

CLAY COUNTY ARCHIVES
MARTIN WOOD WPA ORAL INTERVIEW
(BOUGHT WOOD AT BLACK CREEK)

American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1940

[Martin Cross, Wood and Fuel Dealer]

26024

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Life History

Montgomery Corse,

(Wood & Fuel Dealer)

1801 Goodwin St.,

Jacksonville, Florida

Written by Rose Shepherd

MARTIN CROSS, WOOD AND FUEL DEALER

Mr. Cross, retired wood and fuel merchant, lives in a splendidly substantial brick home near the foot of Goodwin Street in Jacksonville where he can hear the lapping of the waves of the incoming and outgoing tide in St. Johns River which has figured so prominently in his life history.

Rosa, a happy-faced colored maid, with the assurance and proprietary manner of a well trained family servant of an old-time Southern family, ushered me into the specious living room, with "Mr. Cross [hoah's?] the lady you's expectin."

There he sat, a kindly man, with his eighty years resting lightly upon him, with the exception of partial deafness and a slight stoop in his shoulders, his hair snow-white, his skin clear, a faint pink in his cheeks, and the twinkly blue eyes not covered with glasses.

He rises, shakes hands in a [cavalier?] fashion, and places a rocking chair - which from its size and comfortable cushions must be the favorite chair of Mrs. Cross - and says:

"My memory is failing and I'm not sure I can give you the information you wish, but I'll do my best, and perhaps when we get further along in the interview, more will come to me.

"I came to Florida from Virginia in the early 1880's and settled with my family on an orange grove near Picolata, a prosperous river town on the banks of the St. Johns, about 18 miles from St. Augustine.

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I was then twenty-two years of age.

"At that time, the St. Johns River valley was the center of the citrus growing industry of Florida. Our orange grove had been well established, and we lived in a frame house - not log - built by the former owner. The house was large and roomy and most comfortable for that period, a fire-place in the sitting room, but the kitchen had a fine wood-burning range, which furnished most of the heat when necessary and on which all of the cooking was done. There were no screens, although the beds were fitted with a canopy overhead on which netting was hung to keep out the mosquitoes which were numerous in the warm months and most troublesome.

"The orange trees, for the most part, were budded from the native sour-orange trees although there were nurseries from which specially grafted stock could be obtained. However, growers supervised their groves carefully, attending to their own planting, budding, etc. The trees were not sprayed. He did not know much about fighting [scale?], pests, etc., in the early days. Later a popular [emulsion?] composed of whale-oil and soap, thinned with kerosene, was used with considerable success in combatting scale. No, there were not any [Mediterranean?] fruit flies to worry us - nothing but quantities of the ever-present mosquitoes.

"When the trees were young, we planted crops of cow peas, corn, sugarcane, beans, etc., between the rows. But, of course, when the groves of trees grew larger, there was too much shade, and this crop rotation had to be abandoned.

"The oranges, when matured, were packed in crates - Birchwood

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shipped from Maine, curiously enough, like the material used now by cabinet makers and builders for [veneering?].

"The fruit was shipped to Charleston, Baltimore, New York and other Atlantic ports. There was daily shipping service, as water traffic on the St. Johns was then at the height of its popularity. There were no railroads south of Jacksonville.

"The most prominent passenger boats in that period were the John Silvester, and the [Sylvan?] Glen. They ran from Jacksonville to [Palatka?] every day. These boats carried no freight.

"Freight boats were the Water Lily which ran from Jacksonville to Crescent City, and the City of Jacksonville, a freight and passenger boat which went as far as Sanford, the farthest point of river shipping.

"Captain William [Hallowes?] of Green Cove Springs, commanded the Sylvan Glen, and perhaps could easily give the names of other boats on the St. Johns in the early days.

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"Freight was billed at so much a box to the growers, according to the quantity of the shipment and its destination.

