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History of Orlando

S. S. Griffin

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HISTORY OF ORLANDO
BY
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HISTORY OF ORLANDO

By ~~Mrs. S. S. Griffin.~~

Willa Vick Griffin

The following paper was written by Mrs. S. S.

Griffin and read before Sorosis on Jan. 16, 1923:

Madame President and Fellow Members of Sorosis:

There seems little left to be said about Orlando.

I am sure that now we ought to know the town from the height of the tallest building, the Angebilt, which is 150 feet, to the depth of the deepest sewerage well 600 feet. And that we should

be more ~~useful citizens from the study of our town in Sorosis~~ *useful citizens from the study of our town in Sorosis*

I overheard several prominent men talking about the recent election by which the city manager plan was adopted and they said that it was undoubtedly due to the favorable discussion of it in Sorosis. So you see what a power we are destined to become in the community.

Forget for a moment if you please, the Orlando of today, and go back with me about seventy years to the little pioneer settlement which did not even boast a name. Perhaps a half dozen families with their slaves comprised the inhabitants. Mr. Lovell with a farm lying just south of Lake Eola: Mr. Speer with his little family and many slaves on a large plantation on the shores of what is now Lake Highland. Mr. Hull's home and farm was situated on Lakes Davis and Lancaster. Mr. Mizell moved down from the northern part of the state and bought hundreds of acres around Lake Virginia.

How up-to-date the settlers must have felt when Mr. John R. Worthington put up a general store on the lot which is now

used by the Sunshine Club for their croquet grounds, even though there was not a cookstove nor piano in the county.

The merchandise was hauled by ox teams from

Meltonville, which was on the St. Johns river, just above the present site of Sanford. In 1856 the county ^{seat} of Orange county was located here, previous to which the county business was transacted at Ft. Reed, a settlement near the St. Johns river.

Mr. Speer, who afterwards became Judge Speer, was

perhaps responsible for its location here. This question was of course decided by vote with Ft. Reed. The Lodge which is now Apopka and Orlando ^{was} in the race, with the odds seemingly in favor of Ft. Reed, when Judge Speer suddenly bethought himself of the fact that a United States soldier was privileged to vote wherever he might be on election day, so he went to Sumter county where a company of soldiers were stationed and persuaded a number of them to be here on that day, assuring them of a good picnic dinner. Before the noon hour the soldiers were on hand, and after enjoying the lovely dinner remembered that they might vote here, which they did, thereby swelling the vote here sufficiently for a victory.

As to how Orlando was named, I have asked three people this question. Mr. Fries told me the beautiful story of how the guard of a little band of travellers camping here for the night was killed by the Indians, in giving the alarm that they were being attacked, saving the lives of the others at the cost of his own, and that this guard Orlando was buried on the banks of one of our beautiful lakes, and that travellers going through to the southern part of the state after that, would say: "Let us camp by Orlando's grave." Hence the name.

I asked Hon. S. A. Robinson and he, getting his version from Mr. Arthur Speer, son of Judge Speer, and from Captain B. M. Sims, early settlers and Confederate veteran of Ocoee, told me this story:

That a man named Orlando became very ill here and was taken into Judge Speer's home and cared for and that he afterwards was in the Judge's employ, that a deep friendship sprang up between the two and so Judge Speer named the place Orlando in his honor.

I asked Hon. B. M. Robinson and he most emphatically declared that Judge Speer was a great lover of Shakespeare and that he named the place Orlando, for the well known character in "As You Like It."

I dared not ask another how Orlando got its name.

With the naming of the village and the selection of Orlando the advent of the postoffice, mail being brought by a rider from Melonville, and three days being required for the round trip.

Mr. James Hughey was one of the first mail carriers and on the first night out camped at Soldier Creek, the next day went the four miles into Melonville, procured the mail, did the errands and again camped at the same place, and back to Orlando the third day.

How many of you know that stamps were not used then, and that one paid ten cents for each letter when taken from the office.

