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***Idella: Marjorie Rawlings' "Perfect Maid." By Idella Parker with
Mary Keating***

Phyllis M. Taylor
University of South Florida

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the 1930s and 1940s reservations were established at Brighton, Big Cypress, and Dania-Hollywood.

The single most important piece of legislation affecting the Seminoles in the post-World War II era was the 1946 Indian Claims Commission Act, which provided compensation to tribes for past frauds committed by the federal government. According to Covington, the act “proved to be a bonanza for lawyers, a good research tool for scholars who provided material for the attorneys, and of some benefit to those tribes that stipulated that part of the funds go for improvements such as roads and schools. The act also caused a split within the ranks of the Seminoles” (p. 233). What followed was a seemingly endless trail of litigation. Friction between reservation and nonreservation (Trail Indians and Miccosukees) emerged, so much so that the Miccosukees obtained distinct tribal status.

Fortunately for his readers, Covington probably overruled his editors because the book includes many long quotes. We read the comments of such Seminoles as Alligator, Wildcat, Jumper, and Billy Bowlegs; such military men as John Sprague, Ethan A. Hitchcock, John Casey, and Oliver O. Howard; and such other interesting characters as Alexander Arbuthnot, Kirk Munroe, and Lucien Spencer. These long quotes are well chosen and flow well with the narrative. The book contains many excellent pictures and maps. Covington’s work is well researched and written. It constitutes the best full treatment available of Florida’s Seminoles.

James M. Denham

Idella: Marjorie Rawlings' "Perfect Maid." By Idella Parker with Mary Keating. Gainesville, 1992. University Press of Florida. xv, 135 pp. Illustrations. Index. Cloth—\$22.95. Paper—\$12.95.

The tongue-in-cheek title is a good beginning for the ambivalent and understated tone of this book. Idella *was* the “perfect maid” for Marjorie Kinan Rawlings. She was talented, obedient, and industrious, handling every situation, no matter how bizarre, with a quiet, strong desperation that renders a familiar persona in American literature: The Black southern female domestic worker. The most important aspect of this story, however, is that it is Idella Parker’s own life told in her voice, with the assistance of writer Mary Keating.

Written in a serene conversational tone, this recollection gives the warmth and authenticity of a storytelling session on an old sun-drenched Florida porch. One may even feel a sense of being there, listening to Idella “remember the days.” She was cook, maid, beautician, hostess at several of the famous writer’s residences, and counselor for Marjorie Kinan Rawlings from 1940 to 1949. *Idella* gives a detailed, sometimes colorful, often painful narrative of just what that was all about.

The great value of the book is its first person telling of Black Floridian women’s history. Idella provides accounts of the quality of life in north central Florida for Black people and more specifically for the African-American female born in the South at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is always powerful and instructive to remember that Black Floridians had to pay to attend “public schools.” It is magical and exhilarating to read of Idella’s proud connection to Nat



Idella Parker in 1949.

Photograph from *Idella: Marjorie Rawlings "Perfect Maid."*

Turner, the nineteenth-century freedom fighter. And it is also infuriating to relive the amazing transaction in which Idella was secured by Marjorie for what was little more than slavery, with a check for four dollars amid Idella's protests:

“Oh no, ma'am,” I said in a loud voice, “I'm to work for Mrs. Camp. She lives in Ocala, not Island Grove. I tried to hand the check back to her, but she just waved it away.” I continued my protest. “But I'm to work in Ocala for Mrs. Camp.” Mrs. Rawlings looked up with a mischievous smile in her blue-gray eyes and said, “Oh no Idella you don't want to work for Mrs. Camp. She's hard to get along with” (p.16).

Thus, began Idella and Marjorie's decade-long relationship.

For Florida history enthusiasts, the photographs are of special interest, and they are numerous and appropriate. The indexing of the book is also useful for locating Idella's mention of important figures such as Zora Neale Hurston. In the area of African-American family studies, it gives a step-by-step view of the mechanism of Black Floridian survival in the first half of the century.

The simplistic style of extreme understatement and suppression is almost pathological. Idella is locked into a ten-year sentence of servitude with an insensitive and eccentric woman apparently afflicted with alcoholism and depression. The perfect maid seemed to be Marjorie's primary source of support, both physical and emotional. Idella leads us through drunk driving episodes, spoiled dinner parties, and the dishonest rip-off of her work in *Cross Creel Cookery*; yet she annoyingly continues to inform the reader that Marjorie was a kind, well meaning person. What we begin to see is a system of volunteer servitude that was condoned and allowed because of circumstance.

Idella was a teacher, gourmet cook, home economics expert, and beautician, possessing all the skills it took to run a rural Florida home of the 1940s and care for an ailing, temperamental mistress. And she was consistently treated like an unskilled, ignorant, minimally useful presence. Though she speaks of her productive and successful life with pride, speculation about the lost potential of such a hard-working and talented person in a non-racist environment is painful.

For, other approaches on the subject one might read Trudier Harris's *From Mammies to Militants*, and Susan Tucker's *Telling Memories Among Southern Women*, or view Muriel Jackson's documentary *The Maids*, wherein Dorothy Bolden, founder of National Domestic Workers of America, speaks of the same circumstance in both historical and contemporary perspectives.

Idella is a cool retelling of what it was like to be an African-American caught up in a complex and deplorable system, servant to one of the more “humane” Anglo-American women of the time.

Phyllis M. Taylor