This is the Way It Was in Tampa One Hundred and Ten Years Ago

George W. Wells
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ONE HUNDRED AND TEN YEARS AGO

By GEORGE W. WELLS

EDITOR’S NOTE

This interesting description of Tampa in 1877 comes from a publication, Facts for Immigrants, and in the words of its author "Comprising a truthful description of Hillsboro County." It was written by George W. Wells of Alaffia, Hillsborough County. Note that this describes the county long before Pinellas County pulled away from us in 1912. Our thanks for this article goes to Richard D. Flemings, Tampa CPA, who made it available to us.

In describing Hillsboro County, we must take it by its natural division. Tampa Bay, by extending into the land, makes a
considerable point on the west, and is known as the Clear Water side. A harbor of that name gives name, also, to the whole coast, and in fact the whole of the western portion goes by the name of Clear Water. This division of the county in the variety and superiority of its tropical and semitropical fruits is unsurpassed. It is noted as a healthy region, and furnishes excellent water, free from lime. The waters of the Bay and Gulf abound in choice fish and oysters. The oysters in Old Tampa Bay will compare favorably with any in the world.

The society is good, and there is no lack of churches and schools. There is every prospect for one railroad, at least, whose terminus will be on this coast. A survey has been made through the "neck" down to Point Pinallis [sic], where there is a good harbor and deep water. Ships of heavy tonnage many safely come within a few yards of the shore.

The land in this section is well adapted to farming, producing freely fine sea island cotton and sweet potatoes, and on some soils good crops of corn are grown. As fine vegetables as ever grew in the county, were made at Clear Water Harbor.

Moneyed men and capitalists, being influenced by the misrepresentations of some persons, have been deterred from visiting this section; but, notwithstanding all the impediments thrown in the way, the Old Tampa Neck is rapidly improving. Abroad, this portion is termed poor and unsuited to the wants of the farmer, but the lands are far superior to the lands on the St. Johns river and the lakes in the interior of the State, that have sold for twenty-five, and even fifty, dollars per acre. Chills and fever, and the insects incident to such a climate, seldom visit this section, and should isolated cases occur, they are regarded as sporadic and intrusive. Many families have never required a mosquito bar for protection in their slumbers. It is a remarkable fact that persons who have lived a few years at Clear Water Harbor, and then moved away to other parts, have returned and settled for life. I believe that this portion of Hillsboro county can produce as great a variety of fruits as any section in South Florida-though there may be some varieties in other parts not be found here. The Clear Water region might be termed a peninsula. It is thirty miles long, and is bounded on the east by Tampa Bay, and on the west by the Gulf, along whose coast is the famous Clear Water Harbor. It has a coast of seventy or eighty miles in extent, and is almost surrounded by salt water, which makes the situation peculiarly pleasant and favorable to fruit culture, as it is less affected by cold than places forty miles to the east, and spring is two weeks earlier. As this harbor is a convenient point for shipping, an abundance of fruits and vegetables find their way to Key West and other markets, and are sold at remunerative prices.

Tampa is a small city, situated at the mouth of Hillsboro river, containing six or eight hundred inhabitants. The citizens of the place and vicinity are generous-hearted to the stranger, and the traveling public will find as ample accommodations as in any place in the State. You will find here men of capital and liberality. They favor and aid any enterprise that looks to the improvement of their town, and they are immigrants from every section of the Union.

There are in Tampa ten or twelve wholesale and retail stores, two or three druggists, besides saloons and other little shops, and three hotels, where every accommodation, in any shape and form that can be desired, is found. Several good physicians reside here, although the health of the place is such that
one is seldom called; notwithstanding, their presence, in cases of accidents, is highly necessary. Tampa affords one blacksmith, and his superior cannot be found. He is skillful, attentive and prompt, and in his store you may find anything in his line, from a fish-hook to a sheet anchor. There are several other mechanics—such as carpenters, painters, masons, saddlers, cabinet makers and tanners.

Tampa is the county seat of Hillsboro county, and exhibits a very nice court-house. Several societies exist here, both religious and literary, which fact speaks well for the morals of the citizens. Two newspapers, one Democratic and the other Republican, are issued weekly.

