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CAMPING AND CRUISING ALONG THE SUNCOAST IN 1899

By Kay Tapley

During the mid-nineteenth century, the Pinellas peninsula was a sparsely settled appendage of Hillsborough County. The 1880s brought a slow increase in the peninsula's population, largely through the efforts of land speculator and developer Hamilton Disston. Disston's holdings on the Pinellas peninsula totaled over 150,000 acres. His land company was responsible for extensive advertising campaigns in the northern United States and in England that persuaded many people to invest in lands on "the sun-kissed Pinellas Peninsula."¹

Many who bought land from Disston viewed their property, acquired at from two to five dollars an acre, as an investment only, and they had no thought of actually settling there. Real pioneer spirit was necessary for those who decided to make the long journey to Tampa and across the bay to carve a home out of their isolated property. By 1885 the population of the entire Pinellas peninsula was still averaging less than 150 persons, with the majority of the native-born American settlers coming not from the North, but from northern Florida and neighboring southern states.

The English response to Disston's siren song was a bit more enthusiastic than that of the "Yankee." In fact, there were already several English settlers scattered through the district in October, 1885, when young David Watt arrived on the peninsula with his sister and parents to homestead the 100 acre tract the elder Watt had acquired from Disston's British agents the preceding year.²

Most of the Watts' new neighbors were farmers, who could testify that Disston's advertisements had not exaggerated claims of balmy weather and an almost year-round growing season. Unfortunately, they could also add something that the land company's advertisements had failed to mention – the peninsula lacked good markets for its crops. However, Reverend Watt, a retired Congregational minister, and his family fared somewhat better than many newcomers to the area, because they were able to draw on financial reserves in England. In 1886 they built a new house of "the finest yellow pine from the still-virgin forests of the South" to replace the three-room log cabin which had originally stood on their Pinellas homesite.

Transportation to and from the Pinellas region was difficult and remained so for many years. As late as 1911 it required a 160 mile train trip by way of Trilby and Lakeland to reach Tampa from St. Petersburg. Water transportation was both faster and cheaper, and early Pinellas settlers like young David Watt frequently crossed the gulf and bay. The difficulty of land transport also limited the recreational options of most Pinellas citizens. Amateur theatrical productions, such as one held during the winter of 1886 in which David and his sister acted, were popular diversions, as were picnics, oyster roasts and overnight outings.

Among the favorite amusements of native Floridians and northern visitors alike during the latter years of the nineteenth century was the camping and fishing cruise. With bays and sheltered coastal waters teeming with fish and rimmed by romantic semi-tropical wilderness, Florida's southwestern coast provided endless opportunities for sport and recreation. Florida coastal cruising inspired scores of popular books, from travel accounts to the adventure novels of writers like Kirk Monroe and St. George Rathborne. In his youth on the Pinellas peninsula, David Watt and his friends frequently went on such outings. Their voyages took them sometimes as far south as Marco Island, cruising and fishing by day, and camping ashore or afloat by night.

Just why such outings were so popular, David was not quite sure. In a 1901 letter written from St. Petersburg, he commented "I have been speculating recently as to the curious kink in the nature of some men which drives them periodically to seek discomfort and danger in boats . . . I have found no answer to my queries. I simply know that . . . [we] will slave to have a few days' cruising, and are never sorry to make port again."

David's fascination with Florida cruising continued even after he left Florida early in 1889 to pursue a civil engineering career in Kentucky. He maintained his contacts with his friends on the Pinellas peninsula, returning at intervals for visits. While visiting the peninsula in the 1890s, he wrote a series of long-hand accounts of his cruising activities, apparently to be circulated to his friends and family. Mr. Watt retired to St. Petersburg in the 1920s and late in 1939 presented the manuscript accounts of his youthful adventures to the Florida Historical Society. These interesting and colorful narratives, of which the following document is typical, are located in the Society's library at the University of South Florida in Tampa.

