

CLAY COUNTY ARCHIVES
INTERVIEW OF EUGENE PERMENTER BY CLAUDE BASS

Florida Military Academy

PART I

We were living at 1916 Laura Street in Jacksonville.

Born and raised in Jacksonville. My big brother was already at the school when I came.

Col. Hulvey founded the Military School in 1908 and it was in the Murray Hill area of Jacksonville. My brother started there in 1916 and spent eight years in the FMA. He graduated in 1925.

So he was already well established at the FMA and Col. Hulvey, the founder, fell on hard times so to speak and he came down to Green Cove. And my brother moved along with him.

So my brother was already in FMA at Green Cove Springs when my mother broker down with tuberculosis. So they decided they better send me off to school too. My mother went to Asheville, NC and my father was in a hotel in Jacksonville.

When I went to FMA, I had graduated from the sixth grade at L--- Ferry School in Jacksonville. I came down to Green Cove and I skipped the seventh grade and I entered the eight grade.

They had a junior school and a senior school. The junior school was what they call elementary today. The eighth grade was the last of the junior school. Then you started four grades of high school then graduation. Around 100 students in all.

ROTC school. An accredited high school. We had a regular army officer assigned by the army. A sergeant who was in charge of the arsenal. We had honor rifles.

The Academy used the whole hotel.

The boathouse was one of my favorite places. Recreation if you can imagine back then was kinda scarce. You could come to Green Cove Springs on Wednesday afternoon and Sunday afternoon. You could swim at the swimming pool. Or you could go out in the woods and bill snakes.

Or you could go on the river. Now, I had a good friend and he and I had the same interests.

When we moved back out there, after the fire on the riverfront. . . . It was overgrown, this old boathouse. The roof had fallen and caved in. And the boats were all in disrepair. Everything was covered up in vines and whatall. My friend and I cleaned that boathouse out. It was well kept when the old hotel was a resort.

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We found a naphtha launch. We found four or five canoes. One of which was in good enough shape we repaired it and put a sail on it. Put a center board on it. Then we sailed it for four or five years in the river.

We dove down in there and pulled up all kinds of equipment. It was a ---- made row boat. There were all kinds of hoists and everything to elevate boats. It was quite an elaborate ruined boathouse. Used in the gay 90's.

Every Sunday we marched to church at the Presbyterian church. People had automobiles then and our families could come from Jacksonville by car. There were a little us that ran. Of course the train was nearby.

When I was in school there was a railroad station at Magnolia Springs. In fact my brother was in school with me for two years. He graduated in '25 and I graduated in '28. He had the job of going and picking up the mail at this station. You're familiar with the old hook that grabs the bag. If they had mail for Magnolia Springs they'd throw it off and not stop. If they wanted to pick up mail, my brother would hang the bag on the hook and they'd grab it with a hook when they went by.

There were riverboats running at that time. I distinctly remember the Osceola was running and I believe the City of Jacksonville and I know that City of Palatka was running. At the time in 1923, if you flagged it, signaled it would come in and stop. It visited Green Cove Springs regular. But if we flagged it off the dock at Magnolia Springs it would stop. Otherwise it just went on by. I have on several occasions (usually by auto) have ridden from Jacksonville to Green Cove Springs on the riverboats. My mother, brother and I and guests, out of town visitors, took trips on the river boat.

After the fire, we moved back to the site and into the cottages. Immediately we moved into hotels in Green Cove Springs. One I remember was Hadden Hall, a great whackin big square building in Green Cove Springs and one named St. Elmo. It's a little confusing right after the fire because the whole thing was disrupted. Some of the students left. Their parents tool 'em home. They left a bunch of us and we were shifted around in Green Cove. Finally settled down in Hadden Hall.

The next year we moved back out the Magnolia Springs and into the cottages that had been put in shape for us. These were tremendous big cottages. They called them cottages but they were big – three stories with servants quarters.

The one on the end was the biggest we called The Inn. That was big enough to have one dining room big enough to feed all of us. That was the administration building they took care of everything.

The fire started in the boiler room. I imagine it was a faulty furnace of some kind.

There was a spring on the property. It was a curiosity.

The cemetery was a popular place to scare the youngsters – the younger kids. The graves were caved in and sunken. We use to play around in that thing. There was a bunch of trenches.

