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The History of the town of Apopka

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THE HISTORY *of the Town* APOPKA

By RALPH G. GRASSFIELD
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(1926)

WEALTHY in terms of primitive life were the Indians that had their home on the northeast shores of Lake Apopka, for tradition assures us that this tribe of Seminoles, known as Apopkans, were industrious. The territory held by them was particularly fertile. They planted and harvested and danced to the moon and the stars. Their Gods of wind and rain and sunshine were kindly, giving abundant life. The forest was full of deer and bear and winged life, while the lakes provided food throughout the semi-tropical year.

The waters of the great lake with more than fifty miles of shore line and the scores of other and smaller lakes round about through the territory held by the Apopkans, each with their peculiar charm, were full of fish to be caught with primitive hooks or speared with their harpoons made from bamboo or the straight and strong hardwood sapling. Rolling hills and broad stretches of prairie lands, with here and there a marsh bordering a lake, gave to these peace-loving and home-loving natives a range that was more than ample for their few needs.

Hills and flat lands were densely covered with semi-tropical growth of pine and evergreen oak, gum and magnolia, while in the lower lands and around the lakes the palm trees lifted their tufted crests to the sun and moon. The rustling of the gentle breeze throughout the year in the forest of the Apopka territory, the kindly climate, the advantages of game in the forest and the fish in the lakes, inspired the Indian to a home life and a primitive agriculture, which in turn brought fame to this tribe throughout the Floridian peninsula. The success of their agricultural effort in raising potatoes gave them the name "Apopka" for this, according to tradition means "big potato."

Lived in a Near Paradise

Chronological history of an aboriginal race is unfortunately impossible. Speculation on the mode of living of these Apopka Indians is indeed interesting. Fragmentary facts handed down from the chiefs and medicine men who first had contact with the white man indicate the prosperity suggested here.

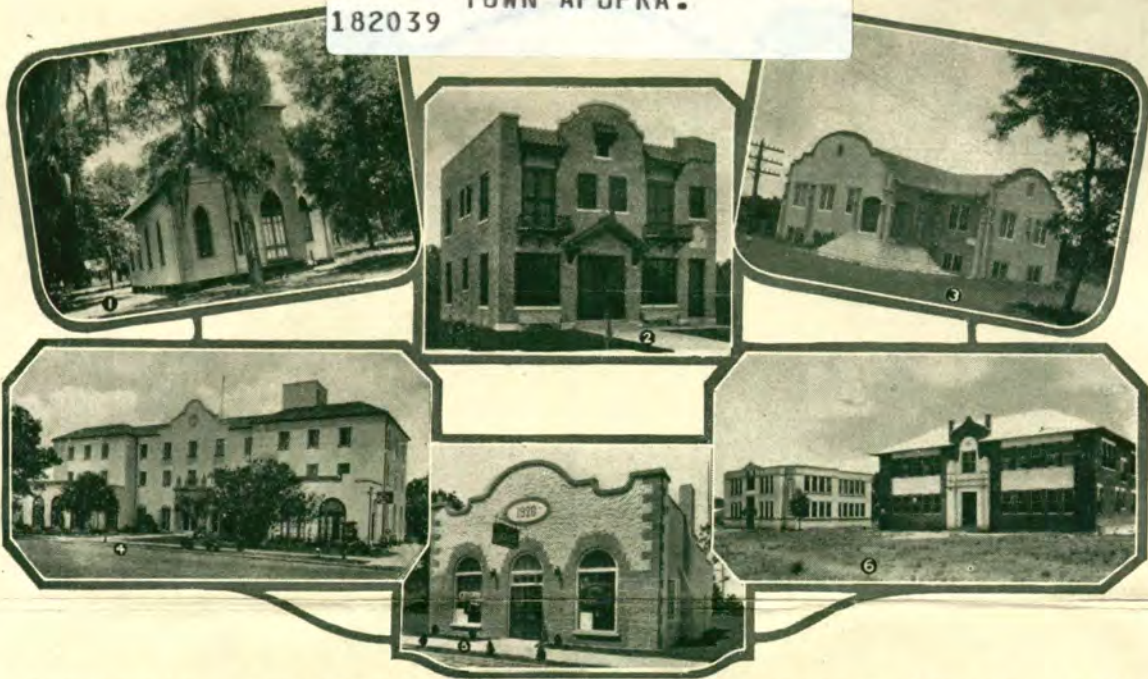
The early conquerors who trekked across the Floridian peninsula during

the years immediately following the coming of Ponce de Leon, noted the character and fertility and recognized the future of this country. The Apopka Indians were not hostile toward the first white men. They gave to them of their substance and provided shelter for those first hardy and intrepid Spaniards who braved the perils of the forest to discover and report on the character of this great inland country.