St. Petersburg, Florida, January 2, 1899

Last Tuesday I spent with Harry,³ looking for a boat, and seeing the rest of the town unvisited the day before, when I arrived from Louisville. At the depot I stumbled on Susie and Nell,⁴ the latter with her husband, a very pleasant young man of five or six and twenty, lieutenant on a revenue cutter. This position he intends to resign, to practise [sic] insurance, and later to enter a law office in New York. Sue looked about as usual, as did the rest, except Bess, who has grown very frail.

Well, we got a boat at last – a cat boat with a huge sail and good beam, but cumbersome and with no cabin. The latter we will improvise from an army tent, brought with other trophies of the late war by enterprising sailors, from Santiago wharf where they had been unloaded. In this one house alone I have come across two rifles and over 500 rounds of ammunition, besides smaller mementoes.

Next day we hoisted sail after waiting two hours for Keddie,⁵ who, being told to come to Mrs. Stanton's, went straight to St. Petersburg and only appeared as I was casting loose our moorings. There were Harry Stanton, Keddie, myself, and Butler's⁶ brother-in-law Myers⁷ in the party. So we sailed about 2 p.m. with a light head wind, reaching Pt. Pinellas at sundown, and from there, after twice stranding on the clam bar, we found a fair wind and a full moon to take us to Pass-a-Grille. It was a bit chilly on the water, so three of us sat astern with a blanket over our

knees, while Keddie lay up forward and smoked his pipe. Myers passed a bottle of chill Tonic around now and again, which the others seemed to like, but I confined my attention to bread and cheese.

