Transcript

Ben Brotemarkle

Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society, is made possible in part by the Department of State Division of Historical Resources and the State of Florida. It's also made possible by the Jessie Ball du Pont fund and by the historic Rossiter House Museum and Gardens in Eau Gallie celebrating pioneer history, the natural environment and women's history. Available for weddings and events at rossiterhousemuseum.org.

This is Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society, on the web at myfloridahistory.org. I'm Ben Brotemarkle and coming up on the program, Sally Baskin Hooker lived in the motel at Greenland from 1945 to 1960 and is the niece of hotelier Norton Baskin and writer Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings.

Sally Baskin Hooker

Aunt Marjorie likes to entertain at the Dolphin restaurant. And once again she would call my mother up and she would say, can you clean Sally up? Which meant get me off the beach and out of a bathing suit.

Ben Brotemarkle

We'll discuss convict leasing in Florida.

Connie Lester

Cash strapped Southern states sought new avenues to deal with an expanded incarcerated population.

Ben Brotemarkle

And we'll talk about the Lee County Conservation Association. All that ahead on Florida Frontiers. Sally Baskin Hooker was born in Florida in 1942. She is the niece of hotelier Norton Baskin and his wife, writer Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings from the ages of three to 18, Sally Baskin Hooker lived in the motel at Marine Land.

Sally Baskin Hooker

Marine Land was the vision of a group of men that wanted to build an area where they could do filming documentaries and to study marine life in an enclosed area. It took several years to procure the land, but they found a piece of property 18 miles South of Saint Augustine that had the Atlantic Ocean to one side and Intercoastal waterway on the other, so they started building the aquarium and the tanks. Well, that became an engineering and construction marvel because not only did they build it in one year, but at a cost of $500,000, a lot of things came out of that. One of the big one was a paint that could be underwater, and the Navy used that for their battleships when they were opening up this group of men realized that there were a lot of people riding by, so they said oh, let's charge a dollar and see if anybody will come. Well, the first day, the A1A which was a narrow little two lane road had over 30,000 people. On it, they said the car stretched almost to Crescent Beach and they said uh huh, we think we've got something here. So, they had built a restaurant, the Dolphin restaurant. They built a motel that had an outdoor bowling alley. They built a little snack shop, The Periwinkle. And we love to call it the Penny

Winkle. And they had a service station which could pump gas because they were 18 miles away from town.

Ben Brotemarkle

After a break from business during World War 2, Marine Land returned as a tourist attraction in 1945.

Sally Baskin Hooker

When World War Two started out, they had to close down Marine Studios because it was on the coast and there was a lot of submarine activity, so it was turned over to the Coast Guard as a beach walking training area for dogs and for the Coast Guard and so that's what they did during the war time. Well after the war was over, they opened it back up. And here they had a motel, a hotel, a restaurant, a little snack bar and they had to find someone to manage it. Well, there was this man, Norton Baskin, at the castle warden in Saint Augustine. And they went to him, and they said we'd like for you to come down and look around and see if you'd be interested in being the manager. Well, he went down, and he realized it was more than what he wanted to undertake. And he told him, he said I have a brother over in Ocala that maybe he could come over and interview. So, my dad came and interviewed. They said oh yes, this is wonderful. And he said now I must warn you. I have a three-year old daughter. Oh, that's no problem, little did they know.

Ben Brotemarkle

Living at marine land provided Sally Baskin Hooker with unique experiences including appearing as an extra in the movie *Return of the Creature* which was filmed there in 1952. A dolphin named Nelly was born at Marine Land and the 10 year old Sally became friends.