The Indians Gave Way

The years rolled on and the Indians continued to live in peace and quiet. Then the early Nineteenth century arrived when wars and aggression swept over the Florida country. The Indian, strong in his defense of his native territory, could not withstand the insistence of the paleface and he finally succumbed. Weaker races give way to the strong, and those who will not make full use of their opportunities must submit to those who will build a greater civilization. Nowhere in all the world is this emphasized more strongly than in the territory of Apopka.

Forest and lake, hill and prairie yielded their natural endowment to the new civilization. The years pre-



1. The Baptist Church. 2. Telephone Office. 3. The Methodist Church. 4. The William Edwards Hotel. 5. Office North Orange Realty Company. 6. Apopka Public Schools.

ceding the Civil War settlers from the North, principally from Georgia, came into the country. They cleared the land, established roads, built homes and schools and produced crops of cotton, sugar cane and vegetables.

A Glimpse Into the Past

From out the shadowy past, in that borderline of memory held by those few who are privileged to remember events of eighty years ago, we get a glimpse of the Apopka country from Mrs. M. E. Buchan. This gentle, little old personage, now lives with her youngest son, Chip Buchan, four miles North of Apopka. Her home, recently hidden, somewhat isolated in the back country, now fronts on the new pavement that runs, a glistening streamer of asphalt out through the back country, and leads to a junction with a similar cross-state highway a few miles to the North.

Through eyes that look with great interest on the rapidly developing country and with a mind that is wholly tolerant and keenly analytical, Mrs. Buchan lives in the past and present as well. She has lived within a few miles of the modern town of Apopka for more than eighty years, coming to the unsettled Central Florida from Georgia when a little girl. She is now nearing her ninety-th birthday. Ninety years young,

though she endured hardships in those early pioneering days, her staunch faith in the future of the country was never shaken. During the Civil War she and her husband with their family found it necessary to move over to the East Coast for awhile, but toward the close they moved back, never to leave their chosen country-side. Her husband passed away more than thirty years ago.

Old Farm Now a Forest

The Buchan home is surrounded by a forest of pine and evergreen oaks, with here and there a great magnolia. Back of the house to the East, some thirty acres have been cleared. Here are fertile acres that alternately produce crops the year round. Across the highway is a tangled mass of semi-tropical shrubbery, towering long leaf pine, magnolia and other native trees. Its virgin appearance does not indicate that this spot was once a great cotton field, during the season and throughout the winter a truck farm. But such is the case and Mrs. Buchan told at length of the wide acres and profitable fields under cultivation before the Civil War and which since have returned to a wild state. She spoke of the old neighbors, the Stewarts, Delks, Lovells, McFaddens, Shows and of Jack and Mary Winters, former slaves, who when freed homesteaded and were the best of

neighbors. Pilgrimages to Orlando, after the town was established, the beginnings of the town of Apopka, the delights of Rock Springs, then the home of Major Delk; the adventures on Lake Apopka and other lakes. Fishing was always good in those early days, and to catch a mess of fish it was only necessary to make the effort. The wild game in the forest, bear and deer, wild cat, panther, otter, possum, were sometimes pests, while wild game birds were abundant.

Those early days had their compensation, assured Mrs. Buchan, for neighbors were neighbors and they always had good times. When the children were old enough to go to school the school was there for them and the other youngsters in the neighborhood. Church was held in the school house, as well as other public meetings. "It is a wonder that the children were never attacked by a panther, for they were numerous in the woods in those days," said Mrs. Buchan. "I remember one big fellow that used to sneak near to the house. I saw him many times for two or three years, but he never harmed anyone."

The Bear in a Berry Patch

"You were never afraid of the bears or panthers?" she was asked. "Of course not," she replied. "We always minded our own business and we were left alone. I remember

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1. Apopka, Florida

once when we were down in the woods East of the house here—this was before the Civil War—picking berries, when a big black bear came up close, raised up on his hind legs and stood looking at us. We just looked at him, then he ambled off through the woods and we never saw him again. We had bear meat once in a while, but the deer were so plentiful that we did not need to bother the bears. To shoot the deer at night, the men-folks would take a frying pan and make a torch out of it, then shine in the deer's eyes. However, the deer were often a real nuisance. They would get into our gardens and eat up the tender green vegetables."

Salt Was Valuable

When the Buchans came back to Apopka in the early sixties, they brought with them several barrels of salt. This salt was made from ocean water. The Buchans were located near the present site of Indian River City. Crossing Florida back to Apopka was by the way of the St. Johns River to Sanford and the Wekiwa river to Wekiwa Springs, then known as Clay Springs. A barge was constructed on the St. Johns just West of Indian River City. All their belongings, including the salt, was loaded and the family floated down the big river and paddled up the smaller one. Salt was precious at that time. Their only fear was that Federal soldiers might discover them and confiscate the product that had been made at such effort. However, the salt was safely landed at their home near Apopka and was subsequently sold at a handsome profit.

