are.

In his “Young Marooners” the author, Dr. Goulding, spells the name

“Ees-ta-chattee,” red man; “Eesta-hodkee,” white man; “Eesta-lustee,” black man, but the Spaniards spelled it Ays-ta-chattee, and called Indian River “Rio de Ays.”

Juno was beautifully located at the head of Lake Worth. To the east lay the rolling dune land, to the north and west fell away the pine and scrub land lying between the lake and the winding waters of the Loxahatchee several miles away. To the south, palm-bordered and pine-shadowed, glistening in the brilliant sun of the semi-tropics lay the lovely sheet of water named by the Indians “Hy-po-lux-o” or long water, dotting the maps under the name of Lake Worth in honor of the United States Army officer of the Seminole Wars. There was good land in abundance around Juno, good for trucking and orange and other fruit growing. Several homesteads were located within a few miles of the courthouse and railroad terminus. Woods and beach were within a few yards of both.

On the east shore of the lake, about three miles south of Juno, lay Lake Worth Inlet, the only opening in the lake. This afforded passage in and out for large vessels. In the 'eighties and previously, if one sailed down Indian River expecting to proceed by boat into Lake Worth, one left the Indian River at Jupiter Inlet, put to sea, sailed south along the coast for ten or twelve miles and then sailed west through Lake Worth inlet. That was the way the Lake Worth pioneers reached that little landlocked haven with its one opening near the north end. Early homesteaders had come that way in the early 'seventies; later homesteaders continued the same way, many families accompanying their goods on the schooners. The same transportation methods continued even after the Celestial Route had opened a quicker service. The lake was twenty-three miles long by half to three-quarters of a mile wide. All along the shore, water traffic was the only way in use.

From Juno southward the view was superb at all times of the day and in every kind of weather. Pitts Island lay near the eastern shore about half way down to Palm Beach. This was home to Mr. and Mrs. Pitts, a couple who had improved on nature by planting flowers of every hue and of numerous varieties, and who welcomed all visitors to their hospitable abode and provided ideal picnic nooks for lovers of the outdoors. This island had been their home for several years and under their care it had been transformed into one of the most truly beautiful tropic spots anywhere in Florida. There were only seventeen acres on the island but every square foot was proof of what could be done with raw materials. Only a few feet separated island and the lake shore to the east and a sea-wall encircled the entire estate. Palms, poinsettias, poincianas, plumbagos and allamandas,



oleanders, hibiscus and bougainvillea growing in rich profusion made a riot of color, while fruits and vegetables added their useful delights. Several varieties of fish were to be had for the taking by anyone fishing from the sea-wall or small dock.

To the westward, across the lake from Pitts Island and almost directly opposite the inlet, commanding a grand view of the sea was Oak Lawn hotel and post office. From these points of beginning stretched the loveliness that has ever characterized this spot on the Florida East Coast.

Notwithstanding the great distance from lumber supply centers and the transportation handicap, there were many handsome homes along the eastern shore of Lake Worth. Plaster houses, well screened, comfortably furnished and well equipped were the rule. Workmen had to be imported as well as materials and this brought many who became permanent residents. There was one notable difference between the pioneers of the Indian River country and those of Lake Worth. The former had come earlier but they had come poor, stripped of nearly all they had by the fierce fingers of war. They were seeing a new terrain, under new and untried conditions, without money or other equipment save that of brawn, muscle and the will to achieve. Their progress had been slow at first but by the middle 'eighties they had begun to realize on their efforts and the young orange groves were producing oranges of the finest quality. Whatever had been their fortunes before the war they had come to Florida empty-handed. They had had to work hard for their eventual success.

By contrast, practically all the Lake Worth pioneers came with money. They entered homesteads, applying their cash to the construction of good homes in the beginning. Most of them also had investment from which they derived an income sufficient for living. Therefore, until well into the 'nineties there was no industry throughout the entire section. There were boats to hire in the winter, boarding houses and hotels for guests and two stores. These were about all that had preceded the *Sun* in that locality and to that paper belongs the credit of establishing the first industrial plant on Lake Worth. Truck growing was a possibility on adjacent lands, but of the time I write, it had assumed no greater proportions than those of kitchen gardens. The great wastes west of the lake were indeed *terrae incognitae*.

The aforementioned differences in the beginnings of the two sections explain the difference in their apparent progress. While Indian River was a long way in the lead industrially, of necessity, the Lake Worth country was more intent on making itself comfortable and beautiful, hence Lake Worth true to its beginning, found its fame early as a pleasure resort.

