

The Sage of Biscayne Bay: Charles Torrey Simpson's Love Affair with South Florida

by Leah La Plante

I do not want to investigate nature as though I were solving a problem in mathematics. I want none of the elements of business to enter into any of my relations with it. I am not and cannot be a scientific attorney. In my attempts to unravel its mysteries I have a sense of reverence and devotion, I feel as though I were on enchanted ground. And whenever any of its mysteries are revealed to me I have a feeling of elation — I was about to say exaltation, just as though the birds or the trees had told me their secrets and I had understood their language — and nature herself had made me a confidant.

Charles Torrey Simpson
In Lower Florida Wilds, 1920

The average sun-struck South Florida tourist, much less the resident, is probably not sure whether the area is “tropical” or “sub-tropical.” Whatever the proper latitudinal designation, the image of exotic South Florida is formed and elaborated by a prevailing southeast wind of flashy publicity and wildly varied experience that has swirled the sun, the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico around a lush jungle of palms, bananas, orchids and breadfruit, across an Everglades of alligators and gracefully plumed herons, down to the Florida Keys’ legendary pendant jewels of the “Flowerida” necklace.

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Some came to pluck the flowers to sell for a profit. Others became enchanted by the area's unique natural richness and beauty and stayed to nurture and protect it. Fortunately for South Florida, one of the latter group was Charles Torrey Simpson, brilliant, self-taught field naturalist and gifted writer of a type that is almost extinct, who in 1905 moved to Lemon City, a few miles north of Miami, on Biscayne Bay. "I loved Florida on sight," says Simpson in his book *Florida Wild Life*, published in 1932, the year he died. "It is, today, dearer to me than any place on earth."¹ For the last twenty-seven years of his life Simpson devoted himself with a passion to exploring and writing about the pine and palmetto flatlands, Everglades, hardwood hammocks and Keys — even then seriously threatened by rudely encroaching civilization.

Charles Torrey Simpson, known in his day variously as The Sage of Biscayne Bay, Doctor Simpson (in 1927 he received the first honorary doctorate in science given by the University of Miami), The Professor, and 'The Old Man' (as he called himself), wrote four books about South Florida nature: *Ornamental Gardening in Florida* (1916), *In Lower Florida Wilds* (1920), *Out of Doors in Florida* (1924), and *Florida Wild Life* (1932), and a great many articles in magazines and newspapers. While Simpson was appreciated and honored in his lifetime, his name is most familiar today as that of the City of Miami's Simpson Park, one of two remaining protected pieces of the Brickell Hammock, which originally stretched from the Miami River south to Coconut Grove and beyond, and from the Everglades to Biscayne Bay, alongside of which was an Indian trail. First named Jungle Park, in 1927 it was renamed in honor of Simpson, called by the Miami Parks Division "the father of all South Florida naturalists," because of his zeal for preserving native plant species.² In her speech at the dedication of the park's newly-built meeting house in 1931, Mrs. R. M. Seymour, Education Director of the Council of Garden Club Presidents of Greater Miami, said, "Simpson Park is well named for Charles Torrey Simpson, the one Florida naturalist who ranks with John Muir, John Burroughs, and other writers of wild life and the natural character of place. His books are and always will be the most authoritative source of information on the natural history of South Florida."³

Simpson was an original, his life the stuff of legend. He was born on June 3, 1846, in Tiskilwa, Illinois, the seventh child of Jabez and Matilda Simpson;⁴ theirs was a poor pioneer family living in a log cabin on the

prairie.⁵ In later life Simpson revealed that “Some of the love I have for the great out-of-doors I got from my mother. She knew the name of every common flower in the fields and woods around my boyhood home and was glad to answer my eager questions.”⁶ As a child, he developed a fondness for natural history, making collections of shells, minerals and fossils, and studying botany.

Like Darwin, Edison, Burbank and other well-known scientists, Simpson had little formal education. Later in his life, he said that he had hated school, complaining that he could never understand sentence parsing and math. “The fields and woods were my school.”⁷ Raised on a farm, he was first a farmer. “While following the plow it was my custom to carry a little box on the plow handles and when a shell or specimen was found I put it in the box and looked up the subject in a book or sent the specimen to the state geological survey.”⁸ Collecting shells was his first passion, South Florida was to be his second and last. Simpson went on to work as a miner, carpenter (he built his South Florida house almost single-handedly), cowboy (for three years in Nebraska), soldier (in the 57th Illinois regiment of the Union Army in the War Between the States, he was with General William T. Sherman in several minor engagements through Georgia from Atlanta to the sea), sailor (after the war Simpson joined the navy to see the world; for three years, aboard the *Shenandoah*, he traveled to Europe, Africa, and the Mediterranean, collecting shells and closely observing the natural world around him).⁹

