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SIN CITY, MOONSHINE WHISKEY AND DIVORCE

By PAMELA N. GIBSON



The Village of Manatee, from Manatee Avenue looking west toward "Braidentown," c. 1900.

-Courtesy Manatee County Historical Society

Old Manatee County, created in 1855 from Hillsborough County, originally included modern Sarasota County and a much larger eastern area that became DeSoto County in 1887. Stretching from the Gulf of Mexico to the Kissimmee River, it encompassed 4680 square miles from Hillsborough's southern border to Charlotte Harbor and Lake Okeechobee. This single county was four times the size of Rhode Island and only slightly smaller than Connecticut. The eastern area that became DeSoto County in 1887 was further subdivided in 1921 and portions became Hardee, Charlotte, Highlands and Glades counties.¹

Throughout the Third Seminole War and Civil War, southern Florida remained a frontier with scattered farmsteads and families, small settlements and few, if any, of the amenities of civilized middle class life. By 1926, however, when a devastating hurricane crossed Florida and blew away the excesses of the Great Florida Real Estate

Boom, South Florida had firmly caught up with twentieth century business, economic and social trends.

There has always been a dichotomy in American history, between the contemporary popular view of the self-reliant yeoman farmer, secure on his own land, living a peaceful and prosperous existence, and the reality of farmers buffeted by violence, commercialism and instability. While early dependence on the U.S. army or local militia gave way to dependence on steamboat lines and railroads, the incursion of big business into agriculture never totally exploded the myth of the independent yeoman farmer. The sturdy farmer and self-reliant housewife were staples of local Manatee County newspapers and preachers into the early twentieth century and remained important to the self-image of the people trying to live up to the ideal.

Historians of the frontier and the American South, however, have long recognized the problem of the violence so prevalent throughout the culture. In Manatee County, violence -- domestic, racial and economic -- persisted throughout the change from rough frontier to urbanized coastland with its organized farms and groveland. DeSoto County, remained rural and isolated, with ranching remaining the predominant industry. A small railroad boom coupled with a large phosphate boom in the 1880s spurred citrus and vegetable farming. Although DeSoto County never experienced in full the coastal real estate speculation and population growth, with their attendant



Manatee County Courthouse, Courthouse Square, Bradenton, c. 1900.

-Courtesy Manatee County Historical Society

social changes, violence lurked everywhere, with political or personal feuds, cattle rustling and fence wars plaguing the area throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²

With the availability of records carefully preserved at the Manatee County Historical Records Library as well as at the Manatee, DeSoto and Sarasota county courthouses, it is possible to study families and the consequences of rapid change. Divorce records were selected for study in the hope that their detailed testimony would reveal why certain families in Southwest Florida *failed* to handle stress or success. These tales of human misunderstanding and family tragedy provide many sorrowful, some passionate and a few humorous moments for the reader.³

Divorce records reveal much about family life, including expectations of family and gender roles kinship relations' privacy, economic conditions, relations between generations, romantic love and the relation of the family to the community. Privacy did not always exist in the manner we know it today. The presence of servants, apprentices, cooks, farm or ranch hands, unmarried kin

and paying boarders all contributed to household survival while impinging upon personal privacy. Family life, including arguments, took place before these witnesses. The willingness of these people, whether family, friends or neighbors, to involve themselves in the lives of other families varied from time to time and place to place. Testimony from mothers, fathers, grown children, boarders and neighbors amplify the family stories recorded among the divorce documents.⁴

According to Michael Grossberg, the idea of marriage as a private contract, separate from community needs, developed in the United States shortly after the Revolution. American law had replaced the colonial ideal of "community" with a newer idea of "family" and was now beginning to replace "family" with "the individual" as the heart of legal concern.⁵

And what would these contracting parties, recognized as individuals, expect from marriage? Economically, of course, the husband continued to be responsible for providing the necessary food, clothing, and shelter. The position of the wife, formerly as economic partner in raising cash as well as managing family farm or merchant household, was being replaced in the Victorian era by a new ideal "the cult of true womanhood." Wives were still expected to exercise frugality and keep a proper house, but the upper and middle classes removed the lady of the house from outside economic interests. The home, husband, and children should provide a wide enough sphere of activities.

