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KITTIE M. LEA: A Pioneer Woman’s Reminiscences of Life’s Daily Struggle and the "Straggling Town" of Tampa

Jennifer Tyson

An array of sepia photographs from many decades past lay strewn about Judge Crockett Farnell’s Clearwater home, helping to bring the story into focus in my mind. It is the life of Kittie Martin Lea, Judge Farnell’s great-grandmother. A woman of amazingly strong character, fitting for a pioneer who came to Florida at the age of 22 with her husband and three young sons, who eked out a respectable life for her boys and generations of the family that followed.

Having read The Reminiscences of Kittie M. Lea, 1877-1891, I was familiar with this woman’s unwavering spirit in the face of extreme adversity. Her diary chronicles the day the Leas arrived in Jacksonville, ready to stake their claim on Florida’s mostly unsettled land. She relates in grainy detail their arduous pioneer life of settlement in Sumter County, the cruelties of Florida’s yellow fever epidemic of 1887-88, and ends two years later with the family’s comfortable life in Tampa. Kittie Lea’s memoir reveals a personal account of her life in Jacksonville and Tampa, a place she describes as a "town" with only one red brick house within its borders. It is also a valuable source of information regarding doctors’ and citizens’ wild speculation on the prevention and treatment of yellow fever before the actual perpetrator of the dreaded disease, the "treetop mosquito," had been widely accepted by those in the medical profession.

Of the family photos once hidden by dust and time in Judge Farnell’s closet, one stands out among the rest. This one shows Kittie’s innocent teenage eyes as she sits for a portrait in Mobile, Alabama, the place she and her husband’s families had called home since before the Civil War. Yet another photo is that of the same woman, this one taken in Tampa. She is decidedly older and appears steady - a woman who’s seen it all.

Traveling by ferry from Jacksonville in 1877, the Leas arrived in Yahala, a small town near Leesburg. They were much like countless other settlers in Florida during the late nineteenth century as they made their way with much hope and trepidation into unknown territory from a world of abundance. Having come from a well-to-do background, Mr. Henry Clinton Lea longed for a place where his family could possibly start an orange grove, and "live and plan" for themselves alone. "It would be hard sailing for several years . . . but soon we would be to ourselves, just ourselves to live and plan for," Kittie writes. " . . . ‘Kittie it would be heaven to me’” was how Kittie remembered her husband’s words, "So we began to get ready." A sense of promise permeated the undeveloped state, and Kittie recounts Mr. Lea’s shared opinion, "It won’t be long before we have railroads, then tourists . . . I feel this in my bones." When speaking of the abundant game, fish, and grove land, Kittie explains hopefully, "Now you can see we had something to build our castles on.”

Like many other pioneers they watched set up homes in Central Florida, Mr. Lea came from a family of stature. He had received his college degree, served the Confederacy during the Civil War, and even assisted in, and narrowly escaped, Southern efforts to overtake Nicaragua prior to the Civil War.
Kittie, herself, was from a respected family in Mobile, but Yahala was unsettled land; virtually devoid of the culture and refinement she and her husband had grown accustomed to. Though Kittie anticipated the dramatic changes pioneer life would hold in store for her, she was unaware of the strength she would find within herself as she faced such trying times.

Describing the conditions her family would have to endure as they took a glimpse of their first homestead, Kittie tells of a one-room house, ten feet by twelve, with two glass windows. That very day, only after her husband had left the house and the children were occupied did she put aside her veneer of content and begin to sob. "I looked hack at house, around in the move." every direction for a hill, a feeling of utter desolation came over me and without realizing it I was crying, tears running down my face and sobs made me helpless. I could not think. I felt as if I was in a dungeon or pit, there was no way of seeing or getting out. Never before or since have I had such a feeling of helplessness." This was only the first in a series of moments in Kittie’s new life that would be filled with despair.

Learning to avoid alligators, for this was and still is "gator country," as well as keep and clean her house and children in what could certainly be considered primitive conditions, were daily triumphs for Kittie. However, the death of her youngest son in her first short pioneering year would test her will like nothing had before.