"In addition to [cowpass?], sugarcane and corn, we raised quantities of sweet potatoes. Strange to say, the idea was prevalent that vegetables could not be grown in Florida, hence we were compelled to supplement our other food requirements by [orders?] on Jacksonville, which were promptly executed and shipped to us at the boat landing at Picolata by daily boat.

"Each family made its own syrup from the sugarcane, and brown sugar was also manufactured locally from the same source. This was the usual family commodity. We had no means of refining the sugar, although

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at any time we wished we could obtain the granulated sugar from Jacksonville. Also powdered sugar, in large irregular sized lumps, was popular with the ladies when serving tea.

"We enjoyed rather good health, with exceptions of occasional fevers, especially malarial fever in the summer months and early fall. I suffered with malaria for a period of two years, and finally [overcame?] it with quantities of quinine. This drug came in bottles about the size of vaseline bottles familiar to us now, containing two or two and one-half ounces. I carried a bottle in my pocket, and took it throughout the day--placing a quantity in a cigarette paper and dropping it down my throat as far back as possible, washing it down with water - taking sometimes as much as forty or fifty grains a day. It made me deaf as a post at the time, and turned my hair white.

"One experience I'll never forget was the case of a laborer, working for a neighbor of mine - neighbors then were on adjoining orange groves, four and five miles away. This young man jumped over a fence and ran a garden-rake through his foot. It made a bad wound, and nothing was thought of it at the time, home remedies being applied; but later in the week he became violent and we sent for the doctor at Green Cove Springs nine miles away. When the doctor [came?], he said at once it was a case of tetanus, or lock-jaw, and there was no hope. The man had to have constant care and was kept under the influence of chloral to [allay?] his pain and keep him quiet. In order to relieve my neighbor, I sat up with the patient at night, long nights they seemed. The doctor gave me the bottle of chloral, which was really not according to medical ethics, but he said it did not make any difference who administered it

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to the patient, as he was bound to die anyway, and to give it to him whenever he became restless.

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"A week passed like this, and one night becoming worn out with my vigil, I dozed off. I was rudely awoken by the grip of the patient's hands on my throat, and he began shouting - 'You are trying to kill me! You've been giving me poison!'

"I shook him off, as he was weak from having nothing to eat for seven days, and gave him another dose of chloral!

"The young man's parents [came?] from Palatka about this time. They were ignorant people, and thought we were not doing all that should be done for their son, especially in keeping him under the influence of an [anaesthetic?], or rather opiate. They took him home, and the doctor at Palatka advised giving him morphine. The parents said they did not wish their son to acquire the morphine habit, and refused to give him the drug. The young man again became violent, and the authorities took possession of him and carried him off to the county jail declaring him insane.

"The authorities at Tallahassee and Chattahoochee were notified, but [mails?] traveled slowly and transportation, too, was limited, so that before the proper authorities arrived a week later, the young man, from his close confinement in jail and being kept quiet and unannoyed, had entirely recovered.

"This is an illustration of how country people had to look after themselves in those days.

"It took three hours to drive from Picolata to St. Augustine. The sand and the corduroy roads made transportation tedious, and often in

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cold weather, I would get out of the buggy and walk to keep warm, and in preference to the jolting over the rough roads.

"There were no sawmills in Picolata. The nearest was at Green Cove Springs. There was wonderful timber in that section. Nobody paid any attention to land ownership - if one wanted timber and saw a section of likely trees, he just moved in and started cutting.

"The cut timber was hauled away in log wagons - strongly built and with high wheels, six or eight feet in diameter, - and taken to Jacksonville which was a sawmill town in those days, with many large mills in constant operation.

"Sad to say, the ruthless cutting of timber has depleted Florida's splendid forests, the sawmill business is dying out, and the pulp mills moving in to take advantage of the scrub pines, as it will be years before the present reforestation plan will enable the lumber business to recuperate and attain its former magnitude.