Finally, Simpson settled into the major work of his first life — mollusks. In the 1880s he had established a reputation as a conchologist. In *Florida Wild Life*, Simpson wrote, “There is a nameless fascination about collecting ... I have been a collector from infancy — in fact, I think I was born one, though I have no recollection of collecting during my prenatal existence.”¹⁰ In the same book, he tells about his first trip to Florida. In December 1881, he and several friends went by rail and boat down the west coast to Bradenton, south of Tampa. He had studied Chapman’s *Southern Flora* and therefore knew many of the trees and plants on sight.¹¹ Having collected a “camel load” of shells, he was lucky enough to run into a marine biologist from the Chicago Academy of Sciences who helped him identify them.¹² Reminiscing after fifty years, Simpson said:

These were golden days and I look back upon them as among the happiest of my life. I was young and filled with splendid enthusiasm; my companions were congenial and were having

the time of their lives; our whole environment could not have been improved upon. For many years I had dreamed of Florida, hoped for it, almost prayed for it, and now my dream had come true and all was far more strange and wonderful than I had supposed it could be.¹³

In the early 1880s, Simpson lived for four years in Bradenton, supporting himself as a carpenter-contractor while he explored Florida's lower wilds. During that period, he made a significant plant and shell collecting trip to Honduras, returning with a variety of the first tropical plants introduced from that area, some of which found wide distribution in South Florida.¹⁴

In 1889, when Simpson was forty-three, his reputation as a conchologist was sufficient for him to be hired by the U.S. National (Smithsonian) Museum in Washington, D.C. In October of that year, he received a letter from William H. Dall, Curator of the Department of Mollusks, offering him a position as an assistant, with a starting salary of \$75.00 a month — this for someone who barely had a high school education!¹⁵ Nevertheless, as Nixon Smiley, *Miami Herald*

columnist and fellow naturalist, noted, Simpson was said to be able to identify some ten thousand shells by sight and give their Latin names.¹⁶ Simpson spent thirteen years at the Smithsonian, traveling often to the West Indies and the Bahamas, classifying two thousand species of freshwater snails and mussels.¹⁷ Degreeless but an undeniable authority in his field, he occasionally lectured at Georgetown University. One tribute came in a letter from Henry A. Pilsbry, Curator of the Department of Mollusks of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia: "I can congratulate you upon



Simpson, to left, and George Clapp, aluminum manufacturer and amateur conchologist, together on one of their many trips. (HASF x-763-49)

the recognition of the value of your achievement ... both in Europe and America. Wherever fresh water bivalves are studied, it is acknowledged that your work began a new era...."¹⁸ Ultimately the museum published a five-hundred-page report on his findings, which Simpson described as "the first scientific classification of its kind ever made in this country."¹⁹

In 1897, Cornelia Couch, Simpson's first wife, died, leaving one son, Pliny. In 1902, he married Flora Roper, widow of a botanist-conchologist friend, who had one daughter, Marion.²⁰ South Florida may have been their mutual fond dream, because later that year, Flora came to the area to look for possible homesites. Writing in the *Florida State Horticultural Society Bulletin* in 1913, Simpson explained, "I chose [the Lemon City location] after studying Cuba, Haiti, Jamaica and the Bahamas. These islands have the advantage of a more tropical climate than South Florida, their soil is generally richer, but I felt that to them could be applied the lines from the missionary hymn, 'Where every prospect pleases, and only man is vile.'"²¹ The Simpson property in Lemon City consisted of nine and one-half acres of mostly pineland, with a small hammock area and a frontage of six hundred feet on Biscayne Bay. Simpson retired from the Smithsonian in 1905 at the age of fifty-six, and immediately moved to Florida. In later life he said with a laugh, "I thought my work was done then," realizing that it had hardly begun.²²

Simpson's first major accomplishment after settling into his beloved new world was building his house. An experienced carpenter, he designed and built it himself, with the help of his son, Pliny. Only the heart of durable Dade County pine was used in its construction. Marion Roper, Simpson's stepdaughter, said in later years that the home was modeled after a picture of an inn in Honolulu that Simpson found in a set of books, *Our Islands and Their People*, published in 1899.²³ In his early book, *Ornamental Gardening in Florida*, Simpson, in a characteristically humorous and ironic tone, wrote:

Some of the best architects in the country have pronounced my house an atrocity, and I present it to my readers [in a photograph] in order that they may know what an atrocity is and be able to distinguish one at sight ... the living part elevated well above the ground, a wide, encircling veranda or gallery, as it is often called in South Florida and the West Indies, and

the rather sharp roof which has never leaked seriously in the worst hurricane. Some of the ideas embodied in it have been taken from dwellings in Jamaica, Hawaii, Cuba and the Philip-pines; others are my own, and it is not like anything in the heav-ens above, the earth beneath, or the waters under the earth.²⁴



The Sentinels, home of Charles Torrey Simpson (HASF x-763-54)

