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A FRENCHMAN IN BROOKSVILLE

translated by Charles Wrong

Editor's Note: In the Fall/Winter 1979 issue of *TBH* (Vol. I No. 2), we published an excerpt from Edmond Johanet's *Un Francais Dans La Floride*, which was originally published at Tours in 1890. Johanet was an intellectual who visited areas that were not easily accessible at the time, including Pasco and Hernando Counties, and his diary records his contacts with and reaction to the inhabitants of the "less civilized" regions of Florida. His comparisons with the daily life and institutions of the French people give his observations unique flavor. Monsieur Johanet's descriptions of Brooksville are every bit as charming as were his comments on Dade City, which appeared in these pages previously.

Finally I came to Brooksville, county seat of Hernando County. I arrived there at 8 p.m., tired out, aching all over, but happy.

It had already been pitch dark for the past hour and a half. I was surprised to see that the carriage was not provided with lanterns. They are apparently unnecessary in that region, being replaced by the instinct of the horses, who are much more farseeing than we are. I paid \$12, a little over 60 francs, for 16 leagues wrung with difficulty from the sands in ten hours. That's really for nothing!

I rested up comfortably from the experience in my boarding-house bed. I had been offered a room with two beds, one of them already occupied; but I declared that the society of the cockroaches that I saw running up and down the walls would be enough to charm my solitude.

When I woke up I was completely stupefied. I had been set down, the previous night, in a town; in the main square of Brooksville. Now, at first light, I found myself in the country! The streets of this county seat (a "county" is the equivalent of a French "department") are like nothing so much as a chain of verdant hills, with ravines and precipices; in the middle of which horses, mules, cows and pigs feed at liberty, on terms of complete friendship with the inhabitants. I saw a swarm of vultures that had just landed on the carcass of a donkey. I grabbed my gun in order to slaughter them, but somebody shouted "Hold it there, you fool, there's a five-dollar fine for every vulture killed!" It was explained to me that the functions of the highway department were carried out by a company of these carrion-eaters, and that they do a better job of cleaning the roads of refuse than any street sweeper of Paris. Sure enough, with a couple of pecks these birds of prey converted a stinking carcass into a very clean skeleton.

Unfortunately they didn't carry off the bones. It's not their "job." It isn't anybody's "job." That word "job" applies to every piece of work contracted for, to every item of piecework, to every occupation.

Nor is it the vultures' "job" to eat up the side-dishes: dirty bits of paper, greasy rags, old pieces of leather, scraps of iron, the remains of wooden cases, fragments of jam jars, rotting bags, torn



A sketch of a Brooksville home.

clothes, with which these verdant roads are strewn. Nobody in Florida ever dreams of mending anything. When a button drops off, it can drop off in peace, with no fear of ever being replaced by a fortunate rival; if a tear appears, it is left free to grow and grow; if you get a spot of mud on your clothes, you leave it to the fresh air to clean it off. No garment can be said to have finally lost favor until it has passed from a white owner to a black one. When a black dweller in the wilds can no longer tell into which hole he ought to put his arm or his leg, he jettisons the garment in the main public square of Brooksville, along with old hats and nameless, topless boots, to the great joy of cockroaches, bugs, fleas, and other insects which feed royally on human sweat.

I ventured beyond the public square. I came to the main street: all the houses were of wood! They were square in shape, and rested on wooden blocks 50 centimetres high; they looked like immense closets standing erect. Commercial buildings carry enormous signs; they look like booths from a fair installed permanently on a little hill. Most of them contain stores of general merchandise, selling everything: butter and jewelry, smoked meat and lace, shoes and dishes. If you don't have any money, you can barter a steer for a complete suit of clothes. As it isn't easy to give you change from a steer, they will enter up the value in your account, and until the price of the steer is exhausted you can go on buying an umbrella, a hat, writing paper, cigars, a subscription to *Le Figaro*, in fact everything needed to give life its charm.



The Hernando Hotel and the Post Office.

Two other houses contain “druggist stores,” pharmacies, very well supplied and very tempting. I also saw three houses containing doctors’ surgeries. I don’t know where these doctors and druggists got their training, but if I were a sick man I would distrust their prescriptions and the way they are prepared. They can’t do you good, and can only do you harm. I would have more confidence in the specialities, in cans or bottles, sent down by some big factory up north. It can be assumed that these last were made up from some formula approved by the Academy of Medicine in New York. Prescriptions, on the other hand...! I saw one that was given by a doctor who could be completely confident of his title, because he had bestowed it on himself!

