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HOMSTEADING IN HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY

By MARTHA PARR

Morris Bridge Road is a heavily-traveled, rural-suburban route running north from Temple Terrace Highway to Zephyrhills, halfway between Temple Terrace and Thonotosassa. Like my neighbors on this road, most of the time I take for granted our modern way of life and all its conveniences. But once in awhile, when I see a giant oak tree being uprooted because an interstate highway is coming through, or an orange grove bulldozed to build apartments, or a lovely old house being torn down in the name of progress, I tend to daydream.¹

In the mid-1840s, when the Seminoles’ Billy Bowlegs had inherited Chief Osceola’s position as leader of the few remaining Indians in the area around Tampa, he and his handful of followers maintained a village not far from here on the shores of Lake
Thonotosassa. They had been successful in driving away the white men who attempted to settle there until 1846, when my great-great-grandfather, William Goodman Miley, brought his wife and five young children by covered wagon to this untamed wilderness.2

HOSTILE INDIANS

Born August 2, 1802, in Glasgow, Scotland, Mr. Miley had married Catherine Shepperd in 1821 and resided in Charleston, South Carolina, until her death on July 11, 1830. He then moved to Augusta, Georgia, where he married Emmaline Ouentz on December 25, 1833. Miss Ouentz was a Jewess who demanded that Mr. Miley divest himself of his slaves before she would marry him. It is believed that they also lived in Montgomery, Alabama, for a time before coming south.

In spite of the hostile Indians at Lake Thonotosassa, Mr. Miley cleared land, built a log cabin, and they established a home. They were in constant fear and danger, and had to make several hurried trips to Fort Brooke at Tampa for protection. I’ve been told by elderly relatives that one night in December, 1848, warning came of raiding Indians, but the family was unable to go to the Fort because my great-great-grandmother was expecting a child. They gathered the children in the cabin and hovered in fear. During the night, an Indian woman, who was also expecting a child, wandered up to their cabin and was taken in. By morning, both women had delivered a son. Presumably because the Indian woman was treated kindly by the Mileys, the Indians grudgingly became friendly. The Miley baby, Martin Marion, was supposedly so named, in the Indian fashion, because his mother saw a Martin bird fly by shortly after his birth.3

OFF TO CIVIL WAR

William Miley "Seanyear" continued to farm and transplanted several sweet orange trees that had sprouted from seeds dropped by Major Dade’s troops years earlier, in 1835, on their ill-fated march toward Fort King. He also continued to raise an ever-growing family and child number 12, Ursula Ann "Sula" Miley was born October 20, 1860. Her father died April 1, 1862. By this time, the older Miley children were grown and married. The Miley Family Bible records two marriages on September 20, 1860. William Goodman Miley “Juneyear” married Elizabeth Delaney DeShong, and his brother, Samuel Augustine Miley, married Mary Keen. There was another wedding less than a month later, on October 17, 1860,
when David Montgomery Miley married Martha Keen. These joyous events were soon to be marred by sadness, however, as first Mary Keen Miley died just six months later on March 19, 1861, and then the young men left to serve the Confederate Army during the Civil War. Marion Martin Miley returned home safely after the war, leaving his older brothers, William G. Miley, Jr. and David Montgomery Miley buried in Knoxville, Tennessee and Vicksburg, Mississippi. Their sister, Emmaline "Juneyear" had married Thomas Pollock in 1857. She later became a midwife and delivered most of the babies born in the community for many years.45

In Geneva, Alabama, near the Florida state line, another young man, John F. Davis, had been born on January 18, 1800. He married a schoolteacher, Mary Perkins, in Dale County, Alabama, and over the years 13 children were born to them, the youngest being twins. My great-grandfather, Marshall Melton "Met" and William Clint were born on June 19, 1855, in west Florida. In 1859, the family returned just across the state line and lived in Alabama until after the Civil War. In 1865, they returned to Florida and headed farther south. Over the next several years, they traveled by oxdrawn wagon for weeks at a time. They would camp and plant a crop, then harvest the crop and move on, searching for a place to settle. In about 1870, they camped at a spot on the east side of the
Hillsborough River known then as Sassafras Ridge, between the present Morris Bridge Road and Davis Road. After raising a crop, they decided to move again and settled in a hammock about two miles south of Lake Thonotosassa.