In *Lemon City: Pioneering on Biscayne Bay, 1850-1925*, Thelma Peters simply describes the Simpson house as a frame structure of two stories that was built seven or eight feet off the ground, with a basement enclosed in lattice.²⁵

While Simpson was justifiably proud of his house, for the most part his thoughts were drawn to the surroundings:

There were two magnificent Caribbean pines in front of the house, eighty feet high and in the full glory of robust life. I called them the Sentinels, and from them I named my house. I felt they would watch over and guard me and mine. But the glory of the place was a couple of acres of fine young hammock that lay within a few rods of my door containing a large variety of mostly

tropical growth, a thing of joy and inspiration. Year in and year out its greenery, its peace and quiet have appealed to me and from it I have learned some of the most valuable lessons of my life.²⁶

And, in those days, a short distance to the west lay the Everglades. It would be nine years before there was electricity and ice.

In *Lemon City*, Thelma Peters wrote that at the Sentinels a "vista was opened to the bay through the mangrove, and a path was built up with rocks across the swamp, giving access to the dock, boathouse and pavilion that Simpson built over the water. The pavilion, open to the breezes, was a favorite spot of the Simpsons', and they often entertained their friends there."²⁷ And of friends there were many, such as fellow naturalists David Fairchild, John Kunkel Small, Liberty Hyde Bailey, Wilson Popenoe, John Gifford, Marjory Stoneman Douglas and others who both shared Simpson's appreciation of the unique South Florida environment and also made a name for themselves in part by writing about it. Later in life, Mrs. Simpson's daughter, Marion Roper, recalled that one of the visitors to the Sentinels was James Deering, who came to consult with Simpson about the landscaping of Vizcaya, his stunning Mediterranean villa on Biscayne Bay. "Mr. Deering was a very serious man most of the time," Miss Roper said, "but after a drink or two he became jovial and full of fun."²⁸ And then there were the neighbors and the endless procession of garden clubs. Toward the end of his life, Simpson once estimated that he had shown as many as fifty thousand people around his garden. According to David Fairchild, "Simpson's charming personality and unfailing generosity towards everyone who came for information or plants made his place a general rendezvous."²⁹

In his book, *A Yank Pioneer in Florida*, Allen Andrews, after a visit to the Sentinels, characterized Simpson as:

Most gracious and kindly, especially to kindred souls who are interested in Florida wild life and its preservation. One might ordinarily be inclined to visualize an outstanding authority on botany, tree snails and Florida wild life as a dry-as-dust individual, entirely wrapped up in his scientific investigations and devoid of all sense of humor. On the contrary, the Doctor is possessed of a keen wit that is continually effervescing, and

whether the joke is on him or his visitors makes no difference in his appreciation of it.”³⁰

This does, however, contrast with the observation of his step-daughter, Marion, that “the qualities that made him so successful and popular with others didn’t always make him pleasant to live with. He had a very strong will, and would push through with anything he set out to do at any cost.”³² One would believe this of someone who, as he said, “published nine good-sized volumes and a considerable number of scientific papers...., besides hundreds of articles for magazines and newspapers.”³²

In a late overview of the Sentinels, Simpson counted 3,000 varieties of plants: over 100 species of trees and shrubs, 75 orchid species, 150 of palms, 20 of rubber trees, 100 of fruits of all kinds, and many single species of rare trees and plants. Simpson the collector gathered around him in a botanical embrace trees and plants that were both native and the result of his many collecting trips throughout the Caribbean. He explained that the money for every plant he purchased was obtained by going without a meal.³³ How glorious it would have been for Simpson’s private green world to be preserved. Just before his death in 1932, the Miami Rotary Club inaugurated a movement to buy the estate and set it aside as



Rustic stone bridge and brackish pool at The Sentinels in Lemon City, home of Charles Simpson. Simpson built the bridge and walls himself. (HASF x-287-2)

a public park, since it was considered one of the finest collections of sub-tropical flora in the world. The Simpsons were in favor of the Rotary Club's intentions, but for reasons unknown the idea apparently did not pass the suggestion stage. As late as 1944, the city of Miami considered purchasing the entire Simpson property and turning it into a park, but the plans fell through.³⁴ Of the private gardens, his and those of the other significant plant explorers and naturalists of this early period, only the Kampong, the Fairchild estate in Coconut Grove, is still intact and is open to the public for special guided tours.