The Victorian "compassionate ideal" emerged as a mixture of romantic love, mutual respect and sexual gratification. The basis of marriage consisted of individuals, freely choosing partners, based on romantic

love rather than economic necessity. The text of Edward Hudson's petition expresses his understanding of the ideal. Edward Hudson married Sarah E in August 1866 at Milton, Florida. The marriage broke up on July 15, 1874, although Edward had "amply provided for her maintenance and comfort, expending largely of his income for such matters of domestic necessity and earnestly striving to make the defendant comfortable and satisfied in the sacred relationship she had assumed." Even his "repeated testimonials of affection and kindness on his part" [sic] had failed to keep Sarah at home. She "became cold and distant" and left him. When Edward filed for divorce at Bradenton, she had taken refuge in Hillsborough County.⁶

The "work ethic" still held sway over the actual attitudes and behaviors of divorcing couples in Florida. On the southern frontier, the need for a frugal wife to manage the myriad tasks of the household sometimes clashed with the aristocratic "class" ideals instilled into white women in antebellum days. In Old Manatee, while wives' divorce petitions sometimes complained of having to work and support themselves, men often listed both indulgent behavior and providing a comfortable home as part of their justification for relief.⁷

In the 1890s, the divorce rate for the United States stood at just six-tenths of one percent. For Manatee County, the 1890s divorce rate was two percent. By the period from 1901-1915, the United States divorce rate hovered between eight-tenths and one percent. The Manatee County rate hovered near six percent and in DeSoto County was eleven percent. The region manifested a much higher rate than the national average.⁸ But was the process of urbanization itself really responsible for so much marital discord?



Manatee County Courthouse, 1921. Now minus cupola, it forms the central core of the current building.

- Courtesy Manatee County Historical Society

From 1822 - 1881, Florida granted divorces for the following causes: kinship within a prohibited degree, impotence, adultery, bigamy, extreme cruelty, habitual indulgence in violent and ungovernable temper or the willful, obstinate and continued desertion by either party for one year.⁹ In 1892, habitual intemperance was added, while in 1906, a small change was made in the wording: a two year state residency was required for divorce, except in cases of adultery.¹⁰ Causes had to be specified both in the legal language of the statute and in detailed testimony. There was nothing comparable to the modern "No Fault" divorce.

This study included over 1,300 divorce cases. From the first divorce recorded in Manatee County in 1860, there were 718 cases by the end of 1926. DeSoto County produced 462 recorded cases from its creation in 1887 through 1926. Sarasota added 127 cases from 1921 through 1926.

These records revealed three trends. First, a disproportionate number of divorces occurred due to abandonments. Second, complaints of adultery, often accompanied



DeSoto County Courthouse, Arcadia.

- Courtesy Manatee County Historical Society

by abandonments, sometimes involved a wife's entry into professional prostitution. Third, a syndrome appeared in a disproportionate number of divorces involving alcohol, violent temper, cruelty and failure to provide the necessities of life. While any one of the above items alone could have been sufficient for a divorce petition, most appeared together in the petitions. Historically, abandonments led the list of reasons for divorce, far outnumbering any other cause. Among the cases studied, 290 husbands and 278 wives abandoned their marriages. The unfortunate thing about the abandonments is that for all such cases historians lose the other side of the story; whether it was really illness, accident, old age, cruel treatment, lack of love or the search of employment that actually kept the spouses apart. Some wives refused to follow their husbands to Florida. Some husbands fled the responsibilities of providing for a wife and - sometimes many - children.

Eliza Boyett married George W. Boyette in June 1865 at Manatee. She claimed that she "always tried to be a dutiful, affectionate and faithful wife" and "gave him love and the affection of her trusting heart, to make him happy and their home live pleasant and agreeable." He later became quarrelsome,

did not support the children, absented himself, followed intemperate habits and generally lived a dissolute life. After seventeen years of marriage and six children, on July 18, 1882, he finally deserted and abandoned the family. When Eliza finally filed for divorce, seven years later in 1889, she charged him with "a harsh and cruel nature toward his family, violent and ungovernable temper, continued ill treatment and neglect, and an unchaste life." Why did she wait seven years to file her petition for relief? She claimed that she "had tried time and again to induce him to return and be a dutiful husband."

Historians have long considered abandonment as "the poor man's divorce." Along the coast, more wives deserted. In the interior areas, more husbands disappeared. In this study, however, with its focus on adultery, the overall number of abandonments plays a small roll. The concern here is not the number of deserting spouses as much as the two locations where deserting spouses went.