By 1872, the Davises had established a farm and most of the children had married and moved away. In addition to the farm, their main "cash crop" was cutting wooden shingles which they took in to Tampa to sell. John F. Davis died that year, when the twins were 17 years old.

In 1875, Clint married Sarah Pollock and they moved onto a piece of land her mother had given her. Clint later recalled that at that time the only families living around the Lake were his wife's grandmother, Emmaline Miley "Juneyear", his wife's mother, Emmaline "Juneyear" Pollock, and his own mother, Mary Perkins Davis. In 1877, the first "Yankees" arrived and settled the area. The Adams family and Elliott family were soon joined by their friend, General W. P. Hazen, from Ohio. Clint sold 40 acres of land to General Hazen for $1.00 per acre, then worked for him helping to clear the land and establish his well-known Belvedere Estate. General Hazen was the first to see the commercial possibilities of raising citrus fruit, and with the help of Clint Davis and Martin Miley, he established the first grove in the area.

**HARD LIFE ON THE FARM**

On May 25, 1875, Clint's twin brother, Met, had married 15-year-old Sula Miley. The young couple soon returned to the spot
where the Davises had camped on Sassafras Ridge and in 1888 established their homestead there. The children came, first three girls, then six boys, one who died in infancy, and one who was killed in a tragic accident as a teenager. Their fourth son, Frank Edward Davis, was to become my grandfather.

Life was hard on the 160-acre farm, where they raised cattle, hogs, goats, horses, chickens. "Uncle Met", as he came to be known by everyone, built first a log house, then what they called "the big house," and eventually a third house which is still standing in good repair and occupied today. Some of the orange trees he planted are still bearing fruit. About once a month, the family would make a trip to Tampa in the wagon to sell the farm produce or trade for their necessary supplies. It was an all-day trip, long after dark when they arrived home. After stopping to water and rest the horses at

FRANK E. AND HARLEY DAVIS, CIRCA 1914
... at work on father's farm

THEY’RE PALS
Martha Parr, M. M. Davis, 1946
Five Mile Pond, which was located where East Lake Square Mall is situated today, everyone would fall asleep in the wagon and the horses would continue on home.7

"KING OF THE COWHOUSE"

By this time the community was growing as more families settled the area. Riley Wetherington was about 20 years old when he arrived at Six Mile Creek from Naylor, Georgia. In 1871 he became dissatisfied and moved to Cowhouse Slough, just north of present Fowler Avenue, where he built a log house and planted a grove. Riley was an enterprising young man and bought a lot of land scattered through Hillsborough and neighboring counties. In 1899, his log house at Cowhouse Slough burned and was rebuilt. It burned again in 1934 and was rebuilt. That house is still being used today. The barn he built in the 20s is also still in use, as is the garage built to house Riley's automobile, the only one in the community for years. In later years, he came to be known affectionately as "King of the Cowhouse".

In the 1890s Mr. Charlie Tuft built a large sawmill on the Hillsborough River at Harney. This was a thriving business and supported a rooming house, operated by the Sumner family, as well as a three-story hotel. Mr. Tuft also built quite a few cypress houses in which the mill workers lived, many of which were later sold, moved to other sites, and some are still in use today.

RAILROAD COMES THROUGH

In about 1898, the Tampa & Thonotosassa Railroad came through Harney, following Harney Road (the old Fort King Highway) to Thonotosassa. There was a large station at Harney and smaller ones at Morris Bridge Road (then called Hillsborough, later

THE MODEL A FORD

. . . Frank Davis, Martha Rowland Davis his wife, Ann Elizabeth Davis and Leo Davis, circa 1928

Temple Terrace Junction), Williams Road (then Idlewild), Tom Folsom Road (Clarkwilde), and Thonotosassa. The train left Thonotosassa in the morning, carrying people into Tampa to work, and returned in the evening, being "put to sleep" at Thonotosassa by a Mr. Strait. Many people

FOUR GENERATIONS

Martha Anne Mathews Parr (baby); Anne Davis Mathews, (mother); Martha Rowland Davis (grandmother); Elizabeth Minns (great grandmother). Taken 1941 at Frank E. Davis Homeplace on Morris Bridge Road, now residence of Martha Parr.
who lived in town came 11 to the country by train to visit relatives for the weekend. Another important service provided by the railroad was the delivery of 100-lb. blocks of ice which they dumped at the stations along the route on Saturday, for the use of the farmers for Sunday dinner, when there was much visiting and socializing.