Simpson was fifty-three when he finally settled into Florida for good. Tall and slender, he was distinguished-looking, with a white moustache and beard, except for his style of dress, typically old outdoor clothes. In *Miami U.S.A.*, Helen Muir describes Simpson "wearing his faded khaki trousers, torn shirt and canvas shoes, carrying a stained bamboo staff, conducting a 'wading trip' to Big Cypress Swamp for nearly one hundred embryonic botanists."³⁵ The reader of his South Florida nature books, knowing Simpson as a tireless, nonstop explorer, can easily imagine how he would have looked. In a letter written to a friend in 1929, Simpson noted:

I probably have made a hundred trips to the lower part of the state and the Keys; have repeatedly tramped the latter from Key Largo to Key West. Sometimes I carried a little tent and about as often went without, camping out alone, have been eaten with swarms of insects, have almost frozen and then been burned with heat. Once I went 38 hours without food and have almost perished with thirst. But there was a charm, an enticement about it all and I could never give it up.³⁶

Then there was the scorn of various locals — Conchs (water people) and Crackers (inland dwellers), who took him for a dangerous desperado instead of a famished and exhausted naturalist and denied him food or shelter. Nixon Smiley told the story of how Simpson was once almost arrested as a vagrant when he returned to Miami at the end of an exploring trip, tired and dirty, with an old canvas bag of plants and shells over his shoulder.³⁷

'The Old Man' divided his energies between gardening at the Sentinels and exploring the wilds, somehow getting himself indoors to work with his collection of over 10,000 shells, which was kept on the

ground floor, to read in his extensive library, and to write. In addition, on September 5, 1914, Simpson received a letter from P. H. Dorsett, Acting Agricultural Explorer in Charge, Foreign Seed and Plant Introduction, U.S. Department of Agriculture, appointing him as a 'Collaborator,' at three hundred dollars per annum (a post he held until June 1932). Simpson served as a consultant, conducted experimental planting at the Sentinels, and allowed for the use of his library.³⁸ He continued to write, although he realized little revenue from it. Simpson wrote in 1924, "I believe I could make more money stealing than writing for a living." About his first Florida book, *Ornamental Gardening in Florida*, he complained that "the publishers did not deal fairly with me and tried to cheat and dodge in every way. Don't give any work to Little and Ives is my advice."³⁹

Simpson got his start as a South Florida nature writer when he was asked by Dr. Henry Nehrling to prepare articles for the Florida Horticultural Society.⁴⁰ His first essay concerned Dade County plants, which attracted the attention of David Fairchild and James Deering's brother, Charles, a strong naturalist. The article, entitled "Native and Exotic Plants of Dade County, Florida," included photographs, and it was distributed as a guide for plant growers in the area. That, as Simpson explained, "got my feet into it."⁴¹ Then came his first South Florida book, *Ornamental Gardening in Florida*, dedicated to Charles Deering, "who, instead of destroying the hammock, is creating it," and subtitled *A Treatise on the Decorative Plants Adapted to Florida and Their Cultivation, with Suggestions for the Ornamentation of Florida Homes and Grounds*. Several of the chapters had already appeared in *Tropic Magazine*, which began publishing in Miami in 1914. Simpson became a regular contributor.

In his introduction to *Ornamental Gardening in Florida*, Simpson, with uncharacteristic optimism in such matters, wrote:

I can look forward with full confidence to a time in the near future when a large area within the territory covered in this work will be girded with the finest of roads bordered with beautiful tropical and semi-tropical shade trees; I can see the land filled with happy homes shaded and embowered with the glorious vegetation of the equatorial regions, a land of peace and contentment, a land of hope, of rest for the weary, a land of perennial verdure and fadeless beauty.⁴²

Simpson had so often bemoaned the fate of the wild in the path of burgeoning man that one cannot avoid reading this as hope temporarily overcoming his more usual deep concern for the environment, as expressed in this line from the first chapter: "Mankind everywhere has an insane desire to waste and destroy the good and beautiful things that nature has lavished upon him."⁴³ Of his four South Florida books, only *Ornamental Gardening in Florida* reaches out directly to the reader with the practical approach of giving advice on gardening in the state, especially in reference to identifying and recommending suitable native and introduced trees and plants.

Simpson's other books essentially leave civilization to its own follies and retreat to the wilderness. He announced in *In Lower Florida Wilds*:

I know of no greater pleasure than that of a naturalist or collector, in the woods, the swamps, along the streams or upon the open seashore. I pity those whose entire life and energies are devoted to money making, who have never revelled in the beauty and freedom of the great out-of-doors.... Here is opened wide the great book of nature, the gleaming page filled with wonders. Here too, is health, peace, and contentment, and a new life for the soul cloyed with the artificialities of an over stimulated civilization.⁴⁴

According to one reviewer of *In Lower Florida Wilds*: "Dr. Simpson is so big a man that the luxury of naturalness is his by right. The value of his work to Florida cannot be computed."⁴⁵ Thomas Barbour, writing in *That Vanishing Eden*: "The best account of the Keys with which I am acquainted is in Charles Torrey Simpson's *In Lower Florida Wilds*. Simpson ... was thoroughly endued with the spirit of poetry,... and was a first-class plantsman. He exerted an extraordinary influence on the lower Florida community and has left a treasured memory behind him."⁴⁶