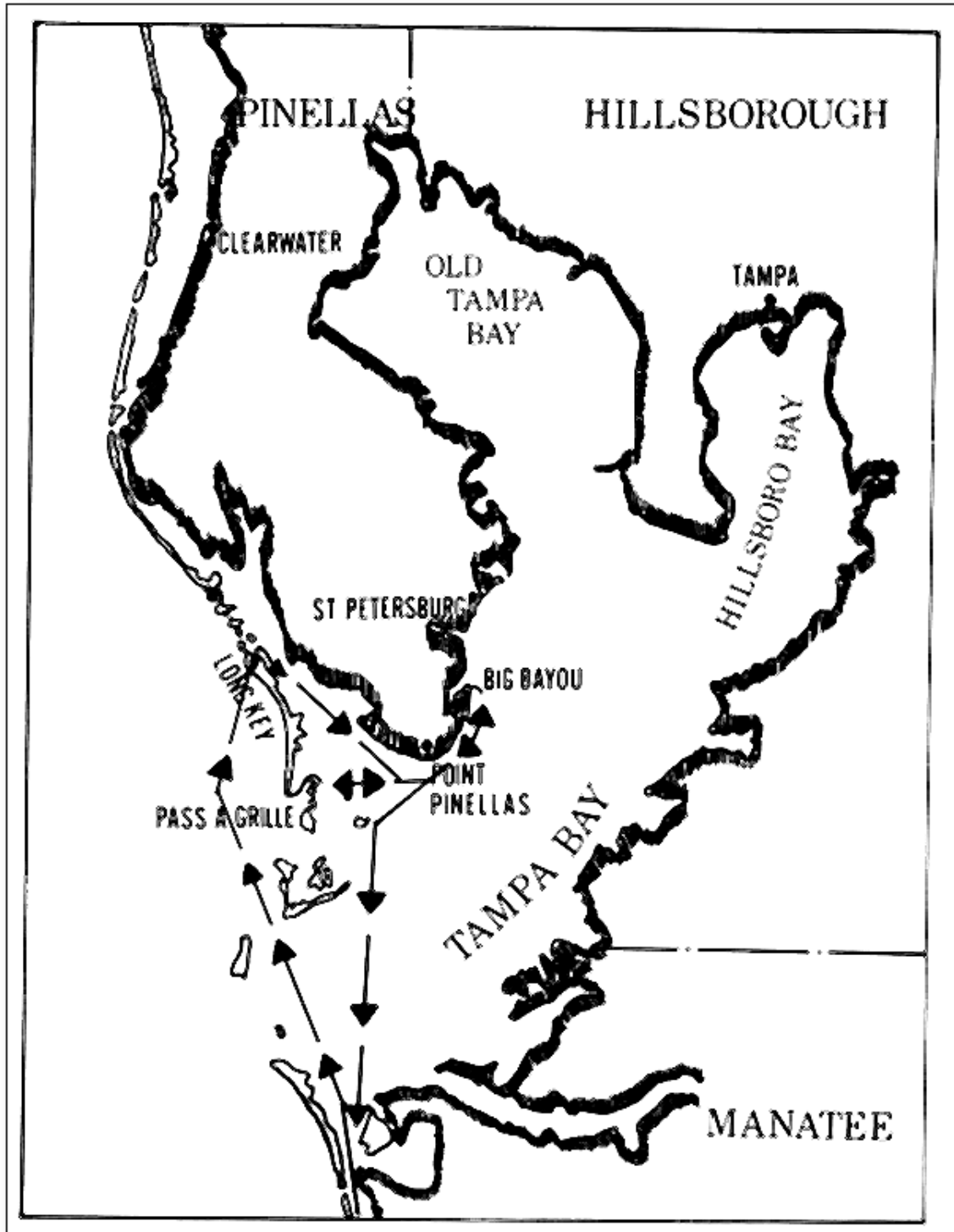


Illustration of Tampa Bay and vicinity. Lines show routes followed by David Watt's 1899 cruises.

Map by David L. Lawrence.

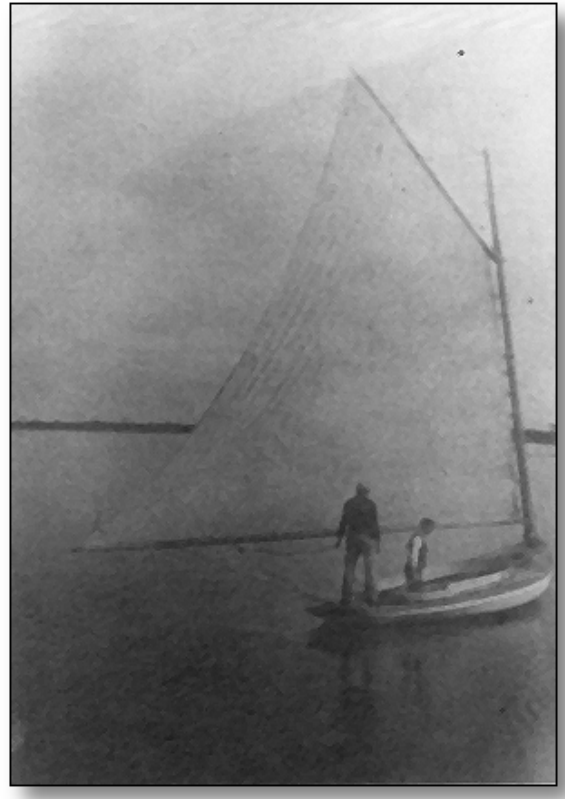
Late at night we made the wharf on Long Key, where Myers had rented a cottage, and there we camped for the three days we stayed there. We had beds and modern comforts, but little fishing, as bait was scarce. Twice I went after crabs, but the water was precious cold, and crabs were small, as they have been pretty well cleaned out.

Long Key has changed but little, but off the mouth, and ranging towards Egmont, lies a long low key, thrown up by the waves where ten years ago I used to sail a boat. It looks curious, for it lies exposed to all the winds & waves, and yet it is slowly and surely growing. Far out to sea there lie the ribs of a three masted schooner which went ashore on the southern edge of the shoal – stuck in clear weather, and there she lay till she went to pieces.

Nothing much took place during our stay. We had the island to ourselves, as the weather was cool, and I spent my time in doing nothing in particular. Myers had to go north on the Monday, so on Saturday we packed up and hoisted sail again, and made for the Bayou,⁸ where we anchored.

On Sunday I went roaming along the lake, which looks as it always did, except for a clearing or two on the north shore. Our old house has been renovated and looks gaudy, and Mr. Lewis has evidently spent much time & money on the place.

