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Reform and Revolution: The Life and Times of Raymond Robbins
by Neil V. Salzman

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social and historical interrelationships of the sites must be established within the context of the community's history, in order to evaluate the relative significance of each site. The lack of any overview of the history of the county or its communities makes this task difficult, if not impossible.

The authors admit the most serious shortcomings of this work in their introduction. "We recognize that our efforts at comprehensive compilation and description are incomplete" (ix). The first is to be expected. It is a rare community that can allocate adequate funding to assess and protect its historic resources. However, the inadequacy of the individual descriptions of sites or buildings calls into question the validity of the designation process. The variation in quality of the landmarks' descriptions is greater than it should be. On one end of the spectrum is the brief description of the Meyers Home of Dade City: "This house was constructed of hollow, glazed terra cotta brick about 1925" (22). The other extreme includes the buildings of Saint Leo College. The descriptions of these monumental masonry buildings and the personalities that brought them into being are cogent and thorough, while succinct.

The leadership and preservation constituency in Pasco County is to be commended for allocating the funds for this educational resource. Let us not forget, however, that this is just a beginning, an opportunity for increased awareness of Pasco's heritage.

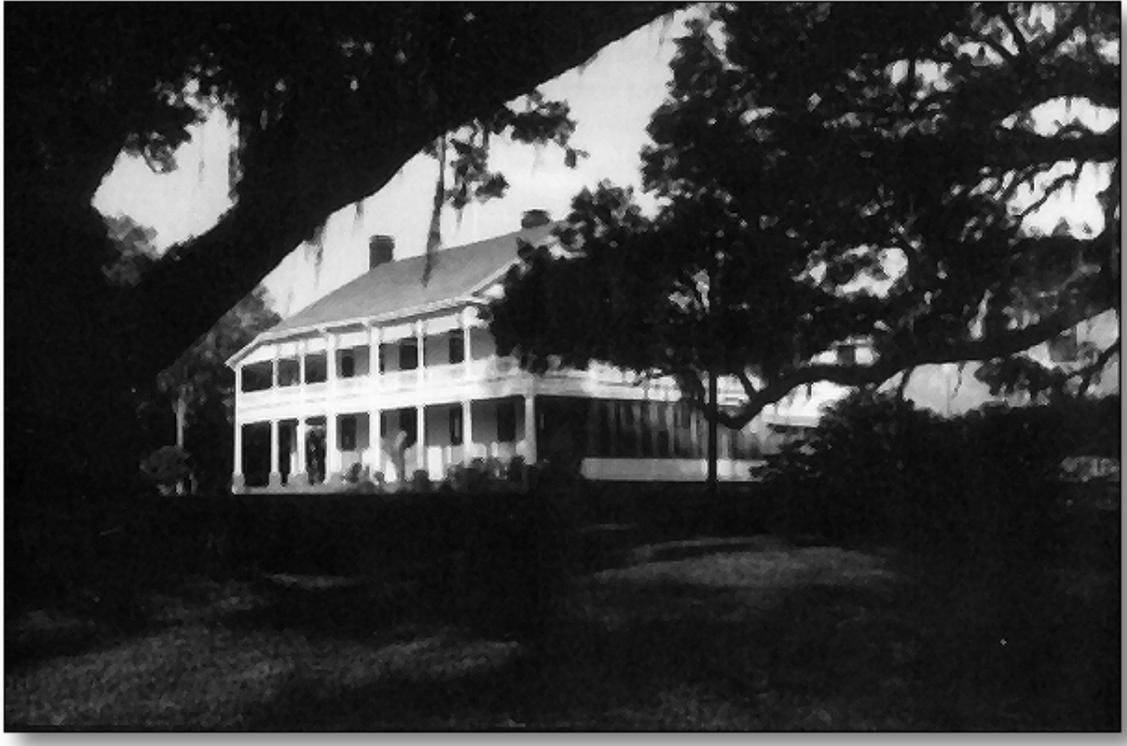
David Rigney

Reform and Revolution: The Life and Times of Raymond Robbins. By Neil V. Salzman. Kent, Ohio, 1991. Kent State University Press. Pp. xiv, 472. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Cloth. \$35.00.

For years, visitors to Chinsegut Hill in Hernando County have listened to the story of "the Lenin Oak" marker, flung into Lake Lindsey by the local American Legion or Boy Scouts at some time in the fifties. We were mildly offended and amused about those ignorant rednecks so paranoid about Communism. Today, after the inglorious death of the Soviet Union and after reading Neil V. Salzman's biography of Colonel Raymond Robbins, the man who planted that oak, I think those upright citizens had a point.