Most often the naturally gregarious Simpson opened the great book of nature with one or several companions. In reference to his first visit to Long Key, he relates in *In Lower Florida Wilds*:

My neighbor, John Soar, and Wilson Popenoe of the Department of Agriculture, and I took a two days' tramp over Long

Key to botanize and explore....When night fell, we gathered some dead pine wood ... and built a fine fire. After a cold supper and some yarns we tried to rest. The mosquitoes were bad; the sharp uneven rock like Banquo's ghost murdered sleep. The sky was overcast, the wind southwest, but we realized a norther was coming ... a cold, steady rain began to fall. Soaked through, but with our blankets wrapped about us, we sat around our weakening fire and 'made a night of it....' Congenial men can draw very near to each other under such circumstances, and although we were cold, wet, and half devoured by mosquitoes, though our environment was the dreariest imaginable, the memory of that night is one of my very pleasantest.⁴⁷

On another trip in a hammock, this time alone, surrounded by live oaks, gumbo limbos, West Indian cherry, lancewoods, white ilex, and even some royal palms, Simpson, in *Out of Doors in Florida*, observed that:

Not the slightest sound disturbed me; in fact one of the charms of the great forest is its stillness. I sat and fairly drank in the wonderful silence and loneliness of the hammock. In such a



Charles T. Simpson reading among wild vegetation in the hammock behind The Sentinels after a hard day of work. (HASF x-287-6)

place one must be alone to enjoy the full beauty and sweetness of it all. Even the presence of the most congenial friend or lover of nature is distracting and in a sense a disturbing element. Alone with uncovered head I bared my life, my all to the Great Power of the Universe, call it Nature, God, Jehovah, Allah, Brahma or whatever you will, and reverently worshipped.⁴⁸

One of Simpson's deeply felt convictions was that plants are somehow sentient beings. In *In Lower Florida Wilds*, after elaborating at length on the wonders of plant adaptation, he remarked:

It seems to me that there is a soul throughout nature, that the animals, and I like to believe, the plants, to a certain extent, think.... A palm sends its growing stem deep into the earth and buries its vitals to protect them from fire; the mangrove raises itself high on stilted roots in order that it may live above the water and breathe; an orchid perfects a complicated device to compel honey-loving insects to cross-fertilize its pollen.... If the work of man is the result of thought, that of animals and plants must be so in some lesser degree.⁴⁹

In reference to the way the strangler fig gradually eliminates and replaces its host tree:

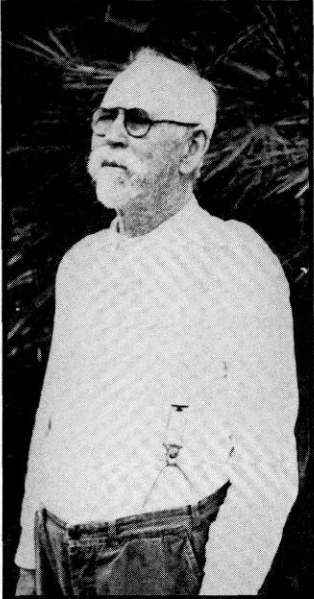
It looks very much like the result of planning and reasoning, of a deliberate selfishness of the worst sort. The helpless tree which is being crushed and strangled in the embrace of the fig, the long, lithe roots thrusting themselves into every crevice, wrapping tighter and tighter about their victim, remind one of Laocoon and the serpents.⁵⁰

In his writing, Simpson continually returned to "thinking" nature. In *Out of Doors in Florida*, he addressed the tendency of some plants to propagate themselves by sprouts as well as seeds:

The idea of sprouts seems to me like a stroke of genius. Like the invention of the steam engine, the telegraph and telephone, these bring a boon to the human race. It will be noticed that I

speak of plants and animals as if they studied, as though they invented things which benefit themselves and their race. Why not? They are constantly engaged in doing such things, in making short cuts, in achieving results, in lifting themselves out of a low and degraded position into a higher and better one, and this looks to me exactly like the work of intelligence, brains if I may say so. Had a man invented the sprout system, he would have been a second Morse or Fulton.⁵¹

In a later chapter, Simpson describes the staying power of the saw palmetto: "Nothing could successfully oppose it; it is full of initiative; it is ambitious, smart!" In *Florida Wild Life*: "I may be told that all these things are so because they could not be otherwise, that the trees are simply obeying the fixed laws of nature; yet somehow I like to believe that in all this there is a purpose, soul, intelligence, almost thought, that these things reach results in somewhat the same fashion I do."⁵³



Charles T. Simpson, in his most comfortable state.
(Courtesy of John Clark Eckhoff)