Since then the weather has been cool and windy, but we will make a line for Sara Sota [sic] as soon as it calms down.



The boat, with Harry and David.

Photograph courtesy of the Florida Historical Society.

**Off Pass-a-Grille
Thursday, Jan. 4, 99.**

I have at last found time for a few lines, but the struggles of the last few days have left their stamp on my shaking hand. We left the Bayou on Tuesday last, after dinner. As there was much to do to get the boat in order, such as putting up the tent, the sails, etc., Harry generously offered to go down and do it all the day preceding. So I let him go, and after a neighborly visit to John Bethell, he went aboard & fell asleep till supper time. This he denies, but results showed he could have done nothing else. So, I all unsuspecting, sail was made about 2 p.m. Keddie had been requested to come directly after dinner, but no sign of him was seen, and, not knowing what idea might have seized him, we put to sea alone. This was perhaps as well, for Heaven only knows where he could have slept.

Our destination was somewhere to the south, tho' nobody knew where, and we sailed on in a light head wind, and to keep up Harry's courage I talked of reaching Manatee that night. But when night came we were a few hundred yards off Tarpon Key,⁹ so I threw out the anchor and we started to get supper. I first discovered that Harry had left all things scattered in the lockers; this was a painful shock, as he had assured me all was in order. I admit the fault was mine, as I ought to have acted on my knowledge of human nature, in a matter such as that. So I left him to find them out, while I started to put up the tent, which Harry had also assured me – but I needn't repeat. Both of us were thus busy, I at one end of the boat, he at the other. Between us lay sacks of bedding, cooking pots, fishing tackle, blankets, crab hooks, cans of provisions, boxes of provisions, bags of provisions, coats, hats, water bottles, forty other articles, and a mince pie. The mince pie was the worst of all. I had bought it that day in St. Petersburg, thinking it would be something out of our usual course, and so it was. When Harry wasn't standing on it it got mixed up with me, and when I had found it under the cooking furnace and kicked it to the stern, Harry would promptly set a saucepan down on top of it. So each of us toiled on, Harry trying to disinter something for supper, I battling with the army tent that came from Santiago. (Later on I found the owner's name upon it in several places. Guileless man! I suppose he thought that would make it sacred.) Between us, back and forth, went that mince pie, and above it all was a gigantic hat of Harry's which he put away in the stern locker three times, only to find it had crawled on deck again, and was climbing over the things. However, I paid little attention to Harry, and after removing all I could to get room for action, I fell upon the tent, and in less than ten seconds I had it spread over the whole boat. I had no idea what an army tent was like, nor had Harry. He has none yet. It seemed to me to have no end, and when I gave up one side hopelessly and commenced another I found flaps & flies and cords and tent guards till I stood alone engulfed in a sea of ducking [canvas]. I dared not move. From the bow to the stern the boat lay under a wild confusion – the tent gleaming white and ghostly under the soft starlight, while I shuddered to think of what lay underneath. Even if an end was found there was no clue nor means as to how to put it up. For some seconds I stood silent, till I heard from the darkness where Harry stood a smothered exclamation: "Good God! Here's that hat again!" I looked at him for a few moments without speaking and then I said gently: "Harry, that mince pie won't be improved by your sitting on it." Harry got up, and the pie fell off him on the floor. When it came to light next time someone had put a bag of onions on its top.

It seemed hours later when I at last got a pup tent flap fastened to the boom, hanging in graceful folds to gather the rain and dew, with the rest of the tent rammed into dark holes and corners. Harry had by that time got the hat under control by piling firewood on it, and we sat down to a frugal meal of fried pork and bread, graced with reflections on the pleasures of camping out. The mince pie – or rather its shattered remnants – was kept until the morrow, and we turned in about 8 p.m., after which a rat on board (Harry had faithfully promised to bring a trap for it, but etc.) went over our stock of provisions from the salt pork to the self-raising flour. I hope he liked the latter.