Cotton Sold for \$1.25

Cotton was mighty valuable immediately after the war assures Mrs. Buchan, and she laughs when she tells of a planter by the name of Lovell, who hid several bales of cotton when the war broke out and when the war ended he had five bales left, for someone stole two of the bales. Mr. Lovell, she relates, sold these five bales at the average price of \$1.25 a pound, receiving \$4,375 for the five bales.

Yankee Soldiers at Rock Springs

Occasionally during the latter part of the Civil War, Federal soldiers were seen, says Mrs. Buchan. She recalls how a company of "Yankees" camped at Rock Springs for a few

days. They did not molest anyone for they seemed to be resting. At least no one ever knew just what they were doing there. Years later, in fact just a few years ago, General George W. Tibbetts, of Seattle, Wash., stopped at Apopka for a few days and during his stay visited Rock Springs. Imagine his delight and interest when he discovered that this was the very spot where he encamped with his company of Federal soldiers for a few days during the war. Thus the past and the present are linked coincidentally.

Modern Progress Is Good

Mrs. Buchan has witnessed the development of the country surrounding the modern town of Apopka for years before the the war of 1861. She has seen the country revert to a wild state and she has been spared to see the tremendous progress of recent years. "All this new progress is right and good," she says, and she believes the things that are being done today are permanent and that the works of today will not be destroyed, "through man's foolishness and enmity." Though she is bowed by the weight of years, she is sprightly and happy in the autumn of her life. Contented with the simple life she has always led, she will likely see many more quiet years. She looks forward with youthful interest to the progress of her community.

Kelly Park and Rock Springs

Gushing forth 26,000 gallons of crystal clear and pure water each minute from the foot of a limestone cliff, Rock Springs, about five miles North of Apopka, is one of the most delightful spots in Central Florida. Dr. Howard A. Kelly, of Baltimore, Md., recently generously gave 202 acres surrounding this spring, and it has been dedicated as a public preserve. A lover of natural beauty, Dr. Kelly has willed that the beauty of the springs and the country surrounding shall remain untouched, with the exception of certain spots that may be cleared and made convenient places for camping and picnic parties. The spring itself is most interesting, for it is the outlet of one of the subterranean rivers flowing through the limestone formations that underlie Central Florida. In addition to this park the Orange County Commissioners have purchased 160 acres adjoining it and the whole 362 acres has been named the Howard A. Kelly Memorial Park.

Rock Springs has always been a rendezvous for those who appreciate loveliness of this type. Long before the war between the State, Major W. S. Delk selected this spot for his home, cultivating with slave labor many acres, and here he reached a considerable prosperity. However, after the war his fortunes dwindled and he died near the springs and is buried at Apopka. The record of those prosperous days live only in the memory of some few who are still alive and in the unwritten history of those days. The foundations of the Delk home and other buildings can still be seen and below the spring itself are the crumbling remains of a dam that provided water power.

The Spirit of Free Masonry

The isolation of the back country of Apopka in the 40's and 50's drew men together in a bond of fellowship that manifested itself in the organization of a Masonic lodge, the first in Orange County. Orange Lodge No. 36 F. and A. M., was chartered in 1856. However, the Master Masons of this County had been regularly meeting for years at Barnhart's mill. Immediately after the new Masonic lodge had been granted a charter the members sought larger and more efficient quarters. In 1857, on January 23, according to the minutes of John L. Stewart, secretary, a new Masonic Temple was seriously discussed. The Lodge had moved from Barnhart's Mill to the home of Mr. Stewart. It was at this meeting place that the new Temple was decided upon.

A building committee was appointed on November 26 the next year (1858) to start the work of securing the new home for the lodge. This committee was made up of J. R. Worthington, Amos Newton, Mathew A. Stewart, L. A. Newton and J. L. Stewart. The new building was presented to the lodge with appropriate ceremonies on October 21, 1859.

The Masons of that day built well, for the building and the lodge room is still in use. It does not compare in appointments nor comforts with those magnificent lodge rooms in our cities of today, but the brotherly love and affection emanating from this Masonic Shrine is true and tried. Within the four walls of the lodge room many men have been raised to the Master Mason's degree and

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many of these have passed to that "bourn from which no traveler returns." But these travelers live in the hearts of those who labor in the Temple of Orange Lodge No. 36.