I've been told a story that the postmaster at Idlewild was a "Yankee carpetbagger" who had a Negro mistress. Local "renegades" gave him three warnings to get rid of her and when he failed to do so, they put them both on a train and shipped them back north.

**PRESIDENT TAFT SLEPT HERE?**

There was by this time an elegant hotel at Thonotosassa, also. It was a palatial structure, with 12’ ceilings and a 40’ long "main room". There is an unsubstantiated story that President Taft had been a neighbor in Ohio to the hotel proprietor and came to the hotel for a visit. They prepared a presidential suite which was never occupied by anyone else afterwards.

As the population of the community increased, social life became somewhat easier. Schools were established every four or five miles, one being located at Harney, on land donated by the Vernon family for that purpose. The teachers at Harney School usually boarded at the Met Davis home. Met Davis was a generous, easy-going, fun-loving man and he loved to give parties. Cane grindings, candy pullings, square dances, and even oyster roasts were regular events at the Davis farm and at other farms in the community. Hog-killing time was a joyous occasion celebrated at the Strickland farm with square dancing all night, stopping...
at midnight for a supper of backbone and rice and all the trimmings.

THE TWINS’ ANNUAL PICNIC

The Davis twins, Met and Clint, began to have an annual birthday picnic, sometimes on the river at Harney, or at the present Fowler Avenue, Sulphur Springs, and even as far away as Bull Frog Creek. Platforms were built for square dancing, oysters were brought by the barrels from Port Tampa, a side of beef or a hog was barbecued, and people came for miles, by wagon, on

TWINS 81 YEARS OLD

This clipping from The Tampa Morning Tribune reported the huge birthday celebration at Sulphur Springs for the Davis twins -Met and Clint -in 1936. When the old time fiddlers plunked out tunes of the 1870s and 1880s, their feet just wouldn’t ‘t behave,” the newspaper reported, and the twins danced the quadrille again.

“Are they bashful?” the photographer asked as he planned this picture of the Davis twins, M. M. and W. C., who celebrated their eighty-first birthday anniversary yesterday. The twins overheard. “Hang on! They exclaimed in unison. They’ve shown here proving they’re not. Miss Betty Joughin is shown here with M. M. Davis, left, and Miss Betty Kelner and W. C. Davis at the right. The girls also are twins.

—Photo by Bureau Press, Tribune Star
horseback, and on foot. These picnics continued for years and were the forerunner to the present-day Old-timers Picnic, still held annually.9

When Miss Bertie Alman (Mrs. O. L. Roberts) graduated from school in Tampa in 1914, she came to Harney to teach and boarded with the Met Davis family. Soon the young people in her classes expressed a desire to have religious youth meetings and Miss Alman had a group from her church in Tampa come out to help them get started. The Epworth League meetings thus began in the schoolhouse, moving in 1917 to a brush arbor on a site donated by Mr. Bill Mathews, and eventually developing into the present Hillsborough United Methodist Church in 1921. The brush arbor sessions were not held every Sunday and were conducted by circuit-riding preachers of various denominations. All the visiting preachers had a standing invitation to have Sunday dinner of chicken and dumplings at Met and Sula Davis’ home. One of the most faithful pastors who came to hold services in the brush arbor was Rev. W. D. F. Snipes, a Presbyterian minister from Tampa.

"PINES, GOPHERS AND SKUNKS"

As vehicular traffic increased, upkeep of the unpaved Harney Road became a public responsibility. Every farmer or voter was required to donate time to maintain the road and the teenage boys were frequently hired to fill in the holes with pine straw. In about 1916 the road was paved with brick a width of nine feet, under the direction of Mr. Archie McCurdy.

