A School House that Lives On; The Robles Chronicle Continues

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Four years before Don Vicente Martinez Ybor’s factory produced its first cigar and seven years before Henry B. Plant’s Tampa Bay Hotel held its grand opening ball, Joseph P. "Uncle Dick" Robles and some of his neighbors built a little wooden school house a few miles north of Tampa. It stands today, but not as Uncle Dick and his friends built it.

On Feb. 11, 1870, the day following their wedding, Joseph Paul and Martha Ann Robles homesteaded a 160 acre tract five miles north of what is now downtown Tampa. It is bounded on the north by Sligh Ave.; on the south by Robles Ave. (now Hanna Ave.); on the west by Livingston
When they moved to their new farm, the Robles were the only white people in a square mile. Indians lived in the woods and went on a rampage when settlers traded them "fire water" for hogs. But soon other pioneer families began to settle around the Robles place. The Henry Murphy, the James Morris and the Tom Bourquardez families became neighbors and close friends.

**PARENTS OF 12 CHILDREN**

Between 1871 and 1897, Joseph and Martha Ann Robles parented twelve children, all born on the homestead north of Tampa. Joseph, or Uncle Dick, as most people called him, had received very little schooling but he realized conditions were changing and that some degree of formal education would be necessary if a person expected to cope with the everyday problems created by a developing Florida frontier. Robles deemed it his responsibility as a father to provide his children the education he had not been able to acquire.

Prior to the passage of the 1868 Constitution, Florida had no established
public schools. While the Constitution provided for a public school system and the 1869 school law called for a uniform education system, neither had much effect on southwestern Florida. In the Tampa Bay area education remained the responsibility of individuals or communities. One of Tampa’s early schools was located in the county courthouse, its teacher paid from fees collected from students’ parents. In the 1880’s and 1890’s, schools were rough in appearance with few amenities. On occasion, if funds were low and supplies were limited, students and teachers might find themselves forced to attend classes in a natural setting, hopefully in the shade of a large oak tree. These were the prevailing conditions in 1882 when three of the Robles children began attending classes two days each week.

FIVE MILE WALK TO SCHOOL

Traveling to and from school in Tampa meant a trek of five miles each way through rough woods and sand trails. The children either walked or rode horseback under a blistering summer sun, or through drenching tropical rainstorms, or shivered through bone chilling foggy winter mornings. Uncle Dick Robles realized that even though his children had been born and were being raised on the frontier and that they were used to hardships, these conditions were a little more severe than they should be expected to endure. In addition, the community was expanding and soon, counting his own growing family and those of his neighbors, there would soon be ten, maybe fifteen children of school age. A school close to the settlement must be provided, but how was this to be accomplished?

Joseph P. Robles was a man of action - a doer. He knew the county school system would not build a school house and provide a teacher for a community as small as his. So, with the help of his neighbors, he would build the school.2

The intersection of Livingston and Robles Aves. (now 22nd St. and Hanna Ave.) was the approximate center of the area known as the Robles/Murphy Settlement. Henry Murphy, a friend and neighbor, owned property at the southeast corner of the intersection. In 1882, Robles bought one half acre of this corner and with the help of his brother, Seabron, neighbors, Tom Bourquardez, James Morris and Henry Murphy, purchased the hard pine and cypress lumber needed to build a one room school house.

'MISS GIRTY’ WAS TEACHER

Marion Waldo Robles, one of Uncle Dick’s sons who had attended classes in the old school, wrote in later years: "The lumber was purchased from Mr. Herbert Bartlett’s mill on the Hillsborough River. Mr. Bartlett had built a wooden dam across the river to provide water to turn the wheel that powered his mill. The dam was known as "Old Dam West of 56th Street Bridge". Later it was sold to the Tampa Suburban and Consumers Electric Light and Street Railway Company."

A later entry in Waldo Robles’ journal noted that "a Miss Girty Crilly" was employed as a teacher, her salary paid by the parents of the pupils.

The school’s attendance fluctuated according to the number of school age children residing in the settlement. By 1886 it must have exceeded ten, because it was taken into the Hillsborough County School System and was designated as the Robles-Murphy
Settlement School Number 75 (later changed to Livingston Ave. School).\(^3\)

The policy of the school board at the time was to close down a school if its enrollment was less than ten students. However, at a later date if the need to reopen the school became apparent, The Board could be petitioned to reestablish the facility.\(^4\) This must have been the case of the Robles School, because the minutes of the August 14, 1889 meeting of the School Board showed it had been petitioned and that the "Robles School House Number 75" was reestablished.

**SETTLEMENT GROWS**

As the settlement grew, so did the school's enrollment, and by 1895 the one room school house was too small to accommodate its students. A church had been built on the property by the same group of neighbors that had built the first structure. The School Board entered into an agreement with the congregation whereby the church building could be used as a school Monday through Friday and as a church on Sunday.

Waldo Robles relates:

"In September 1895 the school was moved into the new church building. They moved out the long church benches and installed some new desks and seats. They also used some of the old "one people" desks out of the old school. In later years all the old one piece desks and seats were taken out and new ones of the same type used in other schools were installed by the County School Board."

