

CLAY COUNTY ARCHIVES
NEIL COKER WPA ORAL INTERVIEW
(MENTIONS BELLAMY RD, MCRAE GRIST MILL)

FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT

American Guide, (Negro Writers' Unit)

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Grandin, Florida

NEIL COKER

Interesting tales of the changes that came to the section of Florida that is situated along the Putnam-Clay County lines are told by Neil Coker, old former slave who lives two miles south of McRae on the road Grandin.

Coker is the son of a slave mother and a half-Negro. His father, he states, was Senator John Wall, who held a seat in the senate for sixteen years. He was born in Virginia, and received his family name from an old family bearing the same in that state. He was born, as nearly as he can remember, about 1857.

One of Coker's first reminiscences is of the road on which he still lives. During his childhood it was known as the 'Bellamy Road,' so called because it was built, some 132 years ago, by a man of that name who hailed from West Florida.

The 'Bellamy Road' was at one time the main route of traffic between Tallahassee and St. Augustine. (Interestingly enough, the road is at least 30 miles southwest of St. Augustine where it passes through Grandin; the reason for cutting it in such a wide circle, Coker says was because of the ferocity of the Seminoles in the swamps north and west of St. Augustine.)

Wagons, carriages and stages passed along this road in the days before the War Between the States, Coker says. In addition to these he claims to have seen many travellers by foot, and not infrequently furtive escaped slaves, the latter usually under cover of an appropriate background of darkness.

The road again came into considerable use during the late days of the War. It was during these days that the Federal troops, both whites and Negroes, passed in seemingly endless procession on their way to or from encounters. On one occasion the former slave recounts having seen a procession of soldiers that took nearly two days to pass; they travelled on horse and afoot.

Several amusing incidents are related by the ex-slave of the events of this period. Dozens of the Negro soldiers, he says, discarded their uniforms for the gaudier clothing that had belonged to their masters in former days, and could be identified as soldiers as they passed only with difficulty. Others would pause on their trip at some plantation, ascertain the name of the 'meanest' overseer on the place, then tie him backward on a horse and force him to accompany them. Particularly retributive were the punishments visited upon Messrs. Mays and Prevatt—generally recognized as the most vicious slave drivers of the section.

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Bellamy, Coker says built the road with slave labor and as an investment, realizing much money on tolls on it for many years. A remarkable feature of the road is that despite its age and the fact that County authorities have permitted its former good grading to deteriorate to an almost impassable sand at some seasons, there is no mistaking the fact that this was once a major thoroughfare.

The region that stretches from Green Cove Springs in the Northeast to Grandin in the Southwest, the former slave claims, was once dotted with lakes, creeks, and even a river; few of the lakes and none of the other bodies still exist, however.

Among the more notable of the bodies of water was a stream—he does not now remember its name—that ran for about 20 miles in an easterly direction from Starke. This stream was one of the fastest that the former slave can remember having seen in Florida; its power was utilized for the turning of a power mill which he believes ground corn or other grain. The falls in the river that turned the water mill, he states, was at least five or six feet high, and at one point under the Falls a man named (or possibly nicknamed) "Yankee" operated a sawmill. Coker believes that this mill, too, derived its power from the little stream. He says that the stream has been extinct since he reached manhood. It ended in 'Scrub Pond,' beyond Grandin and Starke.

Some of the names of the old lakes of the section were these: "Brooklyn Lake; Magnolia Lake; Soldier Pond (near Keystone); Half-Moon Pond, near Putnam Hall; Hick's Lake" and others. On one of them was the large grist mill of Dr. McCray; Coker suggests that this might be the origin of the town of McRae of the present period.

To add to its natural water facilities, Coker points out, Bradford County also had a canal. This canal ran from the interior of the county to the St. John's River near Green Cove Springs, and with Mandarin on the other side of the river still a major shipping point, the canal handled much of the commerce of Bradford and Clay Counties.

Coker recalls vividly the Indians of the area in the days before 1870. These, he claims to have been friendly, but reserved, fellows; he does not recall any of the Indian women.

Negro slaves from the region around St. Augustine and what is now Hastings used to escape and use Bellamy's Road on their way to the area about Micanopy. It was considered equivalent to freedom to reach that section, with its friendly Indians and impenetrable forests and swamps.

The little town of Melrose probably had the most unusual name of all the strange ones prevalent at the time. It was called, very simply, "Shake-Rag." Coker makes no effort to explain the appellation.

REFERENCES

1. Interview with subject, Neil Coker, Grandin, Putnam County