

The Historical Quarterly of The St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.

Vol. 36 No. 3

Summer 2018

Early life around Lake Okeechobee was a big challenge

The area around the north shore of Lake Okeechobee was a wild and isolated place in the earliest days of the 20th Century. Until 1917 it remained a part of St. Lucie County. Going to the county seat at Fort Pierce by horse and wagon meant a two-day trip, each way. Even so, the local population was growing, and catfishing on Lake Okeechobee became an important industry.

In 1948 a husband-wife team of Florida historians, **Alfred Jackson Hanna** and **Kathryn Abbey Hanna**, traced the history of the big lake region in their book *Lake Okeechobee*. Images from the early 1900s are reflected in the following excerpts:

“Because of the widespread demand for catfish, especially in the Middle West, the Lake Okeechobee product was shipped almost exclusively to that section; ... St. Louis and Kansas City appear to have consumed the largest quantities...”

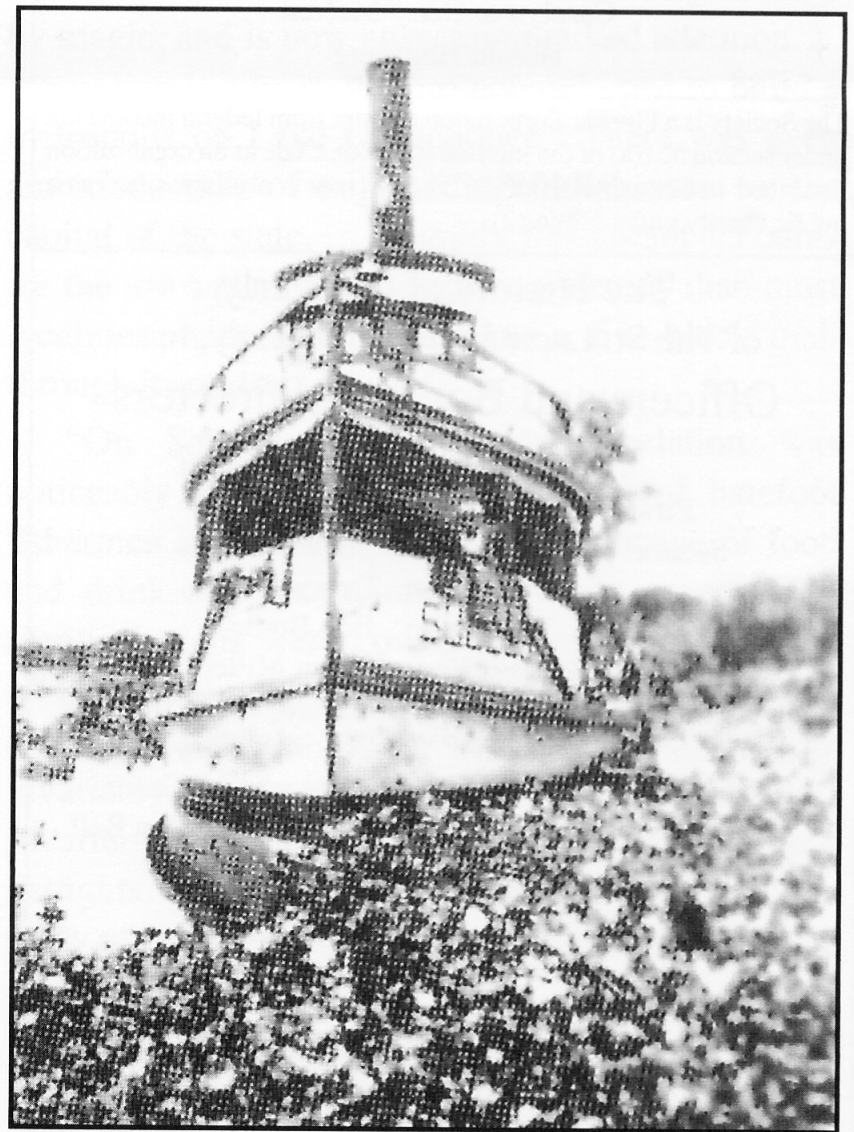
“The personnel of the fishing crews on Lake Okeechobee in the early days was drawn, for the most part, from soldiers of fortune and refugees from justice who found safety and a livelihood in this isolated wilderness. It had been rumored for decades around the countryside that every serious offender against the law south of Atlanta had sought asylum on or near Lake Okeechobee. ... Yet not all these commercial fishermen were social derelicts; many were honest hard-working men and youths who set about laying the foundations for both fortune and prominence in the days to come. ...

