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Homesteading in Hillsborough County

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Sarah A. Stearns (1841-1910) was a young widow with three small sons, Everett W., Marion A., and Dallas J., when she sold their home in Marion County, loaded a one-horse wagon with the barest necessities, and told tier neighbors she was "pulling stakes and going to parts unknown." The year was 1878.

We can only guess as to why the little family chose the site they did. Perhaps the majestic oak trees and the large pond seemed to Sarah an ideal spot for a new beginning, or perhaps they were just tired of traveling. The land on which they camped, staying 30 days and 30 nights without leaving in order to establish homestead requirements, is known today as
Bloomingdale, and is bordered by Lithia-Pinecrest Road on the east, Fulton Road on the west, and Stearns Road on the north.

Though settlers were sparse, there were grim reminders of others who had attempted to claim the land before them. Seven tombstones clustered together near the northern border of Sarah's property were all that remained of a family wiped out by Indians. The story is told that one of them was a man plowing his field when he was shot with an arrow. He ran a mile and a half, pursued all the way by his attackers, before he fell dead near what is today Little Road and Oakview. For reasons unknown, all but one of the graves were moved to another site in later years, but that one stands today, on property owned by the Pulido family. The time-ravaged tombstone reads, "Sacred to the memory of John Carney who was born August 23, 1804 and was cruelly massacred by the Indians on April 17, 1856. Here in the silent grave lies one whom no man had aught against."

**ORANGE TREE A LANDMARK**

With the help of two hired men, Sarah set about building a small one-story frame house and establishing a new home for her sons. She raised sweet potatoes, corn, sugarcane and peas. One of the several orange trees she planted around the house still stands as a landmark, though the house is gone and the property has long-since changed hands.

Shortly after acquiring the land, Sarah sold a parcel of it to a family named Buzby, who proceeded to build. Her middle son, Marion Alexander, four years old, was fascinated by the construction and went there everyday to "help". To keep him out of mischief, the workmen set him to the task of sorting nails into buckets. Little did anyone realize at the time that the house would become an integral part of Marion Stearns' life in years to come.

The community continued to grow as more families searched for new beginnings. In 1897 when yellow fever threatened those living in heavier populated areas closer to Tampa, Preston and Eliza Bailey Randall moved their family to nearby Lithia.

**'AUNTIE ROSE’ SUMMONED**

Though they escaped the yellow fever, it was only a few years later, in 1901, that
young Ariminthia (Artie) was awakened by her father in the middle of the night. Her mother had been taken seriously ill and Artie was sent to summons "Auntie Rose", a Negro lady who was their nearest neighbor. The child made a terrifying run three miles through dark woods populated by panthers, bears and snakes. She brought Auntie Rose to tend to her mother, but Eliza succumbed to the unknown illness before morning.

As homes and farms were established, community needs were felt and fulfilled. A Mr. Norton donated land for use as a cemetery; a two-room schoolhouse was built; churches flourished.

School teachers were recruited from Tampa, usually young ladies who were brought by their fathers to the country to board with the Parrish family during the week while they taught school, then were picked up again on Friday evening to return to town for the weekend.

In addition to the Methodist, Baptist and Presbyterian churches, the Methodists were given land where they built a two-story tabernacle to be used for camp meetings. The upper story was rooms where the visiting preachers slept, and there were cottages and dormitories to house the families attending the meetings. The Methodist church was sold in later years and moved to Brandon where it is still in use. The Methodist parsonage was also sold and loaded onto pine saplings and pulled by mules to its present site on Stearns Road.

RETURNING FROM A HUNT, 1920.
... Marion Stearns, son George and others.
ETHEL RANDALL STANFORD
...and her husband John.
-Photo by Burgert & Son, 1310 ½ 7th Ave.

ARTIE RANDALL AT AGE 6
...with Brother Agustus, Sister Abbygail.

WALTER STANFORD
...wearing polka dot dress.
-Photo by Burgert & Son, 1310 ½ 7th Ave.

DAVID STANFORD
-Photo by Burgert & Son, 1310 ½ 7th Ave
ETHEL RANDALL STANFORD.

-Photo by Burgert, Ybor City
The years passed and the children grew up. In 1902 young Artie Randall and Marion Stearns were married. They lived with his mother, Sarah, until after the birth of their first child, George, in 1904. A short time later, Marion purchased the house where he had sorted nails as a child, returning the land to his mother’s family.

The two-story frame house with the porch across the front was an imposing structure for its day. A gutter directed rainwater into a large tank at the corner of the house, which was their source of water. The house was heated by a large potbellied stove and by the wood stove in the kitchen. In winter, each child would place a brick on the coals in the wood stove to heat during the day, then at bedtime the brick would be wrapped in cloth and placed at the foot of each bed for warmth. Perishables were stored in the "dairy", which was a small structure near the kitchen door. The smokehouse was used for the preparation and storage of meats.