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The old spring house was still there and the railroad tracks were still there from the dock over to the main railroad. And it ran around. It was called a hay burner route. Issued little cards and it was a pass to ride the hay burner route. Rode all around the campus and one of the stops was the spring house. It was pulled by a mule.

I knew some local families in Green Cove Springs. Byers. Southerland, Schaffer, Wade, DeWitt – day students

Armegs (Wade's father) was quite a famous lawyer. Considered one of the defense lawyers in the State of Florida. If you committed murder you wanted to have old man Wade defend you.

The creek area near the school was a swamp area. I spent many an afternoon in the swamp. My buddy and I were snake hunters. I tell my grand children about the snakes in that swamp. They don't believe me.

We had a bull ring for marching off demerits. We marched to a rifle. With collar buttoned up, tie up and all buttons pocketed.

Every night we studied from 7 to 9 o'clock. We studied all together in study hall. A compulsory study hall every night.

Major Boyers was the Superintendent. In 1925 Col. Hulvey, the founder and owner, sold FMA to H. E. Boyer, V. A. Stevens and W. S. Jones. Boyers was a football coach, Stevens was a World War I aviator, a buddy of Eddie Rickenbacher.

They bought FMA at the end of the 1925 school year. Major Boyers was the Superintendent of the Academy. He was brought there as commandant. He was a West Pointer – lost his leg in World War I.

The woods were full of wild cats and coons and snakes, alligators, panthers, and gophers, possums. Trees were full of moss and we use to catch mullet at night by putting a lantern in the boat and they'll jump in the boat.

Big tennis courts were across the road from the main building.

Pete Gustafson went to FMA and was a friend of my brother's.

Down at the swimming pool at Green Cove Springs – The spring flowed into the pool and all around the pool they had various small rooms and small pools. Those were all private pools, they had them all boxed in and they had their own dressing rooms. Those pools were not used when I was there. They had alligators floating around in them.

Col. ---- W. Hulvey the founder had a brother named Crawford Hulvey and in 1923 Crawford Hulvey was Commandant. He moved to Magnolia Springs Hotel sometime around 1924.

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Col. Edwards helped write the ROTC manual. Close order drill. The ROTC manual had footprints on eight-man marching squad units. My brother stenciled them on the floor of this main building on the porch. He put them there when Col. Edwards was writing the manual on the squad movements.

The Hotel was five stories high. The reception room, main office administration area was on this level. I lived on the third floor.

Back in there was an indoor swimming pool – a beautiful indoor swimming pool. Very similar to the indoor pool at Biltmore House in Asheville, N. C.

Boiler room was back here and this is where it caught afire. Back in here.

The parlor was a tremendous big parlor. At the time we were told it was the largest rug in the world. It was so big that they had five pianos with groupings of furniture around each.

Three or four tennis courts right out in here.

The main dining room was a course of course on the second floor.

Had a hydraulic water-operated elevator. It was slow and we were forbidden to use it. It was there and we knew it and understood it.

In my mind there were seven cottages. A little cottage even over here. Cottages three stories high with 12 to 14 rooms.

PART I – TAPE SIDE TWO

The football field and parade ground were behind the cemetery.

My big brother was a lieutenant and he got on one side of the panoramic picture. Then when they got off that end he ran around to the other end. SO he's in the picture twice. Wish I had that picture. Someone has yearbooks.

Qui-Si-Sana – The night the fire burned they took us junior kids into town and they bunked us up at the Qui-Si-Sana and senior cadets mounted guard out at Magnolia Springs because all of the property was taken out of the hotel and lying on the ground.

The Qui-Si-Sana was operated by twin Italian men, the Digalini. It was a nice resort hotel. It had three young ladies playing dinner music – the Wilkerson Sisters. They graduated from Converse College in Spartanburg, S. C.

There was Mildred, who played the trumpet. She eventually married Homer Edward Boyer, the new owner and commandant of FMA. When we moved into the hotel she got to going out with the football coach and that's how they got together.

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A nice high class hotel. People would come in on the river boat and walk up to the Qui-Si-Sana . There were several other hotels in town but that's the one we moved to. The people at the Qui-Si-Sana were a life saver for us.

