

Rural Florida Family Life 1870-1912



Photo from the Florida State Photographic Archives, Tallahassee, FL

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the Cracker Country Docent Committee for Family Life.
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THE FAMILY

The family is the oldest human institution and continues to be the most important to this day.

As families drifted south into Florida to find land and establish homes, the struggle with nature and the environment began to unfold. These newcomers brought with them strength of character and integrity, customs, phrases of speech, words, and songs. They also brought crafts and skills, handed down to them from generation to generation—all typical of the areas they came from.

The Home

The home was the center of family activities, such as the care and nurture of children, preparing meals, eating together, keeping house, playing games, entertaining those who visited, etc. Cooperation was required from each family member, young and old alike. The younger children were given chores such as drying dishes, sweeping floors, or tending the baby. As each child grew older, their responsibilities increased.

Homes were built to meet the immediate needs and circumstances of the family at that time. These “Cracker” dwellings had the quality of cozy, comfortable snugness within them. Additional rooms were built if necessary, as time

passed and families grew. Although some homes had a separate room for dining, many families ate meals in the kitchen at a simply built table of wood from around the homestead. The kitchen or dining room was where the family gathered to read, study, sew, whittle or just talk at the end of the day.

The Father

The father cleared the land, built the home, plowed, planted, and hunted the surrounding area for game for the table. His was a constant battle, both a conflict with wildlife as well as nature. He was responsible for all heavy outdoor chores and for assigning chores to the boys in the family. He taught them the proper use of the muzzle loading rifle or shotgun, the axe, saw, knife and all other tools necessary. He taught hunting, trapping, and fishing skills. The father shared his knowledge of livestock care, herding cattle, riding, and plowing. These skills were necessary in order to help when extra hands were needed around the homestead.

The father was, of necessity, a man of courage and strength. He had to be if he was going to conquer this rural untamed land of Florida.

The Mother

The mother was involved in the multitude of homemaking tasks, hers were

the responsibilities of all daily house work. She was not only a mother, but also a nurse, family counselor, and spiritual leader.

A person of many skills, the mother was also a spinner of yarn, weaver of cloth, knitter, seamstress, and quilter. In the kitchen, the mother was the cook, fruit and vegetable preserver, butcher, as well as soap and candle maker. It was her job to look after the family vegetable garden, and tend to the chickens and other animals around the homestead.

The mother also helped with the planting and harvesting when needed. Keeping track of kinfolks and relatives was also the mother’s responsibility. Mothers also remembered and passed down folk rhymes, stories, songs, party games, and folk remedies.

When no school teacher was available, the mother taught her children everything she knew, right in the home. In addition to the three “R’s”, she taught her children everything they would need to know about home life when they grew up.

The Children

When children became old enough to do so, they went to school. When not in school, they were busy with their chores around the home. There was not much time available for playing games or having fun. When given time to enjoy themselves, nothing delighted them more than

swimming, and all sorts of home-made fun.

Boys also hunted, trapped wild animals and went fishing with their fathers. Boys became skilled at these activities as they gained experience. When different families got together for a visit, they enjoyed playing rough and tumble games with the neighbor boys.

Girls enjoyed playing games with their dolls, or playing alone after school and when their chores were finished. Girls seemed to enjoy school more than boys. Perhaps that's why they enjoyed playing "school."

Boys and girls both looked forward to the times, usually on Saturdays, when the horse was hitched to the wagon and the whole family piled in for a trip to town. Going to church was also a special time for children. It was one of the few times they got to visit with other children of their own age.

Family Living

The Home and Inside Chores

Since there was always much to be done, the family would get up before daylight and go to bed after dark. Some families would all be together in the dining room after supper as the mother and the girls were cleaning up. It was usually a large room where everyone could be together.

If the home had a parlor, or living room, it was used only when company came to visit or other special times. In the winter it was common for everyone to gather in the kitchen if there were no other fireplaces in the home.

While some furniture might have been purchased if the family lived near a town, the men of the family usually made all of the furniture. Home made beds were constructed from peeled logs or boards. Wooden boards, or slats, were used to support the bed's mattress. Mattresses were sewn together by the women using material called ticking. The mattresses were then stuffed with either chicken or duck feathers, pine straw, Spanish Moss, or strips of palmetto fronds. They also made quilts to help keep them warm during the winter months. Early bedspreads were called "counterpanes" and were usually white in color. Around 1900, people began to embroider designs on them. Pioneer women also made their own pillows and stuffed them with feathers. Pillow cases were handmade by them as well.

The floors in pioneers homes were usually made of pine boards. These floors would be very cold during the winter months so the women crocheted rugs, from old rags and other scraps of cloth to keep feet off the cold wooden floors.