Sally Baskin Hooker

My mother was a registered nurse, and they knew this and whenever there was a baby dolphin going to be born, they would call my mother up even if it was midnight and say oh Mildred, you need to come up. You know we need you help for the delivery. Now here is my mother looking through a double pane porthole with tons and tons and gallons of water between her and the dolphin. But she worked up a chart where she could do transitions. She could do the different contractions somewhere in their archives where there are my mother's reports of the baby dolphin. Nelly was in the circular tank as one of the regular dolphins, and then soon she was taken back to what they call the stadium tank where the Dolphins did different tricks. Well, at night I would go up. I had a certain little way of patting on the side of the tank. Nelly would come up and I would dive in and do laps with her, so I grew up with Nelly in my preteen and teen years. She hurt all my secrets. I mean, I would just tell her about bad boyfriends, bad things my momma had done to me. And so, Nellie and I became very good friends.

Ben Brotemarkle

Sally remembers visiting Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings at Cross Creek and getting sand spurs stuck to her clothing. She swapped stories with Aunt Marge on the king size bed at the writer’s home in Crescent Beach.

Sally Baskin Hooker

Aunt Marjorie likes to entertain at the Dolphin restaurant. And once again she would call my mother up and she would say, can you clean Sally up? Which meant get me off the beach and out of a bathing suit. Well, Mama would put me in a cute little dress, and I would walk up to the restaurant, and I have been groomed in my southern manners. Yes ma'am, no ma'am, thank you ma'am, please. I knew how to shake hands in curtsy. And so, she would take me into the dining room. Well, one of them was this grizzly bearded man. And I'm told it was Ernest Hemingway, which didn't mean a thing to me. Another time, there was a lady with a really funny hat on; Eleanor Roosevelt.

Ben Brotemarkle

It was through her uncle, Norton Baskin that Sally met novelist and playwright Thornton Wilder, best known for his play *Our Town*.

Sally Baskin Hooker

When I was in the eighth grade, Thornton Wilder came to Saint Augustine, and he was staying at the porcelain hotel, and he was there to write well. He couldn't get anything done because all the little ladies in town were brunching and lunching him and teeing him, and he finally went to the manager. There at possibly in hotel. He said I think I'm going to have to check out because I can't get anything done and he said Well, Mr. Wilder, what's the problem? He explained to him, and he said, what are you looking for? He said I need somewhere quiet, relaxed, you know where I can write. So, he said I know exactly where you need to go. And he called my mother up and he explained the situation and he said now we've got to be he's got to be able to leave messages, take messages, have them passed on. She said not a problem. Well, this gentleman came down, my mother said his name is Thornton Wilder. How are you? I'm glad to meet you. And every day when I got off the bus, I had an hour on the beach and Mr. Wilder and I would walk the beach, we'd pick up shells, we'd talk. I still did not realize who he was, and probably about a week after he left marine land, my teacher got up and she said, oh, class, we have had the most wonderful thing that happened here in Saint Augustine. We had a famous author staying at the Postillion Hotel, Thornton Wilder. Well, guess whose hand went up. And she said yes, Sally, I said no. He's been staying at my house the last two weeks. Well, my house was the motel.

Ben Brotemarkle

Sally Baskin Hooker was interviewed by community historian David Nolan at the Florida Historical Society Public History Forum and the Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Society Conference. This is Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society. I'm Ben Brotemarkle visit us anytime online at myfloridahistory.org to find discounted books on Florida history and culture and watch our public television series Florida Frontiers, that's myfloridahistory.org.

Ben Brotemarkle

Joining us now is Connie Lester, associate professor of history at the University of Central Florida, director of the RICHES Digital Archiving project and editor of the Florida Historical Quarterly. Connie. Despite the freeing of enslaved people at the end of the Civil War, efforts to control their lives continued and expanded.

Connie Lester

In the aftermath of the Civil War, white Southerners ascribed to a self-fulfilling prophecy that posited the conviction that freed men and women would create a threat to the good order and functioning of civil society. Unable to restrain their baser impulses they would engage in criminal activity that would require punitive responses from law enforcement and the courts. The subsequent creation of laws that criminalized a variety of activities, including hunting and fishing restrictions, trespass and petty theft that had previously been tolerated assured the arrest and incarceration of newly emancipated men and women who looked to the commons to provide or supplement their food and housing, faced with the prospect of providing secure facilities to house and feed these newly designated criminals, cash strapped Southern states sought new avenues to deal with an expanded incarcerated population. Thus, according to the late 20th century research. The convict leasing system was born and flourished.