While playing alongside his brothers, Algernon and "William, five-year-old Henry called out to his mother that he’d found something on the ground to play with. Recognizing the small object to be a corroded bullet, she sternly warned him not to place it in his mouth. After those words of caution, however, Henry called out that he had swallowed the bullet. "Mama, I am going to die. Don’t know why I put it in my mouth, but went right down my stomach, couldn’t get it out." Kittie frantically sent for a doctor as she realized the severity of the situation. She remembers that despite the care Henry’s condition worsened, and "In a few days one eye was crossed, he said, ‘Momma when I look at you I see two Mamma’s.’" Within a matter of days, Kittie states, "Henry did not know us." At one point, both Kittie and Mr. Lea sat by their child’s bed and watched helplessly as "Henry opened his eyes and looked at us, the dearest smile came over his face. He said, ‘Papa, Mama, Mama,’ as the breath left his
Kittie M. Lea with her son William, his wife Janie, and their two daughters, Kittie and Jane. From left to right: Kittie’s granddaughter Kittie R., Kittie M. Lea, William’s wife Jane, son William, and granddaughter Jane Lea. Photograph taken approximately 1915. (Courtesy Judge Crockett Farnell)
precious body. OH! He knew us and said Mama last, yes, Mama last, and all was well with our little man." Though grief poured over her, Kittie realized, "All his life he was my comforter and in this time of such great sorrow I realized that God sent him to me to give me strength to do the work I was sent to do."4

Soon after Henry's death, the Leas decided it best to move into "town," that being the more populated area of Yahala. Their unsuccessful attempts to begin a profitable grove of their own and a longing for closer neighborly companionship prompted the move.5

Having held herself and her family together after Henry's sudden death, Kittie did not know that her courage would he tried again so soon. Though knowing full well of her husband's "problem with drink" as he struggled to find work aiding other settlers' groves or through various odd jobs, she trusted Mr. Lea completely when he made a promise to her never to take another sip of alcohol. She was to find out otherwise when, walking through the town, she looked inside the Yahala store and recognized Mr. Lea sitting at the bar, with full drink in hand. During a time when the mere presence of a proper lady inside a drinking establishment was abhorred, Kittie writes, "I rallied, walked into the store . . . directly to Smith who was serving the drinks and asked, 'Chauncey I want a drink.'" After downing this fateful glass, Kittie "walked out without right or left." Only a few moments later did Mr. Lea meet her at home and state, "I am disgraced forever, can't raise my head or look a man in the face." He then promised her, "if you will never let me see you take another drink, you shall never see me take another."6

While this occasion proves Kittie's virtue, tenacity, and strength, she had her moments of weakness as well. More than once Kittie wrote of times when her family's venture was still new, the children still small, and her will tested to its limits; times when she felt it would be easier to end her misery by succumbing to the waters of Lake Harris near their home. Her husband's love of drinking, the constant trials of moving and starting new homesteads from virtually nothing but a few pieces of furniture and her will became too much for Kittie to cope with. The loneliness she found living in the Florida wilderness - when her closest neighbor was a mile and a half away - and the knowledge that her once wealthy and cultured life was seemingly forever behind her merely compounded the problem. She writes, "I took my three babies and went down to the river bank, crawling out on overhanging roots of Cypress trees and begged God to take the four of us. I could not see a ray of light as to the future, I was a coward, couldn't think or plan, so would the Lord only take us as we sat quiet, all cuddled up close." Kittie tells of the grace of God infringing on her feelings of desperation the split second before she acted on her thoughts. It was the thought of her children that ripped through her trancelike state. "I looked and Will, the baby, and Algernon were asleep. So peaceful and trusting in me their little faces looked . . . The black waves of discouragement rolled away, the beauty of the shore and the river, that I had gone to in deep despair, began to shine out . . . I crept back with Algie and Will in my arms, guiding Henry, until we were on the ground, and there stood Mr. Lea, as pale as death. He put his arms around the babies and me, held me to him without a word, I could hear his heart beat in great throbs."7
Soon after the Leas moved from the wilderness of Yahala to the more populated area of the town, the overwhelming trials of harsh pioneer life subsided greatly. They were in the company of other newcomers "gifted in all lines" and participated in "musical theatricals."8 Culture and company were two of Kittie’s greatest comforts, setting her tired heart at ease.

In the early 1880s, the Lea family moved to a larger home in Blue Springs. It was there that they would have the pleasure of living in a home far from their original humble beginnings in Yahala, for this one was complete with five rooms, a hall, and a wide front porch. It was also in Blue Springs that they encountered numerous other settlers from all parts of the United States, as well as foreign countries. Ironically, Kittie states, "the axe and saw could be heard from daylight to dark . . . the outlook was dismal for city folks. They were afraid of everything. Sunk a lot of money, went back to city life after three years."9 Despite her earlier fears, it was these new people who were now afraid of "everything." Clearly, this excerpt sheds light on Kittie’s developing mind-set that she and her family were an integral part of the land, not to be separated from it by heading back to their past lives of comfort and culture.