Next morning I was up as usual just before dawn, and cooked Harry some delicious oatmeal a la sea-water, which he dutifully ate. I cooked nothing else except coffee, so we made an early start, and by afternoon, in spite of light winds, we had made Longboat Inlet. Why we went there nobody seemed to know, but I thought Harry might like to try the fishing in the Pass. So we went



Becalmed in Tampa Bay, Harry Stanton on left and D. A. Watt on right.

Photograph courtesy of the Florida Historical Society.

to a dock half a mile away, and when I left, Harry had two lines in the water which he kept there till I waked him up an hour later. Then we decided we would get better fishing at Blind Pass, thirty miles away, so in half an hour we were sailing north again over the same course we had come that morning. Harry seemed happy that afternoon – I found out later he had been looking forward to a stew for supper, and as we ran northward in the rays of the setting sun he got out the materials and worked with a glad light on his face, framed in with a handkerchief of aggressive scarlet, tied round his neck. It was a touching sight. When twilight came we were riding at anchor; the breeze had died away; a crimson glow of sunset lay far off behind the keys, and the soft murmur of the surf was borne across the sea. The tent, cowed and conquered, was draped across the boat; Harry's hat was safe from harming us, in the stern locker; and the mince pie was no more. We sat in silence for a long time till the stew was done, and then we sat in silence longer still, until we had eaten it and scraped out the pot. Then, soon after, we went to bed.

Next day I was up with the morning star; it must have been about 3 a.m. – too soon for breakfast, so I turned in again, getting up just before the dawn. Our frugal meal over, we hoisted sail and ran north till Egmont lay off our beam and we were well across the bay. Then the wind fell light, and for some hours we lay in a scorching sun, making only a mile or two an hour till we came abreast of Pass-a-Grille. It was during this time that I put on my full war paint; a red handkerchief knotted round my neck, a crush hat with rim turned down and pulled close over my eyes, no shave for several days, and a pair of goggles. I did this in the gloom under the forward



David cooking breakfast at Blind Pass.

Photograph courtesy of the Florida Historical Society.

deck; then, suddenly, I thrust my head out into the full blaze of sunlight, opposite to where Harry sat. His eyes fell on me; a spasm shook his frame, and his face twitched convulsively, while a smothered moan escaped him: "Oh my God!" I drew back in shadow once more, and then bit by bit I came out till he got accustomed to the vision, and at last he came to look on it with delight.

Late that afternoon we tied up near Blind Pass, and after walking two miles to find a place to fish, I came to the conclusion that all the places were on the other side of the Pass, and I went back to the boat. There we found on enquiry that nobody knew just what we came for, as Harry fervently denied he had ever told me the fishing in Blind Pass was good. In fact he denied it so strenuously that I could tell at once that – but politeness forbids me to say more. So we decided we had intended to go somewhere else, we couldn't say where, but as it was then supper time the question was laid aside. We had more stew that night, but merely a plateful each, and we had to fill up as best we could. As a result we slept badly, and I didn't get up til near sunrise. A stiff south wind was blowing, and there was plainly a norther not far off, so I called up the crew and told him we would go home.

As it was to be our last breakfast I cooked Harry some delicious sliced sweet potatoes fried a la smoke de lightwood. By some happy chance I had caught sight of a frying-pan handle far in the recesses of the boat, and on drawing it out I found a frying pan at the other end, in a fairly clean

condition, and with some lard already in it. I cleaned the top off the latter – enough to remove all traces of the rat – and then put in the potatoes to fry. Unluckily the fire burned out just as they were getting well warmed, so the dish lacked the piquant flavor I had intended it to have, and we had to eat it in a lukewarm state. Soon after I tried to take a snap-shot of us in our regimentals. The camera was set up in the bows; Harry sat expectant in the stem, and after getting the rubber tube all ready I left the camera and went aft. It was too much. I had done my best to steady it, but when my controlling influence was removed and it was left alone face to face with Harry it fell flat over on its side and nearly went into the sea. I said nothing as I could see poor Harry's feelings were hurt, so I got him to photograph me, and then the camera came out all right.