“Settlement of this northern bend of the lake, near which the battle of Okeechobee was fought in 1837, began when its first pioneer, **Peter Raulerson**, brought his family by ox cart to Taylor’s Creek in 1896 to farm and raise cattle. Six years later a few more families had arrived, among them that of **H.H. Hancock**. There were enough children to have a school, and adults to have a post office. The two institutions cooperated when the post office was named Tantie in honor of the redheaded

schoolteacher, **Tantie Huckabee**, from South Carolina. Mail was brought from Fort Drum twice a week by horseback. When in 1905 **Lewis Raulerson** opened the first store, its supplies were brought by boat from Fort Myers [via the Caloosahatchee River into the southwest side of the lake]. By 1909 Judge H.H. Hancock inaugurated both shipping and transportation when he had constructed on Taylor’s Creek a 52-foot steamer, the *Serena Victoria*. ...

[In 1911] “Construction was begun at Kenansville on [**Henry Flagler’s**] Kissimmee Valley Extension

... continued on page 5



The steamboat Success, built in 1906, plied the waters of Lake Okeechobee, plus the Kissimmee and Caloosahatchee rivers for about two decades.

Welcome - New Members

Sue Favorite, Membership Chairman

Mr. & Mrs. William Blatch • Sharman Mullins
 Vivian & David Marion • Boyd Johnson
 Ralph & Patsy Lawson • Jim & Sonja Odell
 Karen Blackburn • Debra Terrio
 Michael & Earlene Hucks • Kathleen & Wayne Hayes
 William & Fran Slat

Contributions

Memorials

Lorena Bussey Memorial

Donna L Hart
 Patricia Russo
 Mose Sanders
 Jack & Sue Favorite
 Nancy Bennett
 Margaret Summerlin
 Martha & Herman Hall
 Mary & John Landgraf
 Debbie Billis
 Linda Leger
 Carolyn & Gerry McNeil
 Harold Holtzberg

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The President's Message

by Nancy Bennett

I want to wish all of you a happy summer! Here's to pleasant days with friends and families and lovely weather to enjoy.

We have had a big winter with visitors from all walks of life around the United States and from other countries as well. I want to give a big thank-you to the History Center volunteers who greet our visitors and introduce them to our area history. We marked our society's 65th anniversary year on March 3 with a "Pioneer Festival" barbecue at the Adams Ranch. We also celebrated another year of volunteering with a luncheon April 24, at which we recognized the time our volunteers have donated to the museum.

We look forward to our next dinner meeting on September 20. We can count on **Robyn Hutchinson** to schedule new and interesting speakers. I want to thank her for all of the great speakers at our dinner meetings this year.

Our May 17 meeting featured "Show and Tell," an opportunity for members to share local memorabilia. Seven members participated. Among them: **Harold Holtzberg** presented much interesting information about the store his grandfather and father owned, Holtzberg's Grocery. He shared information about the prices of items in those days that made us all long for such inexpensive goods -- but of course, not the wages of the day. **Cynthia Putnam** displayed an exquisite day dress that her grandmother, **Dorothy Binney Putnam**, had owned, also a 1932 photo of her wearing the garment.

Enjoy your summer, visit us in the History Center if you get a chance, and join us on September 20 for our first meeting. Δ

Florida Fact

Tallahassee, the state capital, lies about halfway between St. Augustine and Pensacola – the two provincial capitals of East Florida and West Florida during the final period of Spanish rule. (*The Florida Handbook*)

'Honor' series illuminates Florida history in exciting ways

By Terry Howard

If you enjoy high-seas adventures and Florida and U. S. naval history you will love Florida author Robert N. Macomber's honor series. St. Lucie County Regional History Center docents Peter Van Brunt, Ted Burrows and I (our Wednesday volunteer book club) have shared and enjoyed the first 13 novels in the series. The stories follow the career of a fictional U.S. Navy officer, Peter N. Wake, who begins as a sloop commander on Florida blockade duty during the Civil War.