The cocoanut growth around Lake Worth is no more indigenous than



is the orange on Indian River. The former originated in nuts washed ashore from a stranded vessel when they were thrown overboard to lighten the ship. These were gathered and planted by the pioneers or grew where they landed on the beaches, in time to form a distinctive feature of the landscape all along the east coast of Florida. These came from the *Providencia* when she was overtaken by a hurricane.

Sections of the old Lauderdale Trail, a relic of the Indian War days, originally running from Fort Dallas (Miami) to Jupiter, lay between Lake Worth and the Everglades, but this had not been wholly open in many years. Portions of it, here and there, connected a few homesteads in that section, but no continuous open road was in existence at that time on the west side of the lake. The several homes on that side of the lake were a few miles apart.

On the eastern side of the lake, from the inlet southward, lay a compact, beautifully-developed settlement extending practically the entire length of the lake. The northern half of this settlement bore the name of Lake Worth, from which the post office also took its name. This was the older portion of the east side community. The south half of the settlement was the Village and post office of Palm Beach, settled in the middle 'seventies. Most of the residents had come from the middle states, only a few from the east, and fewer still from the lower tier of the southern states. These pioneers had blended their interests, pursuits, aspirations and hopes to such an extent that the entire little strip of land made of that region the perfect *bijou de tropique*.

There was a commodious hotel at Lake Worth bearing the name of the locality, and at Palm Beach was the Cocoonut Grove House, both well appointed and extremely inviting. There was a good general store at both Lake Worth and Palm Beach, in which were also located the post offices of the respective communities and there were accommodations for tourists as the winter population increased. Nearly every property owner was the fortunate possessor of a strip of land extending from lake to sea and romantically beautiful trails afforded private walks to and from a surf bath. There was a small Congregational church where year-round services were held and about half-way down the east side was the beautiful Episcopal church, Bethesda-by-the-Sea, where services were held only during the winter season. A commodious and well-appointed rectory adjoined the church. There was also a good public school conveniently located.

There were several outstandingly beautiful homes, among them Reve d'Ete with its rose and cactus gardens and numerous varieties of plants and shrubs from all over the world. The owners dispensed lovely hospitality.

There was also the magnificent McCormick home, one of the earliest fine houses at Palm Beach; a creation of taste with marble floors, French mirrors, imported carpets and *objets d'art*. All the way down that side of the lake were homes and gardens amid their wide lawns, with rustic trails leading to the beach half a mile to the east. Most imposing at Palm Beach was the hotel. The hotel family was charming, efficient in the extreme — not only in hotel management — but to the entire neighborhood.

There was, at that time, no spectacular splurging, no extravagant indulgence, no questionable companionships; but a delightful, family feeling of peaceful informality; a democracy of the well-bred, the security of culture, and a universal appreciation of the natural beauty of the locale. There were boat trips to all points of the lake, usually wildwood picnic grounds, moonrise parties to the beach, deep sea fishing with experienced boatmen, neighborhood or hotel parlor dancing, musical evenings and Sunday evening “sings” and cozy dinners among the cottages. There were many unattached people who sketched, wrote, studied — conchologists, horticulturists and botanists who explored every nook and cranny of the terrain. Life was simple and therefore very enjoyable.

To a special newspaper correspondent what an enjoyable field! There were all sorts of delightful people to interview who submitted kindly to interviewing. There were charming associations and enduring friendships formed. There were many lovely phases of life for journalists interested in Florida and the people who came there. Columns were written daily from that little hamlet to appear in newspapers and magazines in the northeastern states and mid-west. It seemed a sort of magic that transformed life for everybody there. Those who had been staying there several successive winters were as interesting as, if not more so, than new arrivals. Many gifted people met and mingled there for the first time and came back again and again to renew acquaintances.

Breakfast and luncheon were hurriedly gotten through to make ready for the enterprises of the day; but dinner was rather more formal and the tables were piled with locally produced fruits and vegetables. Fresh coconuts were among the favorites, in cakes, puddings and used in biscuits for shortening. It put cream to shame!

