



## Life on the Loxahatchee by Dora Doster Utz



Dora Doster Utz was born Dora Annie Doster in Atlanta, Georgia November 7, 1892 and passed away in Shreveport, Louisiana January 8, 1959. Her father, Ben Hill Doster, moved his family to Jupiter, Florida about 1894 to help his recently widowed sister, Mrs. Gus Miller, on her homestead there. The Doster's lived first in Jupiter, then in West Palm Beach until about 1908, when they moved to Shreveport, Louisiana. Dora remembered her Florida childhood with so much joy that she finally began to write down her recollections: (Introductory note supplied by Mrs. Margaret N. Pleasant, a daughter.)

### **BACKGROUND**

The first Sunday afternoon following our arrival at the Florida homestead on the Loxahatchee to rejoin Papa, he thought it would be enjoyable to row us up the river to Hunt's Mill and back. The outing had indeed been pleasant, and novel to a city bred mother and two city bred little sisters, until we turned to come back. Suddenly the warm scented breezes became quite chilly, so that we drew our skirts up over our shoulders, and Papa rowed a little faster. More and more the air cooled, as if someone had left opened an icebox door. The temperature dropped until we were shivering. Mama put us children in the bottom of the boat and drew her full skirts around us. Papa rowed like mad, not only to get us home, but to keep himself warm. This was most unusual! By the



time we reached the cabin we were blue with cold, half frozen, and all made a wild dash for the house to start a big wood fire in the kitchen stove.

Throughout the night the temperature continued to drop, freezing pineapple patches, citrus groves and everything it touched. Startled homesteaders heard the boles of their orange trees burst in the night with the report of a rifle. Next morning everyone woke to a sad sight. Fruit or chards, pineapple patches, vegetable gardens, the work of many years, were frozen and dead. On the river, the fish were frozen and lying on the surface of the water, some feebly waving a fin; the water birds and vultures were having a feast. Enterprising fishermen, at some points, were gathering up the frozen fish, packing them in ice and hurrying them north. Some homesteaders took one look at their ruined hopes and summarily left their cabins and acres to the encroachment of the jungle, the wildcats and the panthers.

That was the winter of 1894-1895, and was to go down in Florida history as the "winter of the big freeze." It was our introduction to the homestead. We were to have many more unique experiences; some enchanting, some frightening, but all part of the bewitching fascination that is Florida.

Just a short while before the big freeze, Papa had taken temporary leave of his desk in the office of an Atlanta newspaper to come to Florida and assist a recently bereaved sister whose husband had died, leaving her with a small daughter to raise, a store to be managed, and the homestead which, in order to be proved upon, had to be occupied another year.

After Papa saw and sized up the situation, he decided to stay on in Florida. He sent for his family. He agreed to live on the homestead for a year.

The Loxahatchee and the Indian rivers merged their waters at the town of Jupiter, about two miles away, and together flowed out to sea through a wide inlet. Up and down the rivers were other settlers and homesteaders like ourselves, many of whom were people of culture and education, who enjoyed the challenge of a new environment. There were "cracker" hunters and trappers, and fishermen, making their living from the woods and streams. There were Seminole Indians who found their way into town from the Everglades, paddling their dugout cypress canoes through devious and mysterious channels unknown to most white men. They brought their squaws and children with them and pitched camp along the trail. They traded their hides, plumes, venison, for whatever they needed in the stores.

The solid heart of the town held small merchants, a frame hotel, citrus grove and pineapple planters, the lighthouse keeper and his assistants, the lifesaving station boys, most of whom had families, the weather bureau station keeper, and the telegraph and cable office. By way of contrast, in the winter wealthy, fashionable tourists came down



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the Indian River by steamer or in their own sumptuous yachts. Some of these spent the night at the two story frame hotel near the dock at Jupiter, and proceeded on their way in the morning. Others stopped for a meal at the hotel and departed. Most were on their way farther south to Palm Beach and Miami, which were rapidly becoming the mecca for fun and frolic among the rich and leisure class of "The Gay Nineties." The tourists who preferred the inside water route rather than the coastal steamers necessarily had to quit the river steamer at Jupiter, because there was no water route wide enough to take the big steamers farther south. They boarded the Celestial Railroad cars at Jupiter and rode to Juno, eight miles south, to the head waters of Lake Worth, where they again took boat, by way of large naphtha launches, for their destination.

