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THE FLORIDA CRACKER BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR AS SEEN THROUGH TRAVELERS' ACCOUNTS

by JAMES M. DENHAM

LIEUTENANT Colonel John Wilder of the Union occupation force was stationed for most of the Civil War in Key West. A week after Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox he visited Cedar Key. Located near the mouth of the Suwannee River, Cedar Key was an important rendezvous point for refugees, Union troops, Confederate deserters, and Unionist sympathizers. On April 20, 1865, Wilder wrote his mother that when he arrived there were about 2,000 white refugees, a "great curiosity; crackers most of them— that is poor whites, not more intelligent or virtuous than the negroes." He described them as "pale, cadaverous, ignorant, and many of them fierce." Some of the group had joined the Federal army. "Most of them," he claimed, "have been persecuted by" the Rebels "and are very implacable. They are splendid rifle shots and go about all over the state. They talk of killing this man or that, when they go out as a matter of course— not in fight, but in murdering him."¹

Wilder's comments were typical of many northern commentators who were convinced that the majority of southern whites were victimized by wealthy slaveholders. But Wilder, like most other outside observers, failed to appreciate their general contentedness with their lot, a satisfaction that flowed from a rough form of independence— a kind of inner gratification that outsiders rarely realized. This is not to say that southern whites— espe-

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1. John Wilder to mother, April 20, 1865, Wilder-Loomis Papers, box 47, fol. 3, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida (hereinafter, PKYL).

cially the “plainer” elements—lived in a kind of idyllic dream world, but it does suggest that a people living in the midst of a bountiful country might not understand their poverty, either in intellect or in material circumstances. Perhaps their apparent ambivalence came from a latent pleasure ethic and not a work ethic— a value system based on the enjoyment of life instead of the accumulation of property.

Such a contention can be examined through an exploration of the cultural characteristics of the “Florida cracker” as seen through the eyes of travelers in the first half of the nineteenth century. Accounts left by these visitors invariably included comment on the economic pursuits, migratory natures, living habitations, tendency toward violence, and social diversions of the common folk. This rich information thus provides a window from which to view the lives of Florida crackers.

Between 1821 and 1861 Florida evolved from a virtually vacant province of Spain, inhabited by a few thousand military officials, refugee Indians, and blacks, to an American-dominated agricultural society. During this period Florida experienced immigration from a number of sources, swelling its population to about 160,000 inhabitants. Migrants came from the upper South, the northern states, and Europe, but most settlers came to Florida from directly adjoining states.²

Those who ventured into Florida from Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, and South Carolina sought more-fertile lands either for growing corn and cotton or for grazing hogs and cattle. These migrants brought their cultural values and beliefs and played a major role in making Florida a close replica of its neighboring states. Alternately referred to as crackers or poor whites, these “plain folk” were by far the most numerous inhabitants in the state. They were also the social group that received the most comment from outsiders during the antebellum decades. Always

2. James E. Dovell, *Florida: Historic, Dramatic and Contemporary* (New York, 1952), 357; Roland Harper, “Antebellum Census Enumerations in Florida,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 6 (July 1927), 50-52. Florida circuit court minutes reveal the presence of immigrants from England, France, Austria, Portugal, the German and Italian states, Spain, Sweden, Denmark, Poland, and Russia. State census takers in 1855 estimated that nearly 3,000 of Florida’s inhabitants were born outside of the United States. See “Census Returns,” in Tallahassee *Floridian and Journal*, September 8, 1855.

in evidence at land sales, courthouse days, or public elections, these folk represented the state's most ever-present yet elusive social element. Although some excellent studies exist on them, we know far more about the white upper classes and blacks, both slave and free, than we do about those whom historian Wayne Flynt referred to as "Dixie's Forgotten People."

Terms such as "poor whites," "crackers," and "white trash" have perplexed historians for many years. The first to study these people in a thoughtful way was Frank L. Owsley, who designated them as "plain folk" – a group he distinctly separated from poor whites. Owsley's plain folk were independent, nonslaveholding, white farmers and herders– a kind of middle class.³ Whether writers agreed with Owsley or not, they tended to handle the common folk as roughly as they were dealt with by contemporaries.

