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## The Editor's Corner--Recollections of a Florida Schoolteacher

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## RECOLLECTIONS OF A FLORIDA SCHOOLTEACHER

by ALICE FRY

**M**Y PARENTS moved to Bradenton in the fall of 1908, and my sister and I came down in June of 1909. We were fresh out of college though not college graduates. Before coming to Florida, we had decided we would become school teachers.

We found that since we were not college graduates we would have to pass a written examination in thirteen subjects in order to obtain a teacher's certificate. Spring examinations had already been held. The next would be in September. We divided the time and found that we could spend three days reviewing each subject. Some of the subjects, however, were entirely new to us, such as "Agriculture for Southern Schools" and "Theory and Practice of Teaching." We studied hard though and took the examinations in September.

There were three grades of certificates. If you tried for a first grade the examination lasted four days; that for second and third only three days. The grade that you made decided whether you would receive a second or third grade certificate. We tried for first grade and my sister succeeded in receiving her certificate. I developed an abscess in one ear and wrote the whole of my physics examination holding a handkerchief to a bleeding nose. I was too ill to go the fourth day so had to content myself with a second grade certificate.

By September 1909, the places in the Bradenton city schools were all filled and even most of the positions in the country schools had been filled. There were two left, however, and my sister and I were assigned to these. Hers was at Duette, and mine was at the school at Rye. In those early days the only bridge across the Manatee River was at Rye. Perhaps that is the reason why there was a small settlement there with enough children to warrant a school house and a teacher.

One Sunday afternoon in September I took the train for Parrish, where I was to be met by the people with whom I was supposed to room and board. Much to my relief, L. L. Hine,

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county superintendent of public instruction, was on that train, also traveling to Parrish, and he took me to the home of the Sims family, where I was to wait for Mr. -, who was supposed to take me to his home. I believe the Sims girls taught in Palmetto. Anyway, the family was very kind to me.

I had a long wait but finally Mr. - arrived, driving a two-horse team hitched to a farm wagon. My trunk and I were put in, and we started driving the five miles through scrub palmetto and pine woods to the Rye settlement. The road was rough, the wagon none too comfortable, and the horses old - it seemed an almost endless drive. The house, when we finally reached it, turned out to be a weather-worn wooden structure surrounded by a weather-worn wooden fence. The yard seemed full of children and barking dogs, and the porch, which ran the full length of the house, seemed full of one woman, Mrs. -.

The events of that first night are hazy in my memory, but not the happenings of the next day. It was Monday and the first day of school. My heart sank when I saw the whole family preparing to accompany me. There were four boys, seven, eleven, fifteen, and nineteen years old, and one girl, seventeen. Mrs. - said, "Oh yes, she and Mr. - always went with the teacher the first morning, after that she could look out for herself."

Mr. - drove up with the farm wagon and Mrs. - occupied the seat with him. The children and I rode in the body of the wagon. There was a straight chair for me but as the road was rough and so full of ruts and roots, I was in constant terror of the chair tipping over. We drove two miles through palmetto thickets and pine woods to the school-house. It was a square frame building, set on posts which were rotting and falling to pieces. The trustees of the school district were there, busily occupied in cutting poles and propping the building so it would not collapse. Mrs. - introduced me to the two other mothers who had come for opening day, but the men were too shy to be introduced.

Beside the five children from the - family, there were seven other children, twelve pupils in all. Having made sure the building would not fall down, we all went inside, and everyone turned their eyes towards me. I was pretty nervous by this time and wished that I had a desk to stand behind. There was one in

the back of the room, and two trustees, as though they read my thoughts, kindly shook the rats' nests out of it and placed it on the platform.

I learned later that there should have been opening exercises with Bible reading, a speech by one of the trustees, followed by a few remarks from me. Well, my few remarks were, "I guess we might as well begin." The "Theory and Practice of Teaching" had not prepared me for this situation or for many others that were to follow. The visitors left shortly afterwards, and I was on my own.

There were a few ragged books and I called up a reading class. I had four students who had never been to school before, four in the third grade, and four in the sixth grade. The beginners were averse to acquiring any learning. The six-year-old howled and said he "wouldn't," when I tried to get him to class. He would tell me when he came in the morning that he was going to be just as mean as he could be, and he usually was. As time went on, I brought magazines to school and tried to train their little fingers by having them cut out pictures. Their parents sent word that they did not send their children to school to make paper dolls, they wanted them to be "learned." I tried to instill a love of books and good stories by reading aloud for the last twenty minutes or half hour of each day. This also was resented by the parents who thought the students were not being "learned."

After the first day, I walked to and from school, four miles a day. The boys carried my books and lunch pail for me and usually gave little trouble. But one day the eleven-year-old found a dead grass snake and running up behind me wrapped it around my neck. I suppose I should not have minded too much, since the teacher who I succeeded had left because one of the boys had tried to stab him with a hunting knife. The nineteen-year-old had a most unpleasant trick of cracking his large ears with his fingers, and the older boys would chase the little ones at recess time and stuff chalk up their noses. The "Theory and Practice of Teaching" had neglected to tell me how to handle these situations, although I quickly learned.