The little Celestial Railroad, so named because of the galaxy of stations along its way - Neptune, Venus, Mars, and Juno -was unique in that, on the return trip from Juno, which was at one time the county seat of Dade County, it had to back up the eight miles since it had no turntable. The useful life of the little railroad was doomed, however, for Henry M. Flagler, the Standard Oil magnate, had already pushed his new railroad - which he called the Florida East Coast Railway - as far south as West Palm Beach. The advent of the Florida East Coast Railroad created a new town of West Jupiter, which faced the tracks, the Loxahatchee having been spanned by a high trestle and drawbridge.

## **THE HOMESTEAD**

The homestead was a 160 acre plot hewn from the scrub oak, pine and palmetto flats of that area. Besides the pineapple patch, a strip about 200 feet long and 100 feet wide had been cleared to the river, and the cabin put down in the middle of it. The cabin was one large room, a small bedroom, and a kitchen. A pump in the back yard supplied water.

On three sides of the clearing, the woods and swamps hemmed us in, but on the north the lovely, dark, mysterious river flowed by. The Loxahatchee was one of those fresh water rivers of Florida which had its source in that little known, vast swamp area called The Everglades.

We sat in front of the cabin late in the afternoons and enjoyed the living picture of the river. Mangroves and large-boled cypress trees lined its shores and marched out into the water. Spanish moss and beautiful air plants hung from their limbs; graceful reeds swayed in the sweet-scented evening breezes, and a profusion of varied colored water lilies spread their artists' palettes into the sunset. In the shallows graceful white herons stood like statues and water birds of many varieties dove for fish, rose and circled, and dove again. Sometimes one espied an eagle beating his way up from the fishing flats in the river.



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When this view was bathed in a gorgeous sunset, it was breathtakingly beautiful. I remember most vividly the red ones, when the woods to our west seemed on fire; the river reflecting the flames, the house and grounds taking on a scarlet tint, and one's very face flushed with a feverish glow.

We listened to the birds settling down for the night; the deep-throated bellows of an alligator; the orchestra of tiny insects and frogs beginning their nightly serenade. The tiniest frogs crying, "Tea Table, Tea Table"; the medium sized ones: "Fry Bacon, Fry Bacon"; and the big bull frogs: "Jug o'rum, Jug o'rum." Somewhere back in the darkening woods we heard the hoot of an owl, the thrilling call of the Whip-Poor-Will and the distant echoing answer of his mate. Sometimes at night in those woods a blood-chilling scream as of a woman in distress froze the whole orchestration into silence, and we shivered in our beds. The first time Mama heard that scream, she had bolted upright out of her chair, but Papa had laid a gently restraining hand on her arm and remarked to her incredulous ears that it was a panther prowling around and that she must never go outside to seek a poor woman in distress at night, for their screams were alarmingly similar.

Although the Government had passed the Homestead Act many years before, it was not until 1885 that this sparsely settled region of lower Florida began to be opened up to homesteaders. Since that time, many fine people as well as adventurers of all sorts had decided to cast their lots in this temperate climate whose exotic growth showed such promise. One of our neighbors, who lived across and some miles up the river, was a physician. That must have been a reassuring thought to the parents of two small children! Dr. Jackson was a highly educated and cultured gentleman, whose health had been impaired by the rigors of northern winters while making his medical rounds, so he had brought his family to a milder climate. He was a source of merciful healing not only to the body, as he continued his profession, but to the soul as well, for there was no church in Jupiter at that time and Dr. Jackson read the Episcopal service to whoever felt inclined to come on the Sabbath to the little octagon shaped frame schoolhouse at Jupiter.



Another gentleman and his family living on a Loxahatchee homestead was a Princeton graduate. He was a man of remarkable talents and ability who loved this area and homesteading and didn't care who knew it. He had a keen sense of humor; was somewhat of a mimic and ventriloquist. A visit to his home was a tonic and sure to be amusing. There was an Englishman, suave, poised and affable, who lived on the river. It was rumored that he had but to return to his native land to claim an honored title.