Recently some historians have reacted with concern over what they perceived as a tendency to use the term poor white as a label of contempt for a large portion of southern whites. Southern historian I. A. Newby has noted that "plain folk" have "never evoked much sympathy." Their history, he noted, "has been more often overlooked or caricatured than studied systematically and evenhandedly. Alternately disparaged, patronized, and ignored, these people have never received what every group is entitled to– a sympathetic look into their history that seeks to understand them on their own terms. Historians, like other people, have stigmatized all or many of them as 'poor whites,' 'white trash,' 'crackers,' 'rednecks,' or 'lintheads,' and smeared them with the demeaning qualities these terms convey– benumbing poverty, social wretchedness, assorted bigotries, moral and physical degeneracy. . . . Generally reserved for the kinds of people once disparaged as the 'undeserving' poor– the most deprived of people whose life-styles openly flout middle-class notions of work, accumulation, and social discipline– those labels have become encrusted with the prejudices poor southern white people have always endured." Finally, Newby

3. Frank L. Owsley, *Plain Folk in the Old South* (Baton Rouge, 1949); and Randolph B. Campbell, "Owsley Thesis," in *The Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson and William Ferris (Chapel Hill, 1989), 1422-23.

wrote: "Terms that embody such prejudices are not useful for historians and should be discarded. They are epithets at best, moral judgments at worst. Even the most neutral of them—'poor whites'— focuses attention exclusively on the economic aspect of identity and, in turn, on victimization and degradation."⁴

Much confusion has also arisen from attempts by historians to differentiate poor whites from yeoman farmers. No doubt this has been true because distinctions at the time were as blurred as they are today. As one historian has observed, "Many a small farmer living in rude comfort, his wealth concealed in cattle and swine off foraging in the woods was mistaken for 'white trash.'"⁵ Great confusion also characterizes attempts to differentiate or single out groups such as crackers merely by economic status. Perhaps Grady McWhiney summarized these fruitless attempts best: "Some Crackers were rich, others poor, and still others were neither; but they all more or less acted alike and shared the same values. And that is the point: Cracker does not signify an economic condition; rather, it defines a culture."⁶ A plausible differentiation separating yeoman farmers and poor whites was not only the degree of poverty or squalor, but also a rough designation based on self-sufficiency or independence. At any rate, the class lines separating all southern plain folk were as unclear as they were artificial.

Florida crackers, and generally all southern "plain folk," shared a strong adherence to popular democracy, a hatred of Indians, and a firm sense of racial superiority over blacks, who they believed were only fit for slavery. They possessed a power-

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- 4 . I. A. Newby, *Plain Folk in the New South: Social Change and Persistence, 1880-1915* (Baton Rouge, 1989), 3-4. For more on these issues see Grady McWhiney, *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South* (Tuscaloosa, 1988), xiii-xix; Wayne Flynt, *Dixie's Forgotten People: The South's Poor Whites* (Bloomington, 1979); idem, *Poor But Proud: Alabama's Poor Whites* (Tuscaloosa, 1989), ix-xiii, 1-35. A new work that addresses poor people in America and tends to eschew racial interpretations is Jacqueline Jones, *The Dispossessed: America's Underclass from the Civil War to the Present* (New York, 1992).
 - 5 . George Brown Tindall, *America: A Narrative History*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (New York, 1988), I, 574. This is also the contention of Forrest McDonald and Grady McWhiney, "Antebellum Southern Herdsman: A Reinterpretation," *Journal of Southern History* 41 (May 1975), 147-66.
 - 6 . McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, xiv.

ful sense of family and extended kin networks, which had important ramifications for relations with neighbors and outsiders. They had a vigorous streak of individualism and resolve that derived from living on the isolated frontier. These self-reliant folk usually acted on their own authority. They had a reluctance to surrender matters of controversy with their fellow man to a higher authority. They rarely "went to the law" or to the courts, usually choosing to settle personal offenses among themselves.⁷ Both before and after the Civil War the specter of vigilantism was ever-present among these folk.

