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A Pioneer Florida Family; The Parson Brown Orange

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THE PROGRAM SESSIONS

There was a large attendance at all of the Program sessions and the papers read, which were written for the occasion, were of unusual interest. A summary of several follow and others will be included in future issues of the *Quarterly*:-

A Pioneer Florida Family

Fred Lykes

The stories of the pioneers are of foremost interest to all of us today who have a thought for the past of our State. Because of the frequent change of sovereignty, only a handful of Florida's colonial settlers can be regarded as pioneers of today's Florida, so our pioneers are mostly of our ante-bellum period.

One of these latter was Frederick Lykes who brought his family and several slaves from South Carolina in 1852 and settled near the present Brooksville; where he planted cotton, grass for pasture, and set out one of the earliest orange groves in that part of the State. He had taught school in his old home, so he opened a school here, which also was one of the earliest in the region. Like so many others in all the years, he had come to Florida in search of health for his wife, and here she found it in full measure.

When war came his eldest son, Eugene, of the 2nd. Florida Regiment gave his life for the Confederacy at the battle of Seven Pines; while the younger, Howell, was a member of the Home Guards. After graduation from Charleston Medical College, Howell practiced in the region. "Settlers were still few and scattered and physicians had to travel by horseback far and wide to treat their patients. Money was not plentiful, and bills more often than not were paid in potatoes, corn, etc. With ambition and energy, it was but natural that he should expand his activities in other more attractive and profitable pursuits."

Retiring from the practice of medicine he turned first to the cedar business which for some years was the most important

industry in several Florida counties, with its center for mills and export at Cedar Key. The logs were cut and hauled to the creeks and rivers where they were measured and rafted to the mills to be sawed into slats for shipment to the Northern pencil manufacturing factories.

Cattle in the 1880's, as well as before and afterwards, was the principal industry of a much larger section of Florida, and Mr. Lykes from a small beginning continued to expand his herds until they ranged from Citrus county even to Lee county on the south. The greater part were exported to Cuba from Tampa and Punta Rassa. This was a huge business, for cattle were in great demand in the island, as much of the native stock had disappeared in the several insurrections and it was necessary to restock the herds.

In addition to his widespread business activities Mr. Lykes served for four years in the State Legislature representing his district in the Senate.

The sons of the family were trained in the several branches of the business, and in time each took over a part which, continually expanding, included real estate and insurance, and later widespread shipping. This growth continued and ever broadened.

The manuscript of Mr. Lykes' paper which he read at the annual meeting has been placed in the Society's library as a valuable record of a pioneer Florida family.

The Parson Brown Orange

Mercer W. Brown

The orange has been associated with Florida's history since the earliest Spanish settlers brought the seeds with them. So an account of one of the most important varieties, largely planted in Florida for three-quarters of a century, was featured on the program of the annual meeting. This was a paper on the Parson Brown orange written by Mr. Mercer W. Brown, a grandson of

Rev. Nathan L. Brown who planted the seed of this famous tree, and gave his name to the variety which has helped materially to make Florida oranges rank above all others.

The Rev. Mr. Brown with his family moved to Sumter county from Alabama in 1847. The seed of the noteworthy tree was planted by him in 1856. This was during the last Indian uprising, in which he served as a volunteer, and tradition has it that he brought home seed of some oranges from Peace river where his company was stationed. Another tradition is that Rev. Mr. Brown on a visit to Savannah brought home the seed of some oranges given him by the captain of an English vessel just arrived from China.

One tree among a number planted about his home early attracted his attention and drew the interest of all who planted oranges around their homes throughout that section, especially for its very early maturity and unusual sweetness.