When Mama's loneliness became an urge for company, she took us children and rowed



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up the river to spend the day with our neighbors on other homesteads. Sometimes a group of neighbors met at one home and spent the day pleasantly sewing together, or putting up jelly. Never will I forget the heavenly aroma of guava jelly cooking, or orange marmalade in the making.

## THE SEMINOLES

Seminole Indians were a common sight in Jupiter at that time. The Indians appeared and disappeared quietly through those secret channels and waterways known only to themselves which bore them into the inner fastness of the Everglades. The few hundred who lived now in the 'Glades were the descendants of those fierce warriors who defied and held the might of the United States Army at bay for the seven years duration of the dreadful and bloody Seminole Wars back in the 1830's, which Wars, fought from the borders to the Keys, ended in bafflement for the Army. Two of the chiefs, Billy Bowlegs and Tommy Tiger, were descendants of two of the fiercest of those Seminole War chiefs.

Much fighting had been done at Jupiter during the Seminole Wars not only at Fort Jupiter, where the tall, red lighthouse now stood, but on the very sand dunes of the beaches up and down the Indian River, and crossings of the Loxahatchee; the Indians striking suddenly and then eluding pursuit by completely vanishing into those watercourses and intricate passageways which led into the fastness of the Great Swamp.

No wonder, then, that we were frightened the first time we laid eyes on a Seminole. So, the afternoon we were sitting quietly in front of the cabin taking the breeze from the river, Mama's attention was caught by a movement over the rise of the hill towards the river. It looked like a plume stuck in the turban of an Indian. It was! Then she saw another, and another, and soon the whole file of them were coming up the trail from where they had beached their canoes. She was terrified, and grabbing us children, she raced into the house and bolted the doors. They filed silently by and headed for the trail to town. Then, to her consternation, she saw they were preparing to camp along the trail for the night on our ground, practically cutting us off from town. To increase her further fears, she saw them come up to the back yard pump with their pails and buckets for water. She remained indoors. When Papa came home along the trail that night from the store, he saw the Indians at their evening meal. The men were sitting about a large pot in the center of the circle while the women remained at one side, cooking and occasionally replenishing the pot with meat. Papa paused to address them, but they paid him little attention until the Chief spoke. Nodding his head in the direction of the cabin, he said: "Humph, white squaw scared."



## JUPITER

We were still to enjoy the life at Jupiter for a few years before we finally moved down to West Palm Beach. Our year's tenancy at the homestead being accomplished, we moved down into town. That was a happy move, for now we were among people; had near neighbors; started to school; had parties, sewing bees, and many other interesting experiences.

We moved into a little house on a hill; that is, the hill was said to be a shell mound which had been thrown up by the Indians many years ago. Straight in front of us about a mile away was the magnificent Atlantic, which was an ever moving picture. On our left the Loxahatchee and Indian Rivers merged at the base of a high bluff, upon which stood the weather bureau and signal station, the lighthouse, and the residences of the men who tended them. At the base of our hill lay the right-of-way for the Celestial Railroad, which ran out onto the pier upon which Papa had his store, built on pilings over the river. The tourists coming down the river by steamer always found their way into his store, and he became a sort of first official greeter for the community. He met many wealthy and distinguished people. At one time President Cleveland and his party, en route to Palm Beach, stopped briefly and had dinner at the little hotel before continuing on.

To the south a hot, sandy, sandspur-infested road led off along the right-of-way to the little stations of Neptune, Mars, Venus, and finally to Juno and the head waters of Lake Worth. These stations or stops along the Celestial, except Juno, were nothing more or less than a few shacks and pineapple patches, soon to be deserted when the Celestial ceased functioning.

At the foot of our hill and facing the tracks on the east was the post office, and along the river road east was the telegraph and cable office, more homes, and, winding on around, one finally came to the lifesaving station on the beach, later to be known as the coast guard. Adjacent to the tracks on our left, built on pilings out over the swamp, was the little two-story hotel and other one-story frame buildings, one a saloon. The stairway of the hotel was on the outside of the building. Its kitchen was around a boardwalk in the back, and its outhouses further out on pilings over the swamp. One had to practically "walk a plank" to get to them. The hotel dining room was large and ran down one side of the structure, commanding a lovely view of the rivers. Dances and entertainments of various kinds were held in this large room.