A couple of hours later we were scudding along off Maximo under a double reef, and the boat staggering sometimes even then. Spray flew across her decks and stung our bronzed and smoke-grimed faces, and when we swung round Point Pinellas and met the seas from Tampa Bay I had to drop the peak to get her to steer at all. The wind was heavy from the south, and we ran up the coast with the big waves surging and swinging past our stern, driving us sometimes till the boat swung half around. But we reached the Bayou safely and cast anchor – our work for the time was over, and we could look forward to a few days' rest and recreation. That night (it was Friday afternoon when we got in) a squall of rain came up, and on the Saturday a heavy nor-easter had set in.

Jan. 19

The Keddie mystery has not yet been cleared up. I made several good resolutions to investigate, but they were always side-tracked, so why he never came with us on that trip is still a fearsome and unknown thing. To drive away the recollection I organised [sic] an oyster roast on the old-fashioned lines. I spent a day looking for a good place, collecting a few oysters, and issuing invitations, and when all was done I resigned myself to fate. It happened that I found Joe¹⁰ in town that morning – he had just come from New York – so I brought him down as the principal attraction, after the oysters. We were delayed some time and the others became hungry and – no, not illtempered – we will call it impatient. However, we had the coffee, so we didn't mind. Besides, I had had a few mouthfuls at Mrs. Stanton's on the way down, so I could direct operations with a calm & tranquil mind. There were six of the Abercrombie clan, with Mr. Mann, Nell's latest capture, four of the Stanton household, and those two Watt boys. It was very decorous – four married people and one husband – so we all enjoyed it immensely, and Bob and Joe covered themselves with soot and glory, and then filled up on coffee and oysters. We had only a hundred of the latter left over.

Next day Joe & I and our crew sailed to Pass-a-Grille for crabs, but we found only a few, as Bob Stanton had been over not long before.

After a few days of much needed rest I decided I ought to pay a last visit to the keys, taking along a few others to help to do the housework. I'll know better next time. Two days were spent in getting up the party and when all was ready I found out the night before that all but a few choice souls had fallen back and said they couldn't go. I mention no names; time will deal with them.