Squatters who farmed on a small scale, cattle and hog drivers, and others sometimes designated by contemporary observers as "crackers" arrived on the Florida frontier in large numbers even before Florida passed into American hands. The term "cracker" derived from one of three activities: their skillful use of the whip, which they "cracked" while driving cattle or hogs through the open range; their practice of boasting or making a "crack"; or their habit of "cracking" or crushing corn for making

7. On southern plain folk see Owsley, *Plain Folk in the Old South*; and Bruce Collins, *White Society in the Antebellum South* (London, 1985). For vivid accounts of cracker life in frontier Florida see Ellen Call Long, *Florida Breezes; or, Florida, New and Old* (Jacksonville, 1883; reprint ed., Gainesville, 1963), 52-72; William W. Davis, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (New York, 1913; reprint ed., Gainesville, 1963), 14-45; Achille Murat, *The United States of North America* (London, 1833), 60-79; Rowland Rerick, *Memoirs of Florida* (Atlanta, 1902); and Jacob Rhett Motte, *Journey into Wilderness: An Army Surgeon's Account of Life in Camp and Field during the Creek and Seminole Wars, 1836-1838*, ed. James F. Sunderman (Gainesville, 1953). On cracker herding practices see Terry G. Jordan, *Trails to Texas: Southern Roots to Western Cattle Ranching* (Lincoln, 1981); Grady McWhiney and Forrest McDonald, "Celtic Origins of Southern Herding Practices," *Journal of Southern History* 51 (May 1985), 165-82; and idem, "The South from Self-Sufficiency to Peonage: An Interpretation," *American Historical Review* 85 (December 1980), 1095-1118. For herding on the open range in Florida see Joe Akerman, *Florida Cowman: A History of Florida Cattle Raising* (Kissimmee, 1976); James E. Lewis, "Cracker— Spanish Florida Style," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 63 (October 1984), 184-204; John S. Otto, "Hillsborough County (1850): A County in the South Florida Flatwoods," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 62 (October 1983), 180-93; idem, "Florida's Cattle-Ranching Frontier: Hillsborough County (1860)," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 63 (July 1984), 71-83; idem, "Florida's Cattle-Ranching Frontier: Manatee and Brevard Counties (1860)," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 64 (July 1985), 48-61; and idem, "Open Range Cattle Herding in Southern Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 65 (January 1987), 317-34.



A pair of crackers meet on the trail. Photograph reproduced from Edward King, *The Great South*, ed. W. Magruder and Robert R. Jones (Baton Rouge, 1972).

bread.⁸ To determine which of these had the most influence in cementing the term is impossible.

Most descriptions of crackers depicted a nomadic, ignorant people content with squalid living conditions and governed by a latent warlike nature. Roaming from place to place, cracker families led a hand-to-mouth existence. Many squatted on unclaimed portions of the public domain. They built temporary shacks or lean-tos, planted corn, and stayed until they were expelled by lawful purchasers.

Of all characteristics commented upon in travelers' literature, perhaps the most notable was the mobility of the cracker. Soon after Florida became a state, Frank Hatheway, a clerk in a Tallahassee dry goods store, witnessed the influx of farmers into east Florida. On January 18, 1846, he noted in his diary that during an afternoon walk on the "Augustine Road" he encountered a family from Baker County, Georgia, on their way to east Florida. When he inquired as to where they hoped to reach, one family member told him "they had no specific destination, but would 'sit down' at the first place that pleased them."⁹

The Comte de Castelnau, a French naturalist traveling in Florida in 1838, was also struck by the mobile ways of crackers. They were always on the move, seeking more-fertile and unclaimed lands. "They put all that they own in their wagons," he observed, and "go through the woods hunting for a new dwelling sometimes a hundred leagues from the former one." The French visitor added that most of them "do not own their land . . . but settle in the first place that they find vacant, without being concerned about the name of the owner, who, if he comes to assert his authority, does not receive more response than a bullet from a rifle."¹⁰

Achille Murat, son of Napoleon's famous cavalry commander and a Frenchman who settled in middle Florida, was more descriptive. He represented crackers as "poor citizens usually

8. McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, vii; Charles Reagan Wilson, "Crackers," *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, 1132.