These drug-stores all sell whiskey, rum, brandy, and strong liquors in general. By law, such liquors may only be sold there, because these places cater to the sick! The American drug-store, the tree of knowledge of good and evil, reminds me of those arsonists who are the first to run to put out the fires their own criminal hands have lit.

Bars, tobacconists, a barber, offices of attorneys at law and public notary [sic], a letter-out of horses and carriages for hire, a carriage-builder, a saddler, carpenters, restaurants, boarding-houses, a skating-rink, three printing presses bringing out as many newspapers, ironmongers, grain and feed merchants, a watchmaker, a painter: that is the world of business.

There is a large hotel, the Hernando Hotel, very well run, comfortably furnished, the property of Major John Parsons, managed by L.Y. Jennes. The cooking is very good, but very expensive:

\$3 per day. It is done by a black woman, the wife of old James who was formerly a slave of the Garay family. The \$3 includes the price of the room; the weekly rate is \$10 to \$15. A plantation of orange trees, it is true, surrounds the hotel. It is located on the highest ground of Brooksville, 300 feet above sea level, and from its windows the view extends for 10 leagues round. This is very rare in Florida, a flat region covered with forests, and this fact alone explains why Brooksville was founded where it stands. The town in fact has no water supply: no stream flows through it, and you have to go some distance to find a lake.

On this plateau stand some attractive villas, sheltered by the orange trees; also the post-office, the telegraph office, and the Court House.

The Court House is the community building: the tribunal for all levels of jurisdiction from the simple police court to the court of appeal and the assize court; the town hall and the theatre. In the auditorium death sentences are pronounced, weddings are solemnised, comedies and dramas are performed. On the ground floor several notaries public and lawyers have their offices. Here you will find the registration and mortgage offices kept by the clerk of the court; the treasury, the tax office, the auction mart; everything, in fact, and much else besides.

As the vultures do not have the "job" of cleaning up the Court House, the floor, littered with old papers, orange peel and cigar butts, has never suffered the indignity of a broom. Everyone brings in a bit of dirt on his shoes, and the result is that a mixture of garbage and sand rises quite a bit above the level of the soles of your shoes. In contrast to the floor, the litigant finds himself stripped clean.

Brooksville has, in addition, two churches for white folks and two for black. One of the white churches is Methodist, the other Baptist. The Baptist minister is the Reverend Frank de Courcy, descended from a former French Protestant family which emigrated as a result of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. As for the black churches, the devil himself, be he never so black, could never tell what they are praying to. He would be deafened by their epileptic singing, their rhythmical stamping of feet and clapping of hands, and their brazen-throated preachers. It goes without saying that, white or black, these churches are built of wood. The white churches, with their steeples, really do have the feel of churches. From a long way off they are exactly like those edifices that children put up with the wooden blocks of their building games. They look as if they had been just set down on the grass; and in fact they have no foundations, any more than the other wooden houses of Florida. You feel you could take them apart piece by piece.

Brooksville has two mixed schools [coeducational?], one a public school, the other a free school. The teacher of the latter reads French, and makes an effort to talk it and to teach it: all credit to him. The little students go to class barefooted and bare-legged. You hear no sound of wooden shoes on the floor. In America the wooden shoe is unknown, to both sexes and to all ages.

The administration of Brooksville consists of a mayor, a central commissioner, a mayor's secretary, a collector of city taxes, and nine aldermen or councillors (the mayor being one). The school board is composed of a president and four board members. So much for the municipal government. The Hernando county administration is also located in Brooksville. The sheriff

performs the functions of prefect and of hangman. France, as you see, does not have a monopoly of hangmen/prefects. The current President of the United States, Grover Cleveland, in his capacity of sheriff, has hanged three men; this did not prove an obstacle to his getting married. The prefect or sheriff is assisted by a general council.

The rector of the academy, the treasurer-general, the director of taxes and the tax collector have the same functions as in France.

. . . The court is composed of a judge, a solicitor, an usher, and twelve jurors for civil and criminal cases. Its sessions are held twice a year, in March and April. The tribunal is composed of one judge, and that's plenty – this judge sits only once a month; he's a man of leisure.

Finally, the county sends to Parliament [the State legislature] one senator and two deputies [representatives].