Most of all in Simpson's writings there speaks a brilliant scientist who was at the same time humble, warm and friendly, spontaneous, good-humored, expressing an almost childlike enthusiasm about his green kingdom. After one wilderness exploration with a fellow scientist, he reports, "I fairly shouted in my exuberance as one new thing after another turned up until the Doctor claimed he was really worried about me and thought I needed medical treatment."⁵⁴ On a later trip, upon finding a much-sought-after tree snail: "I capered about like a happy boy; I rubbed it against my cheek and lovingly patted it; I talked foolishly to it. No miser ever gloated over his gold as I did over that magnificent snail."⁵⁵ On Lignumvitae Key, in reference to his inability to throw chunks of wood or rock up onto a high tree branch to dislodge a snail, Simpson calculated that, "I might hit the side of a good sized

barn if it were not too far away and the wind was favorable, but that is about all.”⁵⁶ This is the prevailing tone of ‘The Old Man,’ who in over eighty years of hard work and achievement never lost his *joie de vivre*, his fundamental need to share his love of nature, his delight in expressing it.

Not everyone understood and appreciated this highly original and far-ranging naturalist. In *Out of Doors in Florida*, Simpson reports that on one trip to a Caribbean island, some of the local people thought of him as “... a sort of semi-lunatic or as one lacking in mentality....No man in his right mind would leave his home and ... wander around the woods and along the shores to pull leaves from the trees, break off pieces of rock or crawl around picking up utterly worthless shells.”⁵⁷ In a later chapter about a lower South Florida trip, after a wearying exploration through jungle and swamp, Simpson reiterated that:

Wherever I went I had been taken for a tramp or a desperate man....I tried to get a drink at a cistern, but a man in a very ugly voice told me to go away and leave the water alone. He refused to let me sleep on his floor, and didn't want to talk with me. I started away but came back and asked if he took me for a tramp, and he said I was either that or a bad man. I pulled out a gold watch and chain and asked if bad men and tramps carried such things, then I showed him a ten dollar bill and said, ‘You still think I am a bad lot, do you?’ His severe scowl changed into a smile and he said, ‘O come in, I guess you are all right.’⁵⁷

His fellow scientists and naturalists, those who had read his books and articles, thought he was much more than “all right.” In 1923, the 77-year-old Simpson was the recipient of a high honor of the botanical world: the Meyer Medal. Marjory Stoneman Douglas, who was present at the award ceremony, reported in *The Miami Herald* that in the surroundings of his beautiful garden, Charles Torrey Simpson received the award “in recognition of his life of devoted service to tropical Florida and to the United States.”⁵⁸ Doctor Fairchild, an earlier recipient of the medal, who made the presentation, stated that:

The Meyer Medal is given to you in recognition of your distinguished service in the field of foreign plant introduction. You

have enriched the state of Florida not only through the introduction of a wide range of new plants, but also by the knowledge you have gained and freely shared of the behavior in this climate of hundreds of other plants....I feel, my dear Simpson, that in giving this Meyer Medal to you today, I am merely doing what I know Meyer would like to have done himself.⁵⁹

Ms. Douglas reported, "When the medal was put in his hands, Professor Simpson had tears in his eyes and he was shaking a little, quite overcome. Lathrop [Barbour Lathrop, Fairchild's great benefactor and the first recipient of the Meyer Medal] stepped up to shake hands, proclaiming, 'I'm damn glad you've got it! You deserved it!' and saved the situation with a shout of laughter."⁶⁰

There were many other tributes honoring the Sage of Biscayne Bay. In 1927, the University of Miami awarded him the honorary doctorate in science degree, a first for the institution and for Simpson. Through the years a great many shells and plants, such as the fan palm *Simpsonia microcarpa* and the tropical tree snail *Liguus fasciatus simpsonii*, were named for him. On June 3, 1930, two hundred of Simpson's friends and admirers, among them members of garden clubs and departments of parks and recreation, celebrated his eighty-fourth birthday at the Sentinels. The Simpsons were presented with a gift and there was a cake with eighty-four candles. Punch was served from blocks of ice in which roses had been frozen. There was an article about the party in the Tiskilwa, Illinois, newspaper — for Simpson still had many friends in his hometown who had followed his career with great interest. On April 1 of the following year, the Simpson Park meeting house was dedicated, with two hundred people in attendance.⁶¹

Theodore Spicer-Simpson, the sculptor and medalist, struck a medalion with a profile portrait relief of Dr. Simpson. In a letter of thanks to the artist, the Doctor wrote, "It makes me look dignified and gives more of an air of power to my physiognomy than I possess but these things are, no doubt, a sort of poetic licence [*sic*] which artists are allowed to use."⁶² In Thelma Peters' *Biscayne Country*, there is a picture of Simpson posing for a life-size portrait bust executed by Elva Perrine, member of a pioneer South Florida family.⁶³ At Simpson Park today, one can see a large oil painting by local artist Henry Salem Hubbell of Simpson receiving his honorary doctorate (the frame was a gift from the doctor's tree class). The painting was unveiled

at a book tea at the park in 1942, held to add volumes to the Simpson Park library.⁶⁴ Also framed and on permanent display at the park is a poem by Stephen Cochran Singleton entitled *Charles Torrey Simpson, In Memoriam* that ends with the lines, "All...are richer far today because this man... /Dwelt once among us and interpreted for us/ The messages of rock and tree and flower."

