

# Traditions

*The Quarterly Newsletter of the Collier County Museum*

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## For a Fine Feathered Bonnet: Plume Hunting in the Everglades

by Lynne Howard Frazer

"Among the most beautiful of all the water birds are the herons, which furnish the popular millinery decorations known as 'aigrettes.' It is a sad fact that the plumes so highly prized by women are procurable only by inflicting unsufferable agonies on those creatures."

As early as 1887 the Audubon Society protested the use of plumes on fashionable bonnets, but style and "woman's heartlessness" provided the basis for a flourishing business in the Everglades. In addition to otter pelts and alligator hides, plumes were a valuable source of income for the pioneers of southwest Florida.

The secluded bays and mangrove islands provided perfect rookeries for the coveted plume birds. The Snowy Egret, with delicately curling plumes, "like lace," provided the highly prized cross aigrettes used by the millinery trade. Herons, Roseate Spoonbills, and other rare birds were also the target of plume hunters. Along the Atlantic coast, gulls and terns were killed and used whole in flamboyant hat decorations.

The pleas of conservationists and bird-lovers were ignored by the millinery industry. The feather craze of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century created an insatiable demand for plumes and provided the Everglades plume hunters with an opportunity to make easy money.

Since the plumes were most beautiful during the mating and nesting season, hunters worked primarily during the spring and summer. Nesting in crowded colonies,



the egrets were "sitting ducks." Hunters followed parent birds to the nesting areas and then killed all the adult birds in the colony, leaving the young to die from starvation or become the prey of other animals. C.G. McKinney went plume-bird hunting near Chokoloskee in the late nineteenth century and later wrote, "We ate our lunch and went to the birds' nest a few hundred yards away and began to shoot the mother birds and kill them from their young; then the crows would go and take the eggs and young birds and carry them away to eat them. It looked too hard for me. I decided that I did not think it was doing God's service, and I never went on that kind of hunt any more."

Plumes were "worth their weight in gold," and as the birds became rarer, the prices rose to incredible heights. Fine plumes brought between .75 to \$10.00 each by the early twentieth century. In 1902 one Florida agent shipped 192,000

bird "scalps" to the multi-million dollar millinery industry in New York. Though the birds faced extinction, the plume hunters of the Everglades continued to supply the millinery business with bundles of expensive feathers.

The Florida Audubon Society was founded in 1900 to fight for the protection of Florida's wild birds. By 1901 the Society had convinced the Florida legislature to pass the first bill protecting some species of plume birds. Tragically, although the birds were protected on paper, the state did not provide wardens to enforce the law. As a result, the National Audubon Society hired four wardens to protect the major nesting rookeries of southern Florida. Guy M. Bradley was appointed warden of the southwest coastal areas in 1902, and faced strong opposition from the Everglades plume hunters who were suddenly part of an illegal business.

Bradley took his job seriously and was often shot at for his interference in the lucrative plume hunting trade. On July 8, 1905, Bradley tried to arrest the son of Walter Smith, an alleged murderer and plume poacher, and was mysteriously shot and killed, his body left floating in the water. The story made national headlines and Bradley became a "martyr to millinery." Another warden was killed at Charlotte Harbor. Though public sympathy flocked to the Audubon Society, fashionable ladies still wore egret hats and the poaching continued in the Everglades. Since local hunters could no longer sell to a Florida market, illegal plumes were sent to Cuba, then to Europe, and then to New York as "imported" feathers.

The feather fight continued and by 1910 the Audubon Plumage Bill was before the

New York legislature. If the new bill passed, the use of wild bird feathers in New York, the center of the millinery industry, would be outlawed. The hat industry argued that the plumes were shed by the birds and harmlessly picked up by the hunters. Conservationists countered, "It is not true, as frequently asserted by those who seek to uphold the nefarious traffic, that the plumes are gathered from the ground underneath the rookeries. The plumes do not usually fall until the nesting season is over, and they usually drop in the water when the bird is flying. Furthermore, by that time they are usually so frayed and worn they are of little value to the plume market." Despite the strength of the millinery lobbyists, the Audubon Plumage Law was passed, crippling the Everglades plume business. Later, with the passage of federal laws beginning in 1913, the illegal poaching of plumes dwindled.