The organization of public powers is thus complete in each county, as it is in France in each department.

Not that I took all this in when I first came to Brooksville. At the start I took nothing in at all, so strange and incomprehensible did the town seem to me! I understood nothing about it. I saw some inhabitants, but there didn't seem to be enough of them to need so many shops and churches.

“Wait till Saturday,” I was told; “You'll see.”

And now it was Saturday; market day. Market of what? Nothing was brought in. I saw a lot of natives spreading their wares over the wooden sidewalks, but they did not obstruct the traffic. I was waiting for the arrival of carts full of peasants and vegetables, peasant women and poultry, discharging all their loads onto the public square in the picturesque operation whereby the countryside takes over the town. I was, hoping to see the fat farmer's wife offering “a skinned duck to the fine lady who haggles over the price.” Not a bit of it. If any of the locals brought any goods, they sold them immediately in the store of general merchandise with which they had an account, and in exchange they took away all sorts of provisions, but not much in the way of change. Such people, anyway, are quite rare in Florida, for the little that people produce they consume themselves. Saturday is accordingly the day of business for the shops rather than for the country people. And “country people” is the wrong term if we understand it to mean peasants. Florida has neither peasants nor townfolk. Everyone is alike. You live in the town or in the woods; that's the only difference.

Come into town on a Saturday and you will be convinced of this fact. You don't see any carts. Everyone arrives, like a landed proprietor, in a buggy: a little light carriage mounted on four large, very fine wheels; in a wagon, a sort of dray with four wheels, drawn by two mules; on horseback; or on the back of a mule, an animal so proud of its descent from a horse that it is as stubborn as a donkey.



Sketch of downtown Brooksville.

All these means of transportation fill Brooksville with ladies and misses from the woods, in light dresses all of white, with large shepherdess-style hats. You would take them for bunches of daisies from the meadows, brought to town by satyrs and fauns. And the men, with their goatées, have quite the look of satyrs and fauns about them; unless, that is, their big hats, their collarless shirts, their torn, stained, and threadbare coats, and their trousers tucked into their boots would lead you to mistake them for mountebanks from a fair. Everyone is a gentleman in these parts; so these, too, are gentlemen. Our horse-dealers, cattle-traders, and pig-sellers do not make so good an impression; but our marquises make an incomparably better one. All the same, one sees strange things in the wilds; and I have seen, with my own eyes, some quite peerless gentlemen, with good shoes, good clothes, good haircuts, rivals of George Brummel. They looked rather unfashionable. The dresses of their wives and daughters came from the best dressmakers of New York. How greatly I prefer the white muslin and the shepherdess hats that look so delightful on these daughters of free America, so fresh under the eternal Florida spring!

The origins of Brooksville do not go back to darkest antiquity like Mycenae and Troy. To judge by the age of the oldest plantations of the area, the foundation of Brooksville can't go back more than thirty years. Like girls, the young cities of America count their years in the springtime; at the time of the lilac or the orange blossom, according to latitude. Old cities conceal their age under their ruins; young ones proclaim it by their trees.

About 20 years ago, in the [congress], there were two deputies: Brook[s] and Sumner. One fine day, having run out of arguments, Brooks knocked Sumner cold. Was it for this exploit that the name of Brooksville was given to the town we are dealing with? Or was it for a feat of arms which earned him a more honorable mention, for Brooks, if I remember rightly, was a major or a general? [The source of the bloody dispute was over slavery, which Charles Sumner of Massachusetts opposed and Preston Brooks of South Carolina defended.]

In memory of those two prize-fighters, the inhabitants of Brooksville long preserved, as a tradition, the habit of blowing each others' brains out. Being particularly at odds with the blacks, they amused themselves by making them bite the dust. There were so few amusements in those days! Fortunately, these habits have been modified by having other things to think about. After three black brothers, quarrelsome people apparently, were struck down by the same hand, the series of rifle and revolver shots came to an end.

The legend of American towns built in a single day is not borne out by those of Florida. Indeed, a town does not begin to build its first house until the area round about, peopled by folk who live on their plantations, demands a center for provisions and a place to do business. The first house is always one of those stores, furnished with all the objects of prime necessity, including the post office and the telegraph office. The general merchant discharges the functions of the post-master.