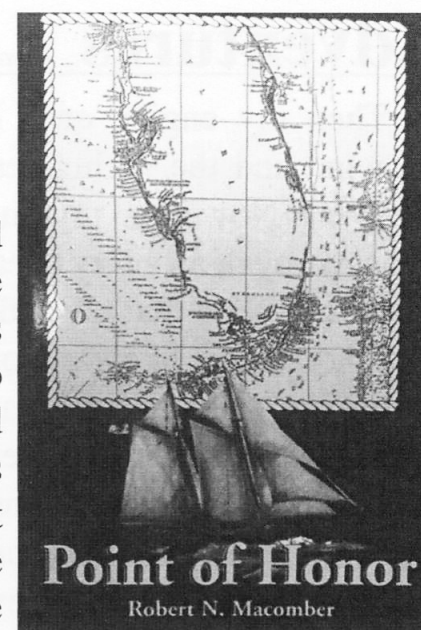
The reader follows Wake as he rises in rank and goes from sail to steam to diesel-powered vessels, creates and serves in the Office of Naval Intelligence, meets and works closely with several U.S. presidents and Navy secretaries, survives countless harrowing escapes from impossible situations in every corner of the world, and all the while protects the honor of his beloved Navy and country.

Intertwined with these adventures are beautiful ladies and torrid romance. Peter N. Wake has been shot, stabbed, starved, tortured, storm-tossed, nearly drowned, blown up, and snake-bit. Peter Wake's

trusted best friend in nearly all of these adventures is Boatswain's Mate Sean Rork, who sports a prosthetic hand that cleverly conceals a deadly spike that comes in handy in close encounters with the enemy.

The fictional stories are based on actual historical events and incidents. The author, who lives on an island near Sarasota, has done extensive research on 19th-century personalities, political intrigues and development of American naval power. He lectures and writes extensively on maritime subjects. His books are published by Pineapple Press in Sarasota.

In the 13th book, Wake (by this time a captain), leads a first major engagement with Spanish forces in Cuba at the start of the Spanish -American War. I highly recommend this series. Macomber's books make fascinating fun. Δ



Adventures in killer seas stir a personal memory

By Terry Howard

If you enjoy historical fiction and sea adventures you should love reading Robert N. Macomber's 13-book "honor" series, featuring the fictional Peter Wake, a 19-century U.S. Navy officer. Wake is forever getting into harrowing situations related to actual historical events.

In his eighth book, *Darkest Shade of Honor*, Macomber accurately describes a storm in the Gulf of Mexico, a description that hit home with me: "The color of a storm at sea is uniformly gray -- the top of the sea and the bottom of the clouds are plastered together in a seething stew of grayish movement. ... Real storms at sea are not the stuff of romantic novels or intellectual lectures. They hate you. They try their best to kill you."

As a commercial kingfish captain I spend a good deal of time fishing 10 or more miles out in the Atlantic Ocean. Unlike most commercial fishermen, I am not mechanically inclined, and was even less

so during my early days of fishing. Years ago, before 1992 (the year I put a diesel engine in my 24-foot boat), I was fishing with the Fort Pierce commercial fleet on a rough day. I had not been catching as well as the other boats.

A winter storm front engulfed us from the northwest and the rest of the boats had headed to the inlet. I had begun catching fish, pulling them in on all of my lines as fast as I could. For me the bite was finally on. I stayed in the ocean pulling fish as the seas increased.

It was total grayness from sea to sky, as described by Macomber. And it was turning dark, but the fish kept biting. By now night was falling and the rest of the fleet was home. Waves were breaking in the boat, but the fish continued to bite. I was alone. The wise thing to do was to head for the inlet, but I kept catching just one more fish.

... continued on page 4

Adventures... *continued from page 3*

Then my engine quit. But for the howling of the wind and the raging seas, all was quiet. It was terrifying. Now I and my tiny boat were helpless and at the mercy of an angry ocean. We were tossed about like a toy. Sure that all of the other boats were long since home, and likely out of radio range, and before setting out a sea anchor that at least might hold the bow into the crashing waves, on a whim I asked on the radio, "Can anyone hearing this tell me what to check first when your engine quits?"