Practically all life centered on the east side, where were located the hotels. Fronting west, from their western verandahs, there was little to be seen but tall pines swaying over tufts of wire grass or saw palmetto. There were few homes on the west side, most of them small and set back from the lake shore and therefore unseen from the east side. Among them was the modest home of Byrd Spillman Dewey, whose book *Bruno* later won

fame. She was doing a little work as her health would permit, but her principal object in life then was to get well, which she was doing. She and her husband, both invalids, had arrived on the lake sometime in the later 'eighties, acquired a home-site on the west shore of Lake Worth and built a small two-story house under the pine trees. In a genial clime, under a southern sun, they were fighting their way back to health. I was a delighted visitor to their home where there were books and book talk. We were all interested in the same things and there was much lively discourse on many topics, but never a word about *Bruno*. Mrs. Dewey did most of the domestic work which she loved, found time to write two or three columns a week for the *Sun*, visited a little at the hotel principally for the music, I judged, and was a most delightful hostess. There were many ingenious, original contraptions about the house to save steps and fill needs, which she designed and her husband executed. These included a kerosene-lamp-stove arrangement by which her salt-rising bread turned out to perfection.

She had a rare critical faculty — rare in that it was kind — and her bright, optimistic encouragement meant much to her fellow travellers along the road of writing. Small of stature, clear-eyed, curly-haired, with quiet manner, unobtrusive yet possessed of a striking personality, few who have ever known her are likely to forget her. I have never done so and cherish her friendship, satisfying and inspiring.

For many years, there was only one practicing physician in all of Dade County, his practice extending from Jupiter and other south Indian River points on the north to the Keys on the south and sometimes even to Key West. His only means of transportation was the ubiquitous sailboat. The hero of this itinerary was Dr. Richard Potter of New England who had arrived in South Florida in the 'seventies and forthwith became one of the pillars of progress and civilization in the section he claimed as his professional field. Skillful, kindly, courteous, a scholar and a gentleman in the truest sense, he was indeed among the foremost of that goodly band who entered the Lake Worth country as pioneers, lived and prospered there and left it honored and beloved by all who knew him. Dr. Potter lived with his mother and sister, his home was south of the Palm Beach hotels and post office and between the sea and the lake. The family had given it the unusual name of "Figulus."

Four miles out to sea from Lake Worth lay the purple ribbon of the Gulf Stream flowing northward. Southbound ships hugged the shore to keep out of its strong current, northbound vessels keeping farther out to benefit by its stream and so hasten their progress. The trade-winds blew and the palms nodded as from the beginning.

South of Palm Beach, residences were less frequently encountered around the lake, though none of them were very far removed from each other. There were several large cocoanut groves on the sand dunes overlooking the sea and farther down toward the south end of the lakes was Hypoluxo Island where the owners lived. They had been living there since 1873 and had made many beneficial and important advances in gardening and truck growing and their palm trees won the admiration of all who saw them. This island was regarded as having the most fertile soil in the lake country. There were two or three homes around the narrow foot of the lake, where trucking was becoming a good business on the moist, fertile land in that vicinity and excellent returns were being realized.

From the hotel at Palm Beach, the old Cocoanut Grove House, this correspondent made a foot journey around the entire circuit of Lake Worth in the spring of 1891. There was not a house, not a home, a farm, a truck garden nor a fine winter residence that was not visited afoot with notebook and pencil for company. Everything was taken in; from the noted Fenian exile, safely ensconced in his "Divinity Grove" to the cultured rector of Bethesda and his lovely wife; from the exquisite charm of Reve d'Ete to the primitive homesteads in the back country; from the erudite atmosphere of Ben Trovato to serene Oak Lawn; from remote Lantana and Hypoluxo to the edenic shades of Nux-a-choo; from the busy printery at Juno amid the gumbo-limbos and maples to the swirling waters around the front door of the Georgia cracker; from the marble floors of the McCormicks to the palmetto thatch of the recluse of Manalapan; from the soft lights and cultured voices of the Vanderbilt Barton house to the "hennery" of the lady chicken fancier; from the social brilliance of the yacht club set to the shack of the toper who had settled his family in the saw grass on the edge of the Everglades; from the surging waves off the ocean beach to the sunset trails among the homesteaders — and it all went down in the little old note book to be transcribed for the big papers throughout the country.

In the autumn of 1894, the *Sun* office was moved from Juno to the newly developed village of West Palm Beach, where the paper continued as the only one in Dade County. At a later date the former *Sun* home and office at Juno was entirely destroyed by fire.

In February 1895, the *Sun*, from its new location, sent me as special correspondent to Biscayne Bay.