Testimonies reveal the altered states of marriage in the region. In 1866, Adeline Anderson of Manatee married William Anderson in Hillsborough County. They lived together until December 25, 1874, when William committed adultery with Maria Mills and revealed that he had a child of her, born in October of that year. He then deserted and abandoned Adeline and went to Tampa to live. Adeline filed for divorce in 1877. Two years later, also in Hillsborough County, Henry H. Cowart married Roxanna Lyons. They lived together until October 1882, when, according to their landlady Mrs. Martha Stewart, "they-lived in my house as man and wife. She left him in anger. She was willful and left in company with another man for Tampa." In 1893, James L. Wallace described how he and

REASONS FOR DIVORCE				
	VICTORIAN	PROGRESSIVE	BOOMTIME	DESOTO
ABANDONMENT	80%	47%	26%	54%
ADULTERY	38%	21%	18%	13%
CRUELTY/ ABUSE	23%	23%	24%	26%
ALCOHOL	7%	12%	15%	17%
FAILURE TO PROVIDE	13%	18%	16%	23%
NO MORE LOVE	14%	4%	.03%	3%
UNGOVERNABLE TEMPER	37%	9%	8%	18%
OTHER/ MEDICAL	20%	6%	6%	16%

Table 1
Reasons for Divorce
 Multiple causes mentioned in most cases bring the totals to more than 100%.

Georgina Gaskins had married in July 1881 in Georgia and lived together for eleven years until May 1892. She then committed adultery and deserted James to live with George Washington. At the time of James' petition for divorce, she was living in Tampa.

In the new century, John Mitchell of Manatee, partial owner of the wharf in Palmetto, described how he married Delphina McCall in February 1904. She deserted on July 25, 1906 and was found living in Tampa with a man named Moses [last name illegible] "in an open state of adultery." He had found her there in bed

with Moses, and was certain of her infidelity. He filed for divorce although, in the meantime, "someone finally shot Mose," but he "didn't know who did it." Maud Heath married Clarence Eugene Curry in Bradenton in April 1909. While married, they lived with her mother, Mrs. Ellen L. Davis. Her husband "proved to be a drunkard and failed to provide the necessities of life." He committed adultery with a woman named Rosa [last name unknown], also with Maud Johnson of Tampa and other women. He then deserted her and was presumably in Tampa. She filed for her divorce in 1911, the same year Arthur E. Walker filed against his wife Texas. Walker

REASONS FOR DIVORCE AFTER ELIMINATING ALCOHOL-SYNDROME CASES				
	VICTORIAN 68 CASES	PROGRESSIVE 307 CASES	BOOMTIME 343 CASES	DESOTO 465 CASES
ABANDONMENT	80%	47%	26%	54%
ADULTERY	38%	21%	18%	13%
CRUELTY/ ABUSE	16%	11%	.09%	8%
FAILURE TO PROVIDE	.5%	.06%	.09%	6%
NO MORE LOVE	14%	4%	.03%	.3%
UNGOVERNABLE TEMPER	29%	.02%	.06%	8%
OTHER/ MEDICAL				4%

Table 2
Reasons for Divorce After Eliminating Alcohol-Syndrome Cases

had married her in April 1907 and, although "he provided as best as he could," Texas deserted him in December 1909. Texas received the summons in Tampa and answered, but did not contest the divorce. In the first thirty-four years of available records, a noticeable pattern developed. Tampa is either the scene of the crime or the refuge for sinning spouses.

References cited in many cases scattered across the years testify to deserting husbands who were met by acquaintances while wandering the streets of Tampa while drunk. Spotted by male relatives or acquaintances,

deserting husbands were reported to their waiting wives and the divorce lawyers. Many male travelers came forward to give testimony as official witnesses in the divorce trials.

Tampa played its part in adultery cases as well. Bunnie Dean Van Brunt ("not yet twenty one"), married Virgil E Ely in Tallahassee in January 1910. He was about thirty-six at the time. He stayed at Tampa and kept sending her away, although "she was kind and affectionate." Her husband finally sent her a letter refusing to take her back because he could not support her.

Things had not changed much from the earlier cases. Bunnie filed for divorce in 1912, the same year that Lula Mitchell, aged thirty-four, filed for divorce from Thomas Mitchell. They had wed in May 1905 in Manatee. In May 1907 Thomas left for Tampa with another woman and consistently refused to support Lula.