A boy named Hester, his daddy was the one invented the plow that fits on a Ford tractor. Another fellow who was my roommate was Jessie Tucker. His daddy was the chief engineer for ---- that carved Stone Mountain in Georgia. Another boy's daddy (I can't remember his name) invented the Eskimo Pie. Daddies were pretty well established.

I enjoyed FMA and I'm proud to have been there. I guess I learned all my bad habits at FMA.

When I was twelve years old they handed me an army rifled – nine pounds – and told me I better learn the number and be able to recite it. We had lots of hardships and we had a lot of fun too.

When I graduated I went to the University of Florida. Transferred to the University of Georgia and graduated with a degree in chemistry. Went to work for Glidden Co. (Naval Stores Division) seven years. Then moved to Liberty Mutual Insurance Co. in safety engineering. I spent the rest of my career in safety engineering – 32 years. After that I did independent consulting work for about ten years.

The ones that played instrument at church – the rest of the cadets marched to church from Magnolia Springs to Green Cove Presbyterian Church. So I got my daddy to buy me a saxophone and I took lessons from that Mildred Wilkerson who was in the music group with her two sisters at the Qui-Si-Sana so I wouldn't have to walk. I learned gold bricking at an early age.

PART II

Train signal and mail hook pole was still at the track but the old Magnolia train station was gone by the time I was there. My brother – older two and a half year – his assignment (it was a goldbrick job) at the Military Academy was a to carry the mail. He'd go over there and hang the bag with the outgoing mail with a hook at each end. The train would come by and the main the mail car would pull a lever that would run a stick out and grab that bag on the run, they didn't stop. At about the same time they'd throw one out on the ground with incoming mail. He'd take that back to the school. Cadets got their mail at mail call. Just a standard military mail call.

We lived by the bugle.

Photo of waterview of wharf and hotel in background.

In 1923, the oriental pavilion at the end of the dock was no longer there.

Photo – sawmill at Magnolia on south side of Governor's Creek.

In 1923 the big old sawdust pile was burning down in the bottom and it was still burning in 1928 when I left.

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Photo – mule pulling a tram at old hotel

When I was there the old tram tracks were still on the property.

Photo – Spring house that covered the Magnolia Spring.

It was behind the cottages. They called that the hay burner route railroad. I had a card I can't find that is a pass to ride the hay burner route at the old hotel.

Photo – 1800's general property

Two photos – panoramic – labeled FMA and Naval Academy Magnolia Springs

I'm not aware it was ever called "Naval Academy"

Photo #9 – General Photos show wood walkways.

Wood walkways were gone by the time I was there.

Photo – cadet in uniform on steps

Most of the trees were cut down by the time I was there.

Photo #12 – Hotel Wharf – Cottages

This building is the boat house. The boat house was on the river.

Photo – Springhouse (just a roof)

That is Magnolia Springs. Let me take a good look.

FMA postcard

Bull ring for walking of demerits. Got demerits if your buttons weren't pocketed (unbuttoned pockets), weren't shaved, uniform dirty, late for formation, spit, in ranks without permission.

Every morning the bugle blew and we went down and we fell in. And we had calisthenics for fifteen minutes. My brother, who was a lieutenant, was giving the instructions.

"Hands on hips"

Well, the commandant was an old West Pointer who felt like you took calisthenics in your under shirt without a shirt. Well, on the west bank of the St. Johns River in December it's colder than the devil. And so I put on a sweater. My brother giving the orders and he told me to take off my sweater. I refused. We had words. Here was a private giving back talk to a lieutenant. He reported me and I got one 100 demerits which I walked off on the bull ring. Ten demerits was an hour so I had ten hours on the

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bullring. Could double time and get double time demerits. We did double time at port arms with our rifles overhead.

We picked up our rifle, uniform on, collar buttoned up, shoes shined, we walked at attention 50 minutes, rested five. The bullring was a prominent thing in my memory.

When you had demerits you were restricted to the campus. You couldn't take leave on Wednesday afternoons or Saturdays and the officer of the day had to set there and see that you behaved.

The cottage on the creek farthest south was the biggest. It was called The Inn. Was big enough for a mess hall for all of us. And had room for the administration offices. Tables served eight china dishes and silver. Kitchen staff of cooks and waiters. They served us. There was a barrel at the entrance to the kitchen when the waiters cleared the tables they threw the left over bread in the barrel. When they got enough they made bread pudding.