It is easy to reveal the first settlers at their arrival by the traces they left around Brooksville. They followed the same path as those I saw collect around the source of a pretty little river, the Wikiwachee, where one day, inevitably, a town will arise. They began by residing at the Hotel of the Beautiful Stars or the Inn of the Golden Sun, the former by night, the latter by day. All the delights of existence! This was the fresh-air period. It was followed by the canvas period: man's desires are insatiable, and, growing tired of the vault of Heaven, they put up tents. Next came the squared-timber period. Continually spurred on by ambition, they cut down pine trees, shaped them into logs, piled the logs on top of each other, and covered the whole thing with shingles split with an ax.

Next we have the age of the plank. A sawmill was set up in the neighborhood, chewing up the green wood with its fine teeth. Houses sprang up, and were inhabited while the sap from the wood was still trickling down the sides.

The setting up of the sawmill attracted workmen, settlers, who were supplied with the wood to build their houses and enclose their property. Soon the first house of Brooksville rose from the ground. Others lined up beside it; and so we have the founding of a town.

In the near future, fire, in a single day of great appetite, will devour three quarters of the town. To rebuild it, they will no longer use wood. This will be the age of stone or brick. That is the story of Chicago.

At Brooksville this story has so far only gone as far as the first chapters. The chapters yet to come will never be as interesting as the story of the city of the prairies or the queen of the lakes. You can't have everything. Brooksville is perched on an attractive hill, breathing a pure and

fortifying air, which has caused it to be sought after by sick people; like Cannes and Menton on the shores of France. It has no lake, to mirror the town in its waters; nor rivers, to provide communication with the great centres of commerce. It is said that the railroad should soon bring it out of its isolation.

There is no theater at Brooksville, but, from time to time, a play is put on by amateurs.

A production of this kind, at which I have been present, does not deserve to be forgotten. The actors, recruited among the high society of Brooksville, charming artists indeed and very distinguished actors, played, with a naturalness to which amateurs don't always attain, two small one-act pieces. The show was of course put on in the auditorium of the courthouse. The scene was adorned with draperies of glowing red. But how strange was the lighting! Cigar boxes, nailed to the walls, and filled with candles!

At the most pathetic moments, your attention was sometimes distracted by two slight sounds: dry sounds, but also wet.[sic] The ladies appeared to find this as simple as if the gentlemen had been munching candy. I expected to see a boy go up and down the rows during the intervals, calling out "Here is the program of the two pieces: tobacco plugs flavored with vanilla, or flavored with orange!"

After the performance, one of the actors came forward, announced one last scene, and closed the curtains. A few minutes later they were re-opened, to show all the actors in a group. In the center, Juliet reclined tenderly on Romeo's arm. In front of them, immobile in his white cravat and his frock-coat, was a minister. After a tender little speech, he took Juliet's hand and placed it in that of Romeo; asked both of them if they took each other for man and wife; and, when they said yes, placed his hands on them and blessed them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Part of the play, do you suppose? Not at all! The minister was a real flesh-and-blood minister with all a minister's powers; the marriage was valid by law and custom; divorce or death alone, henceforward, could break it.

The crowd of spectators left the building, the newly-weds among them. Nobody took any notice of them, but the crafty Frenchman felt a certain interest in the future of these fortunate actors in a play whose climax had made them husband and wife. He followed them until he saw them vanish into a house of the age of wood. It must have seemed to them a palace of the age of gold.

We are really backward in France with our questions of civil marriage and church marriage, our contracts, our banns, and . . . our ceremonies of all kinds! In Florida it's as easy to enjoy the rays of a honeymoon as to get a touch of sunburn.

It was a benefit performance, and the object of the benefit was a cemetery! When anyone, by sheer bad luck, dies, they make a point of burying him no matter where: at the edge of a wood, beneath an orange tree or a palm tree. Not under six feet of earth. What a labor that would make for the company of vultures, who, in addition to highway maintenance, have the task of disposing of bodies . . . after burial! To provide the deceased with the place of refuge they

lacked, some people came up with the idea of using a play to obtain a cemetery. They certainly didn't expect to get a marriage out of it.

. . . As Brooksville appeared to offer me all the resources one could reasonably demand of a town on the grass, the capital of a land that was practically wilderness, I resolved to establish there my headquarters for supply and rest, and return there when I was tired from hunting in the woods.

The house where I live is located in the middle of a magnificent orange plantation. On some trees, 15 years old, I counted up to 2500 oranges. When I marvelled that a single tree could support such a weight, they told me that some orange trees bore 10,000 oranges! Those are venerable trees, forty years old.