In 1915, two enterprising brothers tried to operate a "bird ranch" on Chokoloskee Island. They hoped to legally supply milliners with plumes harmlessly plucked from the "domesticated" birds. Unfortunately, the experiment failed, primarily because the birds ate too much and were too expensive to keep.

In time, the plume hunters of southwest Florida turned to other ways of making money and the birds of the Everglades began to slowly recover from near extinction. Only the Roseate Spoonbill and the Reddish Egret have not fully recuperated from the days of zealous plume hunting. Now, just as the Audubon Society hoped over one-hundred years ago, the wearing of birds is seen in "its proper light, namely as a sign of heartlessness and a mark of ignominy and reproach."



### Museum Dedication

On Thursday, September 17, 1987, the Collier County Museum will be formally dedicated by County dignitaries and representatives from the Friends of the Museum. On this same day two-hundred years ago, the Constitutional Convention completed the proposed new United States Constitution and submitted it to the Confederation Congress for review.

Although the museum will not be

fully operational for several more months, visitors will have the opportunity to preview a fascinating new temporary exhibit, "Blessings of Liberty: The Story of the United States Constitution."

### Construction News

One of the newest features of the museum is an 830 foot boardwalk which winds its way through the museum's outdoor exhibit area. When the exhibits are complete, the boardwalk will guide visitors through several interpretive areas, including: a walk-through Indian mound, the Craighead Lab, a reproduction Cracker Cottage, a simulated Seminole Village, and old "Number 2," one of the Lee Tidewater Cypress Company's logging locomotives. The boardwalk also provides handicap access to the outdoor areas.

The Pioneer Cottage, an important part of the outdoor exhibits, is now under construction. "Yestermorrow Homes," a building firm specializing in homes combining antique architecture with modern materials, has researched and designed the building based on the early "cracker" houses.

The first settlers, mostly squatters, built small shelters out of readily available materials. The earliest homes were probably one-room palmetto huts with gabled roofs of palmetto thatch. By the late nineteenth century, small clapboard cottages were common in southwest Florida, as shipping connections and lumber mills changed the materials available to the pioneers.



### Museum Receives State Grant

The Friends of the Museum are pleased to announce that through the efforts of Representative Mary Ellen Hawkins, the State of Florida Legislature has appropriated \$75,000 towards construction of the Collier County Museum.

Friends' Treasurer, Gerald Lanterman, who with Charles Price Jr., initiated the request, reported that the funds will be used to continue development of the Museum's outdoor exhibit area.

### From the Director's Chair

by Ron Jamro

It's hard to believe that this time last year we were gathered in an open field, nervously watching as the original museum building - all 285 tons of it - was miraculously hoisted onto hydraulic lifts and gently trundled inch by inch across the County Government complex to a vacant and freshly cleared two-acre site. If I had to pick a single milestone that best represents the museum's determination to rise up and make a vital contribution to the history of our community, I would pick that day.

Of course, the major changes that have occurred in the twelve short months since the "great move" are certainly no less impressive. Construction on Phase II of the building project has been completed with beautifully landscaped grounds in place, and a new larger home for the museum's collections exhibit area. Even the original building has been altered - almost beyond recognition - and converted into a proper research library and a 40-seat capacity lecture hall for special school and civic programs. During the summer months and into the Fall, our staff and volunteers will be working hard to create a series of first-rate exhibits to dramatically tell the history of our county. The outdoor exhibits too, will receive some finishing touches such as a fully restored logging locomotive, a faithfully reproduced pioneer homestead, and many more exciting features to come in the near future.

The job is still a long way from being finished, but we could not have wished for more enthusiasm or energy from either the Friends of the Museum, Collier County officials, or YOU - our valued patrons and visitors. Without your trust, support and involvement, the museum could not have had such a successful and memorable year.

All of us here are sincerely grateful.



