

1966

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Joel Webb Eastman



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Recommended Citation

Eastman, Joel Webb (1966) "Claude L'Engle, Florida Muckraker," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 45 : No. 3 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol45/iss3/4>

CLAUDE L'ENGLE, FLORIDA MUCKRAKER

by JOEL WEBB EASTMAN

THE FIRST DECADE of the twentieth century has been dubbed the "Era of the Muckrakers."¹ These were the years when the great muckraking journalists - Ida Tarbell, Ray Stannard Baker, and Lincoln Steffens - were writing their famous exposures of trusts, railroads, and government corruption in the celebrated national muckraking magazines - *McClure's*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *American*. Historical studies delving into this phenomenal concentration of reform writers have covered quite adequately its various aspects and impacts on the national level, but they fail to suggest that there might have been journalists and journals on the state and local level who could also be included in the muckraking movement.²

While it is obvious that in terms of importance and impact national muckraking is most significant, it would also seem apparent that there were muckraking organs operating with some effect on the state and local level. The problem of trusts, railroads, and politics was not merely a national concern, but reached from Standard Oil, the Chicago stockyards, and the United States Senate to the kerosene combines, butchers' bunds, and town council corruption in crossroad communities all across the country. Local muckrakers were necessary, not only to educate the people who did not subscribe to the national magazines, but also to translate these reports into meaningful terms by also exposing graft, corruption, and abuse on the local scene.

In September 1905, over two years after muckraking had first been "discovered" by S. S. McClure, an editorial entitled "The Hunt for Craft," appeared in the Florida weekly, the *Palatka News and Advertiser*. Commenting on the nation-wide spirit of reform and the public's interest in it, the editor concluded: "The hunt for graft is on, indeed, and there is hope that the infection

1. C. C. Regier, *The Era of the Muckrakers* (Chapel Hill, 1932).
2. Louis Filler, *Crusaders for American Liberalism* (New York, 1939); Regier, *Era of the Muckrakers*; and David M. Chalmers, *The Social and Political Ideas of the Muckrakers* (New York, 1964), are all concerned solely with national magazines and writers. American history text books take similar approaches.

may reach our own Florida. Even here the time is ripe for great reform in the affairs of state, and the air is humid with the spirit of protest against political and financial corruption. What is needed is a leader.”³

Shortly afterwards the *Sun*, which quickly became the leading muckraking organ in Florida, began to be published in Jacksonville. Claude L’Engle and the *Sun* were practically synonymous at the time, for he was its founder, publisher, editor, editorial writer, and sometime feature writer. Born and educated in Jacksonville, L’Engle first worked in a mercantile business. Later, he went North and while there he transferred his interest to journalism. When he returned to Jacksonville in 1902, he founded a weekly newspaper, the *Florida Sun*, which began publication in January 1903. This paper, according to L’Engle, was to be “conducted on lines of fearless independence, coupled with bold advocacy of the rights of the people.” In November he ambitiously changed the *Florida Sun* into a daily paper, but it was begun on somewhat of a financial shoestring, and before the paper could be put on a sound fiscal basis, L’Engle ran into difficulties. These troubles were compounded with the alleged blackmail of the *Florida Sun’s* major stockholder by the editor of the rival afternoon daily, the *Metropolis*, which finally forced the newspaper into bankruptcy.⁴

He was determined to try again, however. Without capital, he was not in a position to start another daily paper. The failure of his first venture discouraged investors, and although he denied it publicly, L’Engle must have believed that there was no need for a third daily newspaper in Jacksonville. L’Engle had the resources to establish a weekly newspaper, but he knew that it would be extremely difficult for such a publication to be competitive, especially in news coverage, in an area already served by two dailies

3. *Palatka News and Advertiser*, September 15, 1905.