Every morning I pick two or three golden fruits, frosted by the dew. If one of them appears not to be succulent enough, I throw it away and select another, ripened to perfection by the sun of autumn, full of juice and flavor! The Valencia is no doubt a delicious orange; but you can't beat a Florida orange, picked from the tree with the pearl necklace left by the morning dew! All Nature is at my service. On my passing, a double row of banana trees respectfully bow their large leaves beneath the caresses of the breeze. Rising on their high trunks, the heads of the palm trees protect my own head against the rays of the sun.

My pitch-pine chalet rests on six blocks of seasoned wood 50 centimetres high. It is painted all white, except for the roof, whose wooden tiles are brown. It consists only of a first floor and an attic. In the attic, two rooms have been constructed. The first floor has four: two bedrooms, a drawing-room and a diningroom. Out back is the kitchen, linked to the house by a little wooden bridge. In front is a piazza or covered gallery, as wide as the house, adorned with some climbing plants and some dull-colored flowers.

Under this piazza, a bucket full of water hangs from a small beam. Here comes a visitor. I plunge into this bucket a long spoon ending in a bowl shaped like a cup, and I offer him this nectar as seriously as it would be offered to me if I were to visit someone else. Everyone goes in for passing the cup. It is an Indian custom, or imitated from the Indians; they pass the calumet round as a sign of hospitality. The water in this bucket comes from my cistern, where rain water drains by means of wooden conduits moulded to the gutters of the roof. It is not cold, but, such as it is, I bless Saint Médard for sending it to me, because otherwise I would be obliged to drink the water of the springs, which has a bad taste.

My visitor finds on the piazza a zinc wash-basin, some soap, and a towel, with which to freshen up. I don't invite him to make use of these things, as that might lead him to suppose I thought he might not be clean. But he anticipates my invitation, and washes his face and his hands. He then goes inside, to my bedroom. His eye lights on my hunting boots. He takes off his shoes and tries them on. He finds them too small for him. But he likes my hat; he puts it on his head; it suits him. "How much?" he asks. "It's not for sale," I reply. He sits down without a word.

I have to write something. He comes up to read over my shoulder. Everything of French origin is for him a subject of interest. He takes them up one by one, and asks me what they're for. A Lefauchaux gun arouses his admiration; a gun with ramrod tempts him. Neither object is of any value; but the more he urges me to sell the rifle with the ramrod, the more I feel certain that it's very useful and that I must not part with it. My clothes, my books, my knick-knacks are inspected meticulously. In the end I get to feeling like an Indian tribe, being questioned by a traveller on its habits and customs, and having its arms and clothing examined with care. I am astonished to find myself playing this role, although he seems perfectly at home in his.

Then I, in my turn, ask him questions about his family.

"Are you married? Do you have any children?"

"Three. The youngest was born yesterday. A boy."

"Have you registered his birth? Would you like me to act as witness?"

"What would a witness do?"

"Don't you need a witness when you register a birth? How was it done?"

"Well, the child is entered on the Court House registry like this: A. J. Thomson, sex male, born 1 December 1884."

"Is that all?"

"How much more do you want?"

"His given names in full. The names of his father and mother; and their age, profession, and domicile. And the same for the witnesses."

"All that is unnecessary, dear sir."

As you can see, an American, from his birth, is independent of his family; he is free. So that he may know, later on, how much he took the liberty of weighing when he was born, his weight is announced in the paper, like this: "There has been an increase in the family of Mr. and Mrs. Thomson: a son, weighing 14 pounds." That's how the birth of my visitor's son was recorded in the newspaper, the *Brooksville Register*.

He also tells me that, when he got married, the minister handed him a certificate of the marriage. The minister kept no copy himself; what would have been the point? You don't need to call on the minister to find out if you are married, because you are living together. You would not have a certificate to say that, on the demand of your wife, with whom you had been living for six months, you had been married forcibly and without knowing it.

These customs tend to eliminate illicit ménages and encourage morality. Indeed, it is better to get married right away, in the proper manner, than to find that six months of living together has created a *de facto* marriage.

When you die, said Thomson, there is no death certificate. You fade away without leaving a trace. It's all over; who needs all that scribbling?

But no, it isn't all over. What about inheritance? Who gets what?

Apparently all that is bound to sort itself out, without any public declaration or inventory. Very strange!