The portrait of adultery becomes more vivid in the case of husband Vivian Drymond of Sarasota-on-the-Bay. He married Susie M. Drymon in mid-1912 and was working to build a home during the time they were married. Meanwhile, they lived at his brother's home. According to witness Charles A. Goins [or Gocio], "She acted abusive and hateful and it affected his health and happiness." Vivian did indeed claim to have lost twenty-four pounds in the sixth months of marriage. Susie even took the dog to bed, rather than her husband. Susie left in early 1913 and went to her sister's in Port Tampa. She had previously been in a house of ill-fame in Tampa - a sailor had told her husband that he knew "Little Sue" mighty well. She was older, had already been twice married and twice divorced.

Florence Chancy, after her marriage to Isaac in June 1885, "got into the habit of going out nights." Her excursions sometimes lasted for several days. Isaac was running a blacksmith shop in Tampa at the time of the marriage and later worked on railroad cars. Isaac claimed that he provided well for her." Florence, however, claimed she was having a pretty good time with a Spaniard from a cigar factory" and told her husband "he was no-account and she like the Spaniard better." According to Isaac's nephew Joe Chancey and neighbor Lou Bell, Florence deserted February 15, 1912.

Histories of professional prostitution in both England and the United States point out that

the lack of education for women, combined with a minimum of job opportunities, left many women facing acute poverty or outright starvation. If prostitution was a form of exploitation, it was the best paying form of exploitation available. Poverty, for the women, must always be recognized as the strongest inducement to follow the "oldest profession." Yet the inducement to leave home, when there was some security available along with a socially approved status, must have come from some other source. If not cruelty at home, what then drove them out -- and why *Tampa*?

The second part of the question above may be easier to answer with certainty. The "Sin City Centers" included Tampa, sometimes listed with more precision as either Port Tampa or Ybor City, joined later by Punta Gorda, with a few later references to Plant City and Bradenton.

Tampa, of course, had been well served by steamboat lines since the end of the Civil War and had long served as the economic and transportation hub for southwest Florida and the interior. Finding some deserting spouses relocating in Punta Gorda helped reveal the major link in the chain played by the railroads in aiding and abetting divorce causes and desertions. Punta Gorda also boasted a fishing port and water access to the interior along the Peace River. By 1886, it was the terminal point of the Florida Southern Railroad, which gave it connections to Tampa and Jacksonville, also via the Peace River valley. A number of DeSoto County's deserting spouses and adulterers made their way there, but Punta Gorda still remained a very small-town version of Sin City until the time of the First World War.

Testimony by abandoned husbands described the discovery of their wives in

various Tampa "bawdy houses" and "houses of ill repute."¹¹ "Some unsuspecting "lewd house" customers were shocked to discover "Mrs. So and So" drinking and "acting in a lewd manner" in the next room. These male visitors, far from being ashamed of their own behavior, did their duty and reported the "fallen ladies" to their abandoned relatives. Well before the celebrated excesses of the Spanish-American War of 1898, Tampa had earned its "sin city" reputation.

Seaports offering alcohol and sporting houses had long served as centers of vice. The houses of Pensacola, while never as notorious as New Orleans, had lured sailors to Florida since the early 1800s. They had maintained their customs and reputation well into the twentieth century. Jacksonville and Pensacola remained the true Babylons of Florida, with the U.S. Navy aiding merchant seamen in building their reputations.¹² Southwest Florida's "sin cities" never approached Pensacola in customer base, although Tampa certainly seemed to have mastered the concept of "market share."

What gave Tampa its edge was the arrival of the railroad, which came at approximately the same time as the temperance movement arose and "habitual intemperance" became legal grounds for divorce in Florida. Henry Bradley Plant brought the South Florida Railroad to Tampa in December 1883. The Florida Southern Railroad pierced the interior, connecting Tampa to Charlotte Harbor. Reorganized in 1881, construction began south of Bartow in July 1885. The line marched to Ft. Ogden by August, arrived in Arcadia in March 1886 and reached Punta Gorda on July 24, 1886. Arcadia incorporated into a town on December 6, 1886, just in time to become

the county seat of newly created DeSoto County in 1887.¹³

This new marvel carried whiskey as well as the transient population of railroad workers and large numbers of new settlers. The railroads provided easy mobility to the exciting outside world, to shopping, to regional church affairs, to war reunions, celebrations at expositions in the larger cities. They also opened up new industries such as logging and turpentine and truck gardening. Railroads, therefore, form the link with the third theme pervading the divorce records: the alcohol syndrome. The influx of unattached men who provided the hard labor for the naval stores provided a market for liquor. The thirsty could now go to places where the railroads joined the water and where moonshine whiskey and imported rum ran freely. Tampa or Punta Gorda offered the widest range of illicit opportunities on the lower Gulf Coast.

