

Peace Amongst the Palms: The Story of South Dade's Palms Memorial Park Cemetery

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Campbell. Hainlin. Moody. Harris. These names, whether engraved in stone or etched on bronze, tell it all. Though it has gone by several names during its nearly century long history, Palms Memorial Park is South Miami-Dade County's pioneer cemetery. Established on 10 acres of land, the cemetery has grown to include approximately 50 acres and has played host to over 11,000 burials, but were it not for a series of unusual events, the county's southernmost cemetery may never have existed in its current location.¹

The year was 1912. Woodrow Wilson was on his way to becoming the nation's president. "Grape fruit (sic)," according to the fledgling *South Florida Banner*, a Homestead newspaper, was "retailing at twenty-five cents apiece. Oranges fifty cents a dozen in Miami."² Homestead, Florida, its population growing, was building a new school. Built according to a unique, star-shaped plan, the school would provide educational services to students in all twelve grades. It would sit on land donated by the Model Land Company, a subsidiary of the Florida East Coast Railway. The new school site was located adjacent to the old Homestead cemetery. Dr. John B. Tower, a prominent Homestead physician, claimed that the school's proximity to the burial grounds could prove harmful to the area's children.³ As early as 1911, the Model Land Company attempted to resolve this situation by offering the citizens of South Dade, at a cost of \$35.00 per acre, their choice of Lots 11, 12, 13, or 14 in Section 33, Township 56, Range 39 south of the Naranja settlement.⁴

During an October 11, 1911 meeting, a five-member committee

selected Lot 14 as the site for the new cemetery. Although approximately 50 people signed a petition approving this selection, the choice of the 10 acre tract drew numerous criticisms, so another meeting was held on March 23, 1912. Representatives from the South Dade communities of Homestead, Detroit (Florida City), Modello, Naranja, Redland, Silver Palms, Princeton and Goulds were in attendance. At that time, Lot 11 was chosen as the site for what would become South Dade Palms Memorial Park. At the same time, the South Dade Cemetery Association was formed to assist in the development of the new graveyard. The association was comprised of a president, a secretary and a director from each of the eight communities represented at the meeting. The choice of Lot 11 for the site of the new cemetery met with final approval when it was put to a vote during a public meeting on May 2, 1912. It appears that at least some South Dade residents were certain of the new cemetery's location even before this final approval was secured, as one interment had already been made near the center of Lot 11.⁵

A problem still remained with the existing burials in the old cemetery. According to Dr. Tower, the burials could result in a polluting of the water supply and the outbreak of disease.⁶ With the safety of Homestead's children at risk, it was decided that all burials made near the school site would be removed and relocated to the new cemetery. Several editions of Homestead's *South Florida Banner* for 1913 contain notices for cemetery work days when South Dade citizens performed the task of transferring the deceased from one burial site to the other.⁷ But the men of Homestead, encouraged by ads advising them to "bring your axes, saws, picks, etc., and don't forget your lunch," persevered and, nearly a century later, Palms Memorial Park remains an active, expanding final resting place for many of the area's residents.⁸

The cemetery has gone through several name changes, including the Cemetery of South Dade County, South Dade Palms Memorial Park, Naranja Cemetery, Palms Memorial Park, Palms Woodlawn Cemetery and Palms Caballero Cemetery. Despite the cemetery's numerous name changes and the dramatic transformations in the demographic make-up of South Miami Dade County, one thing has remained a con-

stant. The cemetery serves as a final resting place for generations of South Dade residents from all walks of life. Some of those buried here fought their way through muck, mosquitoes and inclement weather to establish the area as an agricultural powerhouse. Others served their country and community, both overseas and on the homefront. The vast majority lived out quiet lives in what was once considered Miami-Dade County's last frontier. Each headstone in Palms Memorial Park represents a story. Each story represents a chapter in the rich history of South Miami Dade.

Founding Families

No local street or hospital bears his name, but were it not for the convictions of Dr. John B. Tower, with his warnings of possible danger from the close proximity of the original burial site, there might never have been a Palms Memorial Park Cemetery.