9. Frank Hatheway Diary, January 18, 1846, in Manning Strozier Library, Florida State University.

10. Comte de Castelnau, "Essay on Middle Florida, 1837-1838," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 26 (January 1948), 236, 238.

not very industrious, who not possessing the means of buying lands, live upon those of others, and work them until they are expelled by the proprietors. Their poverty is entirely the fruit of their idle and drunken habits." They "pursue this sort of life from choice, from taste, and perhaps, even from habit. For the most part, they have a wife and children, some negroes, and sometimes very numerous flocks. They rarely raise two crops from the same land; on the contrary they quit a district as soon as it becomes peopled." Their houses were "huts" which "may easily be constructed in two or three days." Murat mentioned that he had often met whole families on the move with a cart full of household furniture, children, and one or two men leading about thirty cows and hogs. He continued: "After the questions; Where do you come from? Where are you going? Which are always cordially answered, the head of the family has asked me some details relative to the country, and requested me to direct him to the creek, or the nearest spring. A week after, I have been astonished to see a hut there, a field of cattle, and some poultry; the wife spinning cotton, the husband destroying trees by making a circular incision in them, called a girdle, in short, setting their household goods without making enquiry as to whom the land belonged. Frequently also, I have seen them, after a few days sojourn, abandon their dwelling for the slightest cause, and transport themselves— God Knows where."¹¹

When on the move through the country, crackers often hitched a cow or a horse to a cart with poles. Newton Henry, a soldier stationed at Fort Heilman during the Second Seminole War, witnessed such a scene and wrote relatives in the North that crackers rarely drove single carts "without lines as in our country. They use this article [poles] considerable on their plantations, and when the horse is harnessed into the cart, they mount his back with a long stick, the walls of the cart serving for stirrups, which bend their knees up to about right angles & 'Off she goes.' Once I saw three cracker women coming to market in this manner on the horse and two sitting in the tail of the cart with their legs hanging out. These are fair samples of the Crackers."¹²

11. Murat, *United States of North America*, 51-54.

12. Newton Henry to Calvin Henry, November 16, 1839, misc. mss. no. 15, box 70, PKYL.

The living accommodations of the crackers were almost always of the crudest sort, not only because they were made mostly from materials close at hand, but also because they were often only intended for temporary use. Captain Jacob Motte, a surgeon in the regular army stationed in Newnansville during the early phase of the Second Seminole War, noted that the typical "abode . . . consisted of a shed built of slab boards enclosing an area about twelve feet square." These "mansions," claimed Motte, usually contained several families in the same house.¹³ Ellen Brown, who immigrated to east Florida in the 1830s from Ithaca, New York, wrote relatives that newcomers were forced to erect living quarters similar to the ones crackers inhabited. These clapboard houses, she wrote, were nothing more than "split out wrought [logs] nailed together perpendicularly. [They] make the most unsuitable houses you can imagine. I knew a tree to fall on one and beat it right down to the ground, cupboard, crockery and all. A family would be more safe in the crust of a pumpkin, and about as well sheltered from the weather as a hen coop."¹⁴

Assessments of Florida and its inhabitant—specially its crackers—varied widely and were often contradictory. Observers' comments reflected as much about themselves as they did about the locals. During 1838 Stacy Flanigan, a sailor on board the United States frigate *Constellation*, visited most of Florida's ports. When the vessel reached Pensacola, he shared his impressions of Florida with his niece in Pennsylvania. He thought Florida was "one of the most wretched places in the world and the inhabitants are of pretty much the same stamp, selfish, ignorant, and inhospitable."¹⁵ Newton Henry agreed, "You ask for a description of the Southerners, the people of Florida are an ignorant set devoid of hospitality, and very penurious."¹⁶

Edward King, somewhat of a professional traveler, was less harsh in his judgements. Although he visited Florida a decade after the Civil War, his appraisal was similar to many prewar

13. Motte, *Journey into Wilderness*, 90-92.

14. Ellen Brown to Mannevillette Brown, July 23, 1839, Anderson Papers, United States Military Academy, West Point, NY (hereinafter, USMA).

15. Stacy Flanigan to Emily White, July 9, 1838, misc. mss., PKYL.

16. Newton Henry to Calvin Henry, November 16, 1839.

observers. He depicted Florida's less cultured elements as a "soft voiced, easy-going, childlike, kind of folk, quick to anger, vindictive when rage is protracted and becomes a feud. . . . But they live the most undesirable lives, and surrounded by every facility for a luxurious existence, subsist on 'hog and hominy,' and drink the meanest whiskey." But, unlike Flanigan, King found the crackers "generous and noble in their rough hospitality."¹⁷ When it came to hospitality, the remarks of observers were often contradictory. One suspects that like most other human beings, crackers were hospitable to travelers in so much as they were treated with respect. Their notions of honor and self esteem were such that— as with other Southerners of the time— they "gave as good as they got."