All was not well for long. Henry Lea could rarely find steady work and Kittie was stricken with malaria in 1887, ten years after arriving in Florida. Upon a chance meeting with her Aunt and Uncle, Mr. and Mrs. John Chapman of Plymouth, Florida, Kittie decided to rest under their care as Mr. Lea and the boys, both in their teens, set forth to find a home in Tampa. In pursuit of better financial conditions and employment, the Leas’ hopes were set on this burgeoning town.

Following her family’s move to Tampa, Kittie floated along the Hillsborough River in a boat lined with pillows and blankets, as she recovered from her bout with malaria. She reveled in the relief the sun and fresh air brought her and the beautiful landscape surrounding the area as the boys swan nearby. It is in this section of the memoir that Kittie describes Tampa as a "straggling town," and her husband confessed, "I feel like a coward, but I have walked the streets and tried [to find work] ‘till I am hacked. Such a small town I don’t believe there is a chance for me."10

Yet another testament to the limited development of Tampa in 1887 is Kittie’s dismay that no bridge crossed the Hillsborough River, but only a ferry that crossed at a just one point near a hotel. She also states in her memoir that there were few homes on the west side of the river as it was mostly forest and orange groves. Primarily, Kittie states, bands of "gypsy camps" lived along the east side.

The Leas chose to reside downtown at 705 Jackson Street, at the Pierce Street intersection. This large home was not all their own, however, but a boarding house in which they paid rent to the owners, Mr. and Mrs. Hubbs. As Mr. Lea’s various attempts at employment with lumber and shipping businesses did not provide sufficient income to cover the expenses of rent and furniture, Kittie began cooking the owners’ daily meals.

At this time, Jackson Street had no sidewalks or paving, and as Kittie describes, "this part of town had not more than a thousand inhabitants."11

In August of 1887, just a few months after moving to Tampa, "Mr. Lea anticipated yellow fever" in the growing town due to a
"recent epidemic in Key West." Growth in Tampa was to come to a temporary stand still, as Mr. Lea’s worst fears were confirmed. Charlie Turk, a man living merely a few streets down from the Leas, was the first known stricken and also the first in Tampa to die of the disease. Residing at Jackson and Florida Avenue, Turk was a merchant from Key West who had transported fruit into the port town. With his goods came the mosquito classified as *Aedes aegypti*, later proven to be the carrier of the dreaded disease. As the disease began to spread, citizens of Tampa who could afford the cost fled to northern cities, and those who could not fled into the woods to escape exposure to the fever that was believed to come from contagious victims or filth and squalor.

Though Dr. John P. Wall of Tampa had dedicated much of his life to proving that the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito was the carrier of yellow fever, his findings were not generally accepted by medical professionals or even citizens who respected his views during the time of the epidemic. This can clearly be presumed from reading Kittie’s memoir, as she states that even though Dr. Wall was the Leas’ doctor during the epidemic as well as during her illness with malaria, she and the rest of the city maintained no clear cut theory of how the disease was contracted. There was a "hush and a feeling of dread as to who the unseen enemy with the touch of death would touch next . . . not sure why or where it would be next." Not a word of caution toward mosquitoes can be found in her memoir.

There was a general belief held by Kittie and fellow Tampa residents, however, and throughout the South, that heat exacerbated the fever’s spread. This was certainly the case, but not because the noxious fumes of garbage were heightened during this period, thus causing yellow fever as one common theory proclaimed. Rather, it was because the disease-carrying mosquito thrives in the heat, and was most often introduced to Americans through vessels from South America and the Caribbean. In Tampa, as well as in other cities in Florida, including Jacksonville, the epidemic did not end during the mild winter of 1887. Instead, the fever raged on into the next year like a "forest fire." Kittie states, it would "blaze up . . . break out in unexpected spots . . . then die down for a few days, when we would hear of another case, so the dread of it never left us."