Capt. B. M. Sims, who came here a young man at the close of the Civil War and taught school in the western part of the county, came into Orlando at the close of his school and found the sheriff crying bids for the court house. Friends asked him to bid, which he did and naming the lowest price of \$1,250, built our first

of being our first mayor and James P. Hughey first clerk.

court house, a two story building, four rooms for county offices below and the court room above. and 20 voters when incorporated.

Soon after the The first place of worship was a small building just back of the present site of the Tremont and was used both as a church and school for a long time. The picture of this little house with its hand split shingles and wooden shutters was among those on recent exhibition at O'Neal and Branch's.

The first cemetery was around this house and many years later, when the town began to grow, the bodies were moved to the present cemetery Greenwood.

Perhaps the only orange grove in the county at that time was at Ft. Reed, though most of the families had a few trees in the yard. Oranges of course were not thought of as a commercial enterprise, transportation prohibiting and the principal industry was cattle raising. Sometimes the little band of pioneers felt dire want, and at one time when they could not reach Melonville were forced to subsist for about two months upon sweet potatoes and game, which fortunately was plentiful, deer and turkey being often killed within sight of home.

In 1882 the village had grown around the cemetery and the need for one far out in the country became urgent. A company was formed consisting of the following well known men: Messrs. L. P. Wescott, C. A. Boone, James H. Livingston, Nat Poyntz, W. R. Anno, S. A. Robinson and James Delaney, who purchased 14 acres of the present Greenwood, which was platted by Mr. Robinson, who also suggested the name, and later sold to the city; 25 acres being added some years later.

In '75, forty-seven years ago, the town was incorporated and embraced one square mile. Mr. W. J. Brack had the honor

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of being our first mayor and James P. Mughey first clerk.

It is interesting to know that the town boasted something like 80 inhabitants and 20 voters when incorporated. Soon after the town was incorporated the enterprising citizens began planning for the future. Streets were laid out and property owners planted shade trees along their lots.

Messrs. Jandon, Waterhouse, Kegwin, Tom Shine and many others planting not only along their own but adjacent property as well.

Hon. S. A. Robinson planted one-fourth mile of the beautiful old trees along Magnolia. Under Mayor Marks the council authorized Mr. A. G. Branham to have 400 oaks planted. Let us always pay tribute to those far sighted citizens who planted wisely when Orlando was a mere village, the numerous stately oaks, home of the mocking bird, shade for children at play, perhaps the greatest man made asset, which has given us the right to say "Orlando, the City Beautiful."

Came the building of the commodious 4 room school, nucleus of our present fine school system, of which Mrs. Godfrey has told us. This was on our old high school lot and Prof. C. A. Boone was for years the beloved head.

Mrs. Chelby, Prof. B. Goulé, Mrs. Duke, Mrs. Terry and Mrs. Johnson were among the early and well remembered teachers.

Who can estimate the good and far reaching effect of these moulders of the minds of some of our foremost citizens of today.

In 1880 the first railroad in Peninsular Florida was built from Sanford to Orlando, called the South Florida, built by men of the Boston Herald, through the influence of Mr. Hencke of Longwood. The engines which operated on this road were small wood burning ones, and the passengers often joined the crew in gathering

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fuel. At one time when a political meeting brought a crowd here the engine refused to start the return trip and the passengers had to get out and push as we sometimes do when our cars get stuck.

The next year the building of the Jacksonville, Tampa and Key West from Jacksonville to Sanford, linked the little town with the outside world, and in '82 the road was started south to Tampa, and the entire line became part of the Plant System.

A few of the earlier homes are still standing. The Lockhart home built by Mr. E. W. Speer, who was postmaster for 16 years. The Horne home on Garland Street, built by Prof. Gould. The Dr. Shelby home, the old yellow house on the hill on East Robinson just off Eola, which partially burned a few weeks ago.

The Schultz store which stood for years next McElroy's, later was moved to make way for a more pretentious building and became the Pines.

The small two story house which was back on the Rock building until recently, was for years the principal boarding house, where all the legal lights stayed while court was in session, and was known as the Bass house.