4. The draft of the biographical sketch for the *Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774-1927* (Washington, 1928) is in the Claude L’Engle Papers, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Gainesville. See also Jacksonville *Sun*, November 18, 1905; Tallahassee *Sun*, March 30, November 23, 1907; J. Pendleton Gaines, Jr., “A Century of Florida Journalism” (unpublished Master’s thesis, University of Florida, 1949), 101; and William T. Cash, *The History of the Democratic Party in Florida* (Tallahassee, 1936), 99, 120. Gaines lists L’Engle’s first newspaper as the *Florida Sun*, Cash calls it the *Florida Sun and Labor Journal*, while L’Engle referred to it afterward as merely *The Sun*.

like the *Florida Times Union* and the *Metropolis*. Perhaps through a process of elimination, L'Engle decided to launch a statewide journal with less news and with more articles, features, and stories of broad appeal.⁵

He was able to contract with sixty newspapers in the state to sell combination subscriptions, and when the *Sun* first appeared on November 18, 1905, it claimed the largest circulation in Florida, fifty per cent more than any other publication. With each successive issue, the *Sun* became less a newspaper and more a magazine, although L'Engle continued to call it a newspaper. But news was a minor part of the *Sun's* contents, and it was generally limited to hardly more than a summary of the weeks events. The bulk of the sixteen-page paper was devoted to articles, editorials, cartoons, serials, stories, and poems. There were also columns devoted to agriculture, women's interests, and editorial opinion from other Florida papers.⁶

Some two months after the first issue, L'Engle wrote: "As far as our limited talent and restricted means allow, we are carrying out the Hearst and Munsey idea." Rather than spending money on advertising, he was investing it in the best writers available. He employed an excellent editorial cartoonist, A. K. Taylor, and purchased serialized editions of Booth Tarkington's *Monsieur Beaucaire* and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. In the spring of 1906, L'Engle announced the upcoming publication of ten humorous stories by the popular British writer, W. W. Jacobs, and boasted of his paper that, "Not *Harper's*, nor *Collier's*, nor *McClure's*, nor *Everybody's*, nor anybody's magazine or periodical . . . could surpass it." The publication lacked such luxuries as expensive glossy paper, color illustrations, and fine photographs, but it compared well in content with the better known national magazines.⁷

L'Engle's imitation, however, did not stop with stories and serials, but included also the policy of exposure which set the muckrakers apart from the ordinary magazines. His first editorial, entitled "Tending Garden," was accompanied by a cartoon of a tomato plant being attacked by worms. L'Engle divided all crea-

5. Jacksonville *Sun*, November 18, 1905; Cash, *Florida Democratic Party*, 120.

6. Jacksonville *Sun*, November 18, 25, December 2, 30, 1905, May 5, June 2, 1906; Cash, *Florida Democratic Party*, 120.

7. Jacksonville *Sun*, January 27, November 18, 25, December 9, 1905, May 26, July 7, 106; Filler, *Crusaders for American Liberalism*, 80.

tion into good and evil and stated: "In the garden of human endeavor our aim will be to preserve the tomato plants by picking off the worms, without stopping to consider that the bugs might not like it, that they might get hurt, and that our hands might be soiled." L'Engle planned to use "publicity" - the major weapon of the muckrakers-as the tweezers to pluck off the "despoilers." In subsequent issues, L'Engle announced that the *Sun's* exposures would be aired for the good of the state and its citizens, and that the paper would not be subservient to any interest except the obligation of the press to the public.⁸

The *Sun's* first major exposure came in December 1905. Naval stores producers in the Jacksonville area had organized an export company in an attempt to break the control of a naval stores trust operating out of Savannah, Georgia. At first the company operated successfully, but then, when it began to run out of capital, company officers negotiated a secret agreement with the trust giving it control of Jacksonville production and exports for five years. Although the corporation officers attempted to suppress the significance of what had occurred, L'Engle was able to uncover the details which he published immediately in the *Sun*.⁹

The officers of the naval stores company, whom L'Engle labeled the "Gum Bunch," first attempted to prevent publication of the article, and when that failed, they retaliated by pressuring local businessmen into withdrawing advertising from the *Sun*, an experience shared by most of the national muckraking magazines.¹⁰ Sixteen advertisements were withdrawn from the next edition, but in each blank space L'Engle printed an epitaph:

IN MEMORIAM

This little headstone is erected to the tender memory of an ad. printed in this space last week. Its duty was to nourish this journal which gives the people a voice. Right well was the little ad. doing its duty. It died of an overdose of "Gum." For further particulars of this sad demise see editorial pages of this issue. R.I.P.¹¹

8. Jacksonville *Sun*, November 18, December 9, 1905, April 14, 1906.

9. *Ibid.*, December 9, 16, 1905, February 10, 1906.