Ben Brotemarkle

Now, the convict leasing system seems like just another form of slavery.

Connie Lester

A 1994 article in the Florida Historical Quarterly by Jeffrey A Drobny applies this interpretation to Florida's history of incarceration and convict leasing to demonstrate the horrific circumstances of the practice and the eventual reforms and abolition that followed in the early 20th century. Convict leasing benefited the state in at least two ways. It reduced the costs of incarceration, and it generated an income stream, convicted felons were leased to railroads, mines and timber companies, the harbingers of a modern industrial South the companies that lease the convicts paid aid to the state for the right to work. The prisoners who received no payment for their labor assumed responsibility for housing, feeding, and securing the prisoners they leased. Initially, states provided few if any guidelines for fulfilling the responsibilities industrial firms assumed the situation was ripe for abuse. Drobny described a litany of inhumane circumstances that the largely black prisoners faced. Working in isolated prisoner camps, prisoners were at the mercy of guards and supervisors who devalued their lives. As the title of Alex Lichtenstein's book on Convict Leasing suggest, prisoners perform twice the work of free labor, while a book by Matthew Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another* encapsulates the attitude of whites who oversaw the men and women who worked under this brutal system. Drobny explains the origins of the system in Florida in 1880. Florida leased its first prisoners to major HAY's of Live Oak for $2745, wise sublease the convicts to a New York based firm, Dutton, Ruff, and Jones, a company that dealt in turpentine, rosin and naval stores. In 1889, the Commissioner of Agriculture assumed control of the leasing system and retained supervision until the system ended in 1919. According to Drobny, the forces that encouraged continued convict leasing in Florida included the forest resources that made the extraction of turpentine, rosin, and timber a profitable economic venture. The small labor force available to work in the abundant forests, the previously identified poverty of state government and a general belief that convicts should be put to work and learn habits of industry. In summary, Florida used the convict lease system to avoid expenses, reap financial profits, relieve idleness among state prisoners and supply local industry with much needed cheap labor. Increasingly, state prisoners worked in the turpentine industry, rising from 27% of the prison population in 1899 to 90% between 1907 and 1909.

Ben Brotemarkle

So more than 40 years after the end of slavery, state prisoners were living under conditions that were just as harsh or worse.

Connie Lester

Camps were crude, unsanitary, and sites of daily cruelty forced to work long hours. The US Commissioner of Labor claimed that convicts averaged 30% more productivity than free laborers. They spent long hours chained to one another, even as they slept, worked with inadequate nutrition, bathed from common barrels of water worked and slept in filthy clothing and suffered from long hours in standing water. They were whipped and beaten for infractions against often arbitrary camp rules. In one documented example, convicts were required to run from the camp to the work site, a distance of several miles without shoes. The lacerations to their feet produced inflammation and infection and even death. Until 1910, least female prisoners were housed with male convicts and faced sexual abuse in addition to other brutalities. Convict leasing was profitable to the state counties, lessees and subcontractors. From 1880 to 1912, the state received a total of 2 million, seven, $222,620 in the years 1910 to 1914, one firm, the Florida Pine Company, leased convicts from the state for $323 each and sublease them to individual turpentine distillers and lumber operators for $400 each. Over the four year period, Florida Pine realized $345,540 in profit on subleases. Beginning in 1903 of the state shared its convict lease revenue with counties in proportion to their assessed property value employers of lease convicts also benefited financially after deducting cost, the average profit for naval stores operations using convict labor was $25,000.

Ben Brotemarkle

Connie, what finally led to this horrific practice being changed?