The wooden floors were usually

swept clean, using home-made brooms, at least once per day. Brooms were made using a native plant, called broom sedge or from broomcorn grown especially for that purpose. Broom handles were usually made from small trees, stripped of their rough outer bark. Periodically floors were given a good scrubbing to keep them clean. Pioneer women used mops made of corn shucks and plenty of water and lye soap. If lye soap wasn't available, clean sand was used as a substitute. After the floor dried, the sand would be swept outside.

Cooking for the family was done mostly on cast iron, wood burning stoves, in the fireplace, or over open fires in the yard. Bread, biscuits, corn bread, or "crackling" bread were usually baked each day. "Cracklings" are the small crisp pieces of hog fat left over from rendering out lard. They would be broken into small pieces and mixed with corn bread batter.

Home grown vegetables were preserved, and jams and jellies were made, in season. These would be used later in the year when fresh fruits and vegetables were not available.

Saturday was usually baking day in the pioneer home. Enough pies and cakes were baked to last the family for a week. Since refrigeration wasn't available, these were kept in a special piece of furniture, called a "pie safe." A pie safe was a large cabinet with

screen wire doors and sides. The screen kept out bugs and helped to keep the food cool. Monday was usually wash day. Washing required lots of water and was done as close to a source of water as possible. Since pioneers had no washing machines, washing was done by hand. Clothes were boiled in a big iron pot and then scrubbed clean using lye soap and a scrub board. If the family didn't own a scrub board, a large wooden stick, called a battling stick, was used to beat the dirt out of the clothes.

After scrubbing or beating, clothing was rinsed three times and then hung on the clothes line or rail fence to dry. Bleaching of white clothes was accomplished by hanging them to dry in the sun, which did a good job of whitening them.

Tuesday was reserved for ironing clothing. The women used heavy irons, called flat irons, which were kept hot on the wood stove or perhaps on the hearth of the fireplace. Usually, two irons were used so one could be heating while the other was being used.

The mother did all the sewing for the family. Most sewing was done by hand unless the family was fortunate enough to own a treadle sewing machine. The treadle sewing machine was powered by pumping it with your feet. It was common for little girls to start to learn to sew at the age of four years old.

Since there was no in-door plumbing, water had to be carried from a well or pump for house hold use. Drinking water was usually kept in a bucket on the back porch. A long handled gourd was kept nearby for all to drink out of.

Outside Chores

Every family had a garden to raise fresh vegetables. They grew green beans, cow peas, tomatoes, Irish potatoes, sweet potatoes, collard and mustard greens, beets, watermelons, herbs, and sugar cane.

They also raised hogs, cattle, chickens, ducks, and turkeys for meat and eggs. A cow provided milk for the family and milking was usually a chore for one of the older children. The cow had to be milked early in the morning and again late in the evening. The younger children would help feed and care for the other livestock. Nearly every family had at least one horse or mule that was used for plowing and pulling a wagon.

The girls in the family would help their mother with the canning of vegetables, bean drying, and making jams and jellies. The boys would lend their father a hand when it came time to butcher hogs in the cold winter months and the mother and girls would then be busy making sausages and getting the hams and bacon ready for curing and smoking. Some of the meat would be canned for later use.

It was not uncommon for a family to keep one or more hives of bees to provide them with honey. The bees also helped to pollinate the fruit and vegetable crops grown by the family.

If families lived near coastal areas, they would sometimes go mullet fishing. The mullet was cleaned and packed in barrels with salt to preserve it for later use. Mullet preserved this way was very salty and had to be rinsed off and then covered in water and soaked overnight to remove most of the salt. It was rinsed again before being cooked.

School Life

Early school buildings were built of logs or boards, and were usually only one room. Many times they were big enough to accommodate fewer than twenty children and the teacher. They were meagerly furnished and seldom had black boards. Since paper was expensive and hard to come by, children often used slates for written work.

When a teacher was available they often "boarded" with one of the local families and got lodgin' and meals in exchange for teaching that family's children. If no teacher was available, one of the local parents served as a teacher between fall harvest and spring plowing. When all else failed, parents taught their children

everything they knew, at home.

The length of the school day and of a school term varied depending upon crops being planted and harvested, weather conditions and the availability of a teacher. Rarely was anything taught in school other than the three “R’s”—readin’, ritin’, and ‘rithmetic. If a student became too rambunctious, the teacher had that child sit in a corner of the room facing the wall. If a student got in real trouble at school, the paddle was used as a corrective measure. It was also quite common that when a child got a spanking at school, they got another at home when the students parents found out about it.

The younger students learned from the older students. They heard the older students recite their lessons over and over and were able to retain much of what they were hearing. It was customary, in most schools, for the boys to sit on one side of the room and the girls to sit on the opposite side.

Many children walked to school. It was unusual for students to come to school in a wagon or ride an animal. Horses and mules were needed at home for plowing and other farm work.

Lunches were brought from home in tin pails, called lunch buckets. These lunches were left overs from the family’s earlier meals, or food like cold

biscuits, sweet potatoes or perhaps fried chicken if they were lucky.