The first large planting of seed from this tree was by Herring Hooks about 1870. This, and early orange growing in Sumter county, is described in a booklet ***Our American Italy*** published in 1882 by the Agricultural and Fruit Growers Association of Sumter County:-

“About 1847 Mr. Melton Haynes, then a young man reared in North Carolina, brought into Sumter County some orange seeds taken from the best imported fruit he could find in Charleston. These he planted on his farm on the north side of Lake Harris and cultivated them with moderate success for two years. From this planting young orange trees were carried into various sections scattered all about this great lake region, some finding their way into adjoining counties, and it is believed that from it have grown all the oldest sweet seedling trees of the region excepting the famous “Brown” tree at Webster. The orange tree from that time became a door yard ornament but few families taking the trouble to have one. No one thought of raising an orange for profit. The business of the sparse settlements was the culture of

cotton, sugar cane, etc; and hundreds of acres of wild orange groves were cut down and grubbed out to make room for these crops. Something of an awakening on the subject of orange culture was noticed about 1851, which resulted in the planting of the grove at Yalaha, now owned by Captain Phares, the trees being obtained from Mr. Haynes. Some of the oldest trees now [1882] growing around Lake Okahumkee came from the same nursery.

“Some of these trees were crippled with cold winters, delaying the time for fruitage, lessening the interest of the few sanguine spirits had felt on the subject. In the summer of 1867, Mr. Herring Hooks of Georgia, who had like his neighbors lost nearly everything by the war, was attacked with pulmonary troubles. He had studied somewhat the subject of orange culture and believed it could be conducted in Florida, and in the hope of recovering his health he resolved to make the experiment. Collecting a few household effects with his amiable wife and a large family of small children he started with his own teams and wagons on a long journey into the wilds of Florida. . . . He reached the bank of Lake Harris just as the first Ocklawaha steamer was making its second trip. The site of the present Yalaha was a large corn field with but one log house. Leesburg was a wilderness with a hut or two, and Okahumkee was the home of Kendricks simply. Flour was twenty dollars a barrel and Palatka his postoffice. Hooks found at the home of a neighbor a small box of young orange plants. He purchased it and from it planted the grove now [1882] growing near F. V. Hulls, south of Helena. About 1870, he accidentally met Rev. Mr. Brown at Okahumkee with two barrels of oranges from his famous tree. He purchased them and planted every seed and from these he planted his large grove of one thousand trees now seen on the bank of Lake Harris and for which he recently refused \$25,000 in gold, besides setting the grove at the Palatlakaha bridge. In 1875, Mr. Hooks sent his son with a wagon to the famous orange tree at Webster where

he purchased forty dollars worth of oranges for their seed. From these he planted his extensive nurseries from which so many thousand seedling trees have been scattered through this region.

“A number of the older trees in the state yield annually eight or nine thousand oranges each. The one large tree growing in the yard of Mr. Brown at Webster (about 26 years old) had yielded [1882] eighty dollars worth of fruit annually at different times. A tree owned by Mrs. Hamilton of Sumterville netted its owner in 1878 forty-seven dollars. Mr. Woodard on Corleys Island had a budded lemon tree eight years old whose thrifty top measures over 25 feet in diameter, and yields fruit that sells for from forty to fifty dollars annually besides what is used from it in his family.”

The first extensive planting of budded trees from the original Parson Brown tree was by C. L. Carney in 1874 when he purchased a grove of forty acres of sour orange trees. After a search throughout central Florida for the best orange he could find, he bought the noted Brown tree for eighty dollars and budded his entire grove. That year the tree bore more than 3,000 oranges. An account of the Carney grove was published in the *Florida Farmer and Fruit Grower* in 1896.

Another original account of plantings of the Parson Brown orange, and especially of the groves of S. M. Gary and S. St. George Rogers is in the *Ocala Banner* of March 30, 1923.

No records have been kept of propagation from the original tree. Individual growers secured budwood beginning in the 1870's and before 1896 it was carried as standard stock in many nurseries. Since 1928 the State government has recorded citrus stock moved from commercial nurseries to points within the State. Through 1950 a total of 1,035,655 Parson Brown trees were moved to groves. The original tree reached a height of 65 feet and was killed in the freeze of 1895.