We had a lot of Cubans and Central American boys. They'd go through high school down in say Havana then to learn English they'd send them up to the United States to prep school. That's where they really learned to speak English. We'd go down to the railroad station in Green Cove Springs and meet the train from Miami. There'd be a Cuban boy there with a tag around his neck. Put this boy off at Green Cove Springs like a package.

They couldn't speak a word of English. We'd take em back to the Academy. The rule was there was to be no Spanish speaking. The boy could room with another. They all roomed with American boys.

They couldn't sit at the same dining table as another Spanish-speaking boy. That's how they learned to speak English. They'd pick up the salt shaker and say "como se llama?" (How to you say this?) in Spanish. We would tell him, "That's shit." Then he pick up the ice tea glass and ask again. We'd answer, "That's horse piss." So that's how they learned English. Of course it didn't take them long to figure out they were being pulled and they learned it like it oughta be.

In the Old Hotel there was a hydraulic elevator. We weren't allowed to ride it. I entered in September, 1923 and the hotel burned in November. So I never got a chance to check into the elevator. When visitors came they were always shown the elevator along with the big rug, five pianos, indoor swimming pool.

I was twelve years old when it burned two months after I got there. I was not up to the exploring stage yet.

Parade field between the hotel and ----.

Rifle range back over towards the northeast in the woods.

Back then there was a swamp south of the main building (low and swampy) where we did most of our snake hunting.

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All boys back then had a seven cell flash light. Most of us had a machete. All of us snake hunters had snake sticks. What we would do depending on what kind of snake it was and what we wanted to do with it. We just take that stick and hold his head down and reach down and get him by the back of the neck. I popped the heads off a many of them. Like a whip.

The only riverboats I really remember was the Osceola and the City of Palatka. It was mostly the passenger business dying out.

Obelisk in the Magnolia Cemetery not there when I was exploring ground there.

Town Kids. DeWitt, Omago (?) Wade, Byers – lived here family still here. Pete Gustafson in my brother's class

Have the blanket we bought for me to move into FMA. It's a double blanket. It's twice as long as a regular blanket. You fold it up depending on how cold it is.

Steam heat in the hold hotel building. Fire started in the boiler room.

In our spare time we hauled boats out from the ruined boathouse and rebuilt and refurbished them, boated on the river, put a sail on a canoe so we could sail, hunted snakes, fished.

One time we stole a bottle of potassium and threw it in the river to watch it explode.

One fella got mad and threw his rifle in the river.

We had the old '03 Springfield rifles, bolt action with the box on the side you'd flip it open. There was a little trigger on the bolt. Sneak somebody when he wasn't looking and flip it over. When he pulled the bolt back it would just fly a mile and a half backward in that direction.

For punishment we had what we called "thinning out." You had to stand at attention and hold your hand in like this.

I was reduced to ranks one time for being AWOL. The Wade boy and I were partners in a motorcycle. He was a town boy and he could have a motorcycle and I couldn't. We bought a Harley Davidson. When we moved into the Qui-Si-Sana Hotel there were three young women, the Wilkerson sisters. They were playing music in the dining room. Mildred and Coach Boyer later married. They courted for a while. When she was in Jacksonville one time she saw me. Wade and I snuck off one Sunday and went to Jacksonville on that motorcycle. She told the coach and he checked up and I was AWOL. I was a lieutenant at the time and they reduced me back to the ranks. I mean I was a buck private.

We used to fish at night and catch mullet with a lantern. You hold a lantern up and the fish will jump in the boat and we'd catch mullet with hook and line.

When I was a freshman at the University of Florida they were introducing a new group in the ROTC – the field artillery. We had uniforms just like FMA and they had an infantry unit and this new field artillery

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unit. We had three batteries, A, B, C and they transferred some of the infantry officers to the artillery to start that up. No enlisted men transferred. I immediately became a sergeant in the artillery unit as a freshman at University of Florida because of my background at FMA.

University of Georgia had a cavalry unit in ROTC. Our field artillery was horse-drawn. We had caissons and we hauled Frith 375 field pieces around.

And University of Florida and University of Georgia played polo. Florida boys would ride up to Athens and ride the horses from the cavalry unit at Athens. When Georgia boys came down to Gainesville they rode the field horses of the field artillery unit at Florida.