For the coastal areas, a local railway had chugged between Manatee Town and Sarasota since 1892. In 1902, the Seaboard Air Line Railway finally bridged the Manatee River, connecting the west coast settlements to Tampa. Quick transport to the mercantile centers became as usual for the citizens of Sarasota, Braidentown and Palmetto as for the citizens of Arcadia or Bartow.

Railroad provided the connection between the sin cities and the availability of whiskey. While abandonment clearly led the list of divorce causes, alcohol surely played its part in scattering families, increasing the need for social aid and protection from the cruel and violent "drunkard." The rise of the Temperance Movement and its strong following in Southwest Florida was, in part, a consequence of the abuse of alcohol.¹⁴

Scholars have long stressed the role played by the manufacture of liquors in the southern rural culture. The pioneer population of Old Manatee County at the end of the Civil War was drawn predominantly from Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi. In Florida, as across the South, liquor was an accepted part of the pioneer lifestyle.¹⁵

Prohibition sentiment was also revealed by the 1897 election in Manatee County. The dry forces overwhelmed the wet votes, 417 against 558, thus outlawing saloons.¹⁶ But the temperance movement in Manatee was essentially weak. In September 1897, Sheriff Thomas Easterling petitioned "the parties who have been selling grape cider and other drugs, believed to be intoxicating" requesting them to stop selling what was actually a cheap grade of wine. Public intoxication, "with its annoyance and unpleasantness," angered the respectable element of Bradenton.¹⁷ Indeed the Grand Jury had discovered a rise in intoxication and the selling of liquors the preceding April, which in their judgment, "was productive of nine-tenths of the crimes which have been committed."¹⁸

North Florida, near Jacksonville, held a deserved reputation for producing a fiery, almost tasteless moonshine "made to sell, not to drink." Purity was not considered and the result occasionally killed the drinker.¹⁹ Prior to the arrival of the railroad, local crackers followed the southern tradition utilizing the local sugarcane crop for moonshine "starter." A supply of pottery jugs or kerosene cans were all they needed. Until the arrival of the railroad provided easier access to a more powerful brew, the arrival of railroad workers and new settlers provided the liquor suppliers with a steady clientele.

In rural Florida, before the days of autos and air conditioned movie theaters, entertainment was limited to church revivals, socials, picnics, boat excursions -- and drinking -- and adultery. As with the divorces caused by abandonment and adultery, the key point here is not simply the number of drinkers or adulterers, but where they got the liquor to drink and why so many adulterous spouses wound up in the "sin cities."

In May 1906, Jackson S. Driggers of Palmetto married Alice Whidden.²⁰ His divorce petition recorded that "he was good and dutiful and furnished as good a home as his station in life could afford." Nevertheless, Alice deserted Jackson. The 1912 court summons had to be sent to Alice while she was "living at a house of ill-fame in West Tampa, or Ybor City."

Charles W Scudder of Bradenton related his story of his marriage to Mary E. Reigles in August 1904 and their move to Florida in October 1912. On 19 November 1913, Mary had intercourse with J.J. Jennings of Sarasota. Charles felt "forced to refuse to live any longer with her." She moved to Tampa, posing as "Miss Scott" and had again committed adultery, this time with Oscar Lamb. In an all too familiar scenario, Leffie E Lowe of DeSoto County married Minnie Lowe in 1913. Barely two months later, she deserted and "joined a house of prostitution in Tampa," where she committed adultery many times.

The sporting houses provided more than a haven for runaway wives. All reports indicate that they were places where the liquor flowed freely. Yet the careless manufacture of large quantities of cheap whiskeys, exactly the sort of white liquor which would have been imported by rail and served in such houses, posed an element of

grave danger. The problem began at the still. Illicit, open-air distilleries could be unsanitary, with leaves or pollen adding wild yeasts to the air. During production, these yeasts did not form pure ethyl alcohol, but instead created acetic acid, that is, vinegar, along with some ethyl. As the mixture of ethyl alcohol, water and vinegar passed soldered joints in the still, doublerfilter and condenser, the vinegar dissolved the lead from the lead solder, forming lead acetate. This poison carried over into the finished product.