As in the past the enrollment at Livingston Ave. School No. 75 fluctuated according to the number of school age children residing in the settlement. But by late 1907 the enrollment had reached an all time low - less than ten. The minutes of the Feb. 4, 1908 meeting of the Board of Public Instruction, Hillsborough County, Florida, state:

"In pursuance of a resolution of the Board of Trustees of College Hill Special School Tax School District, this Board ordered that the College Hill and the Livingston Ave. Schools be consolidated at the new Gilchrist Institute on or after February 17, 1908."

So it was, 26 years after the first class was called to order that silence finally settled over the school grounds of the Livingston Ave. School. Soon the church congregation moved to new quarters and the abandonment was complete. The weeds grew about the old buildings as if to engulf them in a green and brown cocoon and the summer rain seeped in around weathered windows and doors. Tropical storms blew away cedar shakes and more water found a way to soil and sear floors and walls within. By 1914 in spite of the ravages of nature and although in a state of disrepair, the two old structures were still standing proud; a monument to the quality of the materials used by their skillful builders.

**MADE GRAVE MARKERS**

John Horace Robles (he was called Horace by his family and friends) was the seventh child born to Joseph Paul and Martha Ann Robles. His birthday was in December 1882, the year his father and neighbors built the old school house. Like all his brothers and sisters he received most of his formal education at the hands of the teachers at the Livingston Ave. School.
During the early 1800's, Horace and his brother Jeremiah were in business together as stone cutters. They made many of the old grave markers that are still standing today in Tampa's Woodlawn Cemetery. In April 1912, Horace Robles and Mattie Hastings Platt were married and moved into a small house in north Tampa. Shortly thereafter, Mattie's mother died and her father, John Wesley Platt moved in with the couple. In the summer of 1913, Mattie was pregnant with her first child. Horace realized his house was growing smaller each minute and he must do something to improve the situation if he and his wife were to raise a family as they had planned. The final blow came when he and his brother were forced to declare bankruptcy. They were the victims of uncollectable debts.

CATTLE DRIVE TO TAMPA

As a young man, John W. Platt raised cattle in the Dade City area. Twice a year he would drive his cattle to the market in Tampa. The drive took several days and one of his regular overnight resting places was in a little abandoned cabin on the bank of a beautiful little lake about 13 miles north of Tampa. He grew to love the beauty, peace and serenity of the place and brought his wife to see it. She too fell in love with the spot and encouraged her husband to buy the property. In the beginning the couple did not establish a home at the lake, but they would come when they could on weekends, stay in the cabin and tend the citrus trees growing on the place.

Horace and his wife had visited the lakeside acreage many times and had agreed it would be a splendid place to establish a home and to raise their family. So they entered into an agreement with John Platt; Horace would build a home on John's land and John would continue to live with the family.

CHRISTMAS DAY 1914

Horace remembered the old school house his father and neighbors had built; the school he had attended many years ago. He was aware of the excellent grade of materials that had gone into the structure. In the spring of 1914 he took what little money he had and bought the old school and church buildings. With help from his brothers and friends, the two buildings were dismantled, loaded on wagons and delivered to the site on the shore of what is now known as Lake Platt. The material from the two buildings was consolidated and from it grew the Horace Robles home that stands today.

Mary Louise Robles Smith, Horace and Mattie's first born, tells of the family's first day at their new home:

"My mother told me that on Christmas Day, 1914, Daddy bundled Mother, Grandpa and me, I was only nine months old, and all our belongings into a wagon and set out for our new home. We arrived late in the afternoon, cold, tired and hungry. Daddy had brought several hens cooped up in a gunny sack with their heads
sticking through holes cut in the side of the sack. When he threw them down from the wagon, an old wild boar, hiding in the nearby palmettos, smelled the chickens and made a swipe at the sack. His tusks took off the head of one of the chickens. Well, Daddy wasn’t going to let that go to waste. He lit the fire in the stove, heated a pail of water and dressed that chicken. Our first Christmas dinner at our new home was that chicken."

Horace and Mattie Robles’ home by the lake, constructed of material from the old Livingston Ave. school house and church buildings was originally built with four rooms, two bed rooms, a living room and a large kitchen that also served as a dining room. Screen porches shaded the north and south sides of the building. Two more daughters were born so, by necessity, the house grew as did the family. In later years a second story was added and the lower floor enlarged. The porches have been glassed in and now almost the entire structure is covered with aluminum siding.

REFUSED TO LET HER DIE

Although its face has been altered, the Livingston Avenue School lives on and continues to be a place of children. Down through the years the old walls have been witness to the birth of one daughter and one grandchild and have vibrated to the child-sounds of three daughters and seven grandchildren.


And so today the old school house, her cypress and hard pine a little more dried and weathered, continues to serve those of the Robles clan. Now owned and occupied by Horace and Mattie’s third daughter, Maurine Robles McTyre, and her husband, John, the house stands tall on the banks of Lake Platt; a monument to Uncle Dick Robles who had the foresight to create her and his son, Horace, who refused to let her die.

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