### Hurricane! Remembering the Hurricane of 1926

by Lynne Howard Frazer

Gusts over 130 miles per hour ripped through southern Florida on the night of September 18, 1926. Without the sophisticated forecasting abilities of today, the people of Collier County had little warning of the oncoming storm.

According to Ellen McLeod, a grammar school pupil in Everglades, "It had been raining nearly every day before the storm came." By early Sunday morning the force of the wind and rain warned that the storm was becoming a hurricane.

In Everglades, most people took shelter in the Everglades Inn or the Courthouse, since these sturdy structures were two stories tall and offered protection from rapidly rising water. No shelter was completely safe. During the storm, the Courthouse lost several windows from flying debris and the "little steeple house" blew completely off the roof.

Judge George W. Storter kept barometer readings throughout the storm and claimed a few days later that it "was the worst hurricane I ever saw." Since the strong gusts blew away the Judge's wind gauge, he believed that the hurricane brought the "heaviest wind I remember."

Most people had little time to prepare for the full force of the storm. Mrs. Winnie Frederick fled from her home wearing only her bathing suit and rubber boots. She sat in the mud-covered Everglades Inn and watched her house float down the street, her two dogs standing on the kitchen table barking at her as the house drifted towards the grocery store. Her dogs and pet monkey survived the storm, but everything else in the house was destroyed, including all of her clothing.

Since the nearest clothing stores were in Fort Myers, she had to wear her bathing suit and boots for ten days until the roads were passable enough to head north for supplies.

According to the *Collier County News*, Immokalee received the brunt of the storm, with damage to fruit crops the "biggest loss inflicted."

Robert Roberts was reported "to be the heaviest individual loser at Immokalee." His entire citrus crop was destroyed and one-third of his trees were uprooted.

Naples received little damage except for the pier, which was partially washed away by the fury of the Gulf. Marco and Chokoloskee were "wind lashed and drenched" but were spared extensive damage. Only "Capt. Smallwood's warehouse was blown down, but his store, known as the store on stilts to Collier County tourists suffered no damage to either structure or stock."

Work on the Tamiami Trail was barely interrupted by the storm and dredge operators reported that "not a washout is to be seen along the entire stretch of grade." Only the camps were battered by the storm and wet workers were forced to spend the night in the sturdy Number 2 sawmill camp. Garland Wright, operator of the Bay City caterpillar dredge claimed, "It takes more than high wind and lots of water to tear open the trail in Collier County where the grade is finished. The Tamiami Trail is built to stay."

Even the mailman managed to com-



Everglades after the 1926 hurricane

plete his run between Everglades, Chokoloskee, Fakahatchee, and Caxambas during the height of the storm. Claude Albury successfully delivered the mail in his twenty-four foot launch "Fish Hawk," forcing his boat through the "teeth of the hurricane." His adventure made front-page news and the local paper reported: "Verily, Floridian mail carriers in the keys and passes of the bumpy old Gulf of Mexico, may proudly wear the title of 'He-Men!'"

Collier County was fortunate in escaping the deadly damage done to Miami during the hurricane of 1926. Rebuilding began immediately and the county soon recovered from the storm. Only a week after the hurricane, the phone system was back in service, the Everglades Trolley was operating, schools had resumed, and the Tamiami Trail dredges were again working on the new road. Though the county had survived the storm, residents shared Nelson Hinton's hope that "another storm like this shall never come again."



We hope you have enjoyed this issue of *Traditions*. As a valued Friend of the Museum, a complimentary subscription is automatically included in your membership privileges.

Please remember that the Museum relies heavily on your support to continually expand and improve our educational programs, exhibition areas and research facilities. If you believe our history should be preserved, we urge you to consider joining the Friends of the Museum today.

Yes! Please enroll me as a Friend of the Museum. Enclosed is my tax-deductible gift of \$\_\_\_\_\_. Benefactor...\$10,000 or more Patron...\$1,000 or more Sponsor...\$500 or more Contributor...\$100 or more Subscriber...\$25.