My old friend, Cleve Lewis, a retired captain that lived in a trailer on the sand ridge on Juanita Street in Fort Pierce, answered at once. He had VHF radio in his Airstream trailer attached to 50-foot antenna outside. I'll never forget his words; "G—dammit Howard, what the hell are you doing out there?!? Check the battery, Howard, check the G--- damn battery!" I did. A cable had worked loose. Because I, and everything, was so wet it shocked me to touch the battery. Using one hand so as not to complete the circuit, I was able to tighten the cable. When I turned the ignition the engine fired, and I headed straight for the inlet.

Though he is now deceased, I will always be grateful to my dear friend, Captain Cleve Lewis. Δ

State college makes history with new record graduation

This is a record-breaking graduation year for Indian River State College. The number of graduates receiving diplomas at the end of this 2017-2018 academic year totaled 3,951, according to a recent IRSC news release. College officials said 799 of this year's grads received bachelor's degrees, which were not available during IRSC's earliest days.

Founded as Indian River Junior College, the institution opened its doors to students in the fall of 1960, in an assortment of temporary buildings in Fort Pierce. Its first graduating class, in 1962, totaled 28 members – 15 women and 13 men. All earned associate's degrees in either arts or sciences, and many then transferred to four-year universities. Δ

Remembrances

Lorena Bussey

Our historical society fondly remembers **Lorena Jacquelyn Roberts Bussey**, who died March 28, less than two weeks before her 99th birthday. Born April 7, 1919, one of eight children in a pioneer local family, she grew up in Fort Pierce and was graduated from Fort Pierce High School in 1937.

A longtime member and supporter of the St. Lucie Historical Society, Lorena Bussey was a familiar presence at the society's monthly dinner meetings until shortly before her death. She also served on the society's board of directors and for some years hosted meetings of the board in her home.

Lace Vitunac

Lace Kitterman Vitunac, a former historical society member and prominent local environmental advocate, died April 22 at age 93. She was born in Chicago and came here as a child with her parents, who owned property and were seasonal residents (Kitterman Road in White City is named for the family).

She was a teacher locally at Dan McCarty High School, and at schools in Germany and Japan while posted abroad with her husband, **Col. Walter Vitunac, USAF**. Locally, Lace Vitunac was a founder of the St. Lucie County Conservation Alliance and advocated protection of lands that eventually became the Fort Pierce Inlet and Savannas Preserve state parks.

Doris King

Doris Warren King, longtime St. Lucie County resident and wife of prominent educator **Dr. Maxwell C. King**, died May 13th at age 91 in Brevard County. She and her husband have been devoted supporters of the St. Lucie Historical Society and are both greatly admired by many of the society's members.

Originally from Texas, Doris King moved to Fort Pierce with her husband, who served as principal of Dan McCarty High School, then as founding president of Indian River Junior (now State) College. She was an enthusiastic volunteer in local civic projects. In recent years she and her husband have resided in Rockledge. Δ

As Time Goes By ...

Items from past editions of the society's Historical Quarterly.

From the first edition – Vol. 1, No. 1 – September 1982: How Hutchinson Island got its name.

James A. Hutchinson, a Georgia farmer, came to St. Augustine in March 1803 and petitioned Florida's Spanish governor for 2,000 acres on the mainland. It was granted the next day and was located on the east [coast] between Indian River Inlet and Jupiter Inlet.... Four years later Hutchinson returned to St. Augustine to say the Indians were molesting his slaves, destroying his crops and stealing his cattle. He requested that his grant be changed to the island. This was granted and the present location of the island is between Fort Pierce and Stuart.

In 1809 Hutchinson complained that his plantation had been raided by pirates. The buildings were burned, slaves stolen, crops damaged. Hutchinson returned to St. Augustine to make a complaint and lost his life in a storm on his return to the island. ...

In 1826 the Congress of the United States confirmed the Spanish land grant... [and] showed the island as having more than 2,000 acres.