No Records During Civil War

For a few years after the new building was constructed public school was held in the lower room. The records of the lodge were kept accurately and completely from the beginning. The only break in the records occurred from May, 1863, to September 22, 1866. This period was during the war, when all social and fraternal activities were suspended. A few meetings were held, but the proceedings of these have been lost. However, with peace restored, the work of the Lodge was continued and records are complete to the present day.

The first meeting of Orange Lodge No. 36 was held on January 23, 1857. The officers were: James G. Speer, W. M.; L. A. Newton, S. W.; J. S. Stewart, J. W.; E. M. Hudson, S. D.; Wm. L. Delk, J. D.; John L. Stewart, secretary, and Robert Barnhart, Tyler. The meetings at first were called to be held from "two o'clock to candle light." Some of the charts and working tools are those that have been in use since the lodge was chartered. Time and use have given great value and interest to this old Central Florida meeting place of Master Masons. The Masons from as "far away as Orlando and other settlements, came here to Lodge meetings." This Masonic Lodge was meeting before Orlando and other modern towns and cities of Orange County were started. The town of Apopka was not in existence at that time. It was rather a scattered district and was first called "The Lodge," and by this name it was known throughout the countryside.

Modern Apopka—"The Fern City"

The little city of Apopka is modern and delightful in every respect. Hard surfaced roads radiate in four directions. The town is the center of a prosperous orange and grapefruit growing section and it is known as "The Fern City" because of the extensive production of ferns within the trading territory. Modern, fully accredited schools, churches, a magnificent new hotel besides two others, stores and homes combine to make this a home city of the highest type.

Exemplifying the commercial spirit of Apopka is the New William Edwards Hotel. This new building is modern in every respect and so located that it lends an added interest and dignity to the business part of the little city. It is said that this hotel is the largest commercial house in a city the size of Apopka throughout the entire South.

Other new buildings in the city are the Witherington building, diagonally across the street from the new hotel. This is a store and office building. Its construction and artistic appearance add materially to the commercial aspect of the community. The North Orange Realty building is another business structure that materially dresses up Apopka. The telephone company is housed in a new and attractive structure that is a real asset to the community.

The State Bank of Apopka is one of the strongest financial institutions in a city the size of Apopka within the entire State. This bank serves the needs of the community adequately. While always conservative and careful, yet the intimate knowledge of Apopka business life possessed by the officers of the bank assures good business practices coupled with real helpfulness.

Outstanding among the smaller newspapers of the State is "The Apopka Chief." This weekly finds a definite place in the business and social life of Western Orange County. It is a forward looking, aggressive newspaper that is a credit to the community it serves.

Though Apopka has progressed rapidly during recent years, only a beginning has been made. Thousands of productive acres remain untouched and are now ready to be subdued and brought into cultivation. Whether it is the Boston fern growing industry which today is the greatest in this section of any single place in the South, or the growing of orange and grapefruit, or truck farming, or poultry raising, or the bulb growing enterprise it matters not. The interest and peculiar training of the individual can be fully met.

With the Atlantic Coast Line railroad and the Seaboard Airline railroad adequate transportation facilities are established. The railroads coupled with the hard-surfaced highway gives complete outlet for all commodities.

Apopka is one-half hour from Orlando, providing a ready market for produce. Proximity to Central Florida's largest city gives to Apopka all the advantages of a large city with the attendant social and recreational facilities, while Apopka offers all the quietness and completeness of country life.

An Industrial Future

Apopka is forward-looking. With her agricultural future secure, an industrial beginning has been made and the citizenship is alive to the possibilities of rapid development in this direction. Small factories are seeking the southland and particularly Florida. This little city has facilities and an interest that is attractive for a wide range of industries that could be successful in such a location.

The town is incorporated with the commission form of government. The streets are paved and the water supply comes from a beautiful spring-fed lake. The homes are attractive and the building program for the immediate future assures a rapid growth. Within Apopka's immediate trade territory are many points of interest. Lake Apopka is the second largest lake in the State and one of the largest lakes in the United States. It takes a place with the great lakes of the country. Wekiwa Springs, four miles from the town, is another wonder spot, where clear, cold water pours forth from the earth in such a volume that a river large enough and deep enough for water craft of considerable size to ply their way to the St. Johns and thence out to the Atlantic.

Though situated in almost the center of peninsular Florida, a two hour's drive takes the motorist to one of half a dozen famous beaches on the Atlantic ocean, while the same time will take one to the Gulf of Mexico to the West.

From the savage red man to the modern man and woman of the Twentieth century in the foremost files of time, this spot and the surrounding territory has attracted and held. Florida's forward march, not only as America's winter playground, but as one of the leading commonwealths supplying foodstuffs, is accentuated by such aggressive and forward-looking communities as Apopka.