A turpentine still located between the Stearns home and Lithia provided work for Marion as his family grew. The turpentine was hauled in barrels on a mule-driven cart to the distillery in Lithia, then shipped out by railroad flat cars.

**INITIALS ON CROSSTIES**

Another means of income was cutting logs for crossties and rafting them downriver to Tampa. It was the custom for each man to cut his initials into each of his logs for identification. Years later, several of Marion’s sons dragged the river and located three of the logs bearing his still-legible initials.
Those logs were milled and used in the construction of their present homes. Oxen teams were highly prized and much wagering was done to determine who had the strongest team. Fighting roosters were also a popular sport, with matches held in the “low woods” and tournaments in Orlando. It was a highly prosperous sport, though illegal, and Artie heartily disapproved of Marion's participation.

There was much visiting among friends and neighbors from Brandon, Seffner and Riverview. Baseball, croquet and horseshoes were favorite games, and frequently the horseshoe tournaments would last all night, by the light of a big bonfire.

Marion and Artie Stearns' family continued to grow as Thurman was born in 1907, Clarabel in 1908, then Frank, Austin, Doyle, Carl and Alice. In September 1910, Grandmother Sarah Stearns died in her little house she had built so many years before.

THE SAGA OF THE BELL

About 1923, a family named Wynn bought a parcel of land near the Stearns home. By the gate, they had discarded a large old dinner bell. Little Austin slipped away one day and asked Mr. Wynn if he would sell the bell to him. Mr. Wynn set the price - one day's labor hoeing corn. Austin got a whipping for slipping off from home, but his mother let him do the work he had contracted to do, and Mr. Wynn delivered the bell to him. The bell was mounted on crossties located close to the kitchen door, where it was to become an important part of the lives of many people for years to come.

Not only was the bell used to relay messages to family members, but during World War 11, it played an important role in the community as well. Many people from Bloomingdale and surrounding areas worked in Tampa at the shipyards, and due to shortages of tires, gasoline, etc., carpooling was a necessity. Clocks were also in short supply, but Artie's mantel clock enabled her to act as the "alarm 11 for her neighbors. She would get up at the required time and ring the bell, which could be heard for more than three miles away, to wake the workers.

As the years passed and the children left home, the bell was neglected and forgotten. In 1934 Marion passed away and Artie was left alone. As she had no phone, Austin once again thought of his bell and mounted it to the side of the house with a pull-rope through the window, so that his mother could summon a neighbor in an emergency.

OLD HOUSE SOLD

The demands of the big old house became too great for Artie as she grew older and in 1957 she sold it. She and her daughter, Clarabel Stearns Summerall, moved into Brandon. The bell was moved once again by Austin, to his home on Wheeler Road near Seffner, where it stands today, a silent reminder of the past. His sister, Clarabel, wrote the following poem for him, which poignantly expresses the emotions evoked in all of us as we attempt to understand and appreciate a way of life gone by.

"The old bell stood by the paling fence, Its piers had rotted away. Like the old gray mule and the one-horse plow, It belonged to yesterday.

Never again will children know The joy that it could bring, With its welcome chime of 'dinner time
To those who heard it ring.

At the break of dawn on a summer morn,
Its message was 'Arise,
Hurry, get some plowing done,
'fore Sol heats up the skies.'

The old bell told of many things
To those who knew its code.
Five taps meant 'Company's coming, Pa,
A whole dern wagon load.'

Two taps meant, 'The cow is out,
Perhaps the old sow, too.'
Three taps meant, 'The preacher's here,
So mind now what you do.'

One tap just meant, 'You're wanted, Pa,
But do not fret or worry.
Just come on home when you get time;
There is no need to hurry.'

Mom had a different touch, it seemed
For every message sent,
And Dad could recognize them all
And knew just what she meant.

Sometimes, in case of fire or death,
The bell would sound at night
And neighbors would come from far and near
To help Dad in his plight.

The old bell was not retired
When Mom was left alone.
It was erected on her house,
As Mom did not have a phone.

Yes, the old bell told a story
To every listening ear.
Sometimes I stand and view it now
And brush away a tear.

For the old bell will not ring again
To greet the waking morn.

It stands aloft on another pier,
At Austin's, majestic but forlorn.

(Author's note: This is the second installment of a series on "Homesteading in Hillsborough County". These articles are based on oral interviews of the families involved and tell the stories of the "country" people, the farmers and laborers who are just as much a part of our heritage as the more well-known names in the history books.

The Stearns family is another fine example of the sturdy people who contributed so much to the early growth of Hillsborough County and, subsequently, Tampa. They are a tribute to a time past when one's community was an "extended family" and everyone "got involved".

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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