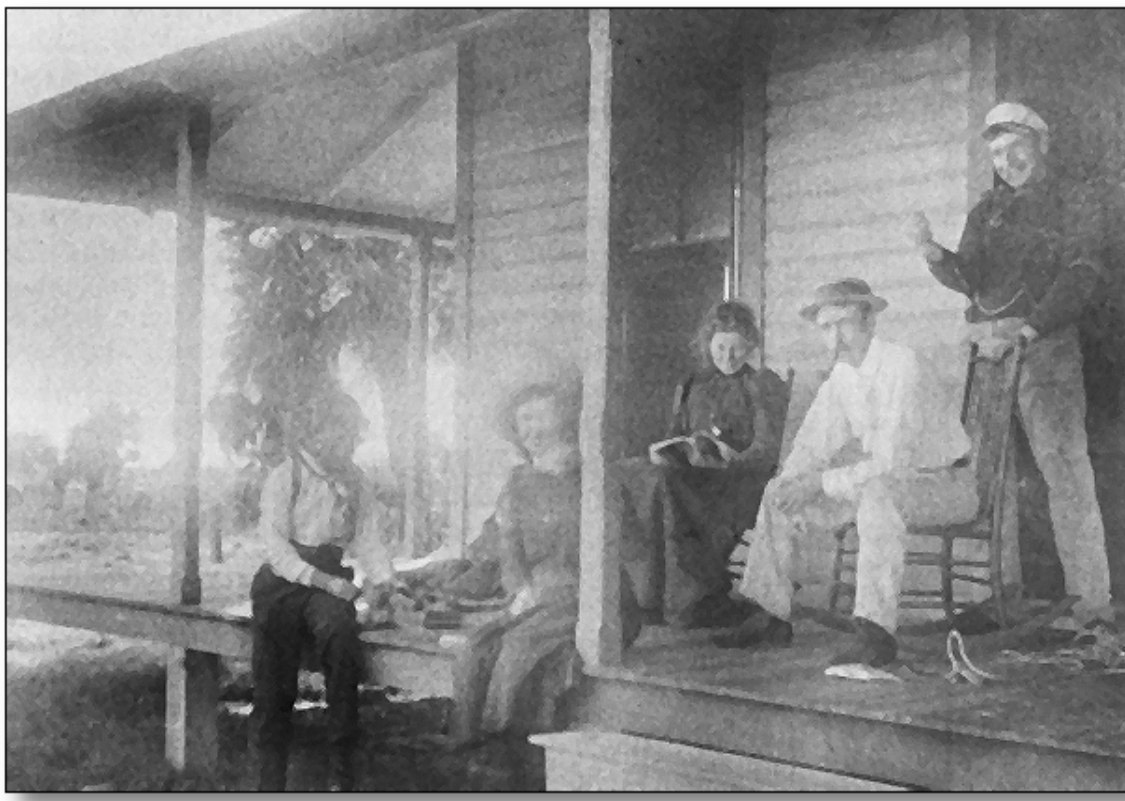


Portrait of Bob Stanton.

Photograph courtesy of the Florida Historical Society.

Sadly I gathered up the wreck of a noble enterprise next day – I say wreck, not wrecks, for that would be a gross misnomer – and in the middle of the morning Gertie¹¹ and Susie and Lettie were sent to Maximo, and Joe, Bob, Harry, and I sailed the boat round there from the Bayou.

As we reached Maximo wharf a rain-squall beat up from the south, and made things lively, so much so that as we brought down our five tons of bedding and provisions the sugar and beans and peas fell into the water, and for the first time in more than a quarter of a century I went camping without beans. Then we set sail in a stiff breeze which fell in half an hour to the flat calm, and we didn't reach our house at Pass-a-Grille till sunset. A good supper set us all in a proper humor again – I forget what we had, as I never pay much attention to food – and then we sat on the veranda and listened to Bob discoursing on art and politics and philosophy. Time passed with winged feet as the night came on, and we turned in late, about a quarter before nine. Next day we (that is the boys) were up before sunrise, to get coffee for the girls, and to catch fish for breakfast. The coffee had a bad effect on Susie, for after it she couldn't see straight. At least, that was the only reason I could give for her being half an hour longer than the others over her hair, unless she had mislaid some of it. The result, however, was fetching, for Bob remarked she looked awful sweet. I told him the remark had pleased her, whereupon he said he didn't give a darn if she was pleased or not. The day passed very quietly. It was Sunday, and a holy Sabbath



Sunday afternoon, men from left are David, Harry and Bob. Women in photograph unidentified.

Photograph courtesy of the Florida Historical Society.

peace lay over earth and sea. We sat on the veranda nearly all afternoon, saying little and happy in our own company. Above us the soft blue sky; around us the rippling of the sea; no sound to break the stillness but the murmur of the surf, and the whispering of the palm trees in the stream of the soft south wind. So time passed till sunset, and after supper we all sat out upon the wharf, and watched the stars rising above Pine Key.

The girls waited till we were about asleep, and then began to talk to us and sing and plague us as girls have ever delighted to do since the dawn of time. Outside the wind and rain were storming; inside, in one room, were curses and horrid blasphemy; in the other three evil spirits seemed to hold sway. They began with the Doxology, for Bob's benefit. Bob had no idea what a doxology was, but the word sounded large and ominous, and he soon began to rail and curse and swear till the rest of us stopped our ears with blankets. Then he got out of bed and loosed the weighted cord before alluded to, and it fell on Susie's head, without of course doing any harm. She said she was at her prayers, or devotions, I forget which. Susie's a rum girl [good sport]. All three of them caught the cord and broke it, and we were left defenceless. They then began to call out "good-night", counting one, two, three, and then letting her go. First it was David, then Joe, then Harry, then Bob. Bob by that time was speechless, only an inarticulate moan escaping from

time to time. A volley of shoes followed, hitting the door just above my head; one of Gertie's shoes was among them. Our appeals for silence were replied to with mocking laughter, and the silvery "good-nights" were hurled at us again. Bob, choking, found his voice; Joe was furious; Harry was exasperated. Strange, weird, grotesque was the language we gave way to; oaths in divers [sic] tongues, uncouth words, wild declamations found only among those that go down to the sea in ships. It was all useless, and the last thing I heard before I fainted from weariness was a chorus of "Twenty one blue-bottles hanging on the wall." The girls got no morning coffee next day.