Connie Lester

Increasing public knowledge of the conditions of convict camps elicited opposition to the practice. In the late 19th century, the Greenback Party and the populist denounced the convict lease. In response, some states made modest improvements in living in work conditions. Organized labor also mounted campaigns against the practice that pitied convicts against free labor. Public opinion against convict labor produced stronger results in the early 20th century. The practice ended in Louisiana in 1901, Mississippi in 1906, Georgia in 1907 and Texas in 1910. Reform changed but did not always improve convict life. The creation of state prisons produced some of the most notorious prisons in the nation, including Parchman prison in Mississippi and Angola prison in Louisiana. Reform came slowly to Florida in 1913, the state established a State Farm in Bradford County, where male and female prisoners unfit for leasing were to be used as the Board of Commissioners of State Institutions May Direct. County commissioners were permitted to lease other prisoners for work on public roads for the so-called chain gang. In 1917, the legislature passed the convict Leased Act, which privileged the state's road construction for convict labor, but also permitted leasing of prisoners not engaged in road work to private firms. In 1919, with the completion of the construction of Rayford prison, the state officially ended convict lease.

Counties continued to lease prisoners housed in county jails until 1923, when the whipping death of a white prisoner, Martin Tabert, a visitor from South Dakota who had been arrested for vagrancy, led the Florida legislature to forbid the leasing of county prisoners to private employers. More recent research by Connor Donegan in the Florida Historical Quarterly and Steve Hahn in the Journal of Southern History has raised questions about convict leasing national. The use of imprisonment for the disabled and the role of the exception clause of the 13th amendment in fostering convict leasing. Their comparisons

across states and regions close attention to the conditions of individual prisoners and the questions regarding the role of fundamental law in the justification of incarceration and convict labor raised important questions in an ongoing national discussion on America's history of incarceration.

Ben Brotemarkle

A difficult history that it's important to remember. Thanks, Connie.

Connie Lester

You're welcome.

Ben Brotemarkle

Connie Lester is associate professor of history at the University of Central Florida, director of the RICHES Digital Archiving project, and editor of the Florida Historical Quarterly.

Ben Brotemarkle

This is Florida Frontiers. Holly Baker is public history coordinator for the Florida Historical Society and Archivist at the Library of Florida History in Cocoa. She has this report on the Lee County Conservation Association.

Holly Baker

Doctor Chris Willem is an associate professor of history at the College of Coastal Georgia in New Brunswick. He wrote an article in the summer Fall 2020 issue of the Florida Historical Quarterly journal titled sea grassroots environmentalism, the Lee County Conservation Association, as Doctor William explains, the Lee County Conservation Association, or the LCCA focused on protecting Florida's coastal waters from dredge and fill projects, particularly in Estero Bay and Lee County.

Dr. Christopher Wilhelm

They started in 1958. Fighting against dredge and fill proposals in Lee County and so Lee County is an interesting place, it's Fort Myers, I think like 35% of the county is water, it's coastal, dominated by islands. The Caloosahatchee River is there, and it and it really is this sort of estuarine county, and they are native Floridians, you know, born and raised, they live there, when it's just a tiny little speck of the town before World War 2. And after World War 2, like all of Florida, it really starts to boom and develop. And a lot of that development is on the coast, people want to be near the coast, this is the appeal of Florida. It has a lot of nice coastline and people want to be near the water and they want to be near the islands and the beach and the boating and the fishing. And at this time the state of Florida is sort of encouraging this development and a lot of that development is being done in a very environmentally irresponsible way. And so, what Bill Mellor and his group and there's other groups throughout the state that are fighting this as well is they're finding what we that we would call a dredge and fill proposal.

Holly Baker

The Lee County Conservation Association was led by native Floridian and Fort Myers resident Bill Mellor, a former real estate developer and a Navy veteran who served in World War 2. Miller, his wife Pat, and other environmental activists with the LCA used their knowledge of the law to fight dredge and fill

projects in Lee County. In 1966, they created Florida's first aquatic preserve, the Estero Bay Aquatic Preserve.