While some believed outrageous speculation such as the infection spread underground at a rate of three feet every twenty-four hours,
the general consensus at this time was that yellow fever was a highly contagious disease. All were susceptible, unless one had been sick with fever previously. While it is true that those having survived a prior bout with the disease had little or no chance of contracting it a second time, the belief of contagious spreading is most certainly false. During Tampa’s 1887-88 epidemic, however, in which some 79 deaths resulted, those who died of yellow fever were often wrapped in their bed sheets, placed in coffins, and buried in order to stifle the spread of the disease.\(^19\)

Since Kittie had survived a previous experience with the fever in Mobile, she felt safe to follow her husband to Jacksonville as they filled the desperate need for makeshift nurses. Always a woman of strength and principles, when Mr. Lea questioned the possibility of his wife adjusting to such harsh conditions upon arrival, she merely stated, "I am needed here."\(^23\)

Various methods of yellow fever prevention are revealed through Kittie’s detailed description of the state of Jacksonville during their own epidemic. She walked from patient to patient as barrels of tar burned in the streets in attempts to purify the miasmic air suspected of causing the rapid spread of the disease.\(^24\) As mentioned in an interview

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The hotel that Kittie M. Lea owned and operated in Tampa from the 1880s until her death in 1943. Her husband William had died in 1896. Kittie is pictured standing in a garden possibly outside the hotel. (Photograph courtesy of Judge Crockett Farnell)
of Jacksonville epidemic survivor, William F. Hawley, this burning tar did have a positive effect, however unintentional. While smelling of "fire and brimstone," this method produced an extraordinary amount of smoke, thus "exterminating the mosquitoes by suffocating them." Yet another inadvertent mosquito repellent was St. Jacob's oil. Some people in Tampa smeared this oil, head to toe, in an attempt to create a harrier between themselves and the germs believed to cause yellow fever. It is now understood that this oil was perhaps an even more successful mosquito repellent than a protectant from "contaminated air."25

In Jacksonville, as in Tampa, firing cannons into the air as well as shooting rifles, in compliance with the theory that microbes could be destroyed by "atmospheric concussion," combated what was believed to be germ-filled air. Because this method of prevention broke windows and further disturbed the suffering, the practice was soon abandoned.27

Homes were disinfected with a mixture of copperas, sulfur, and lime, while many healthy residents drank champagne as it was believed to be a potent preventative solution.28

Beyond attempts at prevention, however, there was little Kittie could do to cure or even treat the symptoms of her patients. Serving a sick or dying patient orange leaf or hot mustard tea was common, as well as efforts to keep patients as comfortable as possible. D.B. McKay, a Survivor of Tampa's yellow fever epidemic, wrote in his weekly *Tampa Tribune* column of the prevention methods he remembered as a young man. A teaspoon of pulverized charcoal in a glass of water taken daily was known to be a successful method of prevention, according to McKay. He also wrote of a potential cure in a good dose of sugar of lead.29 According to Kittie, though, nothing could save the afflicted from death aside from time and fate. She stated, "In twenty-four hours, what was to be the outcome, twenty-four death or to live, was decided." Tracking down food for the crying babies of mothers stricken with the fever, comforting loved ones, and treating patients' symptoms was the most she and other nurses could do to help, though her efforts were gratefully received by all she cared for.30

When the temperature dropped to 32 degrees in November 1888, Jacksonville's devastating yellow fever epidemic drew to a close. Over 430 people died by the time the quarantine was lifted from the city.31 Though moved by the desperation and despair in Jacksonville, Kittie was relieved to finally return to Tampa and her two boys, who were being cared for by a family friend. Tampa's epidemic came to a close with the first winter frost, and while the town made attempts at economic recovery, it would be a full two years before many residents came back to their homes and new settlers again felt safe moving to the town.32

Soon after she and Mr. Lea's return, Kittie learned of the death of her landlord, Mrs. Hubbs. She decided to take the boarding house over and open up a dining room. With the boys' help she began furnishing the rooms and soon Lea's Hotel was a "gathering place for tourists from all parts of the United States."33

The growth of Tampa at this time is revealed as Kittie writes of a bridge finally being built across the river in 1890 and the groundbreaking construction for the Tampa Bay Hotel. It was "the finest hotel in the South," she describes, "and so immense it was a mile around it. There were as many as six hundred laborers at work on the building
at one time." It was at this time that Kittie tells of Tampa's first City Hall, a two story brick building which was being built on the corner of Lafayette and Florida Avenue. Cutting through the lot where she and her sons, William and Algernon, were living, one can not help but sense the unrest this must have caused Kittie's family and her boarders.34

In 1896, Mr. Lea died of a stroke at the age of 48, leaving Kittie to run the hotel by herself. Her two sons pursued fire fighting with the "first fire fighting company in Tampa," led by Lamont Baily, and "none over fifteen belonging to it."35

(Note: The superscript for endnote 36 has been omitted and there is no corresponding entry at the end)36