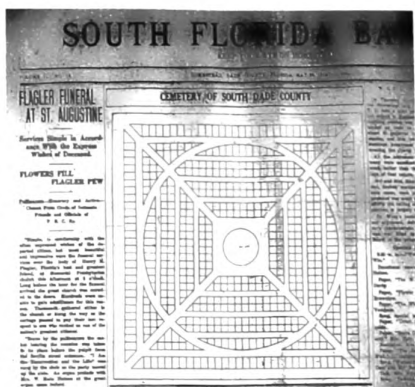
Born in 1873, Dr. Tower was a native of Hoosac Tunnel, Massachusetts, and a direct descendent of John and Priscilla Alden. A graduate of Northwestern University, he was a professor of embryology at Kansas Medical College before moving to Florida.⁹ After contracting tuberculosis while practicing medicine in Kansas, Dr. Tower, along with his wife and eldest children, relocated to Homestead in 1910.¹⁰ Credited with delivering many of the area's babies, Dr. Tower also served as the Florida East Coast Railway's local surgeon for 21 years.¹¹ In addition to his medical contributions, Dr. Tower served on the Homestead City Council for seven years and on the local school trustee board. He was president of the Rotary Club, an officer and director of the chamber of commerce, and served on the board of directors of the First Federal Savings and Loan Association of Homestead.¹² He spent 11 years as president of the Homestead Building and Loan Association. In addition to these accomplishments, Dr. Tower was a 23rd degree Mason and a member of the First Baptist Church of Homestead. While there may be few concrete reminders of John B. Tower's influence on the community, there can be no doubt that South Dade was deeply affected by his presence.

While Dr. John B. Tower was healing Homestead's sick, Thomas A. Campbell was making his mark on the community as well. Campbell's

impact remains visible in the street, schools, and shopping centers named in his honor. Born in Madison County, Florida, on May 20, 1851, Campbell moved to Tropic (Merritt Island), Florida, after the freezes of 1894-1895 and raised beans until, in 1905, he followed his son and son-in-law to the wilderness of South Dade County. Campbell homesteaded 160 acres of land that is

now a part of Homestead and bought an interest in his son-in-law's merchantile business. The store was sold, but Campbell later bought it back and operated it under the name of the Homestead Merchantile Company until his retirement in 1912. Campbell's obituary reported that, unless bedridden by illness, Campbell never missed church. This makes sense since, along with his business ventures, Thomas A. Campbell played an integral role in the establishment of Homestead's First Baptist Church. It was at this church that Campbell's funeral services were held when, due to "low blood pressure and paralysis of the throat," Campbell died at his home on February 20, 1931.¹³

The financial impact of those buried at Palms Memorial Park extended far beyond the South Dade community. Charles Theodore Fuchs Sr. was born in Germany. After emigrating to New York, Fuchs engaged in the produce business before moving to Milan, Tennessee, and establishing a bakery and confectionary business. In 1913, a year after his arrival in Homestead, Fuchs bought out Nobles' Bakery and Grocery Store. The business was such a success that, in 1919, the bakery separated from the grocery store.¹⁴ Headed by his son, Charles Jr., Homestead Bakery was the forerunner of the better known Holsum Bakery, a company that, after the senior Fuchs' death, would go on to



The initial plan for the new South Dade cemetery. Next to this illustration is the headline-grabbing article on the burial of Henry M. Flagler, whose Florida East Coast Railway opened south Dade County to development. Courtesy of Michelle Zakis.

become the largest bakery of its kind in the world.¹⁵ After its separation from the bakery, Charles Fuchs, Sr. continued to operate the grocery as Homestead Grocery until his retirement in 1924. In addition to his business ventures, Charles Fuchs, Sr., served as president of the Homestead Chamber of Commerce, and, although his gravesite is not marked with the group's traditional tree stump marker, Fuchs was a member of the local Odd Fellows Lodge.¹⁶

While not a businesswoman herself, there is no doubt that school-teacher Neva King Cooper influenced many of South Dade's up-and-coming entrepreneurs during their early years. Cooper taught at the Homestead School for 19 years and, at the time of her death in 1934, was believed to be the county's most senior teacher in terms of continuous service. So dedicated was she to her pupils that, despite agonizing abdominal



A contemporary view of Palms Memorial Park cemetery. Courtesy of Michelle Zakis.

pain, Cooper postponed surgery so that she would not disrupt her work at the school. Cooper taught until two days before her death at Jackson Memorial Hospital, a decision that, ultimately, may have cost her her life. Neva King Cooper died as the result of massive blood loss brought on by a large tumor. She was only 39 years of age and left behind a son not yet in his teens.¹⁷ Neva King Cooper's name did not die with her. It lives on in the Homestead school that, when constructed, led to the displacement of the original Homestead cemetery.