The young boys also cut fence posts and hoed orange trees to earn money. Young people "went around in a crowd until they got serious". One man told me, "Until we got involved with the women, we did a lot of fishin’ and coon huntin’." "Wasn’t much around except pine trees, gophers, and skunks." In spite of the difficulties, they managed to have buggy races, swimming parties at Lake Thonotosassa, and "get togethers" at the schoolhouse.10

ARRIVING IN 'HEAVEN'

In December 1911, Walter and Elizabeth Minns sold their ranch in El Paso, Texas, and came to Tampa by train with their four children, including 10-year-old Martha "Dolly" Rowland. It was an arduous trip, but an exciting one for the children who knew nothing but the barren vastness of west Texas. Martha, later to become Mrs. Frank Davis and my grandmother, told me she could still remember the thrill of seeing pine trees and palm trees for the first time, and that her mother told her Florida was "Heaven" after living in Texas. The family stayed at the Palmetto Hotel at Polk and Florida Avenue for about a week, then rented rooms on Morgan Street until they could find a suitable farm to purchase. They bought forty acres in the "piney woods" in Dover, which necessitated Martha and her older sister, Mary Frances, boarding in town in order to attend school. They enrolled at the Academy of Holy Names, then located on Twiggs Street. Soon their two brothers left home also, and Mr. and Mrs. Minns could no longer manage the farm alone. There were several moves, and in 1915 they purchased 20 acres of farmland on Orient Road across from today’s Tampa Bay Vocational-Technical School. The Tuft sawmill at Harney had recently closed and the Minns family bought one of the cypress houses. It was sawed in half from top to bottom and transported by wagon to their homesite, where it stood until destroyed by fire in 1978. The area east of the Hillsborough River and south of Harney Road to about where Sligh Avenue is today
was under water and was called the "backwater". There were many alligators and other hazards. Several families were entirely lost to malaria. I've been told that there was so much water that you could climb a cypress tree and shoot bass with a .22 rifle where Sunnybrook Dairy stands today.

Martha returned home to live and continued to attend the Academy as a day student. This meant walking 5 1/2 miles each morning and each evening to Jackson Heights, where she caught a streetcar to go downtown to school. Her sister, Mary Frances, entered the convent after graduation and became Sister Mary Lewina, and remained at the Academy as a teacher for many years.

THE EPWORTH LEAGUE

The Sunday evening meetings of the Epworth League at the Harney schoolhouse continued to be the primary social gathering in the community, and Martha walked to the school house each week with her mother and younger brother. It was one such evening in 1917, while sitting with a group of girlfriends, when a tall, handsome young man walked in and said, "Why doesn't someone introduce me to these pretty girls?" Of course, someone did, and she met Frank Davis, Met and Sula Davis' son who had been living away from home and working in Mulberry, but had come home to join the Army. During his training period, he was required to go in to Tampa once a week for "drill". He began to ride his bicycle from his father's home on Morris Bridge Road to Martha's home on Orient Road, and their courtship continued until he left with his unit to serve in France during World War I.

Upon graduation from the Academy, Martha started to work at Western Union and boarded in town at the YWCA, coming home on weekends. Someone from the community would frequently go into town on Friday evenings and bring several of the girls out for the weekend, or they could come on the train, for a fare of 250. Martha's roommate at the YWCA was Annie Mae Milling, who became a frequent weekend guest with Martha's family. It wasn't long before she met Riley Wetherington's son, Tom, whom she later married.

ALL DAY TRIP TO MIAMI

The years passed, the Minns sold the farm on Orient Road, and Martha boarded in Tampa with Tom Wetherington's sister, Ola Wilson, as she continued to work at Western Union. Frank returned from the Army and their courtship resumed. One Friday, while routinely sending a wire, Martha was shocked to see that it was a message to Miami stating, "I will report for work Monday morning. Signed, Frank E. Davis." Frank came to see her that night and told her he was leaving Sunday and he guessed they better go ahead and get married. The next day, March 12, 1921, they were married in the courthouse in Tampa and Frank left for Miami on the following day. Martha remained in Tampa for several weeks, then also moved to Miami, to begin married life and "set up housekeeping." It was an allday trip by train, requiring going north to Palatka, then by taxi to East Palatka, then south again by train to Miami, where they stayed until after their first child, Anne, was born. After several moves, in 1926 they returned to Morris Bridge Road and built a house on ten acres that Frank had bought in 1915, across from his father's homestead on the old Sassafras Ridge. That house, where I am sitting now as I write this, was built at a cost of $1,500.00. Frank and Martha planted a grove, but after several freezes and attempts to replant, he returned to his work in
a power plant and the family moved back to Orlando.\footnote{11}