10. Regier, *Era of the Muckrakers*, 137, 177; Arthur and Lila Weinberg, *The Muckrakers* (New York, 1961), xxi; Jacksonville *Sun*, December 16, 1905.

11. Jacksonville *Sun*, December 16, 1905.

L'Engle lashed out against "Gumocracy," comparing those involved to J. P. Morgan who had grown rich, he claimed, "manipulating the product of other men's toil." He asked for the public's help in keeping the "Gum Bunch" from destroying his publication and entered a civil suit charging illegal oppression of his journal. A month later, L'Engle announced that the boycott had failed and that his paper's advertisers were returning. In February 1906, the *Sun* published the names of two operators who had weakened the contract by refusing to abide by its terms, and finally in April, L'Engle announced that the stockholders had repudiated the agreement.¹²

"Legalized land grabbing" was another of the *Sun's* exposures. L'Engle described how a few individuals, whom he threatened to name, had secured control of vast acreage by buying up tax titles. Because of this, L'Engle claimed, the land was passing into the hands of a few men who would reap the benefits of increasing land values as the naval stores industry expanded its operations. The *Sun's* other exposures followed a similar muckraking theme. L'Engle labled a state land company "a trust" and accused it of attempting to keep land prices artificially high. He printed the names of companies involved in a Florida beef trust, a grocery trust, and an electric trust, and he urged the Duval County solicitor, who was then prosecuting an ice trust, to press indictments against these businesses.¹³

Another consistent topic of attack was newspaper standards, a familiar subject of the national muckrakers. L'Engle denounced Florida newspapers as hypocrites because they allegedly sold news and editorial space by the column inch, and he constantly stressed the *Sun's* own high standards. There were other familiar muckraking topics in the *Sun's* agenda. L'Engle analyzed the uneven distribution of wealth in the nation and urged the adoption of a progressive income and inheritance tax. Child labor, patent medicine abuses, and excessive campaign contributions came under his bitter attack. On the other hand, the new state parole

12. *Ibid.*, December 16, 23, 1905, January 13, February 10, April 14, 1906.

13. *Ibid.*, May 5, 19, June 9 July 7, 14, 1906; T. Frederick Davis, *History of Jacksonville, Florida and Vicinity, 1513-1924* (St. Augustine, 1925), 233. See also facsimile edition with introduction by Richard A. Martin (Gainesville, 1964).

system, the direct primary, municipal ownership of public utilities, and conservation were all warmly defended by the *Sun*.¹⁴

Politics and government were major and consistent areas of interest for Claude L'Engle. He advocated electing only "good men" to office so as to assure the successful operation of representative government: "If all the good people would vote. If they would vote only for good people - Graft in public office would cease, political corruption would disappear, and the power of money would not be a factor in governmental affairs." The *Sun* printed the names of the men whom L'Engle felt were not suited for public office and those who he felt had allied themselves too closely with corporate wealth. He attacked the city attorney of Jacksonville for securing waterfront rights for himself and the railroads, and he claimed that the city council had accepted a non-competitive bid from an unqualified contractor only because the latter was a friend and supporter of one of the council members. L'Engle called the Democratic candidate for the legislature from Manatee County a "crook," and he endorsed the Socialist candidate who was elected. Some politicians felt the sting of the *Sun's* criticism at election time, and others enjoyed its support.¹⁵

In the national magazines usually no more than one-fifth of the paper's contents was devoted to muckraking articles.¹⁶ The *Sun* devoted a considerably larger portion of its space to exposures of trusts, corruption, and other state and local abuses. Moreover, L'Engle's philosophy, as expressed in his editorials, was consistent with the muckraking branch of the national progressive movement, and the advertising boycott against the *Sun* was strikingly similar to the experiences of national journals. All things considered, L'Engle's publication is properly labelled a "muckraking journal."