In 1843 John Hutchinson, grandson of James A. Hutchinson, arrived from Augusta, Ga. with the Armed Occupation Act (Indian River Colony) and established residence six miles south of Fort Pierce on the river shore of the island. He was not heard from after the failure of the Indian River Colony in 1849.

From Vol. 3, No. 3 – March 1985: Robert D. Tylander's memories of school days.

In May the class of '35 will be reunited in celebration of its graduation from Fort Pierce High School. Several members of the class started together in the first grade of elementary school in September of the year 1922.

I was one of those who started in the first grade in 1922. The next twelve years were filled with lasting memories. The era encompassed a giddy "boom" when everybody seemed to have everything they wanted and more than they needed, and a bottomless "depression" when our parents struggled to keep businesses going or even food on the table.

The "depression" started for us after devastating hurricanes in 1926 and 1928. For the next ten years there was little money in Fort Pierce. The economy was largely stagnant. There was very little emigration or immigration. As a result there was an enclave of closely-knit caring people.

The School Board did the best it could with very limited funds. The teachers' salaries were very low but we remember nothing but dedication from them. Notwithstanding the limitations and handicaps, I never felt I had to apologize for my education in the Fort Pierce schools. Δ

Lake Okeechobee *continued from page 1*

to bring the Florida East Coast Railroad to Lake Okeechobee. ... [Also in 1911] the name of the post office was changed from Tantie to Okeechobee. ... On January 5, 1915, regular train service was inaugurated. ... *The Florida Farmer and Homeseeker* of November 1916 announced that 'Okeechobee is a new town that has sprung up in the past two years as if by magic, and is now attracting marked attention.... According to report, the promoters hoped to build a metropolis on Lake Okeechobee. There was even ambitious talk of superseding Tallahassee as the capital of the state. ... Possibly this dream accounts for the town plan which is more generous than most localities, with wide streets and a five-block mall through its midst. ...

"On Saturdays the town's population was noticeably increased by large groups of barefoot fishermen in search of relaxation, a change of food and drink and entertainment. Other groups with identical plans were cowboys from ranches to the north and northwest of the lake. Pioneer human nature being what it was, a sharp conflict in procedure invariably developed between these two factions. Invariably, also, these conflicts degenerated into fistfights. ... Before long, Okeechobee basked in the glory of being the roughest, toughest town east of the Mississippi."

Both the authors, Alfred and Kathryn Hanna, held doctorates in history. He was associated with Rollins College, she with Florida State University. Their book was published by the Bobbs-Merrill Co. as part of its "The American Lakes" series.

St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.
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Membership Application

St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc.

Please join us in preserving our local heritage for future generations.

Name _____

Spouse's Name _____

Names and ages of minor children:

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

Home Telephone _____

Business Telephone _____

Cell _____

Email _____

I/We wish to join the Society at the level indicated below.
Membership is from September through August.

- New Renewal Individual (\$20.00)
- Family (\$25.00) Business (\$50.00)

Please make checks payable to:

St. Lucie Historical Society, Inc
P O Box 578
Fort Pierce, Florida 34954-0578
For Information telephone: (772) 461-8020

General Meeting are held at:

**The Elks Lodge
635 South 5th Street
Fort Pierce, Florida 34950**

Society General Meetings are held on the 3rd Thursday of the month, from September through May. A meal is provided before the meeting at the price of \$12.00 per person. Reservations must be made for these meals no later than two days in advance of the meeting. To make reservations telephone (772) 461-8020 and leave a message. Reservations and your RSVP information by e-mail to: dinner@stluciehistoricalsociety.net. Dinner begins at 5:30 P.M. and the General Meeting Starts at 6:00 P.M.

Volunteers are Needed

If you have 3 1/2 hours that you can give once a week either in the morning or afternoon, please consider volunteering at the Museum.

Admission, to the museum, for St. Lucie Historical Society members is FREE. So come and take a tour.

The latest exhibit is St Lucie Families-Crafters of Local History.

The Pineapple Patch Gift Shop has a large selection of books of Florida historical value, cards, handmade Seminole Indian dolls, and baubles made by volunteers.

Museum Hours:

Wednesday-Saturday, 10 am to 4 pm. Sunday, 1 pm-4 pm