Early in 1932, the year of his death, the 'Old Man's' last book, *Florida Wild Life*, appeared. The president of the Macmillan Company called upon Simpson and insisted upon its publication, an honor Simpson said that he could not resist.⁶⁵ It is to be hoped that in 1996, the year when the City of Miami celebrates its one hundredth birthday, and the history of the area will be under more than the usual scrutiny, Simpson's South Florida books will again be in print, read and appreciated as they so richly deserve.

At the end of the final chapter of *Florida Wild Life*, entitled "In Memoriam," Simpson expresses for the last time his deeply-felt concern for the future of wild life in words as appropriate to today as to that era:

Looking back to the days when South Florida was a beautiful wilderness filled with magnificent wild life and then contemplating the wreck of today is enough to sicken the heart of a lover of nature, yes, even of any sensible person who has a true valuation of the useful and beautiful. If things go on here as they have done in the past few years this can only end in the destruction of all that is lovely and of value that nature has bestowed on us....But let us not bring down the curtain in utter despair, let us not turn away without hope from this scene of ruin and desolation. Within the last few years there has come an awakening, a realization of the value of beauty for beauty's sake, and intelligent people are beginning to ask if it is wise to utterly destroy everything nature has so lavishly given us for the sake of gain.⁶⁶

In December 1932, at age eight-six, while at work at his desk at the Sentinels, Dr. Simpson suffered a fatal heart attack. The funeral was held in his garden. It is reported that at one point in the service, violin music came from a distance, as if the wind in the trees were bidding him good-bye. Hundreds of mourners were in atten-

dance, and there was a mile-long procession to Woodlawn Park Cemetery in Miami for the burial ceremony. A tree, one of the stoppers discovered by Simpson, was planted next to his grave, on a plot deeded to the Garden Clubs of Miami by the Woodlawn Park Cemetery Association.⁶⁷ Today, more than sixty years later, that tree remains next to his grave. Simpson willed his enormous shell collection and the part of his library devoted to that science to the University of Miami. The rest of his library of hundreds of books went in part to the Flagler (later the Miami Public) Library; the remainder can still be seen at the Chapman Field Plant Introduction Station.⁶⁸

On February 2, 1933, The Florida Society of Natural History passed a resolution honoring Simpson:

Whereas, in the death of Dr. Charles Torrey Simpson, honorary president ... the Society has lost a distinguished member, and Whereas his contributions in the fields of conchology, botany, and horticulture and his books on natural history on this unique section of the country have made him known to scientist and layman alike, and Whereas, as one of the pioneers in the field of natural history in this southern part of Florida he has endeared himself to its residents and acted as interpreter of its natural charms, be it therefore resolved that The Florida Society of Natural History, recognizing its great loss, hereby places on record its indebtedness to this scientist and nature lover and expresses its sorrow at the loss of this valued member.⁶⁹

One can only hope that the wish Simpson expressed in *Florida Wild Life*, in tribute to his favorite palm trees, has somehow been realized:

The royal is stately, it is an aristocrat, its outlines are sharp cut; as it stands in its severe beauty it is one of the most striking, even startling objects in the vegetable kingdom. The coconut has infinite grace as well as majesty; it is distinctly emblematic of the tropics. I hope when I die I may go to some place where I can see the smooth, gray columns of royals, where I can gaze on their splendid, black-green leaves as they are tossed and shaken in the strong trade wind, where the wonderful leaflets

of the coconuts dance and shimmer in the moonlight as they are gently moved by the soft, warm sea breeze.⁷⁰



**Charles T. Simpson, dwarfed by his natural surroundings in South Florida.
(HASF x-763-5)**

Endnotes

1. Charles Torrey Simpson, *Florida Wild Life* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1932), 31.

2. Simpson Park archives, supplied by Ralph Beaudry, Park Naturalist.

3. Ibid.

4. *Dictionary of American Biography*, 11th ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 661.

5. Thomas Baird, "Man Who Helped Create Most of City's Beauty Finds Fame and Fortune Late in Busy Life," *Miami Daily News*, April 24, 1932, Main Section, 6. A lengthy interview of Simpson.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Simpson, *Florida Wild Life*, 18.

11. Ibid, 31.

12. Ibid, 30.

13. Ibid, 31.

14. Baird, "Man Who Helped Create."

15. William H. Dall to Simpson, Washington, D.C., October 15, 1889, Simpson file, Special Collections, Otto G. Richter Library, University of Miami, Coral Gables, Fla.