L'Engle had his own particular likes and antipathies which he publicized in the *Sun*. He supported organized labor and was favorable toward immigration; he opposed Negroes and President Theodore Roosevelt. Muckrakers were not totally sympathetic to-

14. Regier, *Era of the Muckrakers*, 171, 173-75; Jacksonville *Sun*, November 18, 25, 1905, February 3, 12, 24, March 24, April 21, May 12, 17, June 9, 1906.
15. Jacksonville *Sun*, January 13, February 10, 17, March 3, 24, 21, April 21, May 12, 1906; Cash, *Florida Democratic Party*, 121.
16. Harold U. Faulkner, *The Decline of Laissez Faire, 1897-1917*, VII, *The Economic History of the United States* (New York, 1951), 372.

ward labor, and many pointed out that unions were subject to the same corruption and abuse as the large corporations. Most Progressives feared unions more than they did the monopolies.¹⁷ The *Sun*, however, was very pro-union. L'Engle published favorable accounts of local union activities and articles by union leaders, he leaned toward the union side in a printers' strike against one of the local newspapers, and he continually praised the American Federation of Labor and its president, Samuel Gompers, for the great work they had done "for the working men in the country." L'Engle supported Gomper's decision to have labor enter politics, and stated that if all the people who believed in the principles of organized labor would vote accordingly, "the common people would again rule this country and we would hear no more of trusts and the corruption of Government by the use of money." On another occasion L'Engle wrote "It is a noteworthy fact that a majority of the great movements that have resulted in the advancement of human progress have originated in the labor organizations." There is no readily apparent explanation for L'Engle's labor attitude. Jacksonville does not appear to have provided an atmosphere any more conducive to organized labor than any other city.¹⁸

Immigration was not a major muckraking issue, but it is commonly accepted that the Progressive movement generally opposed immigration since it served as a supply of inexpensive docile labor to be exploited by the huge industrial corporations. Yet, the *Sun* repeatedly urged an increase in immigration. Florida was still a frontier area and needed to increase its population as rapidly as possible. While L'Engle wanted people to move to Florida, he revealed his southern and progressive, if not muckraker, racial bias when he called for "*the right kind of people to settle in the state.*" German, French, or Dutch farmers would be acceptable, he felt. Another *Sun* writer stated that, "We should . . . solicit foreign immigration and in such a manner that we may be able to discriminate as to the class invited."¹⁹

The national muckrakers did not share in the general racism

17. George E. Mowry, *The Era of Theodore Roosevelt and the Birth of Modern America* (New York, 1962), 100-03.

18. Jacksonville *Sun*, December 30, 1905, January 6, February 3, 10, 24, March 24, April 7, 1906; Davis, *History of Jacksonville, Florida and Vicinity*, 229; Cash, *Florida Democratic Party*, 99.

19. Jacksonville *Sun*, November 18, 25, December 2, 1905.

and Anglo-Saxon bias of the progressive movement, and several exposures of mistreatment of Negroes were published. But, unlike the reaction to other exposures, the public, especially in the South, failed to become excited about the Negro's plight. The *Sun's* attitude towards the Negro was the typical contemporary southern view. L'Engle thought that Negro education was not only a waste of tax money, but also dangerous. Negroes, he claimed, "who can read and write *are more criminal than the illiterate negroes.*" The Negro schools at Tuskegee and Talladega, Alabama, he charged, had been "established by money-burdened New Englanders of misdirected philanthropical energy." L'Engle once suggested, not too seriously perhaps, that lynching was the "humane way" to deal with the Negro problem. Later, in a more moderate mood, he further explained his position: "We have no fear that we will be accused of 'negrophilology' . . . pushing the negro forward to a place where he does not belong. We have always expressed our sympathy with the negroes as a race and have done whatever we could, whenever we could, to better their condition. We are perfectly willing and even anxious to see him rise, [but] draw the line at his rising into social equality with the whites, which we do not think will be good for either race." If this statement truly represents L'Engle's sentiments, it can be considered a relatively liberal stand under the existing national and regional conditions.²⁰

Many muckrakers were ardent supporters of Theodore Roosevelt, and most Progressives were willing to back him when he advocated liberal legislation. But the *Sun* violently opposed the president and missed no opportunity to criticize him. L'Engle joined in the general southern criticism when Roosevelt invited Booker T. Washington to the White House, and he opposed the administration's foreign policy program. L'Engle's analysis of Roosevelt's political maneuverings were astute, and he accurately