Carl Schumacher was a Homestead pioneer who experienced, first hand, life in a one-room home with no refrigeration, huge mosquitoes and unexpected hurricanes. He shared these experiences and many more in two books, *Stories of Life in South Dade* and *Stories of Life in South Dade County*. Born in Springfield, Ohio, Schumacher came to the Redlands with his family in 1912. At the time of his death in 1996,

he was the oldest living graduate of Redland High School's first graduating class. Over the course of his lifetime, Schumacher worked for the Holsum Bakery, served as an entomologist for the crop-dusting division of Delta Airlines, and managed Earl's Grocery Store in Liberty City.¹⁸ Schumacher's first love, however, was history. He served as historian and vice president of the Florida Pioneer Museum for over 20 years and was distraught over the museum's condition following Hurricane Andrew in 1992. Schumacher took great pride in the rebuilding efforts that, after his death, led to the reopening of the museum.¹⁹ Recording his memoirs up until his final moments, Carl Henry Schumacher may have been one of South Dade's last true pioneers when he died on July 1, 1996.²⁰

Stories from the Past

War. Epidemics. Natural disasters. The dates on a headstone often serve as a reminder of unexpected calamity. Such is the case with the double marker in the Hodge family plot. Myrtle and Sarah Hodge, the daughters of Mr. and Mrs. G. M. Hodge of Homestead, were visiting their friend Rita Bertaut in Islamorada when, without warning, the Florida Keys were struck by the deadly Labor Day Hurricane of 1935. They had gone to the Keys for a diamond ball game between teams from Tavernier and Islamorada.²¹ Although they returned home on the Friday or Saturday before the storm, the girls went back to their friend's house on Saturday night and perished along with the entire Bertaut family. Sarah's body was located and cremated on Pelican Key six weeks after the storm. Myrtle's remains were found on November 20, 1935, on Bonny Key, 35 miles northwest of Islamorada. Myrtle's body and Sarah's ashes are interred in the family plot under a brass marker that proclaims them, "Together Forever."²²

South Dade is, of course, well known for its agriculture, and while many recognize Tom Peters as the "Tomato King" of South Dade, few realize that the area played host to a "Pickle King" as well. Sam S. Accursio Sr.'s family accompanied his ailing father to Florida City in the 1940s. Born in Everett, Massachusetts, and raised in Boston, Accursio drove a taxi and worked at odd jobs in order to support his parents and six siblings. Called "Little Italy" because of its popularity

among Italian immigrants, Florida City may not have had a road sign to mark its existence, but Accursio saw promise in the area's future as an agricultural community. After his 1950 marriage to Phyllis Stingone, Accursio borrowed a tractor and began cultivating a rented plot of land. Eventually, Accursio's holdings grew to include 4,000 acres of farmland and a packinghouse. He earned his moniker, as well as the 1995 American Vegetable Growers' Association's Agriculturalist of the Year Award, because he specialized in growing tiny, cucumber for pickles. Accursio died in 1995 and is buried close to the land that he loved and labored on.²³

Honoring Heroes

As is the case with many large cemeteries, Palms Memorial Park serves as the final resting place for numerous heroes from all walks of life. Interred within the cemetery's expansive grounds are members of the nation's armed forces. Some perished on faraway battlefields while still in the prime of their youth. Others survived to share their stories back on the home front from the vantage point of old age. Not all of those who died serving others faced peril in distant arenas of war. At least two local firefighters and four South Florida law enforcement officers, each struck down in the line of duty, are buried in the cemetery. Both groups are honored for their service, some in individual plots and others in the cemetery's military section.

Each of the slain lawmen interred within the cemetery's grounds represented a different law enforcement agency. Correctional Officer I. Fred S. Griffiths was murdered while heroically thwarting an escape attempt in Palm Beach County.²⁴ Francis Kenneth D'Azevedo, along with two fellow Metro-Dade auto-theft detectives, was gunned down by the driver of a stolen car. The detectives inadvertently came across their killer while engaged in an unrelated arrest at the Miami Beach driver's license station.²⁵ Coral Gables Police Officer Walter Franklin Strathers, fell victim to an unknown perpetrator while on routine patrol in an affluent Coral Gables neighborhood. Officer Strathers' death remains one of the three unsolved murders of law enforcement officers in Miami-Dade County.²⁶ In the 1920s, Homestead Town Marshal Charles Bryant was gunned down in what, at the time of his death, was referred to as the community's "Negro section." Hosted by

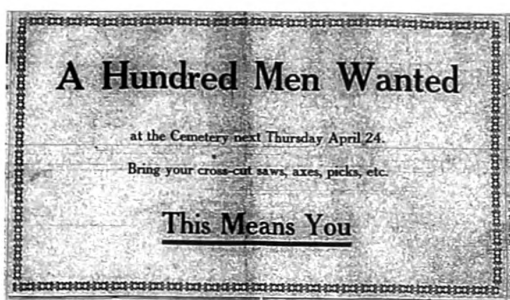
hooded members from the local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan, Marshal Bryant's funeral cortege reportedly stretched from the church to the cemetery.²⁷

Adorned with toy fire trucks and Metro-Dade Fire Department decals, Lieutenant Dewey Henry's headstone declares him "A Fireman's Firefighter." Trapped for almost two hours under nearly a ton of carpeting, Henry died while battling a fire at Dolphin Carpet Warehouse, Inc., on September 11, 1994. A firefighter for 36 years, Henry warned others not to enter the warehouse and took the brunt of the carpet's weight when it fell, thereby saving several other first responders.²⁸



The final resting place of Dr. John B. Tower, the moving force behind the creation of the cemetery. Courtesy of Michelle Zakis.