Lead collects in the body over a period of time. It attacks the brain, liver and other vital organs. Small amounts create spasms, blindness, bleeding lips, sores and other permanent damage. Sooner or later, the buildup of lead results in death.²¹ The brain damage associated with the dangerous whiskeys and heavy intoxication of too much rum match descriptions of behavior in the spouse and witness testimony of the Old Manatee area divorce cases. Recurrent testimony strongly suggests that the strength of the whiskey circulating in Southwest Florida not only served to make the partakers drunk, it began addiction from the first drink. Continued use, if even only moderate use, induced brain damage and affected behavior. A number of husbands were cited as having lost their jobs "due to drink." Spouses complained of week long drinking binges, which exhausted family resources. Screaming outbursts, threats, beating wives or children accompanied at-home drinking bouts or resulted when the drunk arrived home. Some women beat their children or attacked their husbands.

The husbands described in the divorce records usually "broke out" or "went on a binge" after payday. Once at home, the cruel treatment of the family began. This liquor was almost always specified as "whiskey"

by family members and witnesses. It was obviously readily available to the men at or near places they were paid or near the railroad they used to return home.

The cumulative effect of the alcohol, although always present, was slower to show in outbursts of temper and cruelty for those whose drinking was limited. Nevertheless, the long-term cruelty and violence associated in the court records with alcohol abuse was all too common. Additional testimony, such as the loss of a job caused by excessive drinking, substantiates the link between drink and marital failures. The presence of liquor in a society does not automatically cause either alcoholism or crime or divorce. But the addictive effects of liquor in southwest Florida, creating the continual craving for more drinks, endangered relationships. This addictive property of the drink represents one of the keys to unraveling the connection between the Sin Cities with the Old Manatee area divorce rates. Another is, of course, that the opportunities of legal divorce provided an escape from the cruelty of an alcoholic spouse without recourse to abandonment.

Even after 1892, when "habitual intemperance" became legal grounds for granting a divorce in Florida, alcohol was never given as the single reason for divorce. From the records, the presence of an "alcohol syndrome" among drinking spouses became obvious. Many legal petitions for relief through divorce combined "habitual intemperance," "extreme cruelty," "violent and ungovernable temper" and "failure to provide the necessities of life." The testimonies, spread out over the years and among many attorneys across the region, support the idea of a menacing alcoholism loose in society. It is unlikely that a few clever divorce attorneys simply fitted all cases into a winning format of legal phraseology.

Some pre-1892 cases based on "cruelty" charges and many of the 37% of cases citing "violent and ungovernable temper" bear such striking resemblance to later alcohol cases that they would have been included in an "habitual intemperance" category had one been available. Indeed, *every* Progressive era case that listed habitual intemperance as a cause also listed extreme cruelty.

Martha Locklear married Edwin B. Hogan in Bradenton in December 1891. They lived together, raising vegetables until April 1908, when she deserted and went to Tampa. She explained that she *had* to leave for her safety, when he tried to kill her after she found him passed out under the house. He was shiftless, but in 1911 he still had thirteen head of cattle and five acres of land, which could be used to provide for her and the children.

Estella Campbell of Sarasota was a "true and faithful wife" to Guss after their marriage in May 1910, "except at such times as the acts and conducts of said defendant did prevent her." He was "a habitual drunkard" who used all his money and taking hers. He beat her and failed to provide for her. At the time of the divorce, in 1913, he was under arrest for cutting her throat, "not fatally, but painfully." She had two witnesses to verify her story.

Few husbands mentioned intemperance as a wife's marital failure. Considering some of the ingredients in patent medicines and the "ladies' restoratives" of the time, this seems unusual. Instead, temper, adultery and abandonment represent the charges hurled at wives. But what of those wives who, whether for sport or medicine, "took to drinking"? How were they supplied and where could they go to drink? How could

they, usually poor almost always cash-poor, have paid for a steady supply of drink?

Women who wished to drink, finding themselves homebound, would have a harder problem than the husband who "broke loose" on payday. To accept a drink from a boarder or neighbor would calm the conscience as well as slake the thirst. Payment for the drink could be made via adultery. Given the addictive quality of the whiskey apparent from the multitude of court records, it is reasonable to suppose many of the abandonments were not simple cases of ladies tired of cooking or tired of love. To insure a steady supply, a woman who truly required regular doses of whiskey could follow her supplier to Tampa or Punta Gorda. Once she became a "fallen woman" at home, there was less resistance to becoming "professional" as long as there was alcohol to suppress the resistance. It could well have appeared to some ladies as a desirable alternative to cooking over a hot Florida farmhouse stove.