At that time schools usually went through the eighth grade. In some areas completing the eighth grade qualified a person to be a teacher.

Later on it was required that there be twenty five students to start a school in rural Florida and enrollment had to stay at ten pupils or the school would close. Teachers were paid twenty-five dollars a month, or roughly one dollar per student per month. Some school buildings were used for public meeting houses and religious services after school was over.

Church Activities

Sunday was strictly observed by the early pioneers. All non-essential work was set aside for a day of rest, reflection, and worship. Religious and social life centered around the church, where services were usually conducted once each month by a circuit riding preacher. That way, one preacher could minister to several different congregations. The preacher delivered sermons, sometimes lasting for several hours. He also performed marriage ceremonies, served at funerals and caught up on all happenings since his last visit to the area. For his services he was paid in room and board, or perhaps some clothing or food items. It

was not uncommon for the preacher to be a local farmer who carried on his usual work and preached on Sundays.

Singing was a very important part of the church service. Hymns were sung with gusto, often without any musical instrument accompaniment. If the church was a large one or had well-to-do members, there might be a pump organ to provide music. If hymnals were not available the congregation sang from memory.

After a week of hard work, families looked forward to getting dressed in their Sunday best, hitching up the wagon and going to “meetin” as is was often called. While some came by wagon, some came by horse and buggy, and still others walked. Everyone who could be there, would be there.

Following preaching, dinner was served on the church grounds. Each family brought well filled baskets of food to be shared. After the bountiful meal was eaten, the children played games while the adults enjoyed the opportunity to fellowship with the neighbors, exchanging news and just relaxing.

The church building was also used to hold general community meetings and social gatherings of all kinds. When no schoolhouse was available it frequently served that purpose too. In some communities, when no church building was

available, the school was used for church services.

Social Activities and Games

Social gatherings were very often more than mere entertainment. Neighbors were happy to help each other and gladly took advantage of any opportunity to get together and socialize.

Some activities were work related although they also served as social functions. House raising's, rail splitting's, hog killing, land clearing, and cane grindings are examples of work activities that brought communities together to make a job go faster and also served as social gathering. The men often did the work while the women prepared a large meal for everyone's enjoyment. Children took advantage of the opportunity to enjoys games and to play together.

Other social gatherings were strictly for enjoyment, such as weddings, fish fries, dances, barbecues, box suppers, candy pulls, and horse races. Surprise parties were also held. One family would have their neighbors over for a "Surprise Party" but would secretly tell them a couple of days in advance so they could get ready.

A game often played by men was horse shoes. Shooting competitions were also enjoyed

by the men folks. Women were often good story-tellers, telling funny or scary, or "haint" tales. Women would sometimes gather for a quilting bee. Several ladies would gather in another's home to make a quilt for the lady hosting the gathering.

The schoolhouse was used for many social gatherings such as; picnics, plays, dances, or checkers and chess competitions. Pioneers enjoyed almost anything to while away the hours and help keep in touch with their neighbors.

Girls often played with homemade dolls. They even had doll weddings, christenings, and funerals. Group games played by girls included; hopscotch, charades, London Bridge, poor kitty, hide n' seek, and jump rope.

Boys enjoyed games such as marbles, mumbly peg (played with a pocket knife), as well as checkers or chess. Town ball was also played by boys using a soft ball and a stick for a bat.

Other games played by children included, hide the thimble, skin the cat, tug of war, and swinging.

Almost all toys during this time were home-made. Children amused themselves with toys like a "whizzer" made from button threaded on a string and spun between the outstretched fingers of both hands. Rolling hoops, sling shots, stilts or Tom

Walkers, and stick horses were popular. Whistles whittled out of a Willow tree branch, carved animals, wooden tops and flying jennies were favorites of many.

Children also enjoyed climbing trees, playing in the sand, fishing and swimming. At that time almost all fun was home-made.

Odds and Ends About Pioneer Families

It was common for families to make their own soap. The housewife saved all the fats and greases throughout the year. During the cool fall months, she would boil these fats with lye, often homemade from wood ashes, and water. This resulted in a strong yellow soap that did an excellent job of keeping the household and the family clean.

Candles were often made at home as well. Wicks were made from cotton, down of the milk weed seed pod, or tow string. The wicks were then repeatedly dipped in melted tallow (beef fat) or perhaps bees wax until a candle of the desired size was produced.

Pioneer life was hard and early rural Floridians were, out of necessity, self-reliant and self-sufficient people. However, they were always ready to come together for fun and fellowship, and to help their neighbor when help was needed.

“Early Florida Crackers did so much with so little. While today it seems we do so little with so much.”

Doyle E. Carlton, Jr.



Cracker Country is a Rural Florida Living History Museum,
located on the Florida State Fairgrounds and an
educational program of the Florida State Fair Authority.

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