Like Dewey Henry, Firefighter Robert J. Harackiewicz died a hero while fighting a fire in South Dade County. Ruled a homicide because the fire was intentionally set, Harackiewicz succumbed to a heart attack while handling the hose during a boat fire in Florida City. Because the fire involved no injuries, a rescue unit had been sent back to the station and had to be called back when Harackiewicz collapsed. Despite resuscitation attempts, Harackiewicz, whose simple brass headstone bears only his last name, the replica of a Metro-Dade firefighter's shield, and the insignia of the International Association of Firefighters, was pronounced dead on arrival at Homestead's James Archer Smith Hospital.²⁹



The cemetery's development rested on volunteer help. Courtesy of Michelle Zakis.

Not all of the heroes honored at Palms Memorial Park Cemetery carried a sidearm or sported a uniform. Scott McBeath and Bartley Talbot continued helping others, even in death. McBeath died in an automobile accident and Talbot succumbed to injuries sustained when a drunk driver ran a stop sign and struck his jeep. McBeath's monument bears the image of a Georgia Bulldog and Talbot's is dominated by the portrait of a surfer. Smiling photographs of the young men serve as proof that their lives ended far too soon. Mature beyond their years, both young men were organ donors and, upon their deaths, their selfless actions improved the quality or saved the lives of others.³⁰

Over 11,000 men, women, and children are buried within Palms Memorial Park. Their monuments and memorials serve as a reminder of 11,000 unique stories. A bronze plaque near the cemetery's mausoleum reads, in part, "A cemetery is a history of people — a perpetual record of yesterday and a sanctuary of peace and quiet today. A cemetery exists because every life is worth loving and remembering — always." Palms Memorial Park Cemetery tells the story of South Dade and its people. It is a rich story. One worth remembering. One worth retelling. One worth continuing.

Notes

- 1 Ann Josberger McFadden, *Dade County, Florida—Woodlawn Cemetery: Formerly Palms-Memorial Park* (Miami: Ann Josberger McFadden, 2001), V.
- 2 *South Florida Banner*, May 10, 1912.
- 3 Jean Taylor, *The Villages of South Dade* (St. Petersburg: Byron Kennedy and Company, 1985), 158.
- 4 McFadden, *Dade County, Florida – Woodlawn Cemetery*, III.
- 5 McFadden, *Dade County, Florida – Woodlawn Cemetery*, III.
- 6 McFadden, *Dade County, Florida – Woodlawn Cemetery*, III.
- 7 Jean Taylor, *The Villages of South Dade* (St. Petersburg, FL: Byron Kennedy and Company, 1985), 158.
- 8 *South Florida Banner*, April 18, 1913.
- 9 *The Leader-Enterprise*, 1, April 14, 1939.
- 10 Paul S. George, *A Journey Through Time: A Pictorial History of South Dade*. (Virginia Beach, VA: The Donning Company/Publishers, 1995), 58.
- 11 *The Leader-Enterprise*, April 21, 1939.
- 12 *The Leader-Enterprise*, April 14, 1939.
- 13 *The Homestead Leader*, February 26, 1931.
- 14 *The Leader-Enterprise*, September 13, 1940.
- 15 *Homestead Leader-Enterprise*, January 6, 1950.
- 16 *The Leader-Enterprise*, September 13, 1940.
- 17 *The Leader-Enterprise*, June 8, 1934.
- 18 *The Miami Herald*, July 3, 1996.
- 19 *South Dade News Leader*, July 3, 1996.
- 20 *The Miami Herald*, July 3, 1996.
- 21 *The Leader-Enterprise*, September 6, 1935.

- 22 *The Leader-Enterprise*, November 22, 1935.
- 23 *The Miami Herald*, December 11, 1995.
- 24 Florida Department of Corrections, 1987 – A history of corrections in Florida. <http://www.dc.state.fl.us/oth/timeline/1987.html>.
- 25 William Wilbanks, *Forgotten Heroes: Police Officers Killed in Dade County* (Paducah, KY: Turner Publishing Company, 1996), 130-134.
- 26 Wilbanks, *Forgotten Heroes*, 107-109.
- 27 Wilbanks, *Forgotten Heroes*, 28-31.
- 28 *South Dade News Leader*, September 13, 1994.
- 29 *South Dade News Leader*, October 16, 1979.