Physical descriptions of crackers were almost always unflattering. For example, Ellen Brown noted that the "country folk," she encountered in the Suwannee River area were "made of clay indeed. They are the most squalid and miserable looking creatures in the world."¹⁸ The Comte de Castelnau described crackers as "tall, sturdy, bold, addicted to drinking, and habituated to interlarding their words with terrible curses. Accustomed to living alone in the woods, they have adopted the habits of savages with whom they are in constant contact; at every moment their conversation is interrupted with war cries." "They leap about and howl," wrote Castelnau, "and make no effort to restrain their passions." Crackers seemed to possess a seemingly inbred ambivalence toward the law. They are not "checked by human laws— these cannot reach them in the midst of the woods, nor by religious principles that are totally unknown to them, these men know no other power than physical force, and no other pleasure than carrying out their brutal passions."¹⁹

Achille Murat agreed and added fighting to the list of undesirable qualities. He noted that "there exists no form of government" among them; "every dispute is amicably terminated by the fist. . . . The land or their houses have, in their eyes, but a

17. Edward King, *The Great South*, ed. W. Magruder Drake and Robert Jones (London, 1875; reprint ed., Baton Rouge, 1972), 420-21.

18. Ellen Brown to Mannevillette Brown, January 31, 1837, Anderson Papers, USMA.

19. Castelnau, "Essay on Middle Florida," 238-39.

secondary value,” but not so for their livestock. “Each of these has its mark; and if any are stolen, he assembles his neighbors, and the proofs in hand, they go together to the thief, and administer to him a punishment more or less severe. According to their morality, cowstealing is the greatest crime.”²⁰

Most descriptions of Florida’s crackers depicted a people affable in temperament but also capable of fierce rages. Observers noted that they could be aroused to armed combat at a moment’s notice. The Comte de Castelnau recounted an incident he witnessed at Chattahoochee involving some travelers and a cracker ferryman. Late one evening a party of weary travelers came up to the opposite side of the river “tired by a long days journey; they wanted to cross it and called loudly for the boatman to go and get them; the latter lying carelessly in his ferry boat heard them for an hour but did not condescend to even answer them; finally, at my urging he decided to do his duty, but having been rebuked rather keenly by the travelers, he coolly seized a pistol and fired at point blank at one of them who miraculously was not hit.” The Frenchman also remembered meeting a young man on the road traveling from Tallahassee to the Apalachicola River. “According to the custom of the Country,” the man “immediately started a conversation. His manner was gentle and affable and I felt sympathetically drawn toward him. Soon we spoke of the purpose of his trip, and he drew from his bosom a bowie knife a foot and a half long, and told me very quietly that he was going to Columbus to find one of his cousins who owed him some money, and that he intended to kill him if he did not pay him.”²¹

Castelnau was also fascinated by the tendency of frontier folk to make frightful physical encounters the focus of raucous public entertainment. The Frenchman noted that when “a young man longs to fight, which is very often,” he goes to a public place and begins crowing until a crowd gathers. He “imitate[s] a cock and cry[s] out from on horseback: ‘I am a horse but I defy anyone to ride me.’ Sometimes they fight with their fists but generally with a pistol, a bowie knife or iron covered

20. Murat, *United States of North America*, 51-54.

21. Castelnau, “Essay on Middle Florida,” 238-39.

cudgel.²² In 1843, during his trip through east Florida, Episcopal bishop Henry Whipple also observed this “fighting spirit,” which he claimed, “was so prevalent that it was necessary for a man to keep double guard on his tongue, else he might be called out by some of these worthies.”²³

Newcomers who settled in Florida’s lightly inhabited areas sometimes found themselves surrounded by a people they regarded as primitive as the environment. In 1839, for example, Corine Aldrich, an army surgeon’s young bride from upstate New York, wrote her brother of her experiences living in a room adjoining a store at Mineral Springs, a small village on the Suwannee River in Columbia County. The store also served as post office, barroom, and social center. “My ears are constantly assailed,” she wrote, “by inquiries for letters, oaths and curses at disappointment, badly read extracts from the different newspapers, cracker remarks, chicken fights, horse races, betting and bullying, country politics, and horse laughs. I only hope that I may not degenerate.”²⁴