Perhaps the Summerlin, built by that far sighted citizen to whom Orlando owes the beginning of her system of Parks, Mr. Jacob Summerlin, was the first hotel. It has been told me that Mr. Summerlin never wore a coat but when the weather became cool, wrapped himself in a blanket and wore it with all the grace of an Indian chief. That he was as much a dude in the wearing of it as some men in a dress suit or monocle.

Then there was the Lucerne- a three story hotel on Lake Lucerne, and the Arcade (which some years later burned) on the corner of Orange and Robinson avenues, owned by Mr. John Burden's father, who about 25 years ago sold the large lot for \$150.

In the early days Church street from the railroad to Orange was the principal shopping district and Mr. White had the first large store, carrying a complete line of merchandise. At this time tall pines stood between this store and the court house and all the land lying between Lake Lucerne and the present site of the Methodist church could have been bought for \$350.

And there was a pond with moss covered trees reaching over into the water between the San Juan (which was originally only three stories high, owned by Mr. Kedney) and the court house, which at this time was not the original 4 room one for this was burned and a more pretentious one built, which later was moved and became part of the Tremont when our present one was built in '91, at a cost of approximately \$63,000, which did not include our city clock, which has kept us hustling these many years-- the cost of which, \$550 exclusive of gong, was raised through subscription by Mr. Sherman, who made two trips to Boston in connection with this matter and to whom much credit is due for his untiring efforts and earnest solocitations in its behalf.

I wonder if any of you here remember the 12 foot square open well at the intersection of Orange avenue and Pine Street, and the steam engine that pumped the water from this well which was our first fire fighting apparatus. The hose for which was wound on a reel and drawn by man power.

Mr. W. S. Sherman was a fireman in Boston before coming to Orlando and organized and became president of the State Fire Association, which extended from Jacksonville to Key West and was also Chief of Fire Department for many years. Chief Dean was a fireman under him for many years.

Tournaments were held every year in the different towns at which time a silver cup was presented the company making

the quickest run, and it is interesting to note that the first hardsurfaced street or road in the county was laid by Mr. Sherman (of Bartow clay, Orange county clay being undiscovered) on Pine from the railroad to the English Club in the Rogers building, the property owners along the street paying the cost, which was something like \$1,000.

This was hardsurfaced for the fire laddies when the tournament was held here. I want to pause a moment just here to say that most of these items of early history were given me by Hon. Samuel A. Robinson, who has kept a record of notable events here for many years.

None of us who were "among those present" will ever forget the winter of '94 and '95 for to the Florida Cracker everything dates back to the BIG FREEZE when on Dec. 27, 1894, the mercury dropped to 24 degrees and in February it fell from 85 at noon of the 7th to 17 on the morning of the 8th. A lowering of 68 degrees in less than 12 hours. Property values both in country and town dropped with the thermometer and not for years did Orlando recover from this calamity.

In the names of many of our streets early and valued citizens were honored, Gore, Marks, Webber, Robinson, Hyer, Livingston, Hughey, Jackson, Delaney, Boone, Palmer, Lockhart, Parramore and Lord, are some of those which recall to mind men of sterling worth and unselfish interest who were never so busy that they had not time for civic work.

In the long list of men who have helped to make Orlando what it is today, I want to especially mention two who are no longer with us, but who's influence will always reach on just as a pebble dropped into the water causes a ripple which goes on to the end in ever-widening circles.

Judge J. D. Beggs, who came here 39 years ago and who for more than 20 years was superintendent of the Baptist Sunday school, junior member of that well known firm of lawyers, Beggs and Palmer, states attorney, which office he most ably filled for 20 years, president of the Orlando Bank and Trust Co., and for 6 years judge of the criminal court of this county, which office he held until his death.

And Judge J. M. Cheney, who a graduate of the Boston University Law School, came to Orlando 37 years ago and entered into the practice of his profession in the well remembered firm of Cheney and Odlin, was city attorney, served as U. S. attorney for the southern district of Florida from 1906 to 1912, was U. S. judge for southern district of Florida from 1912 to 1913, after which he resumed practice in Orlando.