## THE PASSING OF THE CELESTIAL

After we had lived in Jupiter proper for a year, it became plain that the heyday of the river steamers and the little Celestial was past. Mr. Flagler's Florida East Coast Railway had sealed their doom. It was so much more





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convenient for tourists to pursue an uninterrupted journey to the paradise that was Palm Beach, and its world-famous and luxurious hotels, The Royal Poinciana and The Breakers.

So, the Celestial fell into disuse, and Papa was commissioned to dismantle it. Some of the river steamers, such as the St. Sebastian and the St. Lucie, were beached along the river and eventually rotted away there. The little mail boat "Dixie" was tied up in the canal and disintegrated there. The big railroad carried the mail now, supplanting the primitive years of boat, stagecoach, and even barefoot mailmen walking their routes along the beach. The hotel was abandoned and the nearby saloon vacated, becoming the meeting place for more respectable pursuits like dances, for instance.

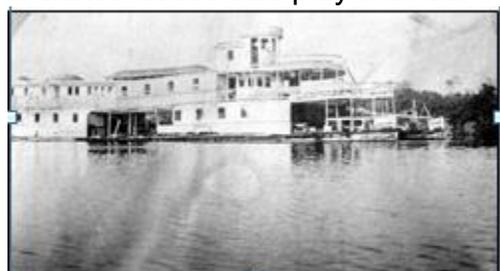
Papa continued for a time to operate his store at the end of the dock In Jupiter. He owned it now, having bought out the interest of his sister, who had married the young weather bureau man and moved across the river to his station. Papa also built a second store along the tracks of the Florida East Coast Railway at West Jupiter. A new two-story frame hotel had been built at West Jupiter and other stores and buildings.

## **A BATTLESHIP COMES TO CALL**

The Spanish-American War, which had been festering for some time, was now come to a head. War had been declared by our Government against Spain. Our new uncle was a busy man now, keeping passing ships informed on war conditions. In those days he signaled them by day with flags, and at night, by flares.

Another night to be remembered, which was to go down in the history of the war, was the visit to Jupiter of a mysterious battleship. At the time of the declaration of the Spanish-American War, one of our mightiest battleships (editor's note: The Oregon) had mysteriously disappeared and nothing had been heard from her by the world at large for months. Starting out in March, 1898, from a harbor on the Pacific Coast before the days of the Panama Canal, she was forced to sail entirely around South America. However, even allowing for the 14,000 mile journey and the lack of radio and wireless communications in those days, she was considered to have mysteriously disappeared, as this lapse of time was not required to make such a journey. With war excitement at fever pitch, everyone was asking what had become of "the pride of the American Navy."

One day my sister and I went to spend the day at our aunt's house and play with our cousin of the same age. Our uncle told us he was expecting a certain ship and had been up on the tower watching for her. While he ate a hurried dinner, he sent us to the tower to keep a keen watch out and report if we saw any ships coming. Finally near sunset my sister's sharp eyes





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discerned a wisp of smoke on the horizon. The ship was approaching very slowly from the north. It was about a half hour before sundown when he began signaling. No answer was returned to the usual question: "What is your name?" She looked like an American battleship but we could not be sure, so our uncle telegraphed the news across the river to the cable office that a strange ship was offshore.

Our uncle, like a modern Paul Revere, continued to watch from the tower until he saw swinging lights of lanterns and what appeared to be a boat being lowered and armed men getting into it. The excitement grew to fever pitch. Imagine the scene when the boat got near enough for the townsmen to recognize United States sailors!! They soon made it known that it was The Oregon lying offshore. They had come around the Horn; coaled at Barbados; given Cuba a wide berth to avoid the rumored Spanish fleet lying in wait for them, and they had used further precautions by not answering our signals, for fear of being drawn into a net through some Spanish ruse. This was May 24, 1898.