John Renfroe, age 38, was a neighbor and witness for L.J. Byrd of Punta Gorda in his case against Viola Byrd. Married in DeSoto County in March 1905, L.J. claimed Viola drank and had a violent temper. In January 1910 she deserted. John's testimony stated bluntly that "she drank *whiskey*."

All of this remains speculation unless comparison of the alcohol syndrome cases can be checked against the total number of divorce cases specifying cruelty, temper and failure to provide.²² In Victorian era Manatee County, "extreme cruelty" was cited in 23% of the total divorce cases. Subtracting those cases known to be alcohol related, however, leaves only 16% of all Victorian cases involving cruelty. Also because alcohol was not accepted by the state as a separate cause for divorce until

1892, it remained unspecified in the earlier cases. Although it must remain unproven, the overall number of cruelty cases not involving alcohol could well be even smaller.

The Women's Christian Temperance Union organized a chapter in Manatee County during the Progressive era. Yet cruelty continued to be seen in 23% of cases. Worse, for the marriages involved, the percentage of cruelty cases remaining after subtracting those known to involve "whiskey" is even lower - only 11 % of the total cases in the Progressive era - meaning alcohol was a growing social problem involving serious damage to domestic peace. It became, at least, more noticeable now that the state accepted it as cause and encouraged mention of it in divorce petitions.

Surely, Federal Prohibition, in place by 1920, should have had some effect in curbing alcohol use, if for no other reason than by slowing down distribution via saloons and other open channels. Nevertheless, in Boorntime Manatee County, the rate of cruelty cases rose to 24% of overall divorces. Cruelty flourished and more alcohol-instigated damage occurred in marriages during the height of Prohibition in Florida. Society suffered, if a healthy society is measured by respectful, loving behavior within stable marriages. Whether such ideals had previously been the norm, or whether cruelty and alcohol had flourished behind closed doors for lack of a legal escape such as divorce, it was unquestionably damaging late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century families in Southwest Florida.

The need to drink, whether instilled into the body by a "bad batch" of moonshine or long term use of properly distilled and aged alcohol, produced an addiction. The railroad

termini and port cities, Tampa and Punta Gorda, offered the most convenient sources of liquor. The number of abandonments caused by whiskey will never be known, since alcohol use was not always known or allowed by the state as a cause for divorce. In cases involving adultery along with intoxication, the adultery charges did not require the state's usual two year wait for the divorce process. Specifying adultery, therefore, saved time for those seeking their freedom from a doomed marriage. The presence of Manatee and DeSoto county women drinking as well as working in the brothels of the whiskey cities suggest that alcohol, rather than boredom or a mere lust for adventure, contributed to desertions. The work of the WCTU, so prominent in Southwest Florida's newspapers from the 1890s on, failed to stem the continuing family and social damage.

It is no longer enough for historians to simply acknowledge that the South had a tradition of alcohol manufacture and use and that Southern society was outwardly violent. Nor is it enough to state that men were traditionally violent to women or exploited them. A search for the reasons behind the violence, both social and domestic, is needed. In southwest Florida, the destabilizing element for marriages was not politics, nor poverty alone, but alcohol with its accompanying syndrome of violence. Crime, prostitution and family violence followed in its wake. The study of the effect of alcohol on other known Southern violence and its effect on children who grew up as children of alcoholics, along with their later effect on the southern families and society is an area that needs a great deal more work.

ENDNOTES

¹ Joe G. Warner. *Biscuits and Taters: a History of Cattle Ranching in Manatee County* (St. Petersburg, 1980).

² Canter Brown, Jr., *Florida Peace River Frontier* (Orlando, 1991), 266-281, 312 - 316.

³ Florida law did not permit simply separations "from bed and board." All divorces granted were complete divorces "from marriage," that is, fully ending all legal bonds between the parties. Researchers studying the history of divorce in Florida have several advantages. Many record depositories saved or microfilmed the original records. Florida law, since the legislature gave the power of divorce to the chancery courts in 1828, required not only that petitions for divorce cite the legal reason for the plea, but each petitioner must also supply full details of the events surrounding the marriage and the actual conditions from which they sought relief.