In 1920 was Republican candidate for U. S. senator. He was a member of the American Bar Association, the State Bar Association, and the Orange County Bar Association. Aside from his professional activities he organized and promoted and was secretary-treasurer and principal owner of the Orlando Water and Light company, operating water, electric, gas and light plants. For years served as trustee for Rollins college, was one of the most brilliant lawyers in the State, whose death in 1922 was a distinct loss to the city, county and state.

From the little one room church and school have grown the 16 places of worship, for Orlando is famed as a church going town, and the 6 commodious schools.

One has but to choose-- three large grammar schools, an enormous new high school! Cathedral, a boarding school for girls, and St. Joseph's Academy, the convent, and only 5 miles away is Rollins, the oldest college in the state, founded in 1885.

Educationally, Orlando ranks with the highest in the state. Orange county was one of the first and has remained one of the foremost good roads boosters in the state.

In fact the first good roads congress was held here in 1897, under the auspices of the Orlando Board of Trade and was attended by delegates not only from all sections of the U. S. but Europe as well.

Orlando is as the hub of the wheel, with good roads, the spokes, radiating in every direction. First came the clay and marl streets and roads and later the brick and with the advent of the auto, residents of the surrounding country are brought within easy shopping distance.

This, together with the natural beauty and healthfulness of its location, the public spirit and enterprise of its citizens the harmony with which they usually work together for the common good--the interest outside capital has and is taking in the developments in the city are all factors in its growth.

But after all these things only supplement the greatest factor in the growth of the city, which is the prosperous back country which lies around it. To those who doubt this statement and say it is due solely to its progressive citizenry-- and I would not undervalue that which comes second in the upbuilding of any community. I can only refer them to the lean years following the freeze of 94-95 when the town was practically dead, when property values were unbelievably low to the steady growth of years as the surrounding country has developed till today Orlando is said to be the largest shipping point for citrus fruits in the state.

We hear much of the phenomenal rise of property values in the city. How many of us know that they are proportionately great in the county, that land which sold ten years ago for \$10 per acre now brings as much as \$150 undeveloped, and I know of one truck

farm for which the owner has refused \$3,000 per acre.

The history of this city and county is the history of other towns and counties in this section of the state.

Favorably situated in the semi-tropical portion of the state with rich lands suitable for the cultivation of the money making fruits and vegetables, enables most of us to have enough and to spare for the comforts, with time for the development of the higher things of life. Books, clubs, music, with perhaps a deeper insight into the affairs of the day than might be found in the poorer sections of the state.

Among those Orlando is proud to claim might be mentioned our present secretary of war, Mr. John W. Weeks, who was a surveyor under Mr. Fries and was at one time chief of our fire department.

And Mr. Norman Robinson, brother of Mr. S. A. Robinson, who was one of the first professors of natural science at Rollins, was state chemist, which office he most ably filled, and was a scientist of world wide fame.

Celia Solomon is making a name for herself as a pianist and makes her debut as a concert pianist in Sorosis house some time this winter.

Jessie Pedrick is a daughter of which Orlando is proud for she is a musician of great talent and has recently had the honor of receiving a scholarship for a winter's study of music given her through the high recommendation of her teacher, Ernest Hutchinson.

Another widely known and greatly admired artist that we are proud to claim is the poet Victor Starbuck, who has a keen insight into the hearts of men which makes his poems a joy and inspiration to all who read them.

I remember hearing Bishop Atkins say in a sermon a few years ago that he always felt a deep pity mingled with admiration and an earnest desire to help those born on a lower social plane who desired to elevate themselves into the circle of the elite. He being born at the very pinnacle of society structure. In a Methodist parsonage. I think we native Floridians have much the same feeling for those less fortunate who were born outside of its borders.

Pity that they were not one of the elect. Admiration that they are doing all possible to overcome this handicap, and an earnest desire to adopt them into our family until like Rosalind they exclaim "I'll tell the Aliens I cannot be out of the sight of Orlando."