"I [came?] to Jacksonville in 1893. It was then a sprawling little town, confined mostly between what is now Hogan Street and Hogan's Creek. It consisted of five separate municipalities - Jacksonville, East

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Jacksonville, Fairfield, Lavilla and Brooklyn - the latter extending from what is now Myrtle Avenue to the St. Johns River, and bounded on the south by the present Forest Street.

"I established my business on East Duval Street, and right across was the early St. Luke's Hospital, started, financed and run by the women of Jacksonville, including Mrs. Alexander Mitchell, a wealthy railroad executive's wife, and other prominent ladies of the town.

"My help were the ordinary Negro laborers, who became familiar

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figures on the streets of Jacksonville, with the mule-drawn carts delivering wood and other fuel to the citizens of Jacksonville. There was some coal used in fire places in those days, but most of the fuel was native wood. I obtained my supplies from the Black Creek section and other nearby creeks and streams which were heavily wooded. A great deal [came?] from near Middleburg.

"There were no furnaces, of course, or other methods of artificial heating them.

"People in the country built a fire in the yard, and stood around it to keep warm.

"When I first came to Jacksonville, the streets were deep sand. The streetcar tracks stood up a foot or so, and all vehicles had to cross the tracks at the street corners on raised board crossing.

"But it was a delightful place to live. Everybody knew everybody else, and all were friendly and neighborly. I miss the old [contacts?], so many have passed away. But every morning, I go back to my old office for an hour or so, so that my old friends can come to visit while we talk over the old business days in Jacksonville.

"Now the town has become so [cosmopolitan?], it seems almost filled with strangers, and if I walk along the streets there are few faces which are familiar. However, the other day I attended the funeral of a prominent grocer, a charitable, well like man, and I knew nearly everyone there. So the old-[timers?] are still here, though they may not always be in evidence.

"The old landing at Picolata is a ghost of the past. Where our home stood in a turpentine still. The orange groves are all gone, as citrus

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culture has concentrated farther south in Florida. There are only two houses standing, and they are in bad repair.

"Two brothers, Doctors Sollace and Neal Mitchell, were the prominent physicians in Jacksonville when I came here in the early 1890's[.?] The were well educated, and had had the advantages of the best training in the United States and abroad. Both were kept tremendously busy, and were the first

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physicians I [knew?] of that had the modern method of keeping in constant touch with their offices by telephone. They could always be located promptly. Each had immense practices and both died from the strain of overwork when they had barely reached middle life. In early times, it took hours to reach or locate a physician, death or anything might happen in the meantime.

"One would hardly believe the immense quantities of fish and other seafoods that were taken out of the St. Johns River in those days. The fisherman would go out with [seines?] and rowboats and come in loaded to the water's edge with their catches.

"Ducks - well, ducks in season settled on the bosom of the St. Johns by the acre.

"No, there were no [hyacinths?] in the river, but there were quantities of water lettuce, and aquatic growth a pale yellow in color and coarser than the garden lettuce. The coming of the [hyacinths?] crowded and killed out the water lettuce, so it is not seen now. Cattle will eat [hyacinths?], but they would not eat water lettuce, which is tough and rather hard and [stickery?]

"The Seaboard Railway ran from Fernandina to Lake City, Tallahassee, Cedar Keys; and a branch came into Jacksonville. The old tracks may now

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be seen at the foot of Hogan Street, where the Logan Coal Company yards are now located. The passenger station was there when I came to Jacksonville.

"In the old days we used kerosene lamps for lighting. They made a nice soft light, but were lots of trouble to keep filled and in order. They used to smoke, and the chimneys had to be washed and polished every day. The housekeepers had to contend with a lot of disadvantages in the early days.

"The good old days? Well probably as good as any of their kind, but I like the present, with its modernity and improvements.

"Do I regret the passing of my business? No, we are living in a different age, and must keep abreast of the times. Fuel oil, gas and electricity have supplanted the old methods, and to most all are a welcome change."