20. Regier, *Era of the Muckrakers*, 152; Filler, *Crusaders for American Liberalism*, 280-82, 276-7; Weinberg, *Muckrakers*, 216, 233; Chalmers, *Ideas of the Muckrakers*, 114; *Jacksonville Sun*, January 6, February 10, March 3, 24, 1906. In March 1907, after L'Engle had moved the *Sun* to Tallahassee, *Cosmopolitan* published an expose of the convict lease system in Florida used by Standard Oil, Henry M. Flagler's Florida East Coast Railway, and the lumber and turpentine trusts, which the magazine called a system of "Chattel slavery" of both whites and Negroes. L'Engle branded the charges "wild exaggerations" and accused the newspapers and magazines printing them of poor journalism. See *Tallahassee Sun*, November 17, 1906, March 30, 1907.

pointed out Roosevelt's opportunism, his effective use of publicity, and his meager legislative accomplishments. L'Engle's opposition to Roosevelt can probably be explained by his Democratic partisanship, his southern heritage, and what he believed was his ability to accurately assess the President's leadership.²¹

Since the *Sun* was obviously a muckraking magazine, and since the journal and L'Engle were synonymous, it follows that L'Engle was a muckraker. Unlike the national writers, he performed a variety of functions. His exposures appeared at times as articles, but more often as editorials, although always under his by-line. The *Sun's* muckraking articles, most of which were written by L'Engle, sometimes slipped into what might be called "expose" or yellow journalism, but this occurred also on the national level. L'Engle was deeply involved in Florida politics, and this was also not unusual for other muckrakers. L'Engle endorsed much of the Progressive movement's philosophy, but he was basically a reform journalist engaged in educating the public to the evils in society.²²

On June 23, 1906, L'Engle moved the *Sun* from Jacksonville to Tallahassee, where, he said, he could better serve the interests of the state. While located in the capitol, he published a daily newspaper, the *Morning Sun*, during the legislative sessions of 1907 and 1909. The weekly *Sun* continued in its familiar muckraking role until September 1908 when financial difficulties again forced L'Engle out of the newspaper business. But again, he was able to gain new support, and in December 1910, L'Engle began a new weekly, the *Dixie*, in Jacksonville. In 1912 he was elected to Congress and did not serve as editor after 1913, but the *Dixie* continued to be published until 1917. L'Engle died two years later, on November 6, 1919.²³

21. Regier, *Era of the Muckrakers*, 114-15, 198; Jacksonville *Sun*, December 12, 1905, January 20, February 3, March 24, 31, April 14, 28, May 19, 1906; Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era, 1910-1917* (New York, 1963), 2.
22. Weinberg, *Muckrakers*, xix-xx; Wesley M. Stout, "The Beachcomber," unidentified newspaper's political column, L'Engle Papers; draft of the Congressional biographical sketch, L'Engle Papers; *St. Augustine Evening Record*, November 13, 1919; Quincy *Gadsden County Times*, November 13, 1919; *Tallahassee Historical Society Annual*, IV (139), 76; Chalmers, *Ideas of the Muckrakers*, 104-05, 110.
23. Jacksonville *Sun*, June 2, 23, July 14, 21, November 10, October 6, 20, 1906; advertising brochure for the Jacksonville *Dixie*, May 22, 1911, L'Engle Papers; *St. Augustine Evening Record*, November 13, 1919.

L'Engle had boasted early in 1906: 'We have made *The Sun the State* paper. It is *more* widely read, more carefully read, oftener quoted, and wields more influence than any other publication whatsoever, that is circulated among Floridians.' The *Sun* did lead in the state in paid subscribers and newsstand sales. This fact, considered along with the success of the "Gum Bunch" exposure, the paper's apparent impact on Florida politics, and L'Engle's later election to Congress shows that the *Sun* did wield influence.²⁴ More important, the *Sun* shows that muckraking journals did operate on the state and local level. Its variations from the majority of the national magazines illustrates the local and regional diversity of the literature of exposure and of the progressive movement in general. The apparent impact of the *Sun* shows that local muckraking, like the national, did have a significant effect.

24. Jacksonville *Sun*, November 18, December 23, 1905, January 27, June 2, 1906; Cash, *Florida Democratic Party*, 122.