Such appraisals were not confined to Northerners; similar comments often came from other Southerners who settled in Florida. In 1842 John Purveance, a recent arrival from Wilmington, North Carolina, warned his uncle that Mineral Springs and the entire surrounding region were peopled by a folk as dishonest as they were crude. “Don’t stop anyone from coming out but a Rogue or a Drunkard,” he wrote, “as there are plenty of them here now.” Jacob Motte, the Harvard-educated scion of a Huguenot family from Charleston, was seldom without a disparaging comment about the frontier folk he encountered. Throughout his sojourn in Florida he lamented the “total ab-

22. Ibid. For more on southern violence see McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 146-70; and Elliot Gorn, “‘Gouge And Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch’: The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry,” *American Historical Review* 90 (February 1985), 18-43; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1982); Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., *Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South* (Austin, 1979); and John Hope Franklin, *The Militant South, 1800-1861* (Cambridge, 1956).

23. Lester Shippee, ed., *Bishop Whipple’s Southern Diary, 1843-1844* (London, 1937), 25.

24. Corine Aldrich to Mannevillette Brown, March 31, 1839, Anderson Papers, USMA.

sence of reading material on the frontier . . . , the lack of which produces a group of people . . . the 'dumbest in the world.'²⁵

If Motte loathed the ignorance of crackers, Edward King lamented their lack of literacy, but he did not use this limitation as a cause for contempt. "In the backwoods," he wrote, "there is an alarming amount of ignorance among the adults; there are hundreds of men and women who have not the simplest rudiments of education and many amusing stories are told of the simplicity and boorishness of the 'Crackers.'²⁶

Observers also commented on the crackers' rough country humor. Bishop Whipple remarked about this quality several times during his sabbatical to east Florida in 1843. He remembered, for example, an incident that took place in Judge Isaac Bronson's court in St. Augustine. "Some of these crackers," he recalled, "have a good deal of humor and have a happy faculty of making doggerel poetry. A gentleman whose name was N. Burrit was the other day teasing one of these fellows for rhymes. After a while the cracker commented: 'God made a man & called him Nelson Burrit. After he saw his face he was sorry for it.' Thus turning a good joke on the lawyer, his tormenter."²⁷

Humorous incidents also flowed from the humble civility of these local folk. Mrs. Robert Raymond Reid, wife of the prominent judge and governor, recounted an episode during her late husband's days of riding circuit. Judge Reid took a few moments out of a busy court session to perform a civil marriage for a backwoods cracker couple. Mrs. Reid described the man as "ugly enough but the woman [was] beyond all comparison for hideousness." After the brief ceremony Judge Reid closed with, "'Now kiss, you are one.' 'Arter [after] you is manners,' said the cracker, causing members of the bar present to shout with laughter."²⁸

Ellen Brown found a similar scene at a cracker wedding ceremony near Newnansville. The spectators must have burst into laughter when the bride's turn came to respond and "instead of

25. John S. Purveance to Alexander McRea, March 3, 1842, misc. mss., PKYL; Motte, *Journey into Wilderness*, xiv.

26. King, *Great South*, 420-21.

27. Shippee, ed., *Bishop Whipple's Southern Diary*, 27.

28. *Ibid.*, 46.

the words 'I will' lo and behold she ejaculated 'I won't.' The justice, supposing there must be a misunderstanding on her part, repeated but she again astonished the company with 'I won't— I told you I would not before' and took her seat, determined not to obey." Miss Brown, somewhat a supporter of women's rights herself, applauded the girl's stubbornness. She ended her correspondence to her relative in Ithaca by exclaiming, 'Hurrah for the Crackers!'"²⁹

Political occasions were important forums for social diversion, and candidates for office often found themselves attending dancing parties to seek votes. Such occasions rarely lacked alcoholic beverages. Enoch Vann, a Madison County attorney and candidate for office in 1860, accompanied his opponent, a man named Mays, on a speaking tour of Madison, Taylor, and Lafayette counties. As Vann and Mays prepared for a debate at the Taylor County Courthouse, Vann noticed a "one horse cart . . . backed up to the door, and a person . . . dealing out drinks to all who wanted them." The dispenser of the goodwill was Vann's adversary. When the debate concluded, Vann found himself alone. Mays and the others had adjourned to the less formal surroundings of a small log house. "I noticed that a large number of men went into that house," claimed Vann, "so I took my stand at the door. The house was crowded, and there were several who could not get in. Finally I heard Judge Mays singing a song, one verse of which ran thus: "When I was young I used to wail/ Upon ole massa and hand de plate/ Fill the bottle when its dry/ And brush away the blue-tailed fly./ Jim Crack Corn, and I don't care/ Jim Crack Corn, and I don't care/ Ole Marsa gone away." All joined the chorus and yelled "Hurrah for Mays!" Vann interpreted this turn of events as certain political defeat. "I forthwith mounted my horse," he remembered, "shoved my hat on the back of my head and took the nearest route homeward bound."