I do not wish to join at this time, but please send me a year's subscription to *Traditions*, the Museum's quarterly newsletter. My \$8 payment is enclosed.



Please return to: The Collier County Museum  
3301 Tamiami Trail East  
Naples, Florida 33962



# A Poker Hand from the Past

by Tom Morgan

See how many aces - correct answers - you can draw from these five wild card questions from Collier County's past. Answers are below.

1. Pontoons were a part of plume hunters' lives, what were they?
2. Gator peels were an early frontier staple but chemistry killed the market. What were they and what killed the trade?
3. Which Florida tourists travel the farthest every year?
4. When and why did the Florida Legislature "abolish" wild hogs by law?
5. How did mullet become mammals?

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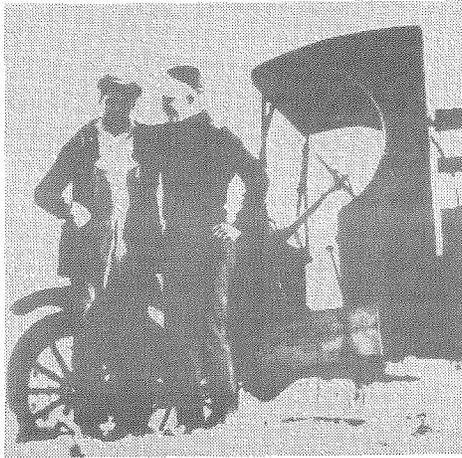
1. Pontoons were the south Florida name for marsh rabbits, the only rabbit known to swim willingly.

2. Gator peels were alligator hides used to supply the purse and shoe market. Hunters claimed chemical companies ruined the trade by creating synthetic skins.

3. The Arctic Tern stops over in Florida between its Arctic summer home and its Antarctic winter home.

4. In 1937 the legislature declared the wild razorback hog non-existent in order to end the illegal shooting of domestic pigs claimed by hunters as "wild hogs."

5. A 1930's legislature aided net fishermen by stating that mullet had gizzards and were therefore mammals, exempting the mullet from the net fishing ban.



## New Acquisitions

Old Engine Number 2 survived through years of neglect, but not without some scars. Vandals and collectors had long ago stripped the locomotive of many of its valuable pieces, leaving behind the rusting skeleton of a former beauty. Fortunately, through the generosity of many people, the museum is slowly acquiring many hard-to-find items for this important part of county history.

Mr. Vernon Sweet recently donated a "Pyle National Locomotive Headlight," circa 1904, complete with visor and original number panels. The headlight has been carefully restored by the museum staff and will crown the locomotive when the engine restoration is completed this Fall.

The museum also received a brass locomotive bell from Col. William W. Kitchen. The bell once belonged to Mr. Lewis Metzger, Vice-President of the Baldwin Locomotive Works during World War II.

Over sixty-one years ago, workers struggled in the swamp to build the Tamiami Trail. Recently, a rare, newly discovered collection of Tamiami Trail construction photographs was given to the museum. The photographs, taken by Meese Ellis, a dredge operator and foreman, capture aspects of the everyday life of the trail workers. Highlights of the collection include a photograph of a model T truck loaded with boxes labeled "Hercules Blasting Caps, Handle Carefully."

## Museum-to-Go Program

A number of special programs designed specifically to complement school curricula are currently undergoing development at the museum and will be available to county schools early this fall.

Each outreach program emphasizes a different aspect of Collier County's history and includes a carousel slide presentation, complete with a written narration, lesson plan, fact booklet and suggested classroom activities. Most are accompanied by a sturdy traveling kit of artifacts and historic reproductions drawn from the museum's reserve collection to provide students with a closer, "hands on" learning experience.

First releases in the series include: "Way Back When: The Story of Collier County," with a companion Sampler Kit and "The History of Florida," a general overview of our state's past, with a traveling kit entitled "The Changing Shape of Florida," using maps to trace Florida's development.

The Museum-to-Go programs are provided to teachers free of charge on a weekly loan basis. For details please contact Elaine Gates at 774-8476.

001-113-7410

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