Raymond Robbins (1873-1954), likely Hernando County's most prominent resident ever, made a place for himself – modest, yet noteworthy – in early twentieth-century American history. In his extensive, if not exhaustively researched study of Robbins, Professor Salzman offers a highly readable biography. It benefits throughout from the author's warm interest in every facet of Robbins the man and public figure. Raised in Ohio and Kentucky, the young Robbins first lived in the Brooksville area as a ten-year-old, and he returned regularly for physical and emotional recharging until he settled down permanently in 1924. He bought what was then Snow Hill in 1905 and named it in the Inuit Eskimo language "Chinsegut," which meant "the spirit of things lost and regained."

Robbins' life lay under the shadow of two premises – hereditary mental illness ("unipolar depression," according to Salzman's tentative diagnosis) and the passionate attachment to his older sister Elizabeth, an acclaimed actress and author. The former affliction may have



The manor house at Chinsegut.

Photograph courteously of USF Special Collections.

accounted for the hyper-activity Somerset Maugham once called “not human.” It drove the seventeen year-old from Florida’s west coast to working in the coal mines of Tennessee, to studying at Columbian (now George Washington University) Law School, to practicing law and early politicking in San Francisco, to prospecting for gold in the Yukon wilderness, to caring for and preaching to the lost souls of Nome, Alaska, and to engaging himself in the politics of Chicago, Illinois, and the nation on behalf of the social gospel and unionization. A powerful public speaker and tireless organizer, Robbins propelled himself into “the thick of every major social struggle of the Progressive Era.” All presidents from Theodore Roosevelt to Herbert Hoover sought his advice, as did Harold Ickes, William Borah, and many others. Raymond Robbins chose well when marrying Margaret Dreier (1868-1945). The daughter of prosperous German-born parents, she was an influential labor activist and social welfare organizer in her own right, serving as president of the National Women’s Trade Union League from 1907 to 1922. However in Salzman’s book, neither she nor her rival sister-in-law come to life.

Robbins’ greatest challenge and most significant contribution to history, in his biographer’s eyes, came in 1917 when Theodore Roosevelt advanced him as a member of the American Red Cross Committee to Russia. Financed by the copper magnate William B. Thompson, the committee enjoyed no standing with the Wilson administration, although its first chief, Thompson, and Robbins, his successor, received commissions in the U.S. Army. Initially faithful to Thompson’s goal of helping keep the Provisional Government in power and Russia in the war,

Robbins soon embraced not only the bloody revolution of Lenin and Trotsky but also its two leading protagonists as well. Liberation from Tsarist oppression was the noble objective, and in 1917 probably no Western observer was placed as closely to the Bolshevik power center as the squire from Hernando County.

After his return to the United States, Robbins became a highly visible advocate of the fledgling Soviet Union, first speaking against allied intervention, then for American recognition. He also embraced the causes of Prohibition and world peace, and he signed on as an early recruit in the fight against Nazism. After a fall from a tree in 1935, the outdoorsman found himself paralyzed from the pelvis down. Raymond Robbins died nineteen years later at his beloved Chinsegut Hill, where both he and Margaret are buried.

Suddenly thrust into a front seat to watch highest historical drama, but emotionally unfit to stay put and far too naive to realize the dimensions of the events, Robbins cast himself in a role no greater man could have filled. His biographer regrets that success was denied this novice in foreign affairs. But Salzman declares that between 1987 and 1991, the date of his book's publication, the prophet was finally vindicated. Professor Salzman forgets to mention that Gorbachev was not a Lenin. But even if we accept the parallel, what in 1990-91 appeared as "a dramatic transformation in U.S.-Soviet relations" of the very kind that Robbins advocated, has already slipped away. The perception of historical events is, after all, changing constantly, and the Robbins-Salzman version enjoyed one of the shortest lives in business. By placing his hero into a contemporary world-historical context and promoting him to prophet of the New World Order, Professor Salzman doomed this thrust of his book to almost instant anachronism.

Current plans are to replace the marker at Chinsegut's "Lenin Oak." Fine, but don't tell the Russians. Their enthusiasm would only be matched by that of the Germans if told that next to it we might be planting a "Hitler Ash."

Georg Kleine