The trade of this port is considerable, and commands the produce of the interior as far out as forty miles; and until Leesburg, in Sumter county, was established, people came as far as one hundred miles with their produce. The commerce of the place has not been lessened, either by Leesburg or Manatee, for as many new-comers settled within the scope of trade as drew off to the above-named new markets. The shipping tonnage I am not prepared to give in figures, but will state that three steamers and several respectable schooners touch at this place daily and weekly. Two mail routes, one by water (weekly), the other by land (tri-weekly), supply the place with the latest news, and place Tampa in connection with the outside world. Over the land route the mail is carried in a hack or stage. You may truly suppose that traveling is pretty rough over the rooty roads of the country. The item of roads, I am sorry to say, does not show as favorably as one might wish, but the country is not very hilly or rocky. A few bridges over the branches, creeks and small rivers would considerably add to the speed and comfort in traveling to and from Tampa, and through the country generally. It is evident to everybody that nothing is wanted in this country so much as a railroad. Tampa is a delightful resort for invalids, and many would come on the cars who cannot travel on water.

Hillsboro river is not a large stream, yet small boats may ascend it three or four miles. At Tampa it widens into a small bay, and boats of several tons can approach the wharves. Large vessels find it inconvenient to come to the wharf, and therefore anchor off some three or four miles, and are relieved of their passengers and freight by the use of smaller ones, which are always ready for the business. Nothing of much important can be said of the Hillsboro river, only that a few lumbermen find employment by rafting lumber down the stream to the saw-mills in Tampa. The large cypress trees formerly were made valuable by the labors of the shingle-maker and the cooper, but I believe they have been drawn upon so heavily that what remains is not worthy of notice. There are some lands up and down this river suitable both for farming and fruit-raising. The range along this river was formerly very good for stock, but has failed to a considerable extent, except near the head, which is yet very good for hogs.

The Alafia river and vicinity now claim our attention. This river is not very long, but is made by the confluence of several small streams, which, by their united waters in the rainy season, render it in many places impassable. A few good bridges would remove this difficulty, and traveling would never be impeded by high water. It empties into Tampa Bay about ten miles southeast of Tampa. The lands near the mouth of this river have already received the attention of several good men, who are able to appreciate the natural resources of the country. They have flocked to that point lately, and now nearly every place eligible
for location has been secured. The visitor would certainly conclude that they "mean business".

The mouth of this river is coming rapidly into notice, and if capital, energy and industry are brought to act in conjunction with the natural facilities of the place, nothing is wanting but time to make this one of the great marts of the South. The fertility of the soil, the good harbor, the several good fisheries, all tend to favor the idea of its increasing importance. Two or three stores and one turpentine still are already in operation. The river and vicinity are well timbered, abounding in cypress, yellow, and pitch pine. It is navigable for small boats as far as Bell's creek, a distance of nine miles. It can be cleaned out and made navigable forty or fifty miles; and as soon as the country is settled, this will be done, and then it will equal or surpass the St. John's, for it has a large scope of back country to maintain it, and as the country is being settled, the trade will increase; and, if our winters do not prove fatal to the orange family in the future, in a few years great quantities of fruit will be ready to ship from this point.

This portion of the county is very pleasant and agreeable. It is well watered and healthy; the range is somewhat eaten out, but stock do very well yet, especially on the southeast side. There yet remains a large amount of both State and United States lands subject to either homestead or entry. Game is somewhat scarce, but fish abound — chiefly the salt water varieties. Near this river, about twenty miles from its mouth, Mr. A. Wordehoff, an old and well-known citizen, has resided for more than twenty-five years, and has made an independent living; what any man may do in South Florida by using a little industry and management. His is a noted place on this river, and has been known as the Alafia Post-office. He has been for a number of years, and is yet, the Postmaster.

On both sides of this (Alafia) river, from its head to its mouth, are a great many creeks and branches, which empty into it, making it a well watered country for stock. The same may be said of all rivers in this country.

Hillsboro is bounded on the north by Hernando county, on the east by Polk county, and on the south and west by the Gulf of Mexico. This county in the last few years has become very thickly settled, comparatively considered; notwithstanding, there is room for many more good citizens, who are always welcomed. The number of inhabitants, mostly white, is about six thousand.