⁴ Nancy F. Cott, "Eighteenth Century Family and Social Life Revealed in Massachusetts Divorce Records," *A Heritage of Her Own: Toward a New Social History of American Women*. Nancy E Cott and Elizabeth F. Pleck, eds. (New York, 1979), 107 - 135

⁵ Michael Grossberg. *Governing the Hearth: Law and the Family in Nineteenth Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1985.)

⁶ A note on the records and breakoff points for the eras may be in order. In Manatee County, the original records for the years 1860 through 1893 are still preserved in the Manatee County Historical Records Library, which serves as the county archive. This set the range of dates for the "Victorian" era. Chancery records from 1894 to the present are on microfilm at the office of the Clerk of the Circuit Court in the basement of the Manatee County courthouse. The second record book ends with 1916, a convenient point at which to end the "Progressive" era, just prior to American entry into the First World War in 1917. The last period, encompassing both war and "boom", therefore runs from 1917 through 1926. Sarasota county has microfilmed the index volumes of its early records, beginning in 1921 and most 1940 records are microfilmed in full. However, the original copies of the early divorce records seem to have failed to survive the move to the new high-security county records center. Some information, as well as the total number of cases, could be gleaned from the indexed information. DeSoto County's records, all original for these years, remain stored in the vault of

the office of the DeSoto County Clerk of the Circuit Court. Some records were unavailable due to stuck or unreachable drawers, but almost all cases were checked.

⁷ Robert L. Griswold, *Family and Divorce in California, 1850-1890* (Albany, NY, 1982). California is a very good state to compare to Florida. Both states urbanized fairly late with "ready made" developments, suburbs and cities born of the new mobility of the post-Civil War era. Both states lacked the strong industrial traditions of the North in the 1870 - 1920 period, although Florida remained far less industrialized. Also see Elaine Tyler May's wonderful work on marriage expectations, *Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America* (Chicago, 1980) and William L. O' Neill's *Divorce in the Progressive Era* (New Haven, CN, 1987).

⁸ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, "Marriage Rate and Divorce, 1920 - 1970," items B 214 - 220 in *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*. 1, 48, 64. Also see Harry Hansen, ed., *The World Almanac and Book of Facts for 1958* (New York, 1958), M3.

⁹ James McClellan. *A Digest of the Laws of Florida, 1822-1881*. (Tallahassee, 1880.

¹⁰ *Revised Statutes of Florida*, 1892 (Jacksonville, 1892).

¹¹ This terminology varies among witnesses, husbands and lawyers, but is interchangeable.

¹² James R. McGovern, "'Sporting Life on the Line;' Prostitution in Progressive Era Pensacola," *Florida Historical Quarterly* LIV (October 1975), 131 - 144.

¹³ Anthony P. Pizzo, *Tampa Town, 1824 - 1886* (Tampa, 1968), 81 - 82 and Gary R. Mormino and Anthony P. Pizzo. *Tampa: the Treasure City* (Tulsa, OK, 1983). Also Canter Brown, Jr., *Florida's Peace River Frontier*, 268 - 291.

¹⁴ Heather C. R. McClenahan, "A Diarist's Tale: Roby McFarlan's Tampa, 1887 - 1888," *Tampa Bay History* 15 (Spring/Summer 1993), 529.

¹⁵ Grady McWhiney. *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways In the Old South* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 1988), 92, 128 and Joseph Earl Dabney, *Mountain Spirits: A Chronicle of Corn Whiskey from King James Ulster Plantations*

to *America's Appalachians and the Moonshine Life* (New York, 1974), 224.

¹⁶ "No Saloon," *Manatee River Journal* November 4, 1897, 2

¹⁷ "A Popular Movement," *Manatee River Journal*, September 17, 1898, 2.

¹⁸ "Grand jury Presentments," *Manatee River Journal*, April 14, 1898, 2.

¹⁹ Dabney, *Mountain Spirits*, 225.

²⁰ Eleven divorce cases involved members of the Whidden family. These cases ranged over time from 1893 through 1924 and included family members as complainants, defendants and witnesses.

²¹ Dabney, *Mountain Spirits*, 223-224.

²² Some file folders in Manatee and Desoto Counties fall to contain full petitions or witness testimony. They were counted as divorces for a longer study of social trends but could not be included here in the count of reasons for divorce.