On another occasion Vann and his adversary attended a backwoods dancing party in his district in hopes of addressing the crowd. But fiddling, dancing, and drinking dominated the evening. Vann watched the dancing in the doorway of the "lean-to" and wrote: "A fat girl . . . , breathing heavily and in full

29. Ellen Brown to Mannevillette Brown, July 14, 1838, Anderson Papers, USMA.

perspiration, asked me if I was almost through smoking. I apologized," remembered Vann, "and was about to pocket my pipe when she informed me that she would like to smoke a little herself. I again apologized for not offering my pipe before—carefully wiped the stem on my coat tail and handed the pipe to her with a polite bow. She puffed away until she had to move up" and rejoin the others. "She wiped the stem under her arm and returned to pipe to me and galloped off. Of course I commenced smoking right off— for I do not know how many voters were looking on, whose votes I would have lost." Nevertheless, Vann might have saved himself the trouble. "When the election came off," he wrote some years later, "I 'tailed the the ticket'— the fire-eaters having the majority by many votes."³⁰

Five years later, as the Civil War was winding down, Lieutenant Colonel Wilder visited Cedar Key and attended a country ball conducted by white refugees. A fiddler provided musical entertainment and "young men and maidens" were plenty. The Union officer described the rural mode of dancing as "not cotillions but regular break downs where two only danced at a time as fast and as long as they can stand, when two or more take it up." Wilder remembered the female dancers were "chewing tobacco, dipping snuff, and drinking water out of a tin dipper." The "ballroom" was a "barn and the spectators— a motley crowd of children, pigs, soldiers, women, civilians, and everybody else."³¹

Life among the crackers provided amusement for some, but Lieutenant Henry Prince, a regular army officer stationed near Newnansville during the Second Seminole War, could not hide his elation when he learned of his transfer away from such folk. "Lewis is to be transferred back to Micanopy," he recorded in his diary, "so I will be off tomorrow. Farewell ye crackers! & ye cracker girls & farewell ye *one* 'roomer' log houses where lives & sleeps, a whole generation. Farewell the dirty foot, slipshod; but never knew a stocking; the unwashed face; ropy hair; the swearing, lazy, idle, slut! Ye slouched hats & grandshires courts— good bye. Ye drinking, drawling, boasting, cowardly

30. Enoch Vann, *Reminiscences of a Georgia-Florida-Pinewoods Cracker Lawyer* (n.p., 1937), 34-35.

31. John Wilder to mother, April 20, 1865.

Sliggards— Fare ye well!”³² Whether friendly or hostile, these ever-present frontier folk always gained the attention of those who lived or traveled among them.

Despite the amount of commentary on them, there is still much to be learned about crackers in antebellum Florida. What was their relationship to the institution of slavery? What percentage were landowners? Did they grow cotton, or did they rely solely on driving cattle and hogs for economic survival? Were they part of the market economy in Florida? Their political activities and affiliations remain a mystery. Were they Baptists, Methodists, or unchurched? And finally, impressionist travel accounts indicate that crackers were generally anti-Confederate, but was this really the case? These and other questions are certainly worth exploring in an effort to understand these people more clearly.

Despite massive immigration into Florida from the North and other sources in the twentieth century, traces of cultural values that have their origins in Florida’s “cracker past” are still visible. One of the most obvious legacies is the determination to ensure the least possible governmental interference in people’s everyday lives. Individualism, animosity toward taxation, a latent distrust of government-sponsored social programs from education to social services— as well as an ambivalence directed against both the promoters and recipients of these programs— certainly have their roots in the cultural legacies of Florida’s common folk. By examining Florida’s crackers we look through a window into our own existence. The study of the culture of this group allows us to understand the state’s contemporary society more fully and with a deeper appreciation of the many different human elements that have gone into making our diverse society..

32. Henry Prince Diary, May 14, 1838, in the private possession of Frank Laumer, Trilocochee, FL.