Kittie remained proprietor of Lea's Hotel until her death in 1943, and it was this very boarding house that Kittie's great-grandson, Judge Crockett Farnell, has some of his earliest memories. Among the slew of photographs Mr. Farnell, William Lea's grandson, shares with me a unique family story not found in Kittie's Reminiscences. The tale of Lea's Never Failing Hair Tonic began in 1905 when one of Kittie's boarders, a kind man with a proposition, introduced her to his tonic.37 The man claimed the tonic cured dandruff, eczema, and other skin trouble while "bringing hair which had been faded or white back to its natural color," as well as "bring hair back on bald heads." Kittie found that the formula did indeed work, and as photos show, up until her death her hair remained glossy and brown.38

Discovering later that this kind gentleman had been convicted of arson and of murdering his wife, and believing this man to be innocent, Kittie agreed to his one plea. 14e would allow her to sell as much tonic as she wished if she would only help in his defense. Though she did what she could, he remained in prison near Ocala for many years thereafter, and while incarcerated, decided to repay Kittie's kindness by giving her the potent and profitable formula. From 1912 until 1990, the Lea family's tonic virtually sold itself as William Lea, and later his son and grandson, took over and operated the business.39

Like a quilt pattern, the photos and stories shared by Mr. Farnell begin to form a vivid image of Kittie in my mind. It is a vision of a woman with an indomitable spirit, strong will, and giving heart. The Reminiscences of Kittie M. Lea, 1877-1891 shed light on a time when Tampa was just beginning to open doors of opportunity to those daring enough to accept the challenges and rough conditions. Kittie's writings reveal first hand accounts of the yellow fever epidemic that plagued Tampa and Jacksonville, and look back into the past when pioneers left families, comfortable surroundings, and security to settle the unknown. Throughout her memoir, a reader can sense that Kittie M. Lea did indeed pass from "girlhood into a mature woman," and realized that her family's loss of money and affluence upon their arrival in Florida had led to "blessings of trust and understanding."40

ENDNOTES

Jennifer Tyson is a graduate of the University of Florida with a degree in history. Employed as a teacher with the Hillsborough County school system, she has interned at the Tampa Bay History Center.

2 Ibid.
3 Kittie M. Lea, Portion of Pioneer History of Florida and the Yellow Fever Epidemic at Tampa, Florida,
1877-1891, 11; Hilda Montesino, Tampa Bay History Center Library.


5 Ibid., 29.

6 Ibid., 33-34.

7 Ibid., 11.

8 Ibid., 38.

9 Ibid., 55.

10 Ibid., 70-74.

11 Ibid., 75-83.

12 Larry Omar Rivers, "‘They . . . exalt humbug at the expense of science and truth:’ Dr. John P. Wall and the Fight Against Yellow Fever in Late-Nineteenth Century Florida," The Sunland Tribune, 25, 1999, 14.

13 D.B. McKay, "The Time Florida Mail Was Punched and Fumigated," Maryetta Lane, Tampa Tribune, 9 August 1953, sec C, Tampa Bay History Center Library.

14 Rivers, "‘They . . . exalt humbug at the expense of science and truth:’ Dr. John P. Wall and the Fight Against Yellow Fever in Late-Nineteenth Century Florida," 12.


16 Ibid., 12.

17 McKay, "Yellow Jack is a Grim Visitor," Tampa Tribune, 27 October 1957.


19 McKay, "Yellow Fever Caused Shotgun Quarantines Here In the Earlier Days," Tampa Tribune, 22 September 1946.

20 Lea, Kittie M. Lea, Portion of Pioneer History of Florida and the Yellow Fever Epidemic at Tampa, Florida, 1877-1891, 86.


23 Lea, Kittie M. Lea, Portion of Pioneer History of Florida and the Yellow Fever Epidemic at Tampa, Florida, 1877-1891, 97


25 Ibid.


27 Shepherd, "William F. Hawley".

28 McKay, "‘Yellow Fever!’ Was a Terrible Cry in Early Tampa; Doctors Fought Plague With Curious Remedies," Tampa Tribune, 15 January 1956.

29 Ibid.


33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 118.

35 Obituary, Tampa Weekly Tribune, 15 April 1896.

36 Judge Crockett Farnell, interview with author, 5 October 2000.

37 Kittie M. Lea, "For My Granddaughters; Concerning My Ownership of Lea’s Never Failing Hair Tonic," 30 August 1931.
39 Judge Crockett Farnell, interview with author, 5 October 2000.