16. Nixon Smiley, "Strange House Built by Noted Naturalist in 1905 Still Stands," *The Miami Herald*, July 30, 1950, 6G.

17. Baird, "Man Who Helped Create."

18. Henry A. Pilsbry to Simpson, Philadelphia, Penn., June 11, 1931, Simpson file, Special Collections, Otto G. Richter Library, University of Miami, Coral Gables, Fla.

19. Baird, "Man Who Helped Create."

20. *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, 23d ed. (New York: J. T. White and Co., 1933), 661.

21. *Florida State Horticultural Society Bulletin*, 25-26 (1912-1913): 166.

22. Baird, "Man Who Helped Create."

23. Smiley, "Strange House Built by Noted Naturalist."

24. Charles Torrey Simpson, *Ornamental Gardening in Florida* (Concord, New Hampshire: Ramford Press, 1916), 15-16.

25. Thelma Peters, *Lemon City: Pioneering on Biscayne Bay 1850-1925* (Miami: Banyan Books, Inc., 1980), 252. According to Morris McLemore, a columnist for the *Miami Daily News*, the house contained three stories: "The house has no rooms — save Simpson's laboratory — on the ground floor. Apparently the scientist didn't altogether trust the bay that lay a few hundred feet east of his home. The main family rooms and the kitchen are on the second floor, and the bedrooms at the top." See Morris McLemore, "McLemore's Miami," *Miami Daily News*, November 30, 1961, 8F.

26. Simpson, *Florida Wild Life*, 119.

27. Peters, *Lemon City*, 253.

28. Smiley, "Strange House Built by Noted Naturalist."

29. David Fairchild, *The World Was My Garden* (Miami: Banyan Books, 1982), 401.

30. Allen H. Andrews, *A Yank Pioneer in Florida* (Jacksonville: Douglas Printing Company, 1950), 270.

31. Smiley, "Strange House Built by Noted Naturalist."

32. Ibid.

33. Baird, "Man Who Helped Create."

34. Smiley, "Strange House Built by Noted Naturalist."

35. Helen Muir, *Miami USA* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1953), 186-87.

36. Simpson to Minnie Jay Kent, Coconut Grove, May 29, 1929, Simpson file (Box 18), Historical Museum of Southern Florida, Miami, Fla.

37. Simpson Park archives.

38. P. H. Dorsett to Simpson, Washington, D.C., September 5, 1914, Simpson file, Special Collections, Otto G. Richter Library, University of Miami, Coral Gables, Fla.

39. Simpson to Mrs. Sarah G. H. Jones, May 1, 1927, Simpson file (Box 18), Historical Museum of Southern Florida archives.

40. Baird, "Man Who Helped Create."

41. Ibid.

42. Simpson, *Ornamental Gardening in Florida*, XIII.

43. Ibid, 3.

44. Charles Torrey Simpson, *In Lower Florida Wilds* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1920), 300.

45. Review of *In Lower Florida Wilds*, Simpson file (Box 18), Historical Museum of Southern Florida, Miami, Fla.

46. Thomas Barbour, *That Vanishing Eden* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1946), 200.

47. Simpson, *In Lower Florida Wilds*, 201-20.
48. Charles Torrey Simpson, *Out of Doors in Florida* (Miami: E. B. Douglas Co., 1923), 256.
49. Simpson, *In Lower Florida Wilds*, 252-53.
50. *Ibid.*, 377.
51. Simpson, *Out of Doors in Florida*, 58.
52. Simpson, *Florida Wild Life*, 150.
53. Simpson, *Out of Doors in Florida*, 204.
54. *Ibid.*, 38
55. *Ibid.*, 385.
56. *Ibid.*, 296-97.
57. *Ibid.*, 388-89.
58. Marjory Stoneman Douglas, "American Genetic Association Honors South Florida Botanist-Philosopher," Simpson file (Box 18), Historical Museum of Southern Florida, Miami, Fla.
59. *Ibid.*
60. Marjory Stoneman Douglas, *Adventures in a Green World: The Story of David Fairchild and Barbour Lathrop* (Coconut Grove: Field Research Projects, 1973), 57.
61. Simpson Park archives.
62. Simpson to Theodore Spicer-Simpson, Miami, Fla., July 23, 1923. Simpson file (Box 25, No. 17), Special Collections, Otto G. Richter Library, University of Miami, Coral Gables, Fla.
63. Thelma Peters, *Biscayne Country* (Miami: Banyan Books, 1981), 179.
64. Simpson Park archives.
65. Baird, "Man Who Helped Create."
66. Simpson, *Florida Wild Life*, 193-95.
67. Simpson Park archives.
68. Smiley, "Strange House Built by Noted Naturalist."
69. Resolution document of the Florida Society of Natural History, February 2, 1933. Simpson file, Special Collections, Otto G. Richter Library, University of Miami, Coral Gables, Fla.
70. Simpson, *Florida Wild Life*, 57.