There were some very cold days during the winter of 1909-1910. There was a wood stove in the school-house but no chim-

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ney, and when we built a fire the room was soon blue with smoke. I solved that problem by having the boys build a fire on the sand in front of the school, then we moved our chairs out and sat in a circle around the fire while I held classes. One day the boys killed a little puffing adder and held it over the fire to see its legs come out. I was holding classes around the fire one cold sunny day when County Superintendent Hine came to visit. I never knew whether he approved or disapproved, but he did not stay long.

At the boarding house where I lived that winter, I reached my room by going through the family room to the back porch. My door, which was made of pine slabs and never closed tightly, opened on this porch. The single window was covered by a pine slab shutter, hinged at the top and propped outward with an old croquet mallet. Nearly the whole floor space was taken up by my trunk, a bed, a table, and a stand. The roaches ran over everything and one night I cut a scorpion in two with my embroidery scissors. The daughter of the house often complained at breakfast time that roaches had bitten her toes during the night.

The combined dining-room and kitchen was in a detached room at the end of the front porch. We ate on a low table covered with an indifferently-washed black oilcloth. The children and I sat on benches, while Mr. and Mrs. - had chairs at both ends of the table. Supper was cooked about four o'clock in the afternoon, so as to be done before dark, and then it was left to cool till the men came in from the field. We ate by the light of an oil lamp with no chimney. Soot from the flaming wick fell on the food. There was a scarcity of table-ware and the children were constantly urging each other to hurry up with the spoon as someone else needed it. The food was mostly grease and grits, and to add a little variety, a whole onion and a knife were passed from hand to hand, each person carving off a slice or so.

The school board paid me \$30.00 a month for teaching the children and sent a voucher for \$12.50 a month to Mr. - for my room and board. This was the only family in the neighborhood willing to board the teacher. The other families were so widely scattered through the school district that I never learned where most of my pupils lived. When we got home after school we used to have contests to see who could eat the most oranges or chew the most sugar cane. Five oranges at a time was the best I could do

and I don't remember about the sugar cane. Mrs. - told me if I was a poor puny little thing she would do my washing and ironing for me, but since I wasn't, I could do it myself.

When I came in to breakfast it was to find Mr. - sitting at the head of the table, an old black felt hat pulled well down over his forehead, and Mrs. - at the foot with an old brown shawl wrapped around her head. No one said good morning or good evening, and they all seemed puzzled and startled by my morning greeting and good night when I went to my room.

On cool evenings when supper was over we sat around the open fire in the family room. Mrs. - chewed tobacco almost constantly and expectorated with great precision upon the hearthstone, neatly missing her youngest, Ike, as he dodged in front of her. When Ike got too lively, Pa would say, "Go wash, Ike," and Ike would reluctantly get the family boiler, a tin can with a wire handle. He would fill it with water and put it in the fire to heat. Then, he would get the family rag, basin, and soap, and begin. If Mrs. - thought her face needed it, she would take the rag first and wipe it off. Then, Ike would wash his bare feet and legs and go to bed. I went to my room early, but did not always have a restful night. If Mr. - could not sleep, he got out his fiddle and played weird strains on it. I was often awakened, sometimes at two in the morning, by these uncomfortable sounds.

One night I was awakened by the sound of violent quarreling. Will, my nineteen-year-old pupil, and his father were having words. As the voices grew louder and the cursing more violent, I shrank farther and farther under my blankets, finally pulling them up over my head. I was terrified. Finally, there was silence and then, a little later, the sound of the fiddle. Will was gone about three days and then came home. I never knew what the trouble was.

The Holy Rollers or Pentecost were holding a revival in Parish that winter, and for several Sundays we all drove in to attend services. We took dinner and supper and stayed all day and late into the night. The revival was held in an open tabernacle with hard pine benches and a sawdust floor. There were morning, afternoon, and evening services, each about two hours long. Part of the time was spent in testifying and singing. I saw one man go through

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what they called "getting the Holy Ghost." He had gone up after the sermon to be prayed for, and then he seemed to feel the Spirit move him." It was an unforgettable scene. It was eleven o'clock at night. The tabernacle was lit by flaring lamps and the full red moon was just appearing over the horizon. All the congregation crowded around the altar. The man lay moaning in the sawdust, flat on his back, while the preacher stood over him, exhorting and praying, "Try a little harder, brother, you're winning through. Oh Lord, help him!" Then the congregation all joined in a hymn, "I'll pay the price whatever I do, I'm coming through, Jesus, I'm coming through." By this time, the man had stopped moaning and was babbling and jabbering. The Holy Rollers believe that the Lord uses their mouths as His instruments when they talk in "tongues," as they call the jabbering. Certain of the elect, they claim, can interpret the sounds. At school next day, the children all talked in "tongues" and played at getting salvation.

With early spring of 1910, came unseasonable rains. It rained and rained and rained, and I made up my mind I had had about enough. I made a bargain with myself. If it rained the next day I would go home. It did and I did.