In June 1936, they came back to attend the Davis twins birthday picnic, which was held on Bull Frog Creek that year. Grandma Sula Davis warned 14-year-old Anne about "all those wild boys" and, of course, she met them all, including 16-year-old David Mathews. Dave’s father, George Mathews, was a section foreman for the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad, which had replaced the old Tampa & Thonotosassa line by this time. The Mathews family lived in a railroad "section house" which was located next to the Hillsborough Methodist Church at Temple Terrace Junction. The church building had been erected in 1921 on land donated by Riley Wetherington, as the community had grown and the old brush arbor no longer fulfilled its needs for a meeting place.

**STREETCAR OPERATOR**

After the picnic, Frank Davis and his family returned to Orlando and it was not until 1938 when they moved back to their home they had left earlier on Morris Bridge Road that Anne renewed her acquaintance with Dave Mathews. She went into Tampa to the Academy of Holy Names, which was by this time at its present location on Bayshore Boulevard, and only came home on weekends. The church continued to be the center of social life for the young people as it had in earlier years, and Anne and Dave attended the youth meetings on Sunday evenings and the parties which were held about once a month. Anne graduated from high school in June 1940 and went back to Orlando to visit friends there, when she received a telegram from Dave telling her that his family was moving to Lake Alfred and if she wanted to see him again she had better come home. She returned home and they were married on June 22nd. They lived in Tampa, where Dave operated a streetcar until 1943, when Frank Davis’ work once again required moving, this time to Jacksonville. Anne and Dave Mathews moved into her parents’ home on Morris Bridge Road with their small daughter - me.

Morris Bridge Road was still "country" when I was growing up, and life was still slow and gentle. Houses were few and scattered, and the occasional car which passed on the road each day was always a neighbor, everyone waving as they drove slowly past. Days were quiet, with just an occasional whistle as a train went by, and nights were filled only with animal sounds - an owl hooting nearby, a dog’s mournful howl.

"**ALL DAY SINGS**"

The church was still the social center of the community, with frequent "covered dish suppers", 4th of July and Labor Day picnics at Lake Thonotosassa, bazaars, ladies’ afternoon quilting bees, annual revivals, and frequent "all day sings" on hot drowsy Sunday afternoons.

Going to town on Saturday was a big event, which usually meant going to Sears & Roebuck on Florida Avenue for necessary shoes or housewares. Grocery shopping was done at Jaeb’s Store on Harney Road, a fascinating mixture of sounds and smells emanating from the butcher’s block and its sawdust floors, the soda fountain, and row after row of rainbow-colored penny candy.

Family entertainment was gathering around the radio for "Gangbusters" and "Amos and Andy" and "Inner Sanctum". Jigsaw puzzles were spread out on the dining room table and left for several days, until they were
completed, then admired for several more days before being reluctantly taken apart piece by piece.

"THE SASSAFRAS ON THE RIDGE IS GONE..."

The quiet country road is a busy street now. The cow pasture where I played has streets running through it, and the sinkhole with its rope-like vines and shadowy "caves" has long since been filled in and covered with houses. The pond where I caught tadpoles was taken away when Highway 301 was built through the middle of the 10 acres that my grandfather had owned since 1915, and the country store has been replaced by supermarkets and convenience stores. The church has a new building, and the old one sits behind it, as outdated and neglected as the brush arbor before it. The little cemetery at Thonotosassa, where the Mileys and the Davises and their neighbors are buried is unkempt and seldom visited. We're always too busy.

But once in awhile, when I catch a hint of orange blossoms, or a rare stillness at twilight is disturbed only by the lonely call of a whippoorwill, something stops me and I remember....

The sassafras on the ridge is gone now, as are those people. None of them were rich or famous, their names are not found in the history books, but each played an integral and important part in what Tampa and Hillsborough County are today. Sassafras Ridge should be remembered by all of us who cherish the memory of those brave, hardy men and women who forged a life from a wilderness so long ago.
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