Dr. Christopher Wilhelm

How do you protect water? Because we sort of know how to protect land. You have a National Forest, you have a National Park, you have a Wildlife Refuge, but what do you do for water? And so, they toy with the idea of a State Park, but Bill Mellor says in his interview, no one had ever heard of a State Park in the water. And so, they kind of come to this idea of an aquatic preserve. And what the aquatic preserve basically does is it takes those submerged lands and basically says you cannot issue dredge and fill proposals and you cannot sell the submerged lands in the aquatic preserve. You can do everything else you can fish, you can boat, you can hunt. There are essentially no other regulations. It's just really protecting the habitat.

Holly Baker

When the LCCA a came about in the late 1950s, there was a growing awareness of the importance of protecting the environment. The activism of the LCCA inspired other environmental groups in Florida to fight to protect the waters in their communities.

Dr. Christopher Wilhelm

What Bill Mellor and the LCCA are doing is they're not just protecting Fort Myers, they're not just protecting Estero Bay, they are really creating an entire legal and ecological framework for how to protect additional areas throughout the states. And they are really spreading these ideas that Bill Mellor is in contact with people from all over the state, essentially giving them a blueprint for how to fight these proposals. He works very closely with an individual named Art Marshall, who becomes really important in Everglades preservation in the 70s and 80s, but he's important, he's doing this stuff in the 50s and 60s with coastal preservation and so Mellor is really sort of this proselytizer spreading these legal arguments and these ecological arguments and really working with other people to get them to do what he's doing and its very successful.

Holly Baker

Today, Florida has 41 aquatic preserves consisting of 2.2 million acres and 8400 miles of coastline. The aquatic preserves ensure the protection of bird rookeries, fish nurseries, freshwater springs, salt marshes, seagrass meadows and mangrove forests across Florida.

Dr. Christopher Wilhelm

It really is just habitat protection and it's really an amazing thing. There's no other system like it in the country at this time, but it's incredibly significant, incredibly important. I think it's really sort of ignored part of Florida's environmental history.

Holly Baker

The Lee County Conservation Association was instrumental in establishing the first aquatic preserve in Florida, which then led to the creation of more Florida aquatic preserves. They also challenged how coastlines could be developed in terms of bulk headlines and feelings submerged lands, and they changed the way Florida would allow the development of shorelines in the future, Doctor Chris Wilhelm.

Dr. Christopher Wilhelm

I think what's really notable about them is that most of them are native Floridians. Most of them served in World War 2, and most of them were people intensely connected to the environment of Florida. Vince Haunch had a nursery that grew like grapefruit and avocado. That's very Florida to me. Another individual was a commercial. Fisherman, Tootsie Barnes, who apparently received the first Commercial Fish license in the states. And then Bill Mellor and his wife, Pat Mellor, very connected to nature, you know, I talked to Bill, and he really had so many stories about his childhood growing up in Florida, going out boating every weekend and fishing and sleeping on islands. And these were just native Floridians, very connected to their environments and very connected to their place. And they wanted to protect that place. But I think this is a great story because it really is native Floridians protecting their home.

Holly Baker

For Florida Frontiers, I'm Holly Baker, public history coordinator for the Florida Historical Society and archivist at the Library of Florida History in Cocoa.

Ben Brotemarkle

You've been listening to Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society. Please join us right here again next week and find us anytime online at myfloridahistory.org.

Production assistance for Florida Frontiers comes from Connie Lester and Holly Baker, and this week, David Nolan. The program is edited by John White. Have a great week, I'm Ben Brotemarkle. Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society, is made possible in part by the Department of State Division of Historical Resources and the State of Florida. It's also made possible by the Jessie Ball DuPont Fund and by the historic Rossiter House Museum and Gardens in Eau Gallie, celebrating Pioneer history, the natural environment and women's history available for weddings and events at rossiterhousemuseum.org.