We had to leave on the Wednesday; provisions were out (my sainted country, how those girls did eat!); our friends were supposed to be getting anxious about us; and we had a chance of taking back with us an old lady living next door. So we left at one o'clock, with the old lady, to whom Bob sang a song; while he and Joe made faces and threw eggs at each other and at my passenger. No tears were shed at leaving – our grief was too deep for that; we merely clasped hands as we said goodbye when we left the Bayou (I found it advisable to disengage Bob's and Susie's hands after a few moments, when he whispered to me confidentially that "Susie was a blamed old goat"). The trip was over, and has passed into the memories of each one of us. (Slow music.)¹²

¹ Hamilton Disston, a wealthy Philadelphia manufacturer and at one time Florida's largest land owner, also figured prominently in bringing the much needed Orange Belt Railway to the Pinellas Peninsula. For a more complete account of Disston's Florida enterprises, see Karl H. Grismer's *The Story of St. Petersburg* (St. Petersburg: P. K. Smith & Co., 1924), pp. 47-57.

² Information on the Watt family's homestead and experiences in the Pinellas area is taken from an unpublished letter to Watt Marchman, Executive Secretary of the Florida Historical Society, dated December 12, 1939. This letter also provides considerable information relative to the persons mentioned in the Watt document reprinted here. The letter forms part of the Watt Papers housed in the Society's Miscellaneous Manuscripts Collection.

³ Harry Stanton. The Stanton family came to the area in 1886 from Sandingham, England, where they had been tenants on the estate of the then Prince of Wales. Watt to Marchman, December 12, 1939.

⁴ Susie and Nell Abercrombie. The Abercrombies were an impoverished southern family whose plantation had been lost during the Civil War. Their arrival had preceded the Watts' by several years. Members of the family included eighty-year-old Dr. Charles Abercrombie, his son, Dr. John B. Abercrombie, John's wife Susan Cary and their six daughters – Lettie, Josie, Nell, Susie, Bess and Mary. Watt to Marchman, December 12, 1939.

⁵ David Keddie. A Scotsman, Keddie was the ex-manager of a branch of the Canadian Bank of Commerce. Down on his luck when Watt knew him, he earned a living in the St. Petersburg area as a day laborer. Watt to Marchman, December 12, 1939.

⁶ Cyrus Butler. Butler was a young bachelor and the Watts' next-door neighbor. A graduate in civil engineering from the University of Illinois, he was one of the residents who managed to make a substantial success of his orange grove. Watt to Marchman, December 12, 1939.

⁷ Mr. Myers was a lawyer from Waycross, Georgia, who built up a thriving practice in the Tampa Bay area. His inordinate love of fishing and camping, according to David Watt, led to his downfall, as he pursued these pleasures to such excess that his clients eventually deserted him. Watt to Marchman, December 12, 1939.

⁸ According to an annotated map accompanying the Watt Papers, "the Bayou" was Big Bayou near St. Petersburg.

⁹ Tarpon Key also appears on contemporary maps as Cabbage Key and Bird Key.

¹⁰ Joe Watt. David mentions having two brothers, Joe and John, both former stockbrokers' clerks in London. From the Watt Papers one gathers that the family included additional brothers, but only these two are named. Watt to Marchman, December 12, 1939.

¹¹ Gertie Stanton.

¹² Scrawled on the margin of the original letter were the following words: "I hereby wish to state that Mr. D. Watt has feloniously used my name without my consent and I do hereby state that I did not use the curse words that are ascribed to me. Yours sincerely, Bob."